**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

*PARASHAT ACHAREI MOT-KEDOSHIM*

“Before the Lord You Shall Be Purified”

# **By Rav Shimon Klein**

Introduction

Our *parasha* opens with a description of the way in which Aharon is to enter the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim*, “Thus shall Aharon come into the holy place…,” with a long list of sacrifices, incense, and Temple service that allows entry (vv. 1-28). The text then goes on to establish the Yom Kippur observance of the entire nation as “an everlasting statute” (vv. 29-31), and then stipulates the service of the *Kohen* *Gadol* – the continuation of the service of Aharon in each generation – as an everlasting statute as well (vv. 32-34). If we were to ask which is the more significant aspect of Yom Kippur – the entry of the *Kohen Gadol* into the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim* or the command to *Am Yisrael* to afflict themselves and the other laws pertaining to this day – we would most likely choose the former, without devoting much thought to the question. But is this in fact the case? What can we learn from the focus on Aharon throughout this unit, to the point where a separate unit must be appended clarifying that what Aharon is commanded to do also applies as an “everlasting statute”? It would have seemed more appropriate that the text provide a single description of the Yom Kippur service that applies both to Aharon and to future generations. The essential question that we will attempt to answer here is: what is the uniqueness of Yom Kippur as reflected in this unit?[[1]](#footnote-1)

Our chapter comprises three consecutive units, and collectively they present a certain picture. Our first step will be to understand what is generally happening in each of them.

“Thus Shall Aharon Come Into the Holy Place”

(1) And the Lord spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon, when they came near before the Lord, and died. (2) And the Lord said to Moshe: Speak to Aharon your brother, that he should not come at all times into the holy place within the veil before the covering which is upon the Ark, so that he will not die, for I appear in the cloud upon the covering. (3) Thus shall Aharon come into the holy place: with a young bullock for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering… (*Vayikra* 16:1-3)

These words at the beginning of our *parasha* take us back to the events of the eighth day of the inauguration of the *Mishkan*, when a fire emerged from before God and consumed Nadav and Avihu, Aharon’s sons. Now, in the wake of that catastrophe, God addresses Moshe and sets down rules. First, there is the setting of a boundary: “That he should not come at all times into the holy place.” Then, there is a long series of commands: “Thus shall Aharon come into the holy place….” There are many sacrifices, the offering of the incense, and all of Aharon’s service as described in this unit.

The opening words, “that he should not come at all times into the holy place,” might have been read as leading to a definition of time: “Not at all times – but rather on a particular day of the year.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In fact, the plain reading seems to be intened as negating accessibility: “He should not come at any time that he may wish to – unless he undertakes a long series of actions; only after all of that may he come into the holy place.” In other words, Aharon is entitled to enter the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim* whenever he wishes to, but he must carry out the whole series of actions that the *parasha* describes. This reflects the understanding of the Sages in the *midrash*,[[3]](#footnote-3) the Vilna Gaon, and many commentators throughout the generations.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Service of the People on Yom Kippur

(29) And this shall be an everlasting statute for you, that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do not work at all, the home-born or the stranger who sojourns among you. (30) For on that day He will forgive you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord. (31) It shall be a Shabbat of solemn rest (*shabbat shabbaton*) to you, and you shall afflict your souls, by an everlasting statute.

In contrast to the first unit, which is addressed to Aharon and his generation, in this unit, the text speaks in terms of an “everlasting statute” – for all generations. Here we find the expression, “that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord,” and one cannot ignore the connection between this and the opening words of the *parasha*, “And the Lord spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon, when they came near before the Lord, and died.” The overall heading is, “the death of the two sons of Aharon when they came near before the Lord.” The response to this is on two levels: in Aharon’s generation, there are regulations as to how to enter the *Kodesh Kodashim*; on the level of the “everlasting statute,” the entire nation is commanded to observe a day of affliction with a prohibition on work on the tenth day of the seventh month. By observing both these levels, God will allow atonement and purification for Israel and they will be permitted to stand and “be clean from all their sins before the Lord.”[[5]](#footnote-5) At the same time, there are differences: in contrast to the first unit, in which the expression “before the Lord” is understood in the physical sense – “within the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim*” – it is now meant in an abstract sense. The verse cannot be talking about the Temple, since the subject is every man of Israel. Hence, the presence before God is meant here in the sense of the person’s consciousness, and it is connected to this special time – “in the seventh month, on the tenth of the month” – which allows every Israelite to achieve this position.

