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בס"ד

Parashat Aharei Mot Part II Another Level of Purification – The Yom Kippur Rites

1. Introduction

Since the Tabernacle represents G-d's dwelling place among Israel, 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 from entering the Tabernacle, or its precincts, or eating of sacrificial flesh, until completing the appropriate process of purification.

In addition, in the pure conceptual construct of the Torah and in accordance with its ideal standards, it appears that any impurity contracted by an Israelite is regarded as defiling the Tabernacle to some extent. This is the case even when the impurity was encountered outside the Tabernacle and the individual did not enter it or its precincts or partake of sancta while defiled. Of course, becoming defiled does not imply that any transgression had been committed. But when people are in such a state that the Torah forbids them to enter the sanctuary they are considered unable to fully relate to it; in a subtle manner, its function to continuously promote purity and holiness in the nation is interfered with and its impact upon the nation diminished. (See our study, *Parashat Tazria' Part I – On Laws of Impurity.*)

In the course of time, impurities are sensed to "accumulate" in the Tabernacle as well as among the people. These effects occur despite the cleansing procedures that each individual and the sanctuary undergo, as called for on each occasion in accordance with instructions that were mostly prescribed in the preceding chapters in Leviticus.

Although of a different order, transgressions also create impurity both within the individual and the sanctuary.

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 exegetical principle, "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 (Day of Atonement) ceremony.

2. Higher Level of Purification

In the Yom Kippur program, which includes special annual sacrifices, blood-sprinkling services and other rituals, the Torah invests the day with significance far beyond the realm of cleansing from ritual impurities. The day's ceremonies also provide for purification of both sanctuary and people from the effects of the sinning that inevitably occurred in the course of the year. Several rituals of the day's services directly address such cleansing, including the symbolic "scapegoat" ceremony.

In this unusual ritual, Israel's sins are placed on a goat and sent to the remote wilderness (Azazel). Before the goat is sent away the high priest places his hands on the goat's head and recites a confession of Israel's sins: וְהִתְנַדָּה עָלָיו אֵת כָּל עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֵת כָּל פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכֹל הַתְּהוֹמוֹתָם ("and he shall confess over it all the iniquities of the Israelites and all their sins, for all their transgressions" [Lev. 16:21]). Mention of the various categories of sins ('*avonot*, *pish'ehem* and *h□atotam*, whatever the specific definition of each) indicates that this confession must be comprehensive.

The implied corollary of the confession of sin is repentance; it would be hypocritical without it. It is impractical for each individual to enter the sanctuary precincts for a personal acknowledgement of transgressions and express his desire to be granted a fresh start. This meant that the high priest was to represent all the people in the sanctuary, but surely each individual was expected to repent privately 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, in his attire, must set the tone and reflect the humble feeling conducive to contrition and confession. To perform his Yom Kippur-related services he is required to dress in the four basic priestly garments, similar to the common priest, and all are to be made of plain linen (assumed to be white), rather than don his usual eight vestments that are made of elaborate materials. (He does wear the latter at those times when required to perform the everyday services of the day.) In accordance with the special sanctity of the day he must wash his whole body (understood as ablution) both 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. The key clause reads: כִּי בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם (“For on this day it will be atoned for you to purify you from all your sins” [v. 30a]). 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 עֲזָאזֵל (Azazel) appears nowhere else in Tanakh besides in our chapter. Various opinions have been expressed in the Talmud, Midrash and commentators concerning its meaning. Many have assumed that it was a throwback 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 annual offering was sent – of course, under Hashem’s auspices – for the purpose of a bribe or distraction (see *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer* 45; Ramban); such interpretations approached what other traditional authorities deemed irreconcilable with

biblical monotheism and totally unacceptable as they opened the door to the heretical, if not worse.

Mishnah Yoma 6:6 speaks of pushing the goat off a cliff to its death rather than merely “sending” it away, as prescribed in the biblical text. Rabbi D. Z. Hoffman takes it as a symbol that stresses that death is associated with Azazel, in contrast to life that is associated with Hashem. But perhaps the Mishnah’s “interpretation” of the ritual was to prevent a misunderstanding that “sending” the goat to Azazel constituted an offering.

Ibn Ezra cryptically appears to suggest that the term Azazel was derived from the word for goat (אֵז), 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 supposed chief of the goat-demons, in contrast to the sinful Israelite 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, without any suggestion of belief in the actuality of the expression. Consider the Israelite’s joyful tribute upon crossing the sea, “Who is like You among the *elim*, Hashem?” (Exod. 15:11); Moses’ prayer, “...for which god in heaven or on earth can do as Your deeds” (Deut. 3:24) or 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). In any event, the riddance 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. Before being selected it is to be standing with another goat before Hashem while the priest chooses by lot which is to be a sacrifice to Hashem and which is to be sent to Azazel. Drawing lots means

that the goats are essentially equal and there is nothing inherent in either that makes it more fit for either purpose. In this way, 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]).

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 performed yearly. Second, everybody is required to *תענוי* אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם, literally meaning to engage in self-affliction, but a locution that in Scripture clearly refers to the affliction of fasting.* Third is the prohibition to engage in labor on that day. Abstention from food and drink (this is the only fast day mandated in the Pentateuch) emphasizes the importance of the day 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: *וַעֲנִיְתֶם אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם בַּתְּשׁוּעָה* וְעִנִּיתֶם אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם בַּתְּשׁוּעָה לְחֹדֶשׁ בְּעָרֶב מִעָרֶב עַד עָרֶב תִּשְׁבְּתוּ וְשַׁבְּתֶם (‘‘and you shall afflict yourselves on the ninth of the month in the evening, from evening until evening, you shall keep your Sabbath’’ [Lev. 23:32]).

The three requirements – being an annual ceremony, a day of self-denial and of cessation from labor – are repeated in reverse order after provision of a central verse, in standard chiasm format. (In the second cluster of clauses, cessation from labor is denoted by *שַׁבַּת שְׁבִתוֹן הִיא לָכֶם*, ‘‘A Sabbath of restfulness it shall be for you.’’) The center verse articulates the monumental nature of the day: ‘‘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 speaks of atonement and purification from sin as definite and certain (taking for granted that the Israelites would fulfill their responsibility sincerely), since G-d mandated the service and pledged His receptivity to it. Accordingly, a confident and optimistic spirit is appropriate. The chiasm surrounding that central verse fosters 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 in which 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 Psalm 35:13, *עָנִיתִי בְצוֹם נַפְשִׁי* translates, ‘‘I afflicted myself with fasting.’’

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

Rabbi Eleazar the son of Azariah expounded as follows: *מִכָּל הַטְּאוֹתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' תִּטְהָרוּ* (‘‘from all your transgressions before Hashem you shall be purified’’ [Lev. 16:30b]) – transgressions between man and G-d, the Day of Atonement atones, transgressions between man and his fellow man, the Day of Atonement does not atone until he [the sinner] 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 cleanses Israel from its transgressions it is a celebratory occasion. At times in the past this celebratory feature has been taken in a way that seemed to eclipse the serious nature of the day and deemed praiseworthy, when marriage-age girls would go out to the fields and sing and dance before the boys, as brought out in Mishnah Taanit 4:8:

Rabbi Simon the son of Gamliel stated: ‘‘There have not been good days for Israel comparable to the fifteenth of Ab and the Day of Atonement, for on those days the daughters of Jerusalem [alternate texts: Israel] would go out wearing 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...’’