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בס"ד

Parashat Ahare Mot Part II On The Yom Kippur Purification Rites

1. Introduction

Since the Mishkan represents G-d's dwelling place within the nation, it is incumbent upon each member of the nation to observe its sanctity. Thus, any Israelite who encountered one of the impurities enumerated by the Torah is prohibited to enter the Mishkan, or its precincts, until completing the appropriate process of purification. In addition, in the pure conceptual construct of the Torah, it appears that any impurity contracted by an Israelite is regarded as defiling the Mishkan to some extent, even when encountered outside the Mishkan and the individual did not enter it or its precincts while defiled. Of course, becoming defiled does not imply that any transgression had been committed. But when people are in a state that they cannot enter the sanctuary it appears that they are considered unable to fully relate to it; its function to continuously promote purity and holiness in the nation is interfered with and its impact upon the nation diminished.

In the course of time impurities are sensed to "accumulate" in the Mishkan as well as among the people. Transgressions also create impurity. This occurs despite the cleansing procedures that each individual and the sanctuary undergo, as called for on each occasion in accordance with instructions mostly prescribed earlier in Leviticus. It is understood that G-d, patient as He may be, would eventually not abide the increasingly impure situation and would withdraw His presence from a defiled sanctuary and nation. (This is another aspect of the famous exegetical principle of the Sages, *לִיבְרָה תוֹרָה פִּלְשׁוֹן בְּנֵי אָדָם*, "The Torah speaks in the language of man.") Consequently, immediately following the chapters that legislated the laws for bodily impurity (Lev. 11-15) the Torah

prescribed annual purification rites for sanctuary and nation – the Yom Kippur ceremony.

2. Higher Level Purification

In these rites that possess special annual sacrifices and blood sprinkling services the Torah invests the Yom Kippur ceremony with significance far beyond the realm of cleansing from ritual impurities. The day's program also provides for purification from sin for both sanctuary and people. Several rituals of the day's services directly address such cleansing, including the symbolic "scapegoat" ceremony. In this ritual Israel's sins are placed on a goat that was chosen by lot to be sent to Azazel, to the remote wilderness. Before the goat is sent away the high priest recites a confession of Israel's sins: *וְהִתְנַדָּה עָלָיו אֵת כָּל עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֵת כָּל חַטֹּאתֵיהֶם לְכֹל חַטֹּאתֵיהֶם* ("and he shall confess over it all the iniquities of the Israelites and all their sins, whatever their transgressions," Lev. 16:21). Mention of *avonot*, *pish'ehem* and *hatatam* (whatever the specific definition of each category of transgression) indicates that this confession must be comprehensive.

The implied corollary of the confession of sin is repentance; it is hypocritical without it. The impracticality of each individual entering the sanctuary precincts for a personal acknowledgement of transgressions necessitated the high priest to represent all the people, but surely each person must also repent individually wherever he or she may be. By definition, this requires contrition, regret for past wrongdoing, and a resolution of faithfulness going forward. The high priest must set the tone and reflect the humble feeling required for contrition and confession in his attire. He performs all his Yom Kippur-related services in the four basic garments of the common priesthood, and all must be made of

linen, instead of his usual eight vestments made of elaborate materials. In accordance with the special sanctity of the day he must wash his whole body (understood as ablution) before donning the “white garments” as well as upon changing out of them. For services with the “golden garments” he merely washes hands and feet.

With the riddance of personal sin and the opportunity for a fresh start, the institution that provided annual inspiration for spiritual renewal for each individual in the nation was established. כִּי בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטָהָר. אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם (“For on this day it will be atoned for you to purify you from all your sins, before Hashem you shall be purified,” v. 30). It is understood that this benefaction is effective only for those who identify with the purpose of the protocol. Thus, the conclusion of the bodily impurity section was elevated from the realm of rite and ritual to the moral sphere and to improvement of the moral standing of each individual in the nation.

3. Azazel

The term אֲזַאֲזֵל (Azazel) appears nowhere else in Tanakh besides in our chapter. Various opinions have been expressed in the Talmud, Midrashim and commentators concerning its meaning. Most have assumed that it referred to a supernatural being of one sort or another or to the domain of such a being, a vestige of pre-Torah notions that identify the wilderness as a realm where forces inimical to human welfare reside. Surprisingly, several traditional expositors assumed Azazel was an active being to whom some sort of offering was sent – under Hashem’s auspices – for the purpose of a bribe or distraction (see Pirke of Rabbi Eliezer 45; Ramban); such interpretations approached what other traditional authorities deemed unacceptable as they opened the door to the heretical. (Mishnah Yoma 6:6 speaks of pushing the goat off a cliff to its death rather than merely “sending” it away. Rabbi D. Z. Hoffman takes it as a symbol that death is associated with Azazel, in contrast to life associated with Hashem. But perhaps it was to prevent a misunderstanding of “sending” to Azazel as constituting an offering.)

