

Yom Kippur

Leviticus 16:1–34; Numbers 29:7–11; Isaiah 57:14–58:14; Hebrews 9:1–15

notes by Tim Hegg

God's Way of Atonement

The Torah *parashah* chosen for reading on Yom Kippur contains the instructions for Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), and particularly the manner in which the Cohen Gadol (High Priest) was to perform the sacred ceremonies of the day. We should first note the strategic placement of this chapter as noted by the opening verse: *Now Adonai spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they had approached the presence of the LORD and died.* In the narrative structure of Leviticus, the various types of sacrifices have been delineated, showing the prescribed manner in which God could be approached through the mediation of the appointed priests. The story of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, and the errant manner in which they performed their duties, is given prior to our *parashah* in order to emphasize how serious the whole priestly function was, and to show that there was only one way in which God could be approached. Any deviation from the pattern given by God was completely unacceptable. Mankind could not devise his own methods of atonement. Only God's way would be acceptable. Thus Moses reminds us of the death of Aaron's sons to emphasize that His way of atonement was the only way sins could be removed.

Nothing could be more important for us to grasp from this *parashah* than this. Since the beginning, mankind has believed the lie that God's way is not the only way. Adam and Chavah were fooled by the Deceiver into thinking that they could go their own way—that they could determine their own destiny and create their own righteousness. Ever since sin entered the world, mankind has rebelled against God, creating his own standards of righteousness, believing that he could “pull himself up by his own boot straps” through his own religious inventions. The Torah, however, teaches us differently. There is only one way of atonement, because there is only One God, and His holiness can be satisfied in only one way: through sacrifice made by the appointed mediator. The laws given in our *parashah* are a clear and specific foreshadow of the ultimate sacrifice mediated by the ultimate Cohen Gadol, the Anointed One, Yeshua.

Having reminded us of the death of Aaron's sons, Moses emphasizes by the repeated phrase “that he may not die” (וְלֹא יָמוּת) that God's way of atonement is the only way.

The first use of this phrase is in v. 2: “*Tell your brother Aaron that he shall not enter at any time into the holy place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, or he will die; for I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat.*” The first law given is that Aaron is to enter the Most Holy place only at the appointed time. If he were to enter any other time, he would die. And the reason is that God appears in the cloud over the mercy seat. In other words, the very holiness of God demands that Aaron come only at the appointed time. Any other time would be an affront to God's holiness. Here we learn that God has appointed a time for atonement. The festival cycle is the revelation of God's plan of salvation in its entirety, completed in one year. That the Cohen Gadol enters only once into the Most Holy place during this cycle foreshadowed the coming of Yeshua at the appointed time to enter, once for all time, into the work of obtaining eternal redemption (cf. Heb 9:12; 10:10).

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Torah, so that He might redeem those who were under the Torah, that we might

receive the adoption as sons. (Gal 4:4–5)

(One wonders if the Midrash, *Lev Rabbah* 21:7, cp. *Ex Rabbah* 38:8, in which the Sages conclude that Aaron could come any time into the Most Holy place, but his sons in subsequent generations could only come in on Yom Kippur, is influenced by anti-Christian polemic.)

The phrase “that he may not die” is found a second time in our *parashah* in v. 13: “*He shall put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the ark of the testimony, otherwise he will die.*” Not only must the appointed Cohen Gadol come into the Most Holy place at the appointed time, and only at the appointed time, but he must also come with more than just the blood of the sacrifice. He must also bring incense and burn it upon the altar of incense in order to produce a cloud that would cover the mercy seat. Thus, on Yom Kippur, both the blood and incense were necessary elements in order to affect atonement in the Most Holy place. This too is a clear foreshadowing of the work of Messiah. The blood of the sacrifice sufficed to pay the penalty for sin, but the incense, symbolic of the work of intercession (cf. Ps 141:2; Rev 8:3–4), was necessary for applying the payment of sacrifice to those who would be saved. Thus, in the laws of Yom Kippur, the sacrifice of Yeshua as well as His heavenly intercession is foreshadowed. The payment for sin, made through the giving of His life as a substitutionary sacrifice upon the execution stake, is presented to the Father on behalf of His people through His intercession on their behalf.

