Searching for Spirituality in the Yom Kippur Avodah Service

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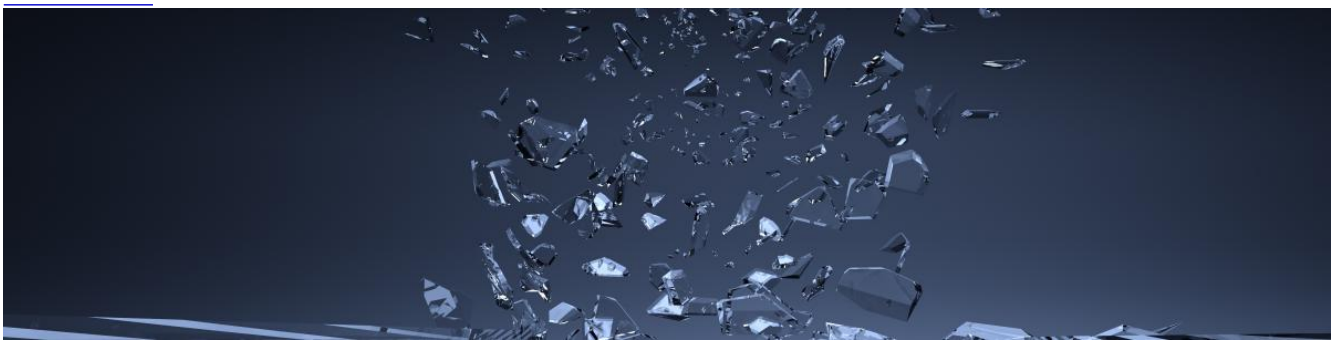

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The centerpiece of Yom Kippur is the Avodah, a poetic review and, on some level, reenactment of the High Priest's service in the Beit Hamikdash on that holiest of days. The Talmud in Yoma devotes much of the Tractate to a careful presentation of the Avodah, based on Leviticus 16. The service is precise and meticulous. Our focus will be on searching for some of the Avodah's spiritual messages often lost in its complexities. While some argue that spirituality and halakha are antithetical, I believe the reverse is true – spirituality gives halakha wings. Its message is desperately needed today. And so, we begin our study by going through the steps of the service as described in the Yom Kippur *mahzor* with Metsudah translation.

1. *Hakhanah* – Preparation

Upholders of the faith

A week before the tenth

Secluded the High Priest

As was done in the days

After the completion of the Mishkan

The Talmud expands: While some suggest the seven days parallel the dedication of the Temple, others suggest it parallels the giving of the Torah. In the former, we are preparing for our efforts in the Mikdash; in the latter, we are preparing to receive revelation. In the former we give, God receives; in the latter, God gives and we receive. In dialectic, we – God and humans – move simultaneously towards each other, never quite touching. And as the Talmud in Sukkah (5a) states, in the liminal space the love is so intense it transcends words – there is silence.

To be sure, during the Avodah's preparatory period, the High Priest is warned to be careful with the service, he purifies himself and practices some of the ritual – but spiritually, *begadol*, on a macro level, this time is required to help the High Priest (Kohen Gadol) be in a proper spiritual frame of mind for the Avodah. This is in the spirit of the Talmud which declares, "the pious people of early times used to wait an hour before praying in order to focus their thoughts upon their Father in heaven (Berakhot 5:1). Some understand this to mean that before tefillah, one should wait a while and in that time pray that he or she will be able to properly pray when tefillah formally begins. As the popular Hebrew adage goes, "*lifnei ha'tefillah ani mitpallel she'bezman ha'tefillah ani etpallel* – Before I pray, I pray that when I pray, I'll pray."

Perhaps the preparatory phase before tefillah or before the Avodah should also include periods of silence. The silence of removing the clutter, the silence of meditation. Silence is not merely an absence of words, but is above words, transitioning from awestruck speechlessness to verbiage. As Dr. Michael Fishbane writes:

There are two kinds of silence. One of these is natural silence, and is characterized by the absence of noise. The other kind of silence is spiritual, and is characterized by potentiality and anticipation…anticipatory silence helps prepare the self to hear sound sounding. (*Sacred Attunement, A Jewish Theology*)

2. *Keviyut* – Constancy

After the seven-day period of *hakhanah*, the High Priest immerses in the mikvah.

