**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**A River Flows from Eden:**

**The Garden of Eden**

**as the Inner Source of the Jewish Holidays**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #04:**

**The Atonement that Purifies – Part I:**

**The Unique Service of Yom Kippur**

**I**

**Atonement and Purification**

**Introduction**

The primary purpose of Yom Kippur is atonement (*kappara*): "For on this day shall atonement be made for you (*yekhapper aleikhem*)" (*Vayikra* 16:30). This finds expression in the name of the day, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and in the many times that the idea of atonement is mentioned in the Biblical passage dealing with the Yom Kippur service.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the sections that precede the passage dealing with Yom Kippur, we already encounter a broad system for achieving atonement, i.e., the sacrificial system. Atonement is the characteristic feature of the sin- and guilt-offerings. "And the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven" (*Vayikra* 4:31); "And he shall bring his forfeit to the Lord… and the priest shall make atonement for him as concerning his sin" (*Vayikra* 5:6).

Even the first offering described in the book of *Vayikra*, the burnt-offering, which is fundamentally brought not as an obligation relating to some sin, but as a free-will offering, includes the idea of atonement: "And it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him" (*Vayikra* 1:4). We see then that both the sacrificial system and the Yom Kippur service are directed toward the same objective, namely, atonement.

Despite the common theme, and despite the fact that on Yom Kippur as well the sacrificial service occupies a central place, there are certain notable differences between the two systems. The most striking difference is the fact that Yom Kippur achieves atonement for all transgressions, including those committed with intention, whereas sacrifices secure atonement only for unintentional offenses.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Torah sums this up concisely in the verse: "And he shall confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, even all their sins" (*Vayikra* 16:21).

Another difference relates to the place where the atonement is achieved. Generally, the sacrifices are brought on the altar. By contrast, the animals of Yom Kippur are offered in other places: one goat is sent out to the wilderness to Azazel and is killed in a manner unlike the slaughter of all other offerings. The blood of the second goat, "upon which the lot fell for the Lord" (*Vayikra* 16:9), along with that of the bull, is brought by the High Priest into the innermost chamber, the Holy of Holies. This is a unique phenomenon that has no parallel anywhere in the sacrificial system.[[3]](#footnote-3)

These differences make it clear that the atonement of Yom Kippur is not part of the atonement system of the sacrificial service, but rather a system that stands independently with its own unique character.

**Atonement and Purification: Two Separate Systems**

The Torah defines the nature of the atonement of Yom Kippur: "For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to purify you (*le-taher etkhem*); from all your sins shall you be purified before the Lord" (*Vayikra* 16:30). The verse refers to two different concepts: atonement and purification, *kappara* and *tahara*, two concepts which the first half of the Book of *Vayikra* deals with at length.

According to what follows from the plain sense of the text, atonement and purification belong to two different systems: the first is sin and atonement, and the second is impurity and purification. The book of *Vayikra* opens with the first system (with the sin- and guilt-offerings in *Parashot Vayikra-Tzav*) and continues to the second system (especially in *Parashot Tazria-Metzora)*. Thus the Torah dedicates separate units to deal with these areas. In the Mishna as well, these two issues are discussed in separate orders: the sacrifices that achieve atonement are found in the Order of *Kodashim*, impurity and purity in the Order of *Taharot*.

The two systems operate on two different levels: sin and atonement relate to man's world and the relationship between man and God. Man is commanded to observe certain *mitzvot* and to refrain from certain prohibitions. If one actively errs and unintentionally violates God's words, he or she may atone for the sin by way of the Torah's atonement system — the sacrifices.

The system of impurity and purity operates on a completely different plane, which can be called the plane of natural life. Impurity is related primarily to the phenomenon of death, which is the strongest expression of a defect in natural life systems. The first type of impurity taught to us by the Torah is the impurity of a carcass, which is connected to the death of animals. The ultimate source of impurity is a human corpse.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Death brings us together with the failure of the natural world to create perfect life. The death of a human being or of an animal expresses the fact that the world does not function as it would were it perfect, that nature is defective. Impurity expresses the disruption of the natural life systems. Man's impurity is not an expression of sin or of the nature of one’s relationship with God, but rather of one’s contact with the defects and deficiencies of natural reality.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Acceptance of Responsibility**

The differences between the two systems create a critical difference between them with respect to the degree of man's responsibility. The atonement system is connected to each person's responsibility for his or her sins, and therefore each person's atonement depends on the level of responsibility for the sin. A person who sins on account of circumstances beyond one’s control does not require atonement. A person who sins unwittingly requires atonement and must bring a sacrifice. A person who sins deliberately requires atonement, but owing to the severity of the transgression, cannot achieve atonement by way of a sacrifice. Therefore, the atonement of a sacrifice pertains essentially to cases of unwitting sin.

