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Yom Kippur

Roy E. Gane

Andrews University, gane@andrews.edu

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THE SUSAN & ROGER HERTOOG EDITION OF LEVITICUS

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THE KOREN
TANAKH
OF THE LAND
OF ISRAEL

LEVITICUS • ויקרא

EDITOR IN CHIEF

David Arnovitz

TORAH TRANSLATION BY

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l

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Editor in Chief

David Arnovitz

Rabbinic Adviser

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Academic Contributors

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Prof. Ada Taggar-Cohen, *Ancient Near East*

Rabbi Dr. Jeremiah Unterman, *Biblical Scholarship, Ancient Near East*

Contributors

David Arnovitz

Rabbi Uri Cohen

Design & Typesetting

Tomi Mager, *Layout and Typesetting*

Tani Bayer, *Art Director*

Eliyahu Misgav, *Art Director*

Esther Be'er, *Typography*

Dov Abramson Studio, *Design*

Academic Editor

Rabbi Dr. Jeremiah Unterman

Translation of Leviticus

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Project Manager

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Content Editor

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Proofreader

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Maps

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J. Rosenberg

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Marc I. Sherman

Indexer

Marc I. Sherman



Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur (from *yom [ha]kippurim*; Lev. 23:27–28), “the Day of Atonement,” is a unique annual renewal of the covenant between God and Israel that achieves two religious goals: purifying God’s Sanctuary and morally cleansing His people to a level of atonement that goes beyond simple forgiveness.

Other ancient Near Eastern pagan cultures also had rituals to purify their temples from accumulated contamination. Nonetheless, they had no concept of morally cleansing individual people, much less a nation. Partial parallels to the Day of Atonement rituals found in texts from the world of the Tanakh illuminate our understanding of and appreciation for this chapter’s description of the exceptional annual purification of the Israelite Sanctuary and the people.

As Jacob Milgrom showed, the Torah’s concept of contamination stands in stark contrast to the existing ancient Near Eastern notions of impurity. Impurity is introduced by the negative conditions and actions of people, as opposed to being caused by demonic forces or deity disapproval. On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest ritually purges the Sanctuary and its external altar by means of special purification offerings and burnt offerings (Lev 16:14–20a, 24, 33). The Yom Kippur sacrifices remove the spiritual contamination of the Sanctuary caused by human acts throughout the year, including:

- entering the Sanctuary while defiled with residues of severe ritual impurities resulting from physical conditions that

were symptomatic of the birth-to-death cycle of mortality (see Lev. 12–15; Num. 19);

- guilt from rebellious sins – no atonement by animal sacrifice was available (see Lev. 20:3; Num. 15:30–31, 19:13, 20); and
- guilt for minor violations of commandments, which the purification offerings remove from the sinners as a prerequisite to forgiveness by God (Lev. 4:1–5:13).

After purifying the Sanctuary, the High Priest dispatches a live goat to “Azazel,” which symbolically bears the sins of the Israelites into the wilderness, away from

The Torah’s concept of contamination stands in stark contrast to the existing ancient Near Eastern notions of impurity.

the community, which is thereby purified (16:10, 20–22).

The ritual ideologies and practices of other ancient Near Eastern cultures were fundamentally different: they involved polytheism, idolatry, and the occult, as opposed to the Torah’s ethical monotheism. Mesopotamians believed that impurities came from demons. For example, impurity that had accumulated in the Esagila temple of the god Marduk at Babylon was to be rit-

ually purified and exorcised from it on the fifth day of the annual Babylonian *Akitu* Spring New Year Festival. Cleansing of the room in the Esagila temple called Ezida, in preparation for the arrival of the image of the god Nabu for the festival, included wiping the walls of the room with the decapitated carcass of a ram to absorb impurity. The Akkadian word for this wiping off is *kuppuru*, which is cognate to *kipper*, “effect removal,” in Hebrew. However, the evil removed by the ritual was caused by demons, not moral failure or sin. There is no ancient Near Eastern evidence that sacred houses of deities could bear defilements from moral faults.

As in Israel, ancient Near Eastern contaminants, including moral faults, were sometimes viewed as substances that could adhere to a person or his material possessions and could be removed by physical actions. For example, a Hittite text provides rituals for purifying a house from bloodshed, evil impurity, threat, perjury, quarrel, sin, curses, and gossip.

Also, similar to the Tabernacle, ancient Near Eastern temples had to be kept free of contamination, and sacred foods had to be eaten in a state of ritual purity. The Hittite *Instructions to Priests and Temple Officials* require not only the ritual purity of temple staff members but also their moral purity, attained by refraining from stealing from gods or neglecting to properly celebrate festivals. However, as impurities from moral



➤ In the synagogue, Gerrit de Wet, 17th century

violations did not “infect” the Hittite temple, no cleansing process parallels the one described in Leviticus 16.

Some kinds of contamination that inevitably built up over time in ancient Near Eastern temples or on sacred objects could be removed through rituals at regular intervals. During the Ninth Year Festival of the Hittite god Telipinu, images of Telipinu and some other gods, and also a cult pedestal, were conveyed from Telipinu’s temple to a river, where the sacred objects were ritually washed, thereby removing ritual impurity. However, purification procedures in ancient Near Eastern rituals did not remove pollution from human sins as

did the rituals of the Day of Atonement.

An ancient Near Eastern deity could also periodically judge some of his or her people on New Year days, which were cyclical times of renewal. In the Sumerian *Nanshe Hymn*, at the New Year, the goddess Nanshe judged individuals supported by her temple regarding whether they had obeyed her ritual and ethical rules. Marduk judged the human king of Babylon, who denied wrongdoing, on the fifth day of the Babylonian *Akitu* Spring New Year Festival. In contrast, the Torah has a judgment day for all of the Israelites.

Earlier in the past year, some sins had

been atoned for (*k p r*) by purification of offerings and had been forgiven (*s l h*) by God (Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35, 5:10, 13). On Yom Kippur, the purification of the Sanctuary provided the second stage of atonement (Lev. 16). This atonement resulted in the purification of the entire people (vv. 29–34), which went beyond the forgiveness that had been granted earlier.

The purification of God’s Sanctuary confirms the idea of a merciful and just God – His earlier forgiveness of guilty but repentant people, who had accepted His sacrificial remedies, was shown to be just, and His condemnation of the disloyal was similarly just. • RG