

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
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How Does the Scapegoat Atone?
By Rav Yoel Bin-Nun

Seemingly, there should be no such day as Yom Kippur. How can there possibly be any rectification of sins committed intentionally? Repentance certainly has its place, for it comes to repair the deformed personality; but how can a sacrifice bring forgiveness and atonement for anything other than an unintentional sin?

The prophets steer well clear of speaking about a sacrifice that atones for a sin committed intentionally. It is quite audacious to read the words of Yishayahu in the haftara of Yom Kippur itself. What the prophet is asking is whether the community has ensured that, at the end of the fast, a meal will be waiting not only for those who have plenty, but also for the less fortunate: "Offer your bread to the hungry and bring the bitterly poor into your house" (58:7). Fasting, beating one's breast, bowing one's head and wearing sackcloth and ashes by themselves have little meaning for the prophets: "I desire kindness rather than sacrifices," Hoshea declares (6:6). Religious worship that does not uproot moral wrongdoing, and which is sometimes regarded as a "bribe" to God to continue engaging in interpersonal corruption, is regarded in a most serious light.

The Torah teaches that if a person sinned unwittingly and then became aware of his sin, he should bring a sin offering. But does the Torah mention anywhere a sacrifice that brings atonement for a sin performed knowingly?

Yom Kippur atones for intentional sins, although this seems impossible. For unintentional sins, we don't need Yom Kippur to atone, while for intentional sins there can be no atonement (in the sense of erasing punishment). The door to repentance is always open, but punishment for sins committed knowingly should be unavoidable.

Yom Kippur is thus a paradox, and the Torah itself points to this, just as it does to the exceptional laws concerning the red heifer used for ritual purification. All these laws are puzzling: why do we need a heifer; are not all ritual impurities purified through water? Why, when the impure person is purified through the ritual of the heifer, is the priest who performs the sprinkling (and who was ritually pure) simultaneously rendered impure?

The red heifer and the scapegoat are paradoxical exceptions to the general laws of purity and sacrifices, and are very difficult to understand. In fact, our Sages teach that the nations of the world ridicule Israel because of the scapegoat and the red heifer.

It is not so difficult to understand why these sacrifices render impure those who have been involved with them, for they belong to the category of sacrifices prepared outside the camp, and these have the characteristic of rendering impure. But the need for these "external sacrifices" is itself problematic. Generally, we

are forbidden to offer sacrifices outside the Temple. Why does the Torah make an exception here and command the banishing of the goat outside the camp?

In [Vayikra 17](#), a chapter lodged between the Torah reading of Shacharit of Yom Kippur and the Torah reading of Mincha, there is an emphasis on the prohibition, "They shall no longer offer their sacrifices to the 'se'irim" (demons); anyone who slaughters a sacrifice outside the camp is considered to have given an offering to demons! But what about the two goats offered on Yom Kippur? Are we – heaven forbid – hinting at two deities? To whom are we sacrificing the scapegoat in the barren land?

On the Day of Judgment – Rosh Ha-shana – we do not fast, nor do we beat our breast over our sins, nor do we recite Selichot. It is a day of truth, a day of remembrance, a day of judgment. Our fear of heavenly judgment makes this day a fearful one, and we feel awe and dread upon hearing the shofar and reciting Malkhuyot, Zikhronot, and Shofarot. We fear God's judgment of our actions.

But the Torah teaches that fasting has an effect, that man can repent and be given a second chance, that God relates to us not just in justice but in mercy as well. The presentation of the second set of Tablets of Testimony, on Yom Kippur, symbolizes this. The Holy One reveals that there is another dimension to His providence over the world – the attribute of mercy. This is a dimension that has no place according to justice, truth and judgment.

The essence of Yom Kippur, explains the Ramban in parashat Emor, is "mercy within judgment." Therefore, we confess and we cry out Selichot. The Selichot even "spread backwards" all the way to the week preceding Rosh Ha-shana, or to Rosh Chodesh Elul.

During the period of "the Days of Mercy," Rosh Ha-shana is a day (today, two days) of truth, without Selichot. It is a day of judgment based on strict justice. But the Torah nevertheless gives us – against all logic – a day of atonement, where our sins are forgiven and punishment cast away. After all, we are only human, and we cannot deal with the attribute of truth. The Holy One saw that the world cannot exist based only on the attribute of justice, and so He added to it the attribute of mercy.

The haftara – the Book of Yona – teaches us faith, prayer and repentance, in that order. But the haftara does not end after chapter 3, when the people of Ninveh repent. The story continues with the tale of the gourd in chapter 4, teaching us of the attribute of mercy: "Shall I not then have mercy on Ninveh, the great city?" The world cannot exist only in the attribute of justice, and the Holy One performs a great kindness for the world, and a great kindness for Israel, in giving us Yom Kippur. It is a great and wonderful message of hope.

However, the sins and iniquities that are placed upon the goat cannot be offered on the altar. The altar does not accept the offering for an intentional sin.

This goat, then, cannot be offered up, but we must confess and send away our sins, for we cannot stand before the attribute of truth. Therefore, we banish these sins committed knowingly to the wilderness, to a barren wasteland.

That is why the Torah commands – almost in the same breath, as it were – "They shall no longer offer their sacrifices to the 'se'irim," but on one day of the year you shall send all your intentional transgressions out of the camp with the goat. "And he shall confess over [the scapegoat] all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions and all their sins...."

(See the first Mishna of Massekhet Shevuot for the parallel between atonement for the Sanctuary from its impurity by means of the Kohen Gadol entering the Kodesh Kodashim, and the scapegoat, carrying all the rest of Israel's sins and wrongdoings to the wilderness.)

The first half of Sefer Vayikra – up to the service of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur – deals with sacrifices and ritual purity. From there onwards, the second half discusses the sanctity of the congregation (prohibited sexual relations), "You shall be holy," the holiness of the land, holiness in time, etc. By allowing us to cast out even our intentional sins, Yom Kippur connects the sanctity and the purity of the Temple with the daily life of the congregation.

Like the story of Yona, Yom Kippur teaches us that without mercy, the world cannot exist at all. Despite all logic, justice, truth and judgment, Yom Kippur brings us a message of hope, atonement, and great possibility.

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