By contrast, impurity is a factual state of a person who has come into contact with death. This state is totally unconnected to the person's level of responsibility for creating the impurity. On the one hand, even one who contracts impurity by way of circumstances beyond one’s control requires purification; on the other hand, even one who deliberately contracts impurity may become purified. Impurity contracted deliberately is no more severe than impurity contracted by way of circumstances beyond the person's control.

Another ramification of the difference between the two systems finds expression in the modes of achieving atonement and purification, which are fundamentally different from each other. In order to atone for a sin, a person must bring a sacrifice, which stands in place of offering one’s own fat and blood to atone for this sin (see *Berakhot* 17a). In contrast, in order to purify oneself of impurity, a person must immerse in water: "It must be put into water, and it shall be impure until the evening; then shall it be pure" (*Vayikra* 11:32; see Rambam, *Hilkhot Mikvaot* 1:2). Purification in water is a sort of return to the initial point of life before it was blemished.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Yom Kippur: A Day of Atonement or a Day of Purification?**

We have seen a number of fundamental differences between the process of purification and the process of atonement. Still, the Torah summarizes the objective of the Yom Kippur service thusly: "For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to purify you; from all your sins shall you be purified before the Lord" (*Vayikra* 16:30), leading to several questions.[[7]](#footnote-7) This verse seems to mix up the distinct concepts presented at the beginning of the Book of *Vayikra*. It asserts that sin requires purification: "from all your sins shall you be purified before the Lord," and it teaches that this purification is achieved by way of the unique atonement of Yom Kippur. These two assertions contradict everything that we have seen thus far. Here sin is understood as impurity (*tuma*), and atonement is seen as a process that can purify. Why is sin perceived as impurity, and what does this mean?

The transition from the concept of atonement to the concept of purification expresses a far-reaching revolution. As we have seen, the atonement of Yom Kippur (unlike sacrifices) works for unwitting sins, deliberate sins, and rebellious sins, and it brings full atonement for all of Israel. How does atonement work for sins committed with full intention, and why doesn't the level of responsibility impact upon the possibility of atonement?

The initial answer to these questions is that the purification process is a process that does not depend on a person's level of responsibility. Therefore, relating to sins as impurity on Yom Kippur is what makes it possible to treat these sins in a way that does not depend on the person's level of responsibility, so that atonement may be achieved for all of one’s sins.

However, this argument itself is unclear. In the end a person's actions are one’s own responsibility, and they are not like impurity — which is a realistic phenomenon that affects every person whether one wants it or not! Is the conceptual change an arbitrary technical step for the purpose of achieving atonement, or does it reflect deeper conceptual principles?

**II**

**Sin, Impurity and Adam**

**Does Impurity Require Atonement?**

In order to understand what seems to be a mixing of the concepts of atonement and purification, let us set aside for now the section dealing with Yom Kippur, and let us consider the Torah sections of *Tazria-Metzora*, in which we also find phenomena that deviate from the separate principles of purification and atonement.

*Parashot Tazria-Metzora* deal primarily with four types of impurity:

* *Yoledet —* a woman who has just given birth
* *Metzora —* a person suffering from *tzara’at*, often translated leprosy, a malady which manifests in various dermatological conditions
* *Zav —* a man with a certain type of atypical genital emission
* *Zava —* a woman with a certain type of atypical genital emission[[8]](#footnote-8)

Like the impurity of a corpse and of a carcass, these impurities as well stem from the factual situation in which the person finds himself or herself; they do not depend on one’s intention. In the case of these impurities, the fact that impurity does not depend on the direct responsibility of the person is even more evident, as one does not become a *zav, zava* or *metzora* by choice, but against one’s will. Even the *yoledet* cannot have complete control over when she goes into labor, and during the experience, she is subject to great forces beyond her control.

