

"Planet Earth is our Holy of Holies: Reading into Leviticus for guidance on atonement and re-connection."

We had a place called "the Holy of Holies", *Kodesh ha'Kodashim*. It was a secret place entered only once a year by the high priest, on Yom Kippur, when they would purify the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Temple was destroyed, but Yom Kippur remains with us to this day, as the *Day of Atonement* when we purify ourselves.

I will begin by quoting the opening lines of a book which is very dear to me - *Mesillat Yesharim – the Path of the Upright*, where Ramcha"l begins by stating:

"I have not written this book to teach the reader anything new. Rather is it my aim to direct his attention to certain well known and generally accepted truths, for the fact that they are well known and generally accepted is the cause of their being overlooked." (Ramcha"l, Preface to *Mesillat Yesharim – the Path of the Upright*)

All I will say here tonight is known to all of us, as we sleep and as we wake up, on our travels around the world and in our homes and gardens. I've been talking about it non stop and so have many others around the world.

All is known, but has yet to be accepted. And after being accepted, it has yet to be acted on.

But we'll begin at the beginning.

The purification of the Mishkan (Tent of meeting) served as a purification of the world (although in ancient times "the World" meant "the Hebrew world"). A good purification process promised to bring with it abundance, fertility and health on many levels.

On this evening opening our Yom Kippur, I want to take us back to the very first Yom Kippur, to see what we might take from it as a teaching for our own days.

Contamination:

The origin of the Day of Atonement lies in the tragic story of Nadav and Avihu sons of Aharon and nephews of Moshe and Miriam. This is their story:

"And the sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, took each of them his fire-pan and put fire in it and placed incense upon it and brought forward alien fire before Adonai, which He had not charged them. And fire came out from

before Adonai and consumed them, and they died before Adonai. And Moshe said to Aharon, “This is just what Adonai spoke, saying,

‘Through those close to Me shall I be hallowed

And in all the people’s presence shall I be honored’.”

And Aharon was silent.” (*Leviticus 10:1-3*)

What was Nadav and Avihu’s sin, which merited such a tragic reaction from Adonai? The word “fire” throws my mind back to another tragic story of fire, the Greek one where Prometheus steals fire from the gods and brings it to humans. His end wasn’t great either. Now, Nadav and Avihu didn’t steal fire from God, but rather brought “alien fire” into the temple. Having been entrusted with the sacred role of taking care of the **communal fire**, they misappropriated their position and brought in another fire. Their sin was the sin of hubris, of thinking they understood the inner workings of something which was perhaps beyond their grasp.

Before we continue with the story, I’d like to stop for a moment and remind us of the great symbolic importance of the Tent of meeting / Mishkan.

Rabbinic tradition parallels the construction story of the Mishkan with the Creation of the world. There is a midrash about Bezalel, the master craftsman who designed the Mishkan, saying “**Bezalel knew how to join the letters with which heaven and earth were created.**” (*Talmud Bavli B’rachim 55a*). We are told here that Bezalel had access to the blueprint of creation, on which he modeled the meeting place with God.

Another midrash we find tells us “Why does it say; *I love the habitation of Thy house, and the place where your glory dwells?* Because the Tabernacle is equal to the creation of the world itself.....” (*Midrash Tanchuma, Pekudei 2*)

Then they go into the various days of creation and show linguistic similarities in the story telling, for instance:

“About the second day of creation it states: *Let there be a firmament and divide between them, and let it divide the waters from the waters* (Gen. 1:6). About the Tabernacle it is written: *And the veil shall divide between you* (Exod. 26:33). (*Midrash Tanchuma, Pekudei 2*)

However, if we have all of creation around and within us, why would Adonai command us to build a *Mishkan*? Why do we need a Tent of meeting when meeting can, and does, happen all around us? In another Midrash, Moshe asks the exact same question ‘*the glory of the Holy One fills the upper worlds and the lower, and He said to make Him a Tabernacle?*’ to which Adonai answers ‘I do not see things the same way as you do.....

Furthermore, I will come down and contract my Presence within a space of one cubit by one cubit.'...."

[\(Sh'mot Rabbah 34a\)](#)

Contrary to my natural inclination to believe Goddess has no measure and cannot be contained within buildings, no matter how wonderful they are, there is something very compelling in this answer. We are given the opportunity to create a virtual structure in which we practice **responsibility**. A space where we learn care and caution. Just like the real world outside, but on a human scale and with shorter time span between action and reaction.

