YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**YOM KIPPUR 5785**

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In memory of Batya Furst *z"l*, *niftera* 28 Elul 5765.   
Dedicated by her family.

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In memory of all our holy soldiers and brethren who fell *al kiddush Hashem*, and with the fervent hope and prayer that the hostages will return safely and the injured will have a speedy recovery.

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**The Transformation of the *Kohen Gadol* – and Ourselves**

**By Prof. Alan Jotkowitz**

The first *mishna* in *Yoma* teaches:

Seven days before Yom Kippur, they separate the High Priest from his home to the chamber of the officials. And they prepare another priest to take his place in case he becomes disqualified. Rabbi Yehuda says: They also prepare for him another wife lest his wife die, for the verse states: “And he shall make atonement for himself and his household,” (Leviticus 6:16); “his household” means his wife. They said to him: If that were so, there would be no end to the matter. (Mishna *Yoma* 1:1)

What is the purpose of the *Kohen Gadol*’s separation in advance of Yom Kippur? A number of explanations can be found. For instance:

“They separate the High Priest.” Why do they separate him? [You ask] why they separate him?! [Is it not] as we have said, whether according to the derivation of R. Yochanan or that of Reish Lakish [regarding the derivation behind this practice; see below]? No, this is what [the questioner] was saying: Why separate *from his house* [i.e., his wife]? It was taught in a *beraita*: R. Yehuda ben Beteira said: Lest his wife turn out to be under uncertainty of being a *nidda*,and he has relations with her. Are we speaking of wicked people? Rather: Lest he have relations with his wife and she will [*then*] be found to be a possible *nidda*. (*Yoma* 6a)

Apparently, the *Kohen Gadol* was separated as a precautionary maneuver so he would not inadvertently become impure through relations with his wife and thus be unable to perform the Yom Kippur service. This is similar to the reasoning behind Rabbi Yehuda’s view that there should be another potential wife on hand for the Kohen Gadol, as well as the reason the *Kohen Gadol* would avoid sleeping on Yom Kippur Eve (see *Yoma* 18a).

However, many sources point to other important elements of the *Kohen Gadol*’s separation in the days leading up to the *avoda* of Yom Kippur.

**Separation for Preparation: Learning the Procedure**

The second *mishna* in the *perek* might help us better understand another purpose of the separation:

During these seven days, he sprinkles the blood, burns the incense, prepares the lamps, and offers the head and the hind leg. All other days, if he chooses to offer, he may do so, for the High Priest has first rights regarding offerings and regarding portions. (Mishna *Yoma* 1:2)

A *beraita* elaborates:

It was taught in accordance with R. Yochanan [who said the High Priest’s separation was derived from the consecration of the *Mishkan*]: “With this [*bezot*] shall Aaron come into the holy place” (*Vayikra* 16:3), i.e., with that mentioned in that section. Which? The section of the consecration. And what is mentioned in the section about the consecration? Aaron was separated for seven days and then officiated for one day, and Moses transmitted to him throughout the seven days, in order to trainhim in the service. [Thus] also for future generations, the High Priest is to be separated for seven and officiate for one, and two scholars of the disciples of Moses – to exclude Sadducees – transmit to him throughout the seven days, in order to train him in the service. (*Yoma* 4a)

The Rambam explains:

For all of these seven days, he gets used to performing the Temple service. He casts the blood on the altar, offers the incense, kindles the lamps, and offers the limbs of the continuous offering on the altar's pyre so that he will be familiar with the Temple service. (*Hilkhot Avodat Yom Ha-kippurim* 1:5)

Rashi has a slightly different formulation and understands *le-chancho* not as providing hands-on training but more simply as “to teach him.” This is consistent with the next *mishna*, which states:

They provided him with elders from the elders of the court, and they read before him regarding the service of the day. And they would say to him: My Master, High Priest, read with your own mouth. Perhaps you have forgotten, or perhaps you did not learn [in the first place]. (Mishna *Yoma* 1:3)

According to these formulations, the purpose of the separation was to prepare the *Kohen Gadol* for the exceeding complex and difficult *avodat Yom Ha-kippurim*.

But there seem to be other elements involved as well, even besides these factors of precaution and preparation.

**Separation for Sanctification: Encountering the *Shekhina***

The *Yerushalmi* states:

R. Yose ben R. Abun said… Just as Moshe didn’t enter the inner sanctum until he was sanctified in the cloud for seven days, so too Aharon is not to enter the inner sanctum until he is filled with the anointing oil for seven days. (*Yerushalmi Yoma* 1:1)

The implication here is that the separation was part of a process of sanctification.

