

The Battle Between Good and Evil in the Yom Kippur Service

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In parashat Acharei-Mot ([Vayikra 16](#)), the Torah describes the special service performed by the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) – a service meant to atone for the sins of the Children of Israel. The means for achieving this atonement are quite unique, and the need for them demonstrates both the importance of this service, and its difficulty. Only the Kohen Gadol is fit for the atonement of Acharei-Mot; he must wear special white garments and must enter the holiest place – the Kodesh ha-Kodashim – where usually no human foot may tread. The service is performed only "once a year" – on Yom Kippur, the day that stands out from all the rest of the year by its special sanctity, the only day when the Torah requires that the Children of Israel "afflict their souls," thereby nearing the level of Moshe while upon Mt. Sinai – neither eating nor drinking.

A fundamental question arises from a reading of this parasha on the literal level. This is not the first time that the Torah discusses a matter of atonement for sin through sacrifice. A lengthy elaboration of this precise subject is provided at the beginning of Sefer Vayikra. The sacrifices required for atonement are described there in great detail, with the exact type of sacrifice depending on the type of sin involved, as well as on the status of the sinner – a regular citizen, a prince, an anointed kohen, a poor man or a wealthy one, or the entire congregation. It would seem that the entire subject is adequately covered there. But now the Torah returns to it, and the clear message is that something quite fundamental is still missing, so long as we have not yet learned parashat Acharei-Mot. And we must ask: what is missing? What new principle appears in our parasha that we did not read about a few chapters earlier?

Our perplexity grows as we compare the details of the atonement in both sources. None of the special means mentioned above – the Kohen Gadol and his garments, the Kodesh ha-Kodashim, etc. – is mentioned at the beginning of Sefer Vayikra, and our impression there is that atonement for sin is possible without them. We also notice further differences. In parashat Acharei-Mot, unlike the beginning of Vayikra, the incense plays a role in the atonement ceremony. There is a goat that must bear the sins all the way to the wilderness. The "viddui" (confession) of sins plays a central role here, while in the sin and guilt sacrifices at the beginning of Sefer Vayikra there is no mention of it at all, other than in a single instance – the "ascending and descending" sacrifice (5:5 - "It shall be, if he is guilty of one of these things, then he shall confess as to his sin").

These differences add to our sense that the atonement for sin is a matter more weighty and complicated than what we are able to understand from parashat Vayikra. However, the identification of the differences we have mentioned brings us closer to an understanding of the message that the Torah is trying to convey through them.

A certain linguistic difference between parashat Acharei-Mot and parashat Vayikra may shed light on the difference between them. The term "atonement" (kappara) appears in them in two different senses: in relation to the PERSON who sins, and in relation to the SIN itself. In the second sense – i.e., in relation to the sin – attention should be paid to an important difference in formulation. In parashat Acharei Mot, the Torah states:

"He shall atone for the Sanctuary from the impurities of the Children of Israel and FROM THEIR INIQUITIES, FOR ALL THEIR SINS."

"This shall be for you an eternal statute, to atone for the Children of Israel FROM ALL THEIR SINS once a year."

Note that Acharei-Mot speaks of atonement FROM sin. But at the beginning of Sefer Vayikra, the wording is:

"The kohen shall atone for him FOR his sin which he performed." (4:35, concerning the sin offering of the individual)

"The Kohen shall atone for him FOR his sin." (5:13, concerning the "ascending and descending" sacrifice)

"The Kohen shall atone for him FOR his unintentional wrongdoing." (5:18, concerning the conditional guilt offering)

"He shall atone for him... FOR any one of all the things by which he incurs guilt." (5:26 – guilt offering for theft)

In short, the prevalent expression at the beginning of Sefer Vayikra is atonement FOR sin. In connection with the "ascending and descending" offering, this is written twice – in 5:6 and again in verse 10: "The Kohen shall atone for him FOR his sin." (We shall address the exceptions to this rule below.)

Why, in parashat Acharei-Mot, does the Torah speak only of atonement "from sin"? The answer is simple. We have already quoted the verse, "He shall atone for the Sanctuary from the impurities of the Children of Israel and from their iniquities, for all their sins." The Torah draws a parallel here between IMPURITY and SIN. The idea of atonement from sin as a means of PURIFICATION is repeated once again: "For on this day He shall atone for you, TO PURIFY YOU FROM ALL YOUR SINS, before God YOU SHALL BE PURIFIED" (16:30).

It is this new perception that the Torah presents here with regard to sin. Until parashat Acharei-Mot, we recognized sin as a moral stumbling, a mistake. But here, the sin is identified as a dark force that threatens man, rendering him IMPURE. Sin is not a mistake, but rather the opening of the door to evil as a spiritual force, exposing the soul to the impurity that aspires to penetrate man's life and undermine it. The parallel between sin and impurity teaches that the impurity of sin can be communicated to man through a light touch (like the halakhic impurity conveyed through touch) – a touch that exposes man to a moral "virus" that may draw him down to the depths of hell. Release from this invasive and infectious disease requires intensive treatment, the mobilization of all the means of sanctity and purity: the Kohen Gadol, the Kodesh ha-Kodashim, the holiest day. The impurity of sin must be placed upon a goat who will take it to the solitary wilderness – as if it were a dangerous chemical substance, or an infected object – to a place of no human habitation, where it cannot bring about the destruction that it carries in potential.