Now, back to our story:

Some chapters later, we return to the silent Aharon when Moshe instructs him on the correct way of entering the sacred zone (Ha'kodesh). And there, in chapter 16 of Leviticus we learn the laws of cleansing the Sacred space, and of the ritual which will evolve to become **Yom Kippur**:

"And it shall be a perpetual statute for you: in the seventh month on the tenth of the month you shall afflict yourselves and no task shall you do.... And he shall atone for the holy sanctuary and for the Tent of Meeting, and shall atone for the alter, and for the priests and for all the assembled people he shall atone. And this shall be an everlasting statute for you to atone for the Israelites for all their offenses once in the year." (*Leviticus 16:29-34*)

If the ritual cleansing of the Mishkan was done correctly and If atonement was achieved, this was supposed to ensure a year of plenty in all aspects of life. And why? Because the sacred structure represented the world, and the world must be purified for life to continue. As acknowledgement of our great power in the world, it is OUR job as humans to do the ritual of cleansing. This is on both a spiritual and very practical level.

This throws me back to a curious little story in Talmud relating to what happened one year in the Holy of Holies: One time, **Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha**, the High Priest, went into the Holy of Holies, and there he came face to face with Akatriel Ya, Adonai Tzva'ot. Adonai said to Rabbi Yishmael "My son, bless me". R. Yishmael responded with this blessing: "**May it be Your will that Your mercy overcome Your anger, and may Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes, and may You act toward Your children with the attribute of mercy, and may You enter before them beyond the letter of the law.**" (*Talmud Bavli B'rachot 7a*)

Not only do we have the power to purify, we also have the power to bless Adonai T'zvaot himself. Our tradition teaches us that we have great power in the world. At once an exciting and scary concept – We have

the power of cleansing and destruction. We are part of the natural world, but our nature is also the ability to step outside of the natural order, for a short moment, and look back on it.

Now, we can go back and focus on that very first Yom Kippur ritual which the high priest conducted in the mishkan. Since the ritual is quite long, and we'll study some of it tomorrow morning at Shachrit, we will only look at three components:

1. Viduy / confession of sins
2. The Scapegoat
3. Entering the Holy of Holies

Viduy – confession

Something important to notice about confession on YK, is that even when it is personal, it's still communal. Beginning with the High Priest:

'Aharon shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites....'(Leviticus 16:21)

Even today, in the liturgy of confession – we use the word “we” rather than “I”. Viduy is a community project – built out of the personal words of each of us. It is an understanding that the work of purification on a global level begins with the words and actions of each of us, but must transcend into a community wide understanding of where we have gone wrong.

In our days of Climate crisis, entering mass extinction and social upheaval, we must reconnect the “I” and the “we”. How does each private action influence the general outcome? How does public policy influence private lives? And more than anything else, where does our responsibility lie – as individuals, as adults, as members of society – in the outcome that we are moving towards? In order to bring a good and deep confession to our lips on Yom Kippur, **we first must be able to imagine the terrible outcome of not recognizing our sins.** Let's begin our Day of Atonement first by reading from a ***Vidui for our collective guilt.*** We will not read the whole thing

together, rather, begin together now, and then I'll give us all a moment of silence to continue reading on your own, or for allowing your own personal Vidui to rise in you:

OUR GOD AND GOD of our ancestors, although we did not invent environmental destruction, sexism, homophobia, or religious intolerance, words from our most sacred text have been used for more than two thousand years by our people and others to justify these great wrongs. And now we must ask for forgiveness.

For the way the creation story and its words, "to fill the earth and subdue it" have been used by our people and others to destroy the planet You created and called good, we atone.

For the way the story of Adam and Eve has been used to insure that women's domination by men be seen as divinely ordained, we now atone.

For the way that words in *Leviticus* have been used by our people and others to damage and destroy the lives of men who love men, and by extension all queer people, by making these crimes against humanity seem to be Your will, we must now atone.

For the way that the Torah repeatedly condemns the faiths of other peoples, which has added to the tension in the world, and

From *Fragments of the Brooklyn Talmud*, A. Ramer, 2019, p. 57-58 from other faith traditions, we must surely now atone.