Our text identifies a number of sacrifices offered on Yom Kippur. In v. 3 a summary statement is given that pertains particularly to the sacrifices from which blood was sprinkled in the Most Holy place: “*Aaron shall enter the holy place with this: with a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.*” The meaning is obviously that he would enter with the blood of these sacrifices. Thus, our *parashah* teaches that the Cohen Gadol entered three times into the Most Holy place: 1) to create the cloud of incense [vv. 12–13], 2) to sprinkle the blood of the purification bull [v. 14] and 3) to sprinkle the blood of the purification goat [v. 15]. The rabbis add a fourth entrance (m.*Yoma* 7:4), to retrieve the censer and fire pan, but this seems unnecessary.

Our text details specifically the garments to be worn by the High Priest on Yom Kippur, and in so doing, emphasizes the high level of purity needed to perform his duties. The Mishnah records that extreme precautions were taken to assure the ritual purity of the Cohen Gadol. Seven days before Yom Kippur, the Cohen Gadol was secluded in a special room, quarantining him from outside sources of impurity. During this week he rehearsed the laws of Yom Kippur to assure that he knew precisely each aspect of the ritual. Then, on the eve of the festival he was kept awake throughout the night to prevent any chance of nocturnal emission. When the ashes had been removed from the altar the morning of Yom Kippur, and it was certified that the daylight had arrived, the Cohen Gadol was conducted to the ritual bath, and the day’s rituals began.

Initially the Cohen Gadol is clothed only with the holy linen garments (v. 4), consisting of undergarments (breeches), the linen tunic with the designated sash, and the linen turban. Towards the end of the day’s rituals, however, after bathing again, the Cohen Gadol “puts on his vestments” (לְבַשׁ אֶת־בְּגָדָיו). Ibn Ezra concludes that these were not a second set of linen garments, but his ornate vestments which he always wore when attending the altar.

What are we to learn from the careful instructions regarding the sacred vestments of the High Priest on Yom Kippur? First, the fact that the primary duties of the day are performed while wearing only the linen garments (and not the ornate garments normally worn, garments noted to be “for

glory and for beauty,” Ex 28:2) foreshadowed the incarnation of our Master. He came to us clothed in the common flesh of mankind—His glory, which had with the Father from all eternity (cf. Jn 17:5), was set aside when He came in the likeness of a servant (cf. Phil 2:1–5). Yet clothed in the common “dress” of humanity, He was nonetheless pure—untainted by the sin of Adam. For apart from His perfect life, He could have never fulfilled His duties as our High Priest, who was required to be clean in every way in order to perform the rituals of atonement before the Holy One.

Secondly, having completed the specific duties of the day in regard to the bull of purification, the goat of purification, and the living goat sent out into the desert, the Cohen Gadol bathes and reclothes himself in the garments of his glory. Then he offers the remaining sacrifices of the day, which, according to Num 29:7-11, consisted of a bull, a ram, and seven male lambs, and a male goat, along with their grain offerings. It is not clear whether these are in addition to the bull and goat sacrificed earlier, or if this list includes them. Regardless, the final sacrifices are conducted by the High Priest as fully clothed in his glorious garments.

What is the significance of this? Here we see a foreshadowing of the risen Messiah, clothed in His glory, continuing to apply the blood of the sacrifice (both in the sense of praise as well as atonement) on behalf of His people. In that He “ever lives to make intercession for us,” Yeshua, risen, ascended, glorified, and seated at the right hand of the Father, continues to secure the salvation of His people through the application of His sacrifice on their behalf. These final sacrifices of the day are designated as the “continual burnt offering” (עֹלֶת הַתָּמִיד, Num 29:11), and bespeak the on-going work of our Messiah as He secures the salvation of His people before the throne of God’s holiness.