Service of the *Kohen* for All Generations

The third unit, concluding the discussion, returns to the subject of the first unit – the service of the *Kohen Gadol* in the Temple. The difference is that this time, the focus is on the *Kohen* who will serve in place of his father, as an everlasting statute:

(32) And the *kohen* who shall be anointed and who shall be consecrated to minister in the *kohen’s* office in his father’s stead shall make the atonement, and shall put on the linen clothes, the holy garments. (33) And he shall make atonement for the holy Sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the Tent of Meeting, and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests, and for all the people of the congregation. (34) And this shall be an everlasting statute to you, to make atonement for the children of Israel for all their sins once a year. And he did as the Lord commanded Moshe.” (vv. 32-34)

A *kohen* is anointed by his father, and then he, too, is commanded concerning the service that brings atonement to the different circles.[[6]](#footnote-6) What is its time? The expression that the text uses is, “once a year.” Like Aharon, who enters the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim* without any instruction concerning any particular date, here too, no date is specified. In contrast to Aharon, who may enter many times during the year, for future generations entry into the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim* will be only once a year.

To summarize: In the first unit, it is Aharon who is “before the Lord.” He is the subject, by virtue of the atonement that he effects for the different circles amongst the nation. In the second unit, the focus is on the nation, which is “before the Lord,” and how it is they who are cleansed before Him. In the third unit, Aharon’s service is expanded into a service for generations to come, as an everlasting statute, once a year.

Now, in view of our grasp of the three units comprising chapter 16, further questions arise: What is the significance of this structure? What is the logic of God addressing Himself to Aharon and to the future generations separately? What can we learn from the difference between Aharon’s service, which may take place on any day of the year, and the service for all future generations, which is “once a year”?

The Nature of Aharon’s Service

As noted, our chapter begins with God speaking to Moshe “after the death of the two sons of Aharon when they came near before the Lord and died.” Earlier, they had come near before God and they had died; now, the aim is to reenact or restore that “coming near,” but without the rupture. This is to be achieved in two ways: through the service performed by the *kohen* and the actions of *Bnei Yisrael*. We will now compare these two realms and try to define the unique nature of the “standing before God” in each of them. Let us begin with the service to be performed by Aharon:

1. The introduction to Aharon’s entry into the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim* is, “Thus shall Aharon come into the holy place….” The subject is “coming into the *kodesh*,” which means entering inside of the *parokhet* (veil).
2. The expression “before the Lord” is repeated again and again over the course of the service (vv. 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, 18).
3. There are several stages involved in his standing in the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim* before God: “And he shall take a censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar before the Lord, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small, and bring it inside the veil; and he shall put the incense upon the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the covering that is upon the Testimony, so that he will not die. And he shall take of the blood of the bullock and sprinkle it with his finger upon the covering eastward, and before the covering shall he sprinkle of the blood with his finger seven times.” (vv. 12-14)

What is the nature of Aharon’s psychological and spiritual state at that time? To what degree is he focused and directed on this very special encounter?

1. The expression, “before the Lord” is mentioned repeatedly, but none of its appearances describes Aharon himself. The goats are presented “before the Lord” (v. 7), the live goat is presented “before the Lord” (10), the censer full of burning coals is taken “from before the Lord” (12), the *kohen* places the incense upon the fire “before the Lord” (13), Aharon takes of the blood of the ox and sprinkles it upon the covering “before the Lord” (14), and he goes out to the altar that is “before the Lord” (18).
2. Aharon’s stance is not addressed as the subject anywhere in these verses.
3. In fact, Aharon is wholly occupied with the performance of his service. He enters with the censer full of burning coals, his fists full of incense; he takes of the blood of the ox and sprinkles it on the covering and in front of the covering. These actions leave no room in his consciousness for a meaningful “encounter.”
4. At the beginning of the description of the service, the text speaks of a cloud, in the sense of revelation: “For I appear in the cloud upon the covering.” When the service is actually carried out, the function of the cloud is to save the *Kohen Gadol* from death: “That the cloud of the incense may cover the covering that is upon the Testimony, so that he will not die” (v. 13).
5. The entrance of the *Kohen Gadol* into the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim* is described with the words, “[There shall be no man…] when he goes in to make atonement in the holy place, until he comes out.” The purpose of his entry is to make atonement; his aim is not to engage in an “encounter.”
6. Throughout the course of the service, there is no mention of any action on God’s part. All actions are unilateral on the part of the *Kohen Gadol*.
7. There is no defined time for the entry; the timing is individual, relative, and indicative of the subjective dimension of his entry. (A fixed time would allow the *Kohen Gadol* to communicate with God, Who would “await” him at that time.)[[7]](#footnote-7)

As noted, entry into the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim* requires acts of atonement for different circles amongst the nation. This atonement becomes the focus of what is going on; it is this atonement that occupies the *Kohen Gadol* continuously and intensively, such that no real “encounter” takes place in the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim*.

