



Yom Kippur: Purifying the Tabernacle and Ourselves

Rabbi Shai Held

Ask a Jew about the meaning of Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement), and you are likely to hear that it is a day of repentance and forgiveness, a day when sins are atoned for and new beginnings become possible. That is an accurate portrayal of the Yom Kippur we experience each year, but it is actually very different from the Yom Kippur described in parashat Aharei Mot.



The book of Leviticus assumes that both sins and impurities defile the tabernacle (*mishkan*).¹ Unintentional sins can be atoned for through regular purification rituals, and many impurities can be eradicated ritually, but some defilement of the *mishkan* nevertheless likely remains. After all, some unintentional sins go undetected, and some people are probably less careful about ritual purity than others. “In particular, deliberate crimes, which contaminate the inner sanctum where the divine Presence itself is said to dwell, are not expurgated by the regular atonement rituals.” In an attempt to prevent defilement from accumulating, the entire *mishkan* is purged once a year. That is the fundamental project of the biblical Day of

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Thus, on one level, Leviticus 16 is primarily concerned not with the sins of the Jewish people but with the impurity of the *mishkan*. A defiled sanctuary is a

¹ This paragraph paraphrases Baruch J. Schwartz, “Leviticus,” in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *Jewish Study Bible* (2004), introduction to Leviticus 16 (p. 244).



terrifying proposition because, Leviticus assumes, God will not abide in a place of impurity. “An impure, or defiled, sanctuary induced God to withdraw His presence from the Israelite community... As long as impurity persisted, God remained offended, so to speak, and the danger of His wrath and possible alienation was imminent.”² The Day of Atonement thus aims to ensure that God’s presence does not depart from the sanctuary, and thus from the people.

And yet the people play a key role in the purification process. They must “practice self-denial”—understood to mean fasting—and “do no manner of work” (16:29), and the entire process brings about “a sort of purification of the people, since the thorough eradication and disposal of their sins and impurities serves as a personal and communal catharsis.”³ As Leviticus states—in words familiar to many from the annual Yom Kippur liturgy—“For on this day atonement shall be made for you to purify you of all your sins; you shall be pure before the Lord” (16:30). In essence, then, two intertwined things take place on the biblical Yom Kippur: “First, the sanctuary is being purged of the ritual pollution that has accumulated from both priests and laypeople; and second, the accumulated sins of the community are receiving atonement.”⁴

Not surprisingly, in a world with no Temple the exclusive focus of Yom Kippur becomes the purification of the people.

A variety of rabbinic figures are at pains to emphasize that there is nothing automatic about Yom Kippur. No ritual, no matter how powerful, should be construed as working magic: No repentance, no atonement. As a mishnah teaches, “Yom Kippur only brings atonement (*kapparah*) with repentance (*teshuvah*)” (Mishnah, Yoma 8:8). R. Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz

² Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (1989), p. 99.

³ Schwartz, “Leviticus,” p. 244.

⁴ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Notes* (1995), p. 584.



(1550-1619) writes, “Before God will atone for him, every person must purify himself from head to toe.” Luntschitz offers a beautiful homiletical reading of the verse we have already discussed: “You shall be pure before the Lord,” he insists, means that before the Lord purifies you, you must purify yourselves. “Before,” he argues, “suggests chronological priority” (K’li Yakar to Leviticus 16:30).

There is another crucial Rabbinic caveat to the power of Yom Kippur: “Transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur effects atonement; but transgressions against people, Yom Kippur effects atonement only after one has appeased one’s fellow” (Mishnah, Yoma 8:9). Rabbi Eliezer grounds this teaching in another creative interpretation of our verse, “For on this day atonement shall be made for you to purify you of all your sins; you shall be pure before the Lord.” By punctuating the text just a bit differently, R. Eliezer reads: “For on this day atonement shall be made for you to purify you; of all your sins before the Lord you shall be purified” (*mi-kol hatoteikhem lifnei Hashem titharu*). If the simple, straightforward meaning of the verse is that on Yom Kippur Israel will be purified before God, R. Eliezer’s interpretation is that on that day Israel will be purified [only] of its sins before God—because where interpersonal violations are concerned, one must first seek forgiveness from the person one has mistreated.

The point is critical: We may be tempted to imagine at times that we can somehow go around the mess our human interactions have created, that we can go straight to God, who, after all, is the ultimate Forgiver of sins. But the Mishnah will have none of it: God will not forgive our interpersonal sins unless and until we have worked to repair the damage we have done in the human sphere. There is no theological bypass around the interpersonal pain we have inflicted.

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such an approach because it does not go far enough—it seems to allow a bifurcation of the ethical, on the one hand, and the theological, on the other. On their interpretation, R. Eliezer actually aims to teach something far more radical. R. Yoshiyahu Pinto (1565-1648) argues that R. Eliezer’s point is that Yom Kippur effects atonement for transgressions against God only when I have already worked to repair the damage done by transgressions against people. Even sins against God, in other words, are not forgiven until sins against people have been attended to (“Rif” to Ein Ya’akov, Yoma 85b). I am not at all sure that this is a defensible interpretation of the text of the Mishnah,⁵ but it is a highly compelling theological claim: One cannot simply erect a wall between one’s “religious life” and one’s “ethical life.” The interpersonal sphere is so fundamental to Judaism’s conception of what it means to be religious that we need to deal with the harm we have done before we can really even approach God *about anything*. If the first interpretation reminded us that there is no

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theological *bypass* around the interpersonal, the second, much more exacting one, insists that there is no theological *access* without a commitment to healing the interpersonal first.