According to Lev 16:5, two goats and one ram are taken from the “congregation of the sons of Israel,” foreshadowing the fact that the Messiah, the ultimate sacrifice, would come from among the people of Israel. Each of the sacrifices corresponds to one aspect of Yeshua’s atonement for us. The Cohen Gadol begins by offering the bull of purification for himself and his household (v. 6). Here we are reminded that the Cohen Gadol, while a type of the coming Messiah, was nonetheless not qualified to effect the ultimate atonement, for he was himself in need of atonement. He was an imperfect representation of the Coming One Who would offer himself as atonement for His people, but Who was Himself pure and without need for personal atonement (cf. Heb 7:27).

After slaughtering the bull of purification for himself and his household, he gathered some of the blood into the designated vessel, and came into the Holy Place. There he took a fire pan, filled it with coals from the altar of incense, as well as two handfuls of incense, and proceeded to enter the Most Holy Place. He put the incense upon the coals to create the cloud that filled the place, and then dipping his finger into the blood, sprinkled it eastward and upon the mercy seat. There is much argument among the ancients as to this sprinkling. Was it seven or eight times? The text would seem to indicate eight times (1+ 7), the first being “eastward,” but the Hebrew uses a combined prepositional phrase: וְהִזָּה בְּאֶצְבָּעוֹ עַל־פְּנֵי הַכַּפֹּרֶת קִדְמָה, literally, “and he shall sprinkle with his finger upon-before the ark covering (mercy seat) eastward.” The combination עַל־פְּנֵי may indicate that the blood was sprinkled in the general direction, but not specifically upon the Ark itself. Thus, the rabbis (and Josephus concurs) say that the blood was sprinkled in a whipping fashion, so that it contacted more than the Ark itself (m. *Yoma* 5:3; b. *Yoma* 54b–55b; cf. *Ant.* 3.243). The repeated instructions for the sprinkling of the blood of the goat would confirm that the sprinkling “eastward” and the sprinkling upon the Ark itself are separate (cf. v. 15).

Having completed the ritual with the blood of the bull, the High Priest repeated it with the

blood of the goat. That v. 16 specifically denotes a purification of the Tabernacle itself by the sprinkling of the blood would indicate that the blood was sprinkled upon more than just the mercy seat.

Verse 17 emphasizes that the Cohen Gadol must be alone in the Tabernacle when performing these rituals: “When he goes in to make atonement in the holy place, no one shall be in the tent of meeting until he comes out, that he may make atonement for himself and for his household and for all the assembly of Israel.” This presented some logistic problems: how was the Cohen Gadol to handle all of the necessary implements? He had to carry the vessel of blood, the fire pan with coals, as well as two handfuls of incense. The Sages indicate that he was able to do this because the vessel of blood and the fire pan of coals each had handles allowing the priest to slip them over his arms. This allowed him to fill his hands with the incense. Entering the Most Holy place, he would slip the vessel of blood over one of the poles of the Ark, and the fire pan (upon which he had burned the incense) over the other. This freed his hands to allow the sprinkling motion for the blood.

Having offered the bull of purification for himself and his household, as well as the goat of purification for the children of Israel, the Cohen Gadol next took some of the blood of the bull and mixed it with some of the blood from the goat, and applied it to the horns of the altar of sacrifice in order that it should be purified from the defilement of Israel’s impurities (vv. 18–19). The fact that the blood of the bull and goat is mixed together is implied from the language of v. 18, in which there is a singular application of the blood even though the blood of both the bull and goat is specified. In this way, the impurities of the Cohen Gadol and the children of Israel are seen as one. But such impurities are not merely ritual impurity, but the defilement of the heart, for the Cohen Gadol had already undergone ritual cleansing. Indeed, in v. 21 the impurities of the people are detailed as כָּל־עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֵת־כָּל־פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל־חַטָּאתָם, “all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins.” Here we are dealing with sin that begins in the heart and could be described as rebellion against God. The issue at hand in Yom Kippur is the plight of all mankind who has been defiled by the very sinfulness of his nature. As children of Adam, we find ourselves in rebellion against our Creator, and therefore in need of atonement which only He can provide.