The Nation vs. Aharon

Let us now consider the other level of the Yom Kippur service – that of the nation. Some fundamental differences are readily apparent:

1. The expression “Before the Lord you shall be purified” refers to the people, who stand before God.
2. In contrast to Aharon, who is always described in the third person, the people are described in the second person. (In the first unit, the people, too – “*Bnei Yisrael*” - are described in the third person: vv. 5, 16, 19, 21).
3. In contrast to Aharon, who is occupied with performance of the positive actions that do not allow for full concentration on the state of being “before the Lord,” the actions required of the people are defined negatively. They must afflict their souls, in the sense of avoiding eating and drinking etc., as well as avoid any sort of work. This creates the conditions in which a person is free to devote more attention to the inner, spiritual reality.
4. In the first unit, the time is whenever Aharon chooses – i.e., a subjective event. In the second unit, there is a date, and on that date something happens in the world that allows for an encounter with God, Who is “available” on that date.

The Climax – “Before the Lord”

We shall now examine the instruction to *Bnei Yisrael*, “Before the Lord you shall be purified.” Let us consider the structure of the verses:

1. A-“It shall be and everlasting statute for you, that in the seventh month, on the tenth of the month
2. B- you shall afflict your souls
3. C- and *do not work at all*, the home-born or the stranger who sojourns among you
4. D-*For on that day He will forgive you, to cleanse you*, that from all your sins
5. E- before the Lord
6. D- *you shall be purified*.
7. C- It shall be *a Shabbat of solemn rest* (*shabbat shabbaton*) to you
8. B- and you shall afflict your souls
9. A- by an everlasting statute.”

These verses being with a description of the service, which is described as an “everlasting statute,” and mention is made of both the date and the instructions to “afflict your souls” and to avoid work, as well as the context or reason: “For on that day He will forgive you, to cleanse you….” Later on, the text once again commands cessation of work and affliction as an “everlasting statute.”

As we see above, the verses form a chiastic structure. The phrase at the center of this structure, having no parallel, represents the climax of the unit, as well as the turning point that separates all that precedes it from all that follows. This structure invites the scholar to view the text as a spatial image and to imagine a person progressing in it from one stage to the next, until he reaches the climax. There we find an encounter (in our case, with God), and thereafter he retraces his steps, all the way back to the starting point. He revisits each of the stations that he passed previously, but now in light of the encounter at the point of climax and the impression that it has made on him, things look different.[[8]](#footnote-8)

We will now listen closely to the different stages comprising the second unit and try to understand the process that is taking place.

“Before the Lord you Shall be Purified” – Ramifications

The second unit opens with the words, “And it shall be an everlasting statute for you…” – a fixed law and procedure that will not change. “In the seventh month, on the tenth of the month” – a fixed time, presenting a reality that is not dependent on any human choice. In contrast to Aharon’s entry, which arises from his own volition, at a time of his choosing and with no Divine directive, God now sets down the time and it is man who must adapt himself, rather than the other way around. “You shall afflict your souls” – a human act that obstructs the movement of the soul, halting life’s pleasures.[[9]](#footnote-9) “And you shall do no work at all” – this extends the obstruction from the soul to the realm of physical activity and creativity, in which man affects reality, making things happen in the world. In both realms there is a cessation and withdrawal. To whom does this obligation apply? “The home born or the stranger who dwells among you” – the home-born Israelite, who lives permanently in the land, or the stranger who is there temporarily. In other words, the command pertains to the communal space, society as a whole, and hence it includes those who dwell with the nation even though they are different. “For on that day He will forgive you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins” – this is the purpose of all the actions that have been undertaken. On this day, God grants atonement; moreover, He cleanses us of all our sins, through an inner purification and cleansing, and therefore it is up to us to fulfill the first part of the verse. The climax of the process is the nation’s presence “before the Lord.”

