



## “The Devil Made Me Do It”

*The Sanctuary and the Forgiveness of Sin*

Clifford Goldstein  
Editor and Author

**I**n the 1970s American comedian Flip Wilson used to recite the line, “The devil made me do it!” His point being, of course, that whatever sin he committed wasn’t his fault. He couldn’t help it. The devil made him do it.

In Jewish thought, sin is not seen as a necessity, something that we cannot help; rather, sin is the result of man’s own will and free choice. In other words, no one (not even the devil) can *force* us to sin. We sin only because we choose to sin, which is why we are answerable for it. How fair would it be, after all, if we had no choice but to sin, but were then punished for that sin? It would be like punishing a woman for being female, or a child for being young.

Also, despite the laughs Flip’s one-liner always got, nothing’s humorous about sin. It remains, today, what it has always been, and that is the most damaging, destructive, and pernicious force in creation. It’s hard for us, as sinners, to recognize what we’re so steeped in. How do we objectively

perceive that which has, in a sense, changed the very rhythms of the fermions and bosons that make up our being and all accessible physical reality? It’s not easy.

Nevertheless, the horizontal tragedies of sin are everywhere apparent, sucking life out of us from the moment our first two cells meet, mate, and make us what we are even before we become it. In every cry, in every chancre, in every broken bone and in every broken home—sin is the culprit. War, crime, perversion, oppression, these are surface reflections alone of the deeper issue, that of sin. There’s not a sorrow, a loss, a scar rooted and grounded in anything but sin, ours or someone-or-everyone else’s (it hardly matters whose). What matters is that *sin is*, and that every moment all that breathes suffers its consequences.

Yet the real tragedy of sin isn’t in the horizontal, in that which siphons life from every cell, in that which has disturbed the harmony of the four dimensions, in that which makes every heart beat one closer to its fi-

nal screaming, desperate spasm. The most basic, metaphysical consequences of sin exist in a realm we can access only by faith, never by sight or by touch or by reason. What we see, feel, and reason are only echoes, ripples, reflections of a deeper problem in a deeper reality. The real tragedy of sin exists in the vertical, in the rupture between heaven and earth, in the chasm between the creature and Creator. All that sin causes us to do to ourselves and to each other is because of what sin has done to us and to our relationship with God. Sin ruptured that relationship, caused an estrangement, and created a division between the Creator and the created so that the created became separated from the only source of existence, life, and purpose—a separation with consequences more dire than if the umbilical cord were severed in the womb, because what the created lost due to sin wasn’t just physical but spiritual, even eternal.

And, in direct response to this, the problem of sin, the Lord instituted the Hebrew sanctuary service—the

(temporary) means by which this rift could, at least in type, be healed, the means by which sinful man could be restored to His Lord and Creator.

“And they will make for Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell in their midst” (Exodus 25:8, author’s translation), the Lord said to the Hebrews after the flight from Egypt. How fascinating that this sanctuary, this *miqdash* (from the Hebrew word, *qdash*, which means, basically, “to set apart for holy use”) wasn’t just a place for the Lord to reside. It wasn’t just *beyt YHWH*, that is, “the house of the Lord,” the place where He manifested His presence. Instead, the *miqdash*, the sanctuary, was also the center of His salvation activity, the place where the people came to seek atonement, reconciliation, and forgiveness for their sins.

No wonder. If sin has been the culprit in causing the rift between man and His Maker (“For your iniquities have separated between you and your Lord, and your sins have caused Him to hide His face from you, that He will not hear”; Isaiah 59:2), then how appropriate for the sanctuary—the place where sin is forgiven, atoned for, eventually carried away—to also be the place where God will “dwell in their midst.” Man can approach the Lord in the sanctuary because the sanctuary is where sin, that which first severed man from God, is atoned for.

Over and over, in the context of the sacrifices, atonement happened through the sanctuary and its services: “and the priest shall make an atonement for them, and it shall be forgiven them” (Leviticus 4:20); “and the priest shall make an atonement for him as concerning his sin, and it shall be forgiven him” (Leviticus 4:26); “and the priest shall make an atonement for his sin that he hath committed, and it shall be forgiven him” (Leviticus 4:35). Atonement is clearly linked to forgiveness, and it happened with blood. “For the life of the flesh is in *hadam* [the blood], and I have set it for you on the altar in order to atone for your souls, because the blood, it will atone for the

soul” (Leviticus 17:11). Said the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, “For this reason, the blood, which to the ancients was the life power or soul, forms the essential part of the sacrificial atonement (see Leviticus 17:11). This is the interpretation given by all the Jewish commentators, ancient and modern, on the passage.” The Talmud (Zabachim 6a) concurs: “Surely atonement can be made only with blood, as it [Leviticus 17:11] says, *For it is the blood that maketh atonement.*”

Though much debate exists on the exact meaning of the sanctuary rituals (there’s not much explanation in the book itself; meaning has to be carefully extracted from the acts themselves), the idea of substitution appears. A person sinned and, through the death of the sacrificial animal, an amoral creature that did not sin (that’s not capable of sin), a person is forgiven. Again, *the Jewish Encyclopedia*: “In every sacrifice there is the idea of substitution: the victim takes the place of the human sinner. The laying of hands upon the victim’s head is an ordinary rite by which the substitution and the transfer of sin is effected.”

Tightly linked to substitution is the idea of the *bearing* of sin, a crucial component in the sanctuary service. Said Leviticus 5:1, “And if a soul that will sin hears the voice of an oath, and he was a witness or saw or knew of it but did not tell, he will *bear* his iniquity.” In contrast, after the death of Nadab and Abihu, Moses said to Aaron’s other sons, the priests, “Why have you not eaten the sin offering in the holy place, and God has given it to you to *bear* the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the Lord” (Leviticus 10:17).

Atonement is linked to forgiveness, and atonement is linked to the bearing of sin, that is, when someone else, other than the sinner, bears that sin in the sinner’s stead. This is the essence of what the *Jewish Encyclopedia* meant when it talked about substitution and the transfer of sin as seen in the Hebrew sanctuary service.

What’s fascinating too is the word

for “bear” in Leviticus 10:17, *nasa*; though the basic meaning of *nasa* is “to bear, to carry,” there are a few places where it is translated as “forgive.” Perhaps the most dramatic example is in Exodus 32, when Israel—having barely left Egyptian bondage—made and worshiped the golden calf. After Moses had destroyed the idol by grinding it into powder and strewing it upon the water, he interceded before the Lord for Israel, pleading; “Yet now, if you will *forgive* their sin; but if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of the your book, which you have written.” The verb translated “forgive” comes from *nasa*, which means the verse could just as easily been translated, “Yet now, if you will *bear* their sin; but if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of the your book,

*No one, not even  
the devil, can force  
us to sin.*

which you have written.” Moses was asking the Lord Himself to bear the sin of Israel?

This isn’t the only place that concept appears. In Exodus 34:6, 7, the text says, “The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, *forgiving* iniquity, transgression, and sin.” The word for “forgiving”? Again, from *nasa*, “to carry, to bear.” The Lord, merciful and gracious . . . *bearing* iniquity, transgression, and sin.

God Himself bearing the iniquity of His people?

All these truths, and so much more, are derived from the sanctuary service, the place where God chose to dwell among men, the place where He deemed to teach, not just Israel but the world, the truth about Him and His salvation. The place which taught how sin was to be forgiven, not just Israel’s sin, but the sin of whole world.

Even Flip Wilson’s.