Having offered the purification sacrifices and atoned both for himself and for the people, the Cohen Gadol next offers the living goat. The two goats had already been brought before the Lord at the opening of the tent of meeting, where lots were cast to determine their respective roles (vv. 7–8). One goat was designated as the sin offering, and the other as “scapegoat.” The Hebrew for this second goat is לַעֲזָאזֵל, *la’aza’zeil*, literally, “for azazel.” The translation “scapegoat” follows the LXX which has ἀποπομπαίω, “for the one carrying away evil” and τὸν χίμαρον τὸν δεσταλμένον, “the goat determined for dismissal” (v. 26). The LXX translators may have understood לַעֲזָאזֵל as עֲזָאזֵל, “goat that departs,” for though אֲזֵל is Aramaic, it does appear in biblical Hebrew (cf. Prov 20:14; Job 14:11). Others have suggested that אֲזֵל is related to Arabic عَزَع, meaning “rough ground or terrain.” Some rabbinic sources, as well as many modern commentators, take Azazel to be the name of a pagan, desert goat demon, and suggest that the iniquities of the Israel are carried back to their pagan source via the live goat. Though this has become the dominant interpretation among modern commentators, it seems far more based upon modern theories of the history of religions than upon historical and textual data. The support for the word meaning “the goat that departs,” and by extension, “the goat that carries away evil” seems quite adequate.

The ritual in connection with the scapegoat is given in vv. 21ff. The Cohen Gadol lays both of his hands upon the head of the goat and confesses all the sins of the people. Then the text is very

specific: “*and he shall lay them (the iniquities, the transgressions, and the sins) on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who stands in readiness.*” Here we have a clear picture of the vicarious nature of the atonement. The innocent animal carries upon himself the guilt of the people. Someone who has been appointed, and stands ready, is given charge of the goat, and it is led out to the wilderness. Rabbinic tradition has it the goat was made to run over a cliff in order to assure it would never return to the camp of the Israelites.

What is the significance of this added ritual? If the sacrifices of the bull and goat, and the application of the blood upon the mercy seat, signal the payment for sin, and the propitiation effected between God Who is holy and the sinner, then the symbolism of the scapegoat is the removal of the effects of this sin. Or to put it in theological terms, the death of the sacrificial animal speaks to the payment for sin (justification = declared not guilty) while the carrying away of sin by the live goat speaks to a renewed life of holiness (sanctification). Payment for sin is not enough. God intends to redeem a people who, through His own grace, are made into a righteous dwelling fit for the King of glory.

It is remarkable that the Cohen Gadol never contracts impurity even though he clearly transfers impurity to the scapegoat through the laying on of hands. The one who leads the goat to the wilderness, and the one who burns the remains of the sacrificial animals outside of the camp both become impure, and require bathing before re-entering the camp, but the High Priest remains pure. In like manner, though Yeshua carried our sins upon Himself in order to make atonement for us, He remained without sin Himself.

After the scapegoat is led out to the wilderness and released, and the final sacrifices have been offered, the hides, meat, and all that remains of the purification bull and goat are taken outside of the camp and burned. They are not offered upon the altar as a burnt offering, but are removed as refuse. Since the sins of the Priest as well as the people have been atoned for by these sacrifices, they must be removed from the presence of God, since they symbolically bear the impurities. In the same manner, Yeshua was treated as a sin offering by the Father: “*He made Him who knew no sin to be a sin-offering on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*” (2Cor 5:21). Likewise, the writer to the Hebrews exhorts:

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Yeshua also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. (Heb 13:11–13)

Israel awaited a victorious, reigning King. When Yeshua came as the Servant of Adonai, and gave Himself as the sin-offering for His people, He was despised. As a “man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief,” He was rejected by His own. Yet it is through His poverty that we have become rich (2Cor 8:9). There is coming a day, however, when He will appear, not in humiliation, but in all of His glory (Heb 9:28) to reign and rule as David’s greater Son!