He immersed

And put on golden garments

He washed his hands and feet

And made the incision

In the daily morning sacrifice

Before performing the Avodah service unique to Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol busies himself with what was done daily – i.e., the morning standard offering, burning incense, cleansing the wicks of the Menorah, pouring libations. The message: the daily service came before the more high-powered Avodat Yom Kippur, accentuating the importance of constancy, of being faithful to the typical day in and day out ritual. This in consonance with the halakha, "when a frequent and infrequent practice coincide, the frequent practice takes precedence." (*Pesahim* 115a)

This idea is echoed in the Midrash quoted by Rabbi Jacob ibn Habib. "What is the most important sentence in the Torah? *Shema* (Hear O Israel)?... *Ve'ahavata* (And you shall love your neighbor as yourself)?…Ben Pazi says: it is the sentence about the daily offering that reads: 'The first lamb you shall sacrifice in the morning and the second lamb in the evening.' Rabbi Peloni says, the law follows Ben Pazi." (Introduction to *Ein Yaakov*)

The upshot: Commitment requires a constancy, a regularity. Hence, under the huppah we read the ketubah which details the daily ongoing responsibilities and commitments of bride and groom to each other. It is nothing less than a love document. After all, "love is in the details." So too, in our relationship to God – that which we do daily, consistently is what is most important.

Much like the wise Yiddish blessing Sonia Erlich of blessed memory, a congregant, always gave me as we bid goodbye on the phone – "Rebbe," she would say, "Hab a guten tamid" – have a good constancy.

3. *Anivut* – Humility

Having completed the morning daily service, the Kohen Gadol transitions to that part of the Avodah unique to Yom Kippur:

He washed his hands and feet

Took off the eight golden garments

Stepped into the mikvah

Immersed

Put on four white garments

Washed his hands and feet

One wonders: Why when performing this part of the service does the Kohen Gadol wear the fewer, more simple white garments. Isn't this part of the Yom Kippur service grander, deserving of the golden ones?

Perhaps, white represents the need for the Kohen Gadol at the height of his service to remain humble. Precisely when the Kohen Gadol is center stage, facilitating atonement for the priests and all of Am Yisrael, it is important for him to dress in the more modest white color.

This is not the only time the Kohen Gadol is reminded to remain self-effacing. The Talmud records that while we bow four times during the Amidah, the Kohen bows at each of the supplicating blessings (*birkot bakashah*) (Berakhot 34a). To paraphrase Rashi's explanation of this law, "The higher one's status, the more vital it is to be low and humble."

In a similar vein, the Torah tells us that when the priests transition a person from a state of *tum'ah* (ritual impurity) to one of *tahara* (ritual purity), virtually all of the priests involved (except for the *mazeh*) become *tamei* in the process (Yoma 14a). Why? Perhaps, as has been noted, when the Kohen purifies another, it is quite possible for him to feel a sense of haughtiness, a brashness that can go to his head. After all, through his efforts, the person who was *tamei* has been released from a precarious state. To counteract these possible feelings of arrogance, the Torah declares that the Kohen, the purifier, must himself become impure. Precisely when reaching the pinnacle of strength, the Kohen is reminded of self-limitation, knowing he too will soon become impure.

To paraphrase the Talmud, "Wherever one finds greatness, there is humility." (*Megillah* 31a)

4. *Keshot Atzmekha* – Self-Judgement

His ox stood

He leaned his hands on its head

And confessed his sins

And this was his confession

Please O Lord

I have sinned, acted wickedly, and rebelled against you,

I beg you, with Your Name – atone my sins.

Placing his hands atop the ox in the courtyard (*azarah*) near the sanctuary (*heikhal*), the Kohen Gadol asks for personal atonement, for himself, his wife and his household. He does so two other times: before slaughtering the bull, asking atonement for all kohanim; and before sending the goal *l'Azazel*, imploring that all of Israel be forgiven.

This teaches an important lesson – before atoning for others, one must atone for oneself. The movement is from the inner to the outer, as the Gemara states, "act properly before requiring others to do so" (*Baba Batra* 60a). In other words, you can't facilitate atonement for others without self-atonement. An important principle of leadership emerges: "Cleansing" others begins by "cleansing" oneself.