Attention should be paid to a most fascinating fact. What is the measure of God’s “presence” in this description? At the moment of climax, the answer is clear: on this day, God is busy forgiving us, making atonement. He is not busy doing something else; He is “cleansing you, that you may be clean from all your sins.” The event takes place “before God.” That is where you are purified: in man’s full presence before God. Now, we may extrapolate backwards and discover that all the commands thus far all lead to this point. God’s increased presence on this chosen day represents preparation for that long-awaited moment, the moment of climax. Hence the first stipulation, representing a sort of heading, an everlasting statute that is fixed in the foundations of the world, and likewise the time that is likewise fixed, and likewise the prohibitions on creative work – both the sustaining of the soul and creative labor in the physical world, which aim to quiet a person’s inner world and prepare him to absorb something that is beyond himself.

In the wake of this climactic moment, the text goes back to the same stations that the person has covered during this same day – the affliction of the soul and the prohibitions on work. Now, however, in light of the encounter with God, these details take on a new dimension. It is as though the person, on his return journey, discovers added value. This day is a “*shabbat shabbaton*,” in contrast to the mere command to desist from work. This is not just avoidance of action, but rather a positive essence of resting. “It shall be [*a shabbat shabbaton*] to you” – this positive essence is attributed *to you*; it creates meaning for you. The idea that the uniqueness of the day is now “to you,” or “for you,” is unlike the original formulation: “And do no work at all, the home-born or the stranger who sojourns among you.” The different sectors amongst *Am Yisrael* are now encompassed together with you, and the expression “to you” or “for you” now includes them, too. What arises from this description is that the process of atonement and purification before God creates unity and connection. “And you shall afflict your souls” – you must cease the inner movement of realization and broadening of life. The original instruction of affliction was formulated in the future tense – “you shall afflict (*te’anu*)” – whereas it is now written in the form of the past tense through the use of the conversive *vav* (*ve-initem*). The future tense is something abstract, unconnected to reality, since it has not yet happened. The past tense, on the other hand, describes a reality that has already happened, and hence it conveys a greater measure of tangibility and certainty. The use of the past tense with the conversive *vav* is actually understood as a form of the future tense, but in terms of its significance, it has an added advantage in relation to the simple future tense, something like the advantage that someone who has already experienced a certain situation has over someone else who has yet to experience it. “An everlasting statute” – as a concept embodying eternity, in contrast to the formulation in the first part of the chiasmus, where the expression was connected to a date, thereby creating a sense of specific concreteness. The latter formulation alludes to the eternal essence and value of the day.

Conclusion

We must now return to the overall picture and ask: what process is created by these three units? As noted, the heading for all of them is the “coming near” of Nadav and Avihu “before God” on the day of the inauguration of the *Mishkan* and the lesson learned from that tragedy. As a first stage, the text describes the license given to Aharon to enter the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim* whenever he chooses to. There is some degree of similarity between the initiative taken by Nadav and Avihu and the initiative that their father is now permitted to take. The difference lies in the unit that is now presented: “Thus shall Aharon enter the holy place,” as the representative of the nation, and following the various circles of atonement that he makes before entering. As a second stage, the text abandons its focus on the *Kohen Gadol* and the *Mishkan* and addresses itself to *Bnei Yisrael*. Here there is a new stance, a presence “before the Lord.” In contrast to Aharon, who is busy with the performance of his detailed service, the position is now one of passivity. In contrast to Aharon, who is physically located in the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim*, the concept of being “before the Lord” is now no longer reserved to some particular physical space. In contrast to the textual formulation that uses the expression “before the Lord” again and again in reference to the goats, the fire, the blood, and all the stipulated actions, as though expressing Aharon’s spiritual state, fully occupied with all these elements rather than as standing before God, the regular Israelite achieves purification and cleansing “before the Lord.” He is psychologically available and ready for the spiritual experience embodied in the stance “before the Lord.”

All of this applies during the generation of Aharon. What about later generations? Here the relationship between the two days comes into even sharper focus. The text now describes the service to be undertaken by the *kohen*, with the heading being, “And the *kohen*… shall make the atonement….” Mention is made of the “linen garments,” but not in the context of entering the *Kodesh* *ha*-*Kodashim*. Rather, they are mentioned in the context of atonement: “And the *kohen* who shall be anointed, and who shall be consecrated to minister in the *kohen’s* office in his father’s stead, shall make the atonement, and shall put on the linen clothes, the holy garments, and he shall make atonement for the *kohanim*, and for all the people of the congregation” (vv. 32-33). The text then also goes on to speak of an everlasting statute, with a defined time: “once a year.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This stipulation of time, which does not sanctify any particular day, distances the event even further from the dimension of an “encounter.” According to this unit, God does not wait for the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur in the *Kodesh* *ha-Kodashim*. A specific day of this sort is to be found in the unit that speaks about *Bnei Yisrael*, and there indeed He “waits,” as it were, to forgive them and cleanse them, “before the Lord.” In the Temple, there is the *kohen* who enters the innermost holy place, but the focus of his doing so is to effect atonement for the various circles that have been described.