It is this reality that we celebrate on Yom Kippur. We afflict our souls (v. 29) as we reflect upon the high cost of our atonement, and with sober introspection take stock of the suffering our Savior underwent to redeem us. But in this day of fasting and repentance, we also look forward to the return of our Savior, who will appear in all of His majesty as the appointed Messiah of HaShem. Throughout the generations of Israel, the High Priest was to be “anointed and ordained” (v. 32) to

serve as the foreshadow of the ultimate High Priest, Yeshua, Who is the anointed One (Messiah) and who has been ordained (“his hands are filled”) to accomplish eternal redemption for His people.

The *haftarah* for Yom Kippur (Isaiah 57:14–58:14) is obviously chosen because of its theme of fasting. Since ancient times, the Torah’s instructions regarding afflicting one’s soul on Yom Kippur, has been understood to mean fasting. Note the parallel structure in 58:3–

‘Why have we fasted and You do not see?

Why have we humbled ourselves (עָנִינוּ נַפְשֵׁנוּ) and You do not notice?’

This is the same wording used in Lev 16:29 and 23:27, and thus “humbling one’s soul” or “afflicting one’s soul” was understood to mean “a complete fast from food.” Is it possible that Paul and his companions were travelling to Rome as prisoners during the days of Yom Teruah and Yom HaKippurim? Acts 27:9 reads:

When considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast (τὴν νηστείαν) was already over, Paul began to admonish them ...

Since Luke uses the term “*the fast*,” he may be referring to Yom Kippur.

The message of the *haftarah* is quite obvious: *outward signs of piety do not necessarily guarantee genuine, inward holiness*. God’s dwelling is with the “contrite and lowly of spirit” (54:15), meaning He looks on the heart, not merely (as man looks) on the outward rituals of piety. This does not mean, of course, that deeds of piety are irrelevant. What it means is that actions should flow from a genuine heart of humility before the Lord, and not in order to be viewed as pious. True piety of the heart produces outward deeds of kindness in accordance with God’s own heart.

This theme in our *haftarah* is well noted, as those whom God draws near and heals (57:18–19) are contrasted with the “wicked” (57:20–21). Those who are healed by God have praise on their lips (57:19) while those described as wicked are “like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet” (57:20), and it is for this reason that “there is no peace for the wicked.” The strong connection to the Yom Kippur theme is that God intends to heal those who are without peace. He instructs His prophet to

“Cry loudly, do not hold back; Raise your voice like a trumpet, And declare to My people their transgression And to the house of Jacob their sins.

The primary charge brought against Israel by God is found in 57:17–

Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry and struck him; I hid My face and was angry, And he went on turning away, in the way of his heart.

This charge of “unjust gain” is heightened by the fact that outward acts of religious piety continued in spite of the fact that the poor, the orphan, and the widow went uncared for (cf. Is 1:17, 23). Though Israel continued to seek the Lord, and even to guard His ordinances (58:2), most of

the nation fell into the trap of religion—thinking that acts of ceremonial piety were the sum and substance of their relationship to God. Because Israel continued to seek God and to follow His ordinances, she wondered at why she would be under such duress from her enemies. Hadn't God promised that He would protect her if she walked in obedience to Him?

'Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?' (58:3)

The prophet's answer is stinging: "Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers." While strictly keeping the fast of Yom Kippur, they had failed to give their hired help the same privileges of keeping the appointed times. Those less advantaged were treated with contempt. Israel had concentrated upon the first half of the Decalogue, and neglected the second half. She had seen her obligations to God, but neglected the equally important obligations to one's fellow man.