What is the process of purification from these impurities? Each of the impure parties is required to wait a certain period of time (seven days and up, depending on the type of impurity), and afterwards immerse in water, as with other impurities. However, with these four types of impurity, we find a unique phenomenon: the waiting and the immersion in water do not complete the process, for after the purification is finished, the Torah demands atonement that is achieved through sin- and burnt-offerings.

Seemingly, this demand is unintelligible — surely the *yoledet*, the *metzora,* the *zav* and the *zava* did not sin. Why must the person offer a sacrifice if there was no sin, and why does the world of atonement interfere with the process of purification?

**The Atonement Offerings of Impure People**

In order to understand the Torah's demand of the impure to bring an atonement offering, let us remember that the fact that one’s impurity has ramifications upon one’s relationship with God. The impure person cannot enter the site of the resting of the *Shekhina*. It turns out that the impurity creates two things: a natural blemish in the person and distance from God. Therefore, apart from the repair of the natural blemish through immersion, the person must also offer a sacrifice of atonement to renew the connection to God and to be allowed to stand once again before Him.

All of the impurities that require at the end an offering of atonement are impurities that last at least seven days.[[9]](#footnote-9) The seven days of purification are considered a complete life cycle, as Creation was a weeklong process. Even though the person who contracts impurity has not sinned, the distance from God for an entire week is like expulsion from the holy. The renewed possibility of entering the holy after being purified obligates one to bring a sin- and a burnt-offering in order to stand once again before God — a sin-offering for the "expulsion" from the holy, and a burnt-offering as an offering brought when appearing before God.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Atonement for Sin**

A different explanation of the atonement required for certain impure people may also be suggested. It is possible that the need for atonement teaches us that in fact the person has sinned, and that the impurity comes as a punishment for this sin. For this reason, the person is required to undergo a double treatment; one is required to purify oneself of the impurity and to atone for the sin that brought about the impurity.

We find a model for this idea in the case of a *metzora*. In various places in the Bible, *tzara’at* appears as a punishment for sin. Miriam is struck by *tzara’at* for speaking ill of Moshe (*Bamidbar* 12), while Na’aman (II *Melakhim* 5) and Uziyahu (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 26) become *metzora*’im becauseof the sin of pride.

The Midrash sees the advent of both *zavim* and *metzora’im* as a consequence of sin:

Said Rabbi Yosei the Galilean: Come and see how great is the power of sin, for until they sent out their hands in sin, there were no *zavim* or *metzora’im* among them, but when they sent out their hands in sin, there were *zavim* and *metzora’im* among them. (*Yalkut Shimoni*, *Naso, #701*).

The Ramban, as well, takes this tack: "A sin-offering is required to atone for his sin, that it not cause him further sickness" (*Vayikra* 15:11).[[11]](#footnote-11)

On the other hand, it is more difficult to see the impurity of childbirth as a consequence of sin — we hope that a child has been born, a new life has come into the world, and the commandment to have children and the blessing of filling the earth have been fulfilled! *Chazal*, however,complete the picture and explain even the impurity of a *yoledet* as stemming from sin:

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai was asked by his disciples: Why did the Torah ordain that a *yoledet* should bring a sacrifice? He replied: When she kneels in bearing, she swears impetuously that she will have no further intercourse with her husband. The Torah, therefore, ordained that she should bring a sacrifice. (*Nida* 31b)

According to this, we seem to have a full explanation for the sacrifices of atonement that must be brought by the impure, that these offerings come to atone for their sins.

Even so, this is not a simple matter. First of all, it is difficult to overlook the fact that *Parashot Tazria-Metzora* do not mention any component of sin in their description of these impurities. Second, it is difficult to explain the words of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai in their plain sense, for even a *yoledet* who has not taken an impetuous oath must bring a sacrifice. In fact, *Torat Kohanim* presents the opposite picture with respect to a *yoledet*, and it is not prepared to see her offering as a simple offering of atonement for a sin that she has committed:

Whenever it comes for a sin, the sin-offering is mentioned before the burnt-offering. Here where it does not come for a sin, the burnt-offering is mentioned before the sin-offering. (*Torat Kohanim*, *Tazria*, 1, 4)

