YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Parashat Acharei Mot**

**The Struggle between Good and Evil in the Yom Kippur Service**

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*Parashat Acharei Mot* opens with the special service performed by the High Priest to atone for the sins of the people of Israel. The means for achieving this atonement are unique, and the fact that they are necessary attests both to the importance of this service, and to the difficulty inherent in it. Only the High Priest can achieve the atonement of *Acharei Mot*, and he must wear special white garments and enter the Holy of Holies – where, generally speaking, no human foot is permitted to step. This service is performed only once a year – on Yom Kippur, the day noted for its holiness in comparison to all other days of the year, the only day on which the Torah commands that the people of Israel afflict their bodies and thereby approach the level of Moshe on Mount Sinai who neither ate nor drank.

Reading this *parasha* in its plain sense gives rise to fundamental question. This is not the first time the Torah discusses atoning for sins through sacrifices; this topic was addressed at length already at the beginning of the book of *Vayikra*, where the sacrifices necessary for achieving atonement are described in great detail. We learned there about the various types of sacrifice, depending on the sin involved as well as on the identity of the sinner: is he a commoner? A leader? An anointed priest? Poor or wealthy? Was it the entire congregation that sinned? It seemed then that the whole issue was exhausted, and yet, here the Torah revisits the topic of atoning through sacrificial services. Apparently, there is something essential still missing if we have not learned *Parashat Acharei Mot.* What, then, is that missing element? What principle is added in our *parasha* that we have not yet encountered in the earlier chapters of the book of *Vayikra*?

The question grows when we compare the details of the atonement in the two places. All of the special measures mentioned above – the High Priest and his garments, the Holy of Holies, etc. – are absent from the beginning of the book of *Vayikra*, giving the clear impression that atonement is possible even without them. There are other differences as well. The service described in *Acharei Mot* includes the burning of incense, and there is a goat that must carry the people’s sins to a desolate place. There, confession of sins plays a central role, whereas regarding the sin-offerings and guilt-offerings spelled out at the beginning of *Vayikra*, there is no mention of confession, apart from a single case – the variable (*oleh ve-yored*) sin-offering (*Vayikra* 5:5: "And it shall be, when he shall be guilty in one of these things, that he shall confess that in which he has sinned"). These differences sharpen our sense that atonement is actually a much more difficult and complicated process than we might have understood from *Parashat Vayikra*. And it also seems that recognition of the aforementioned differences can bring us closer to understanding the message the Torah wishes to convey to us through them.

One linguistic difference in particular, between our *parasha* and *Parashat Vayikra*,sheds light on the substantive difference between them. The term *kapara*, "atonement," appears in these passages in two senses: with regard to the person who sinned and with regard to the sin itself. As for the second sense – with regard to the sin – attention should be paid to an important difference in formulation. In *Parashat Acharei Mot*, the Torah says: "And he shall make atonement for the holy [place], **from** the impurities of the children of Israel and **from** their transgressions, for all their sins [*u-****mi****-pish'eihem le-khol chatotam*]" (16:16); and similarly: "And this shall be an everlasting statute to you, to make atonement for the children of Israel **from** all their sins [***mi****-kol chatotam*] once in the year" (16:34). That is to say: atonement **"from"** **[*mi*]**sin.

In contrast, the formulation at the beginning of the book of *Vayikra* is: "And the priest shall make atonement for him **for** [**or “about”; *al***]his sin that he has sinned, and he shall be forgiven" (4:35, regarding a sin-offering brought by an ordinary individual); "And the priest shall make atonement for him **for** [***al***] his sin that he has sinned" (5:13, regarding a variable sin-offering); "And the priest shall make atonement for him **for** [***al***] the error which he committed" (5:18, regarding a questionable guilt-offering); "And the priest shall make atonement for him… **for** [***al***] whatever he does so as to be guilty thereby" (5:26, regarding a guilt-offering for robbery). In short, the prevalent formulation is atonement “**for” [*al*]** sin.

(There are two exceptions: regarding the goat brought by a leader, it says: "And the priest shall make atonement for him **from** his sin [***mi****-chatato*]" (4:25); and regarding a variable sin-offering, it says twice: "And the priest shall make atonement for him **from** his sin [***mi****-chatato*]" (5:6 and 5:10). We will discuss the exceptions below.)

Why does the Torah use only the phrase "atonement **from** sin" in *Parashat Acharei Mot*? The answer is simple. We already cited above the verse: "And he shall make atonement for the holy [place], from the impurities of the children of Israel and from their transgressions, for all their sins," in which we see that Torah draws a comparison between *impurity* and *transgression*. The idea of atonement from *sin* as a means of *purification* also appears later in the same chapter: "For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to purify you; from all your sins shall you be pure before the Lord" (16:30). *This* is the new idea that the Torah presents here in relation to sin. Thus far, we encountered sin as a moral failure, as a mistake, as an oversight. Here, on the other hand, sin is identified as a dark force that threatens man and defiles him. Sin is not merely a mistake, but the opening of the door to evil as a spiritual force, an exposure of the soul to the impurity that strives to penetrate human life and undermine it. The comparison of sin to impurity means that the impurity of sin passes to a person even through light contact (like the halakhic impurity contracted through physical contact), contact that exposes a person to a moral "virus" that is liable to cast him down into Gehinnom. Liberation from that invasive and contagious disease requires intensive and concentrated treatment, the mobilization of all means of holiness and purification – the High Priest, the Holy of Holies, the holiest day. The impurity of sin must be cast upon a goat that will bring it to a place of desolation; like a dangerous chemical substance or an object infected with a disease, it must be brought to a place void of human habitation, where it cannot lead to destruction.