5. *Mashma'ut Shel Haser Ha'Mashma'ut* – Significance of the Insignificant

The High Priest then walked

To the eastern side of the courtyard

Where there stood a pair of goats

Identical in color and height

Ready to atone

Two golden lots were mixed

One lot for God

And the other for *Azazel*

He shouted aloud

A sin offering for the Lord

Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik suggests that on a spiritual level, the “lots ritual” reminds us that what appears to be an insignificant action can have significant ramifications. The goats, as the Mishnah notes, were similar in appearance, height, size and value (*Yoma* 62a). Yet, a slight shift of the High Priest’s hand brought about different destinies for the goats – one to the Lord, the other to *Azazel*.

So, too, in life. It is often the case that a word, a kind gesture, a simple show of concern can make the whole difference.

A story illustrates this point: A rabbi asked: how far is east from west? “From Israel to New York, from New York to California, from the front of a study hall to its back” the students responded. No, said the rebbe, how far, “*ein klein drei*” – one little turn and from facing west you are facing east. Yes, the slightest movement can make the difference between *la’Shem* and *l’Azazel*.

6. *Maslul L’Tihur Atzmi* – Pathway to Purifying the Self

The Kohen Gadol returns to the western side of the Azarah. Leaning on the bull just before its slaughter, he atones on behalf of all of the Priests (*u’venei Aharon am kodshekha*) asking they be forgiven before the Lord – *lifnei Hashem*. While the atonements over the bull deals with wrongs the Kohen Gadol or kohanim committed in defiling holy places or objects, more broadly, and spiritually, it can refer as well to “insults” committed against a fellow person, who, at their core, must be respected as upright and holy.

The High Priest asks for forgiveness, citing the sentence “For on this day He will make atonement for you, to purify you; from all your sins, before the Lord, you will be purified” (Leviticus 16:18). When hearing the name of God, the Shem Hashem uttered, the people are overcome – they bow and prostrate, *korim u’mishtahavim*. At that very moment, the High Priest declares – *titharu* – you will be purified.

They bowed, prostrated themselves,

Offered thanks,

And fell upon their faces

And said:

“Blessed [is the] Name,

His glorious kingdom

Is forever and ever."

And he [the High Priest] prolonged

The intoning of the Divine Name

Until the worshippers completed

[The response];

And [completed the verse] said to them:

"You will be cleansed – *titharu*."

Here the Kohen Gadol seeks atonement for all the priests and yet, tells the people you will be purified, teaching a vital spiritual message: the pathway to self-purification is purifying others. More generally, and counterintuitively, in moments of greatest need, one ought to step back, seeking the welfare of others. As the rabbis proclaim: whoever prays for another, his or her prayers are answered first (*Baba Kama* 92a). By channeling concern away from the self towards the other, we are emotionally and spiritually uplifted.

7. *Hamtakat Ha'avodah* – Incense

The Avodah then spells out an elaborate process of the Kohen Gadol bringing incense (*ketoret*) into the Holy of Holies – placing the *ketoret* atop smoldering coals in front of the Ark.

He drew close (between) the Ark's poles

The incense he placed between them

And caused them to rise and smoke

While the Avodah demands meticulous observance, casting an aura of being cold, even distant, the incense reflects a loving God whose Torah, encased in the Ark before which the incense rises – lives and breathes the message of "its way are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace" (Mishlei 3:17). In a word, the incense represents sweetness, softening and setting the tone for a loving Avodah service.

More broadly, what we need now more than ever is a Loving Torah, a *Torat Ahavah*. The term has a two-fold message. First, “loving” can be read as verb, reflecting passion for Torah. In the words of the Psalmist, “How I love Your Torah, I meditate on it all day long” (Psalms 119:97). Second, “loving” can be seen as an adjective, reflecting what many believe is the foundation of Torah; at its core, Torah is a book of love. Each letter expresses God’s infinite love for His people, and for humankind. It’s this message, reflected in the Yom Kippur *ketoret* ritual, that Am Yisrael desperately needs.

8. *Haza’ot* – Sprinkling

In the Holy of Holies, the High Priest sprinkles the blood of the bull and then the goat (which he had just sacrificed) eight times towards the Ark. The first is in an upward movement of the hand; the last seven are sprinkled downward. All of the eight sprinklings fall to the ground, each one comes closer and closer to the High Priest. As the priest does the sprinkling, he counts: *ahat, ahat ve’ahat*…one, one and one., one and two…one and seven”. Our liturgy describes the sprinkling poetically:

He sprinkled with a count

One upper sprinkling

And seven lower ones

Each time he sprinkled

He counted aloud one

One and one

One and two…

One and seven

The Talmud offers suggestions as to why the High Priest always mentions the one, the upward sprinkling, first. Perhaps it can also be suggested on a spiritual plane that while there are “down” moments, one must never forget the “upward,” uplifting, positive blessings that have been bestowed upon us.