Returning to the *Bavli*, there too we find an indication that the *Kohen Gadol* was separated for the sake of *kedusha*, sanctity:

There is no difference between a priest who burns a [red] heifer and the High Priest on Yom Kippur except that [the latter]’s separation is for the purpose of **sanctity**, and his fellow priests may touch him, while [the former]’s separation is for **ritual purity** and his fellow priests may not touch him. (*Yoma* 8a-8b)

A *kohen* preparing to handle a *para aduma* was required to separate and avoid physical contact with others who might transmit impurity to him. The *Kohen Gadol* preparing for Yom Kippur, however, was permitted physical contact with other priests – because his separation was not a matter of purity, but of creating a special degree of sanctity. Rashi explains the nature of this sanctity:

“This one’s separation is for sanctity” – to enter into the “camp” of the *Shekhina*…separate from any frivolity (*kalut rosh*), for awe would fall upon him when he is separated from humankind. (Rashi ad loc., s.v. *she-zeh perishato li-kedusha*)

In another context as well, the Gemara teaches:

R. Matya ben Cheresh says: Scripture’s purpose [in the verse describing Moshe being called into the cloud at Sinai] was solely to inspire him with awe, so that the Torah be given with awe, with dread, and with trembling, as it is said: “Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling” (*Tehillim* 2:11). (*Yoma* 4b)

And there too, Rashi explains:

“To inspire him with awe” – He too reasons… that separation for Moshe was to separate him from people so that awe would fall upon him when he was alone… [to prepare] to enter into the “camp” of the *Shekhina* with awe. (Rashi ad loc., s.v. *le-ayeim alav*)

The separation of the *Kohen Gadol* from his home and worldly pursuits was part of a process of sanctification to instill in him a sense of awe before encountering the *Shekhina*.

Whether the purpose of the separation was to prepare for the *avoda* itself or it was part of a process of sanctification might depend on the source of the *halakha*.

**From where do we learn it?**

A passage we saw above (*Yoma* 6a) referenced two opinions about the derivation of the *halakha* that the *Kohen Gadol* must be separated before Yom Kippur: R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish. We find on the very first page of the tractate that R. Yochanan learns this requirement from a comparison with the sequestration of the *kohanim* before the consecration of the *Mishkan*, as they prepared to perform the *avoda* for the first time:

From where are these words [that it is necessary to separate the *Kohen Gadol* before Yom Kippur] derived? R. Minyumi bar Chilkiya said that R. Machseya bar Idi said in the name of R. Yochanan: The text reads, “As has been done this day, [so] the Lord has commanded to do, to make atonement for you” (*Vayikra* 8:34): “to do” – these are the acts with the [red] heifer; “to make atonement” – these are the acts of Yom Kippur. (*Yoma* 2a)

At the time of the consecration, Aharon and his sons were instructed to remain in the *Ohel Moed* for seven days. This instruction is followed by the verse “as has been done this day…” – which R. Yochanan interprets as an indication that such sequestering is required both before the ritual of the red heifer and before Yom Kippur.

Reish Lakish, however, learns the requirement from a different source:

Reish Lakish said to R. Yochanan: From where did you derive it? From the consecration. If so… [R. Yochanan] said to him, rather, from where do [you,] Master, derive it?

He said: From [the account of] Sinai, as it is written, “And the glory of the Lord abode upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered him six days, and He called to Moshe on the seventh day” (*Shemot* 24:16). Since it is written “and He called to Moshe on the seventh day,” what [is conveyed by mentioning “six days”? This builds a paradigm that anyone who enters the camp of the *Shekhina* requires separation for six days. (*Yoma* 3b)

Rav Soloveitchik[[1]](#footnote-1) and others explain that according to R. Yochanan, the impetus for the separation is the performance of the *avoda*: just as the *avoda* of the consecration service required separation, so too does the *avoda* of Yom Kippur. According to Reish Lakish, the impetus is the encounter with the *Shekhina*: just as the *Shekhina* was encountered, at Har Sinai so too it is encountered on Yom Kippur.

If the obligation is based on the *avoda*, then we can easily understand that part of the process would necessitate practice and learning. If the obligation is based on preparing for an encounter with the *Shekhina*, then we can easily understand that it would involves sanctification and instilling a sense of awe and trepidation. And of course, both aspects can exist simultaneously on Yom Kippur.

**Separation…Then Transformation**

It appears from the *mishnayot* in *Yoma* that, in addition to performing the *avoda* on behalf of all of Israel, the *Kohen Gadol* goes through a personal transformation as well. In the *mishnayot* in the first *perek*, he is almost always presented in a passive way, as someone who is acted upon. Indeed, the sanctification of a *kohen* has been compared to that of a utensil used in the Temple service.[[2]](#footnote-2) He is objectified and even infantilized.