The prophet, delivering the words of the Almighty, goes on to describe the full meaning of the Yom Kippur fast:

"Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" (58:6-7)

One is mindful of the very similar words of our Master in Matt 25 where He contrasts the righteous and the wicked on the basis of how they treated the disadvantaged. The bottom line is that as we show genuine love to those in need, we are, at the same time, demonstrating our love for God: "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me" (Matt 25:40).

The prophet is not deriding the efforts of the nation in keeping the ordinances of God, nor in seeking His righteous judgments (58:2). He rather is saying that the fast of Yom Kippur, in which the purpose is that one's voice should be "heard on high" (58:4), should characterize one's worship throughout the year. In short, religious duties are not for the praise of men, but for the praise of God. True holiness is marked by a love for God which is demonstrated by how one loves their neighbor. "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

The Apostolic *parashah* chosen for Yom Kippur is Hebrews 9:1-15, for obvious reasons. The author to the Hebrews has centered his words regarding the High Priesthood of Yeshua on Yom Kippur, for it was on this day, and this day alone, that the Cohen Gadol entered the Most Holy Place in order to effect atonement for the nation.

In his midrashic explanation of the Tabernacle, the author to the Hebrews has contemplated the reason that God commanded the construction of the Mishkan in two sections, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. Obviously, the two sections are contrasted by the fact that the priests conduct their activities in the Holy Place every day of the year, but that the High Priest alone enters the Most Holy Place, and that only once a year. For the writer to the Hebrews, this demonstrates the difference between the earthly Tabernacle, made with hands, and the heavenly Tabernacle, made

without hands (i.e., created by God Himself). The Holy Place symbolically stands for the earthly Tabernacle into which the earthly priests enter and minister daily. The Most Holy Place, however, represents the heavenly Tabernacle into which Yeshua alone has entered.

Some have wondered if the author to the Hebrews was that well schooled in the basics of the Tabernacle, for in vv. 3-5 and his description of the Most Holy Place, he writes:

Behind the second veil there was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, having a golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden jar holding the manna, and Aaron's rod which budded, and the tables of the covenant; and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat; but of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

The detailed description seems accurate except for the mention of the “golden altar of incense” which he says is in the Most Holy Place when, in fact, it was in the Holy Place, just before the veil (Ex 30:1f; 40:5f). While the Torah wording itself may seem somewhat vague (it could be understood as though the Altar of Incense was, in fact, in the Most Holy Place), it is clear from the instructions to burn incense on the altar daily, that it could not have been in the Most Holy Place, since the High Priest only entered the Most Holy Place once a year (Lev 16:2).

But this difficulty is easily resolved. The word used for “golden altar” in our Apostolic portion is *θυμιατήριον* (*thumiaterion*). This word is found three times in the Lxx (2Chr. 26:19; 4Mac. 7:11; Ezek. 8:11), and always refers to a censer rather than to an altar. According to tradition, the censer of coals upon which the incense was placed was taken into the Most Holy Place by the High Priest, and remained there during the day of Yom Kippur (though no explanation is given as to when it was removed). This makes clear the passage in Hebrews: our author wants us to see that his description of the Most Holy Place is that of Yom Kippur. We should thus translate v. 3, “Behind the second veil there was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, having a golden censer of incense and the ark of the covenant . . .”

The primary purpose of the Apostolic section is to show the manner in which the yearly activity of the High Priest on Yom Kippur foreshadowed the unique work of Yeshua as the ultimate and eternal High Priest that would take place after His ascension. Even as the Cohen Gadol applied the blood to the mercy seat in order to effect atonement for the nation, so Yeshua has ascended to the heavenly Tabernacle in order to apply the merits of His own death on behalf of His people, to effect their eternal atonement and redemption.

As we celebrate Yom Kippur, we do so with the full recognition that our own High Priest “always lives to make intercession for us” (Heb 7:25).