As we see from the verses in Acharei-Mot, this view of sin requires atonement not only for people, but also for the Sanctuary itself. All the impurity of sin collects at the Sanctuary, where the Children

of Israel bring their sacrifices. The very fact that this place is intensively involved in sin – albeit from the angle of its atonement – causes the Sanctuary itself to be "infected" with the impurity, and this makes it necessary to effect atonement and purification for the Tabernacle (later, the Temple) and the altar.

We may formulate what we have said thus far as follows. According to the beginning of Sefer Vayikra, "sin" refers to a person's misguided and incorrect behavior. According to parashat Acharei-Mot, on the other hand, sin is a power of impurity that invades a person's soul, with the person himself in a passive role. According to the first view, the person requires atonement for the evil act that he committed. According to the second view, he requires atonement from the SIN that defiles the purity of his soul. Clearly, from the perspective of parashat Acharei-Mot, the conflict with sin is a much harsher one; it represents a real battle. In confronting the evil that seeks to penetrate, one must first of all fight and put up barriers; if these preventive measures have failed, then enormous efforts are required to "disinfect" the person's life and to restore his purity.

The scope of this shiur does not allow for a review of all the sources in tracing each of the two approaches that we have discussed above. We may note briefly, however, that the lives of the patriarchs appear to reflect them at different stages. When the Rambam, in the first of his Laws Concerning Idolatry, describes the conflict between Avraham and the "evil" of his generation, he speaks of humanity as being mired in brutish opaqueness, mistaken in its path as a result of deficient thinking. He describes Avraham as a lighthouse of knowledge and wisdom, as composing books and lecturing to the masses, teaching knowledge and illuminating the eyes of the misled. Here the evil is not aggressive but rather crass; evil is simply a mistake, and it wafts away when a single wise man "kindles" the light.

Yaakov's battle with evil, on the other hand – as epitomized in the form of Esav, his brother – is far more demanding. This conflict is symbolized in Yaakov's wrestling with Esav's angel – the spiritual power that seeks to destroy him. Indeed, the angel succeeds in causing injury to Yaakov through a gentle touch – "and he touched the inside of his thigh" – a hint at his power of impurity, which requires no more than an instant of exposure – a moment's inattention - in order to cause significance damage.

Now we must return to the beginning of Sefer Vayikra and investigate why there, too, there are some signs of the "Acharei Mot" approach. As mentioned above, the principal exception there was the sacrifice of "ascent and descent," where we find the sole mention of confession, as well as atonement "FROM his sin." In light of our discussion above, the reason is not difficult to understand. Most of the sins for which the Torah requires a sacrifice of "ascent and descent" are described in the verses as matters that arise on their own, in a passive way:

"If a person sins, and hears the voice of entreaty and he is a witness, having either seen or known, then if he does not tell – he will bear his sin."

"Or a person who touches anything that is impure... or who touches a person's impurity...."

Here the Torah is addressing sins that a person stumbles upon inadvertently – through hearing, seeing, or touching impurity. These situations illustrate the threat posed by the sin, which may penetrate the person's life in a moment of inattention. It is therefore not surprising that the atonement designated specifically for these sins includes the aspect of purification that is implanted in parashat Acharei-Mot: the confession, and atonement "FROM the sin." But while in parashat Acharei-Mot this

approach is broadened to apply towards evil in general, in parashat Vayikra these concepts appear only in connection with certain specific sins.

However, we noted that the beginning of Sefer Vayikra presents another exception to the rule: the sin offering of the prince. Why does the prince require – more than other people – atonement FROM SIN, and not only atonement FOR his sin? The answer is that the Torah regards the sin of the prince, too, as something natural, as something that comes about "by itself."

Concerning the prince (i.e. community leader), the Torah teaches: "WHEN the prince shall sin...", and Chazal comment ([Horayot 10](#)), "Is it possible that this is a Divine decree? [i.e., is it inevitable?]" Then the Gemara brings a proof that it is not necessarily so. The "Torah Temima," however, quotes here from the Zohar: "'When the prince shall sin' – he shall certainly sin.'" Thus what the Gemara regards as a possibility is, according to the Zohar, an accurate prediction drawn from the language of the text.

Why is the prince's sin so easy to predict? The Rambam (again, quoted by the Torah Temima) in his commentary on [Avot \(1:10\)](#) explains "Do not fraternize with the leadership" as follows:

"In the pursuit of power, he will have tests and difficult situations, because he is jealous of people and must stand against his opponents, and he loses his beliefs, as it is written, 'When a person is appointed to power on earth, he becomes evil in the eyes of heaven.'"

This being the case, the situation of the prince is different from that of other people. Evil waits specifically at his door, and he must guard himself with extra care – more than anyone else – to prevent its dangerous invasion. For this reason the sin of the prince is like an infectious impurity; it is not sufficient to achieve atonement "for it;" he requires purification "from it."