

# **Rituals for the Day of Atonement**

## **A D'var Torah on *Parashat Acharei Mot* (Lev. 16:1-18:30)**

**By Ellen Soler**

*“Vay’dabeir Adonai el-Moshe acharei mot sh’nei b’nei Aharon....”*

*“Adonai spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron’s two sons....”*

This Torah portion begins with a very striking event: the death of Aaron’s two sons. Yet, as one continues with *Parashat Acharei Mot* and the detailed description of what Aaron is told to do in preparing to enter the “Holy of Holies,” the critical importance of conforming to the prescribed ritual becomes very evident. Why is the ritual so important? Why does God require that the ritual be performed in such a specific manner? And, how do we personalize this process?

One of the key words here is process. First, God warned Moses to tell Aaron that he was only to enter the *Beit HaMikdash* for specific purposes, not capriciously, making a clear reference to the death of Aaron’s sons. Then, God stipulated to Moses the preparations that Aaron needed to make in the process of purification and expiation. After taking a ritual bath, Aaron was to change into sacral vestments: garments made of pure linen void of any gold stitching so as not to have any connection, even remotely, with the golden calf. Then, Aaron was to offer a bull, to make expiation for himself and his household

Next, Aaron was to bring two he-goats to the entrance of the tent of meeting to cast lots: the first goat would be killed and offered as a sin offering to God. In this way, Aaron was to atone for the tent of meeting and the altar. He also was to “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....”<sup>1</sup> Carrying, thus, the sins of the Israelites, the goat would be taken into the wilderness (by a person selected in advance) and set free. In this manner, the Israelites’ sins would be removed and cast away.

Following the ritual of the “Azazel-goat,” Aaron would enter the tent of meeting by himself. At this point, Aaron was to burn incense. And, through the cloud from the burning incense, Aaron was to proceed with the ritual. He was to sprinkle blood from the sacrificial animals on and before the mercy seat in order to make atonement for all of Israel. Then, Aaron would exit the tent of meeting, leaving his linen garments there, bathe, and change into another set of clothes.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 16:21.

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 16:1-23.

It is quite interesting to see how God had commanded such ritual be followed so specifically. According to Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, the message of the Day of Atonement is a personal one that assists each individual in developing a more “harmonious relationship with God and with other people.”<sup>3</sup> However, Rabbi Plaut recognizes the great length to which the parashah goes to explain the rituals of purification and expiation (largely through animal sacrifices, the sprinkling of the sacrificial blood, and the sending of the goat to Azazel). There is even a theory that attempts to establish a possible link between the sacrificial ritual and a theorized ancient Babylonian ceremony called *kuppuru*. This ceremony consisted of the cleansing (most probably performed by a priest) of an ancient Babylonian temple.<sup>4</sup>

The end of Leviticus 16 offers a precise and personal statement of the true intent for our observing Yom Kippur: “*For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be clean before Adonai.*”<sup>5</sup>

Here we finally have a reference to internalization of this process of atonement on an individualized, more personal level. It is stated that for Yom Kippur we are to practice self-denial. Today this is done through fasting. Rabbi Plaut also explains that after the destruction of the Temple, Yom Kippur continued to be actively observed. Individuals could experience atonement through teshuva (often defined as repentance), prayer, and charity. Teshuva, when it becomes this kind of personal process, is often considered more of a return to God.<sup>6</sup> In this manner, atonement becomes more real to us as individuals. We spend the time on introspection and honestly try to follow ritual as laid out for us. We make amends to those we have hurt and take responsibility for our transgressions. We say our sins aloud and ask God for forgiveness. This process aids in restoring our relationships with the others around us as well as with God. It is this annual act of renewal that brings us back to God.

In one of his Torah commentaries, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson also makes reference to this restorative process and to the linking of ritual and ethics: “Ritual requires ethics to root it in the human condition, to force it to express human needs ... Ethics requires ritual to lend substance to lofty ideals, to remind, on a regular basis, of ethical commitments already made ... Ritual without ethics becomes cruel. Ethics without ritual becomes hollow. The two need each other to teach restraint, balance, and

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<sup>3</sup> “The Message of the Day of Atonement,” a commentary in *The Torah – A Modern Commentary*; Edited by W. Gunther Plaut; Union of American Hebrew Congregations; 1981; p. 858.

<sup>4</sup> “The Origins of Yom Kippur;” Plaut; *op. cit.*, p. 859.

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 16:30.

<sup>6</sup> “Atonement and Return;” Plaut; *op. cit.*, p. 861.

compassion. By blending ritual and ethics, we shift the focus from our perspective to God's."<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Artson says that rituals practiced in relation to Yom Kippur assist us in relating to one another as a community (enter ethics) and relating to God (enter spirituality). We are reminded of God and our covenant with God, therefore, every time we follow the rituals.

In his *Laws of Repentance*, Maimonides discusses how everyone is responsible for turning inward and identifying any sins he or she may have committed. He also discusses levels of repentance and at what point one's sins are forgiven. Maimonides addresses how we make amends to God as well as to other people. Part of this responsibility is confessing the sin verbally, seeking forgiveness, and vowing not to commit the sin again. Maimonides calls this process of atonement a "returning to God."<sup>8</sup>

In review, *Parashat Acharei Mot* is not just a reflection of disassociated rituals; rather it is a spiritual and ethical process that can assist us in repairing and/or reconstructing our relationship with God. There are those who fail to find any personal meaning in the rituals associated with Yom Kippur. There are those who ask what all of this has to do with us as individuals. How does this all apply to our world and to us today? I believe that part of the answer is in how honest we are about ourselves: where we are now, where we want to be next year at this time, and how we plan to get there. It is even a very true part of human nature that if one were to follow the same process over and over, an internal transformation really would happen. It is something personal to each individual.

It is in this transformation, this process of observance, that we can become more Jewish. It is in our ethical observance of this ritual that we not only can relate to our world more appropriately, but also can live up to our own responsibility to uphold our end of the covenant we made with God.

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<sup>7</sup> "Ritual and Ethics: A Holy Blend," a commentary on *Parashat K'doshim* by Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, University of Judaism.

<sup>8</sup> Maimonides' *Sefer HaMada*, "Laws of Repentance," Chapter One.