For example, the first *mishna* of the tractate states that the *Kohen Gadol* is separated, and according to Rabbi Yehuda, another wife is taken for him. It is not clear if he even has a say in who would be asked to be his potential substitute wife.

In the third *mishna*, he is handed over to the elders of the *beit din*, who read to him and speak to him like a child. They implore him to "read with your own mouth. Perhaps you have forgotten, or perhaps you did not learn.” On the eve of Yom Kippur, they would stand him up and show him the various animals involved in the service.

The fourth *mishna* describes how they would control his diet. On *erev Yom Kippur*, they would limit his food intake and wouldn’t let him sleep.

In the fifth *mishna*, the *Kohen Gadol* is handed over to elders of the priesthood and made to promise he won’t make any changes in the Yom Kippur service.

In the sixth *mishna*: if he wasn’t learned, the elders would read to him – and this was apparently the norm, as Zekharya ben Kevutal testified.

The seventh *mishna* relates how they wouldn’t let him sleep (even though he might have wanted to), and it implies they would even play games with him to prevent him from sleeping.

Throughout this period, the elders controlled the *Kohen Gadol*’s eating, sleeping, interactions, and education.

But then a dramatic reversal takes place at the beginning of the seventh *perek* of *Yoma* – immediately after atonement is achieved, as signified by the string turning white:

The High Priest then came to read [Torah]. If he wanted to read while wearing the linen vestments, he would, and if not, he would read while wearing his own [personal, not priestly] white robe. The synagogue attendant would take a Torah scroll and hand it to the head of the synagogue, the head of the synagogue hands it to the assistant, and the assistant hands it over to the High Priest. The High Priest stands and receives it and reads standing. He reads *Acharei Mot* (*Vayikra* 16) and “But on the tenth…” (*Vayikra* 23:26). Then he rolls up the Torah scroll, holds it in his bosom, and says: “More than that which I have read before you is written here,” and he recites “On the tenth [day of this seventh month]” of the Book of *Bamidbar* (29:7) by heart. (Mishna *Yoma* 7:1)

This description of the ending of the Yom Kippur service is the exact opposite of what is described at the beginning of the tractate. In the seventh *perek*, the *Kohen Gadol* decides which clothes to wear, no one is telling him what to do, and throughout the *perek* he is active as opposed to passive. In the first *perek*, he wasn’t able to read; now, he is transformed into the teacher of all of Israel. In the first *perek*, he was taught and read to by the elders; in this *perek*, he is the center of attention.

The *perek* ends with the *Kohen Gadol* being escorted back to his house. The escorts are passive; he is now in the lead. He returns to his house, hopefully a new person, and to his loved ones – and not a substitute wife. He puts on his own clothes and makes a party.

This shift hints to the spiritual transformation the *Kohen Gadol* goes through as a result of the preparation and performance of the Yom Kippur service. This remarkable personal transformation serves as a metaphor for the atonement of the Jewish People which hopefully occurs yearly.

**In a Time When There is No *Kohen Gadol***

Is there any relevance to these laws of the separation of the *Kohen Gadol* thousands of years after the Temple was destroyed? I believe there is, and a careful reading of the Rambam's *Hilkhot Teshuva* can show us how:

Since the goat sent [to Azazel] atones for all of Israel, the High Priest confesses upon it as a spokesman for all of Israel, as it is stated: "He shall confess upon it all the sins of the children of Israel" (*Vayikra* 16:21). The goat sent [to Azazel] atones for all transgressions in the Torah: [both] the severe and the lighter [sins], whether violated intentionally or inadvertently, whether [the transgressor] became aware of [the transgression] or not. All is atoned for through the goat sent [to Azazel].

At present, when the Temple does not exist and there is no altar of atonement, there remains nothing else aside from *teshuva*. *Teshuva* atones for all sins. Even a person who was wicked his whole life and repented in his final moments will not be reminded of any aspect of his wickedness, as it is stated, "The wickedness of the evil one will not cause him to stumble on the day he repents his wickedness" (*Yechezkel* 33:12). The essence of Yom Kippur atones for those who repent, as it is stated: "For on this day, it will be atoned for you" (*Vayikra* 16:30). (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 1:2-3)

Why does the Rambam mention the service of the goat sent [to Azazel] in *Hilkhot Teshuva*, when the issue is discussed in depth in *Hilkhot Avodat Yom* *Ha-kippurim*? And why does he need to mention that the *Kohen Gadol* does the confession? The answer can be found in the next *halakha*, where he rules that *teshuva* takes the place of the goat and altar – and so too, by implication, every individual takes the place of the *Kohen Gadol*, as we no longer have him to be our messenger to God in the process of attaining atonement.