In practice, the “once a year” does in fact coincide with the “seventh month on the tenth of the month,” and the two dimensions complement one another. There is the event that takes place in the Temple- where, once a year, the *Kohen* *Gadol* enters the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim*; at the same time there is another event – the simple service that reminds us that the purpose and meaning behind the service of the Temple is the Divine Presence that rests amongst the nation of Israel.

R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi chooses to conclude with the words of R. Akiva, reflecting this idea:

Happy are you, O Israel! Before Whom are you purified? Who purifies you? Your Father in heaven, as it is written (*Yechezkel* 36), “Then I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean,” and it is written [in reference to God], “The Hope [*mikveh*] of Israel.” Just as a *mikveh* purifies those who are impure, so the Holy One, blessed be He, purifies Israel.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. In addition to the discussion of Yom Kippur in our *parasha* (*Vayikra* 16), it appears again in *Parashat Emor*, as part of the unit detailing the laws of different holy days (chapter 23:27-32), and then in *Parshat Pinchas* (*Bamidbar* 29:7-11), within the context of the laws of additional sacrifices for each of the holy days (which do not appear in our *parasha* in the context of Yom Kippur). There is one instance in which the Torah mentions the blood of the sin offering of Yom Kippur as atoning for the altar (*Shemot* 30:10). As noted, there are two subjects in *Vayikra* 16: the service of the *Kohen* *Gadol* in the Temple and the laws pertaining to the people, wherever they may be. The discussion in *Vayikra* 23 matches the section in our *parasha* that relates to the people, almost word for word. In *Sefer Bamidbar*, the subject is the additional sacrifices, including those for Yom Kippur. It is interesting to note that Yom Kippur is not treated anywhere in *Sefer Devarim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Indeed, Rashi, Ramban and other commentators make no distinction between the units; they view the “once a year” that appears later on as applying to this unit, as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “‘That he should not come at all times’ – R. Yehuda said in the name of R. Shimon: Moshe was greatly distressed concerning this matter. He said: Woe is me! Perhaps my brother Aharon has been expelled from God’s Presence at all times… The Holy One, blessed be He, therefore said to Moshe: It is not as you believe… Rather, whenever he wishes to enter, let him do so only in accordance with this order [of service]” (*Vayikra Rabba* 21). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Nishmat Adam*, at the end of his Laws of Mourning, discusses this unit at length. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Accordingly, the service of the people is described as coming first, and this too is described after the presence before God. This resembles closely the structure of the service of Aharon. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Accordingly: (6) And Aharon shall offer the bullock of the sin offering, which is for himself, and make atonement for himself, and for his house. (16) And he shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions in all their sins… (17) And there shall be no man in the Tent of Meeting when he goes in to make atonement in the holy place, until he comes out, and has made atonement for himself, and for his household, and for all the congregation of Israel. (18) And he shall go out to the altar that is before the Lord, and make atonement for it, and shall take of the blood of the bullock, and of the blood of the goat, and put it upon the horns of the altar round about. (20) And when he has made an end of atoning for the holy place, and the Tent of Meeting, and the altar, he shall present the live goat. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the purposes of comparison, in the unit presenting the holy days, there are dates, and the heading of the section is, “These are My appointed times.” The time is appointed by God, meaning that these are times when God shows His Presence and reveals Himself to man. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The “translation” of a chiastic structure into a movement in space is capable of imbuing many instances of this structure in *Tanakh* with new meaning. The pattern is a common one: when a person undergoes some sort of process, its elements are stations or stages that follow one another. At the point of climax, there is an encounter that sears his heart with a new spiritual perspective. After that, he returns to his starting point, but everything along the way is now seen in a new light. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The understanding of this “affliction” (*inui*) as an obstruction of the soul’s movements and the prohibition on work as the halting of a person’s activity has its source in the Rambam’s Laws of Cessation of Work on Yom Kippur: “Just as there is a commandment to desist from work, so there is a commandment to desist from eating and drinking.” The prohibition of eating is understood as obstructing the sustaining of the soul, the animated movement of the soul. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “And this shall be an everlasting statute to you, to make atonement for the children of Israel for all their sins once a year…” (v. 34). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)