As the verses in our *parasha* make clear, this concept of sin calls for atonement not only for people, but for the holy sanctuary itself. After all, all the impurity of sin drains into the sanctuary when the people of Israel bring their sacrifices there. The very attention to sin, even while atoning for it, causes the sanctuary to be infected with impurity, and this requires atonement and purification for the tent of meeting and the altar.

It seems that we can formulate the matter as follows: According to the beginning of the book of *Vayikra*, a sin is a wrong, erroneous action on the part of a person; according to *Parashat Acharei Mot*, sin is a force of impurity that penetrates the human soul, while the person himself is in a passive state. According to the first understanding, the person needs atonement for the bad deed that he performed. According to the second understanding, he needs atonement from the sin that defiled the purity of his soul. It is obvious that from the perspective of *Parashat Acharei Mot*, the confrontation with sin is much more difficult, and it constitutes a real struggle. Against the evil that strives to penetrate, it is necessary first of all to fight and put up barriers; and when those precautionary measures fail, great efforts are needed to cleanse the person's life and restore it to its purity.

This is not the forum to fully review our sources in search of the traces of each conception of sin. However, it can be briefly noted that the lives of the patriarchs seem to reflect these two understandings in different stages. When the Rambam in chapter 1 of *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* describes the confrontation between Avraham and the "evil" of his generation, he talks about humanity being shrouded in the darkness of ignorance, erring in its path due to a cognitive failure, and he describes Avraham as a beacon of knowledge and wisdom who authored books and exhorted the masses, teaching knowledge and opening the eyes of those who had strayed from the truth. Here, evil is not aggressive, but ignorant; evil is nothing but a mistake, which fades away by itself when a wise man turns on the light.

On the other hand, Yaakov's struggle with the evil embodied in his brother Esav was much more demanding. This conflict is symbolized by his fighting against Esav's angel – the spiritual force that wanted to overthrow Yaakov. That same angel managed to injure Yaakov by way of a light contact – "And he touched the hollow of his thigh" (*Bereishit* 32:26) – an allusion to his defiling power, which does not need more than momentary exposure, a trivial distraction, to cause significant damage.

Now we must go back to the beginning of the book of *Vayikra* and try to understand the exceptions – why we find markers of *Acharei Mot* there as well. The main exception there is regarding the variable sin-offering, where we find atonement "from” his sin as well as the only mention of confession in this section. In light of what we have said, it is not difficult to understand why. Most of the sins for which the Torah requires a variable sin-offering are described in the verses as occurring in a passive manner: "And if any one sin, in that he hears the voice of adjuration, he being a witness, whether he has seen or known, if he does not utter it, he shall bear his iniquity" (5:1). And similarly: "Or if one touches any impure thing… or if he touches the impurity of man" (5:2-3). Here, the Torah relates to sins that were committed in a moment of inattention – through hearing, seeing, or touching impurity. These situations demonstrate the threat of sin, which may enter into a person's life in a time of distraction. It is not surprising, therefore, that the atonement for these sins must bear the same character of purification that is inherent in *Parashat Acharei Mot* – confession and renunciation of the sin. In *Parashat Vayikra*,these concepts appear only in connection with certain sins, because of their particular character. In *Parashat Acharei Mot*, this approach is expanded to encompass evil as a whole.

I mentioned that there is also another exception at the beginning of *Vayikra* – the sin-offering of a leader. Why does a leader, more than others, need atonement *from* sin, and not just atonement *for* sin? The answer is that the Torah views a leader's sin as something natural that comes "on its own."

The Torah writes about a leader: "When a leader sins" (4:22), and *Chazal* said about this in *Horayot* (10a): "'When a leader sins' might have been taken to imply a decree. Hence it is stated: 'If the anointed priest shall sin.' As there the meaning is 'if and when he sins,' so here too, the meaning is 'if and when he sins.'" That is to say, one might have thought the Torah is describing the sin of a leader as something that comes of necessity, thus it was important to prove that this is not the case.

However, the *Torah Temima* there cites in the name of the *Zohar*: "'When a leader sins' – he will certainly sin." What the Gemara saw as a possible initial understanding that must be corrected, the *Zohar* sees as a precise reading based on the wording of the verse.

Why should the leader's sin be taken for granted? Let us turn to the words of the Rambam in his commentary to *Avot* 1:10. The *mishna* there says, "Hate acting the superior," and the Rambam explains, "In the pursuit of authority, a person will experience trials in the world and difficult situations, because he will be jealous of people and stand up against his opponents, and he will forfeit his religion, as they said: When a person receives an appointment below, he becomes wicked above." Thus, a leader is different from other people. Evil lurks at his door in great measure, and he must guard himself – even more than other people – against its dangerous intrusion. For this reason, a leader's sin is akin to contagious impurity, and atonement "for" it does not suffice. What is necessary is atonement and purification "from" it.

(Translated by David Strauss)