Other sources would seem to bolster Pinto’s point. Consider the *Haftarah* for Yom Kippur, which explodes among the worshippers (or ought to) like a stick of dynamite. “Your fasting today,” the prophet Isaiah thunders, “is not such as to make your voice heard on high! Is such the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies?... No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock the fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of lawlessness,⁶ to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke” (Isaiah 58:4-6). Does Isaiah imagine God saying, in effect, “I’m glad you’re here to repent for violating Shabbat and eating forbidden foods; but as for your

⁵ In the interests of brevity, I leave out the textual analysis that R. Pinto marshals to support his thesis.

⁶ Reading *mutteh*, lawlessness, for *motah*, yoke. See translator’s note in JPS to Isaiah 58:6.



interpersonal crimes, go apologize to your victims first and then come back?” Hardly. Isaiah imagines God saying, “I cannot fathom what you think you’re doing here. Until you have dealt with the wrong you have done to others, you have no business here at all!” These prophetic words cut far more deeply than the first, common interpretation of the Mishnah, and they seem to support Pinto’s approach.

We cannot drown out the demands of ethics with displays of piety. But then why do we need the piety at all? Why *is* it so important that I apologize to God for stealing from another person, or wounding her, or hurting her feelings?

At the most basic level, when I hurt another person I commit a crime against two parties—my friend whom I injure, and God, who commands me to behave differently. Eating leavened foods (hametz) on Pesah is flouting the will of God, but so also is violence towards my neighbor. In both cases I owe an apology to God.⁷

But something much deeper is also at play. In hurting another person I am not just running afoul of the will of God—though I am also surely doing that. At

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some level, I am also assaulting God, who, Jewish theology insists, is profoundly invested in the dignity of God’s creatures. A mishnah teaches: “Who is honored? One who honors human beings. As scripture says, ‘For I honor those who honor Me, but those who spurn Me shall be dishonored’ (1 Samuel 2:30)” (Mishnah, Avot 4:1). The Mishnah is somewhat anomalous: It talks about honoring other human beings, but it brings a purported proof text about the consequences of honoring God. On one level, the point may simply be that the verse cited provides biblical warrant for the idea that one who honors is the one who is

⁷ See, for example, R. Meir Simḥa of Dvinsk (1843-1926), Meshekh Hokhmah to Leviticus 16:30.



honored. But a variety of interpreters suggests that something far more significant is going on here: The Mishnah is subtly connecting the honor of people with the honor of God, such that one who violates (or affirms) the former necessarily violates (or affirms) the latter as well. In commenting on the Mishnah, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) explains: "He who does not despise any of his fellow men but respects them all as creatures of God, giving them honor for the sake of Him who created them, actually honors God, the Creator of them all. And of such a man, God says, 'For I honor those who honor Me.'"⁸

Some interpreters go even further. It is not just that God is invested in human dignity. No, it is that God so identifies with human beings that an attack on human beings is an attack on God, while an affirmation of human beings is an affirmation of God. R. Yeruham Levovitz (1873-1936) explains why a verse about honoring God is brought to elucidate a principle about honoring people: "One who honors people honors God, literally (*mamash*)[!]... [because] the honor of the image of God is the honor of God, literally."⁹

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God, the Parent of all humanity.***

In thinking about the idea that how we treat others is in some sense how we treat God, I often think of parenthood. Our

love for, and identification with, our children is so deep that if they are wounded we feel wounded, and if someone hurts them we feel as if she has hurt us too. If we take seriously the idea that God creates and loves people, then an attack on us is an assault on God, and a display of respect or love for us is a display of respect or love for God.¹⁰ This is the deepest

⁸ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Pirkei Avot/Chapters of the Fathers: Translation and Commentary by Samson Raphael Hirsch* (New York: Feldheim, 1967), p. 61. Translation very slightly modified. Cf. also R. Yehuda Leib Alter of Ger, *Sefas Emes* to Pirkei Avot 4:1.

⁹ Yeruham Levovitz, *Da'at Hokhmah UMusar*, vol. 2, # 13, p. 38. Levovitz' main point seems to be about the intensity of God's connection (*hibbur*) with people (in Levovitz' essay, *Jews*), not necessarily about God's identification with them. But the thrust may well be the same, and in any event the general point still stands.

¹⁰ Cf. what I have written about human and divine honor in "Humiliation: Judaism's Fourth Cardinal Sin?" CJLI Parashat Vayigash 5774, [available here](#).



meaning of repenting before God for sins we have committed against others: In hurting a human being, we have hurt God, the Parent of all humanity.

The lesson here extends far beyond Yom Kippur—and applies to Yom Kippur precisely because it is a day for taking stock of the rest of our lives. We cannot sidestep the people we have hurt on our path to God; on the contrary, God insistently directs us towards those very people. Repair the breaches you have caused, God says, and then come see Me. But don't forget to come see Me, because a violation of your fellow is always also a violation of Me.

Shabbat shalom.

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