But atonement is not enough. We vow to rectify all wrongs done by us in Your name, individually and collectively, spiritually and legally, so that we live together in peace and wholeness, sharing the Earth's diminished bounty. We vow to create a global society in which all loving hearts, minds, and bodies, made in Your image, find their sacred paths and places in Your holy world.

Seir

And let us say: Amen.

La'Azazel – the Scapegoat לַאֲזָאֵל

One of the more well-known characters in Torah, the Scapegoat appears here in *Leviticus* as the one animal who survived ritual slaughter.

Aharon shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated man. Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:21-22)

Scapegoat was set free in the wilderness carrying with it the sins of Israel, which we could understand as throwing away our sins, perhaps a form of spiritual waste management, maybe even a sort of composting system. For this evening I'd like to offer another reading, in which this goat embodies our own ability to carry and discover our sins and hurts – **when we connect with wilderness**. The spiritual practice of going out into the wilderness to connect better with ourselves is an ancient one. It can be understood as connecting with the wild places inside ourselves, but it can also be understood in the most literal sense— of going outside into the wild places surrounding us to find some healing in that which is not human. In this reading for our times of the Azazel, **we are the goat going out into the wilderness**. We should be carrying our sins and the sins of our

people on our backs over into the non-human world around us, and finally to connect with Goddess. Azazel is the time of remembering we are part of the natural world- and we will have to endure on our own body every bit of craziness we've inflicted on the Earth.

Kodesh Ha'Kodashim – the inner sanctum and holy of holies קודש הקדשים

“And he shall take a panful of fiery coals from the alter, from before Adonai, and a double handful of fine aromatic incense, and bring it within the curtain. And he shall put the incense on the fire before Adonai and the cloud of incense shall envelope the covering that is over the Ark of the covenant, lest he die.” (Leviticus, 16:12-13)

I'm greatly tempted to run into midrash and myth relating to all the exotic things that were housed within and below this inner sanctum. But all of those relate to the Temple, and here in the Mishkan we have the Ark of the covenant. The Day of Atonement aims at cleansing the contamination we've brought on our sacred space. Remember we began with the similarity between the construction of the Mishkan and the creation of the world?

‘And Adonai took the human and set him down in the garden of Eden to till it and watch it’ (Genesis 2:15).

What has been contaminated is our human pact with Goddess way back when in the days of creation . Our original covenant, or assignment on Earth, was to “till it and watch it” – לעבדה ולשמרה. The Heb. here is interesting, especially relating to the word לעבדה. The assignment to watch (לשמר) is quite understandable, to be wardens of this place. לעבדה, on the other hand is usually understood as working the Earth, being good gardeners. But, the root for עבד has another meaning in biblical Heb. which is to worship. **So, perhaps, our role is to guard the Earth and pay homage to it, worship it, make it the focal point of our spirituality.**

That was our original covenant with Goddess, but our actions and hubris pile up layer upon layer of contamination. Looking back at the story of Nadav and Avihu, we might find in it a parallel to the story of eating from the Tree of knowledge of good and bad. The first Human sin and the first Priestly sin were both about misusing our power.

And so, every year the High Priest had to go into the holiest place of creation in order to cleanse that original covenant, as well as our own covenant with Adonai. Every year we are called upon to focus again on our immense power as humans, and decide again and again – do we want to partner in cleansing and *maintaining* Creation (we don't create like She does), or do we want to use our power to imitate creation – but bring about destruction?

Some thoughts for the end

I find Leviticus in general, and this ritual, to be fascinating in the way it deals with contamination (both physical and spiritual) and I think we must learn how to reimagine these rituals for our time.

For this to happen, we must stop constantly dwelling on apocalyptic images of destruction, and rather focus our vision on cleansing. I totally accept the science stating our own human action is bringing on a mass extinction and overturning the natural world.

We are defiling the Earth.

My only proposition is that our stories move to focus on acts of purification. And what better way to start than revisiting the ancient ritual of Yom Kippur.

To end, let's read together on page 494 of our Machzor:

"I used to journey at the heat of summer's day

To the kingdom of magnificent tranquillity -

To the forest's dense thickets.

There between God's trees which had not heard the axe's echo,

I used to wander whole hours by myself,

Uniting with my heart and with my God until I came,

Stepping over, passing between golden snares,

To the Holy of Holies in the forest - the pupil of its eye"

*(Excerpt from the poem **Ha'Breichah** by Chaim Nachman Bialik)*