Ibn Ezra cryptically appears to suggest that the term was derived from the word for goat, עִז, and the

symbolism underlying it related to the “goat-demons” that were then an idolatrous snare to Israel (as explicitly attested in the next chapter, Lev. 17:7). Sending a sin-laden goat to Azazel, the head of the goat-demons, in contrast to the sinful practice of sacrificing to the goat-demons, was an act of deriding and degrading that idolatrous belief. It is a concrete symbol of an ultimate rejection of that divinity attached to a ceremony that gives the people an opportunity to achieve cleansing from having been committed to its service, an act of national atonement.

In any event, it should not be thought that mention of Azazel implies belief in its existence; it is no more than a figure of speech. It is the style of Scripture to speak in such a manner, such as in the Israelite’s joyful tribute, “Who is like You among the *elim*, Hashem?,” in Moshe’s prayer, “...for which god in heaven or on earth can do as Your deeds” (Deut. 3:24) or in the psalmist’s praise of G-d, “He is awesome above all the gods, for all the gods of the nations are idols” (Ps. 96:4b-5a) and elsewhere. In any event, the elimination of sins in the form of banishment to an inaccessible place is well-attested imagery of the ancient Near East. Thus, the ritual had meaning even to those who had no belief whatsoever in Azazel. The term came to signify terrain of a rough nature and, because of the association with sin, a hellish place.

It is significant that the goat to Azazel is not a sacrifice and before being selected it is to be standing with another goat before Hashem while the priest chooses by lot which is to Hashem and which is to Azazel. Drawing lots means that the selection is seen as made by Hashem (“The lot may be cast into the lap, but from Hashem is its decision,” Prov. 16:33) and He stands behind the ritual.

4. Additional Features

After concluding the regulations for the sacrificial service the Torah prescribes several regulations that further the purpose of the day (Lev. 16:29-31). First, Yom Kippur ceremonies are to be fulfilled yearly. Second, everybody is required to תָּעַנּוּ אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם, literally meaning to engage in self-affliction, but a locution that clearly is understood in Scripture to refer to fasting.* Third is the prohibition to engage in labor on that day. Abstention from food and drink

emphasizes the importance of the day (this is the only fast-day mandated in the Torah) and focuses an individual on matters of the spirit. Refraining from work provides the time for reflection as well as the opportunity to gather together for services. In the Leviticus section dealing with the sacred days, the law provides that Yom Kippur is to be a complete day, from evening until evening: וְעִנִּיתֶם אֶת נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם בְּתַשְׁעָה וְעָרַב תְּשַׁבְּתוּ שַׁבְּתוֹכֶם (Lev. 23:32).

These requirements, namely, of being a perpetual ceremony, a day of self-denial and of cessation from labor, are repeated in reverse order after interposition of a central verse. (A day of cessation from labor is denoted by שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּתוֹן הִיא לָכֶם.) The center verse of the three, “For on this day it will be atoned for you to purify you from all your sins, before Hashem you shall be purified” (v. 30) **, articulates the monumental nature of the day. It speaks of atonement and purification from sin as definite and certain; since G-d mandated the service and pledged His receptivity to it – of course assuming it is performed sincerely – a confident and optimistic spirit is appropriate. The chiasmus surrounding that central verse appears to foster a celebratory spirit commemorating the glorious institution that G-d granted Israel, while emphasizing the importance of the associated rituals.***

The linkage with the preceding chapters is clear. The instructions for the Yom Kippur ritual thus belong here rather than in Leviticus 23, the section where the sacred days of the year, including Yom Kippur, are described.

Endnotes

* In Isaiah 58:3, the word צָמְנוּ (“we fasted”) corresponds to עָנִינוּ נַפְשֵׁנוּ (“we afflicted ourselves”) and in verse 5 the word צוֹם (“fast day”) corresponds

to יוֹם עֲנוּת אָדָם נַפְשׁוֹ (“a day that man afflicts himself”). In Psalms 35:13, עָנִיתִי בְּצוֹם נַפְשִׁי translates, “I afflicted myself with fasting.”

** In the Mishnah (Yoma 8:9):

Rabbi Eleazar the son of Azariah expounded as follows: “For on this day it will be atoned for you to purify you; from all your transgressions before Hashem you shall be purified,” transgressions between man and G-d Yom HaKippurim atones, transgressions between man and his fellow man, Yom HaKippurim does not atone until he appeases his fellow man (corrects the wrong and receives forgiveness from the injured party).

*** As a day for fasting and repentance there is a serious and somber character to Yom Kippur, but as the day G-d purifies Israel from its transgressions it is a celebratory occasion. At times in the past this latter feature has been taken in a way that apparently lent somewhat of an anomalous nature to the day, with marriage-age girls singing and dancing before the boys in the fields, as brought out in a Mishnah (Taanit 4:8):

Rabban Shimon the son of Gamliel stated: There haven’t been good days for Israel comparable to the fifteenth of Ab and Yom HaKippurim, for on them the daughters of Jerusalem [alternate texts: Israel] would go out with white garments that are borrowed, in order not to embarrass those who do not have... and dance in the orchards. What did they say? ‘Young man, lift your eyes and see what you would choose for yourself. Do not focus your eye on beauty, look at family...’

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