In this vein, I recite every morning the following reflection:

Yedidi ahuvi, mahmad nafshi: ana azor li l’hodot Lekha al kol haberakhot she’he’enakta li, v’lo latet et libi al berakhot shehaserot li.

My beloved Friend, delight of my soul: please help me give thanks for all the blessings You have bestowed upon me, not allowing my heart to be weighed down by blessings I

lack.

9. *Pereida* – Farewell

After other sprinklings, the High Priest returns to the eastern side of the courtyard, sending off the scapegoat to *Azazel* as he asks for atonement for the people, who once again fall to the ground when hearing the name of God invoked in the request. Soon after, the High Priest dons his golden garments to perform other parts of the Yom Kippur service. Later, he returns to the Holy of Holies wearing his white garments to remove the pan and the ladle used in the *ketoret* service. In the words of our liturgy:

He entered the Holy of Holies

The vessels used for incense

he removed.

One wonders why the removal constitutes a distinct service. Why weren't these objects removed when he previously left the Holy of Holies? Perhaps this was to accentuate the importance of haltingly and lovingly bidding farewell to the Holy of Holies.

Here, the Torah may be teaching us to carefully say goodbye to a beautiful moment. How I remember our children refusing to sing the words of farewell (*tzetkhem l'shalom*) found in the "Shalom Aleikhem" hymn sung at the Friday night Shabbat table. With the language of innocence, they argued, "We've just said hello to the angels; why now say goodbye?"

Our children were not alone in struggling with bidding farewell. It is told that the saintly Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook would rise from his Shabbat table as he sang " *tzetkhem l'shalom*" (go in peace). He would slowly walk to the door, escorting the angels out. Opening the door, he would look out as he longingly, silently waved his hand in a farewell gesture.

After I shared Rabbi Kook's custom of waving goodbye to the angels on Friday night, Daniella Grunfeld, a wonderful congregant, told me that when her children were younger,

she would accompany them to their school bus. As they boarded, she'd wave goodbye. But instead of doing so in the normal fashion, she reversed her fingers, motioning toward herself as if imploring her children to stay near. Even as she said goodbye, she was declaring, *I love you, come closer, come closer.*

10. *Tekes Hatunah* – Simulating a Wedding Service

After changing into the golden garments and completing the daily afternoon service, the High Priest for the last time on this day immerses and washes his hands and feet, putting aside his priestly garments. His exit has sparks of a joyous wedding. The Kohen Gadol appears with a particular glow, offering *tefillot* as many a *hattan* and *kallah* do under the huppah for the community. Uplifted, the assembled join in emotional, enraptured song. The liturgy spells this out:

- The appearance of his face

Was like the brilliance of the sun…

- And this was the prayer…

May it be God's will…

that this next year be…a year of blessing

- How truly glorious

Was the Kohen Gadol

As he left the Holy of Holies,

Peacefully, unharmed.

As the canopy of the heavens...

As a rose garden between thorns…

Shevirat Hakeilim – Breaking the Glass

But in euphoric moments, like a wedding, we break a glass, reminding ourselves of the brokenness of the Mikdash, and yes, the brokenness of human temples. This in sync with Jewish tradition to recall and reach out to the most vulnerable during our most celebratory moments. And so, as we reenact the euphoria of the Avodah, we declare:

But our past sins

Led to the destruction of the Temple…

Tikkun – Universal Redemption

Even as we break the glass, we resolve to fix the broken pieces. In Lurianic kabbalah, it is the tikkun of *shevirat hakeilim*. How does this relate to the Avodah service?

Rav Kook is quoted as suggesting that the Avodah is the synthesizing of the holiest of days (Yom Kippur) with the holiest of places (*Kodesh Kadashim*) with the holiest of people (Kohen Gadol) reciting the holiest of words (*shem Hashem*). This may be the formula for the future redemption (inspired by Shalom Ansky's *The Dybbuk*):

If only every day would be the holiest day

If only every place would be treated as the Holy of Holies

If only every person would be viewed as the Kohen Gadol

If only every word would be as uplifting as reciting the name of God

The ultimate tikkun of redemption would be here.

Lu yehi – if only!