In fact, it is not only after the destruction of the Temple is the individual Jew compared to the *Kohen Gadol*; there are also hints that this was the case when the Temple was standing. The Gemara tells us:

Thereupon [after the reading by the *Kohen Gadol*,]each would bring a scroll of the Torah from his house and read from it, in order to show the multitude its beauty. (*Yoma* 70a)

Furthermore, there are *Rishonim* who maintain that, like the *Kohen Gadol*, every individual has an obligation to read the Torah on Yom Kippur. In a similar manner, the Meiri teaches that the confession of the *Kohen Gadol* inspired all of Israel to perform their own personal confession (*Chibbur Ha-teshuva* 2:13) and the *Yereim* (263) maintains that this confession is a special mitzva of Yom Kippur.

If every Jew is transformed into the *Kohen Gadol*, then the preparation and the sanctification that the *Kohen Gadol* is required to do before Yom Kippur should also apply to us. We can also be transformed from objects to subjects – though like the *Kohen Gadol* of old, we too require much hard work and dedication to achieve such renewal.

**Achieving the Goal(s) of Yom Kippur**

We can understand this comparison to the *Kohen Gadol* if the role of the *Kohen Gadol*, as reflected in the seven days of separation, is centered on attaining atonement which is certainly needed by every Jew in the post-Temple period too. As the Rambam teaches, without the Temple and altar, we still have *teshuva* in our quest for atonement. But what if the focus is on encountering God in the Holy of Holies? How can this be relevant to our Yom Kippur today, after the Temple was destroyed?

The Rambam, based on Talmudic teachings, can help us answer that question as well. The goal of *teshuva* is not only atonement from sin, but also to restore our relationship with God:

Teshuva is great for it draws a person close to the *Shekhina*, as it is stated: "Return, O Israel, to God, your Lord" (*Hoshea* 14:2), and it is stated: "‘You have not returned to Me,’ declares God" (*Amos* 4:6); and it is stated: "‘If you will return, 0 Israel,’ declares God, ‘You will return to Me'" (*Yirmeyahu* 4:1) – meaning, if you will return in *teshuva*, you will cling to Me.

*Teshuva* brings near those who were distant. Previously, this person was hated before God, disgusting, distant, and abominable. Now, he is beloved and desirable, close, and dear.

Similarly, we find that with the same expression with which God separates [Himself] from the sinners, he also draws close those who repent, as it is stated: "Instead of saying to you: ‘You are not My nation,’ He will say to you: ‘You are the children of the living God’” (*Hoshea* 2:1). (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 7:6)

In his magisterial *teshuva* lectures, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein teaches that *teshuva*, just like the *avoda* of Yom Kippur, has two purposes – atonement and an encounter with God:

*Teshuva* has two fundamental channels: the moral and the religious. These two channels can be seen in the linguistic presentation of *teshuva* in our traditional texts as being *teshuva* "from" or *teshuva* "to.” The moral channel is "*teshuva* from,” the impetus to respond to sin and evil in their broadest sense and to rid oneself of them, expressed in, "turn, turn, from your evil ways" (*Yechezkel* 33:11). Similarly, the Rambam's introductory title for his *Hilkhot Teshuva* reads "That a sinner should repent from sin.” There is a recoil, a revulsion from sin and from evil in all its shapes and forms. However, this recoil has a positive side to it as well. It is a desire to get away from being soiled by sin and to achieve a life of purity and perfection, in which one has left behind his “evil ways" and has assumed a new life and possibly a new identity. That is the *teshuva* of the first two chapters of *Hilkhot Teshuva* and of many verses in the Tanakh. This moral *teshuva* is not satisfied with simply cleaning one's hands of sin and leaving it at that. It must also be conjoined by a desire and a vision to attain spiritual good, purity, and integrity.

The religious channel of *teshuva* is being drawn to something or Someone – "*el Hashem*" or “*ad Hashem*" – as in "Come, let us turn back to the Lord" (*Hoshea* 6:1). Here too, many biblical verses call on one to strengthen his connection with God. To engage in this type of *teshuva*, one must yearn to repair his relationship with God and once more enjoy His favor and His grace. One must aspire to have access to him and feel close to Him.[[3]](#footnote-3)

By emulating the spiritual journey of the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur, every Jew has the awesome opportunity to attain spiritual purity and renew his or her relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

1. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kuntres Be-Inyan Avodat Yom Ha-Kippurim*, Jerusalem, 1985, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for instance, *Meshekh Chokhma* on *Vayikra* 8:30, s.v. *vayikadesh et Aharon et begadav*…. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Aharon Lichtenstein, *Return and Renewal: Reflections on Teshuva and Spiritual Growth*, Jerusalem, Maggid Books, 2018, pp. 116-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)