If so, how are we to understand the atonement offerings in the aforementioned cases of impurity? In order to answer this question, we will delve more deeply in the next *shiur* into the relationship between sin and impurity.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. "And he shall make atonement for himself, and for his house" (*Vayikra* 16:11), "and he shall make atonement for the holy place" (verse 16), "and he shall make atonement for himself, and for the people" (verse 24), and more. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. And as the section dealing with sin-offerings opens: "If a soul shall sin through error" (*Vayikra* 4:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This difference will be discussed at length in the *shiurim* dealing with the service involving the goats. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Midrash Aggada* (Buber), *Bamidbar* 19:16; Rashi, *Bamidbar* 19:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. So too prohibited foods, which are defined as "impure", even though they are not governed by the halakhic implications of impurity, are connected to the maintenance of life (eating). Some foods apparently impair some dimension of life. A living person is defined as "a living soul" (*nefesh chaya*), and regarding prohibited foods, the Torah says: "You shall not make your souls impure" (*Vayikra* 11:44). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This principle of purification as a return to the foundation of life in nature finds expression in various details of the purification process.

First, the purification process lasts seven days. Seven days constitute the fundamenal pattern of time in creation, and the seven-day process of purification returns a person to his or her initial state, so to speak, as if reborn.

Second, the purification process is usually carried out through immersion in water. Water is the source of life for day-to-day survival in nature, and the basis of all possibility of life. Water is not only the foundation of life in nature, but also the initial state of nature, reflecting its full potential. At the beginning of Creation, the whole world is covered with water and above it hovers the spirit of God: "And the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters" (*Bereishit* 1:2); from that point the created beings begin to be formed. So too, at the beginning of the formation of each person, the fetus is in water in the mother’s womb. In addition, the water that is required for immersion is water in its initial-natural state, water that has not come into contact with the artificial world of mankind. Hence, the return to natural life in its pure and primordial state is what purifies a person who has become defiled. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also *Be'er Miriam*, *Yom Ha-kippurim*, pp. 170-173. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. These impurities do not deal directly with the principal source of impurity, death, but they too are probably related to it and deal with life and death situations that are intertwined.

The impurities of *zav* and *zava* clearly reflect a disruption in the reproductive system and the bringing of life into the world.

A *metzora* is seen as one who is both dead and alive: "A *metzora* is considered like a corpse" (*Shemot Rabba* 1, 34). More than any other impure person, a *metzora* is required to leave all three camps of Israel in the desert, perhaps like the dead who are buried outside the place of human life. In addition, a *metzora* must act like a mourner: "His clothes shall be rent, and the hair of his head shall be loose, and he shall cover his upper lip" (*Vayikra* 13:45). The *metzora* must mourn, as it were, his or her own death.

The inclusion of a *yoledet* in this group is at first glance most surprising, since birth is a life-giving event. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to see that birth as well brings us together with certain aspects of death. The birthing process itself involves life-threatening danger, for which Shabbat may be desecrated. The woman herself, who embraced two lives until birth — her own and that of her fetus — parts from one of those lives when the baby emerges from her body. It may also be added that childbirth creates a life which, from the very first moment, is fated to end in death. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Therefore, for example, the impurity of an animal carcass, which is discussed in *Parashat Shemini*, does not require atonement, because in the case of a person who contracts impurity through contact with a carcass, the person who immerses is pure immediately at the beginning of the next day.

Why does a person who becomes impure through contact with a corpse not require atonement, even though the impurity lasts seven days? It is possible that the difference stems from the fact that the impurity is contracted through contact with an external body, whereas the impurity of a *zav, zava*, *metzora* or *yoledet* is impurity originating in the person's own body. An impure person requires atonement only for impurity for which he or she is the source, not for impurity that starts in some other body and is transferred through personal contact with that other body.

It must also be explained why a menstruating woman who is impure for seven days does not require an atonement offering, but this is not the forum to expand upon the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Meshekh Chokhma* (*Vayikra* 12:6) states:

And the burnt-offering is [required], apparently, because she had been forbidden to enter the sanctuary all the days of her purification, and now she comes to the sanctuary, and as a show of gratitude to God's name for having returned to her former strength, she should not come empty-handed; this is similar to a burnt-offering of appearance brought by a pilgrim when he appears in the Temple on a festival. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Disease is one of the channels of communication between God and man. See, for example, the verse: "And He said, If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God… I will put none of the diseases upon you, which I have put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord that heals you" (*Shemot* 15:26). *Chazal* discuss at length for which sin each disease comes; see *Shabbat* 32a-33b. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)