

Menachem Begin's Yom Kippur

Parashat Acharei Mot, Leviticus, Chapters 16-18 | April 28, 2022

Let us imagine Yom Kippur in Jerusalem during the final decade in which the Temple stood. All of Israel is assembled on the sacred mount in an edifice whose glory is the wonder of the world. The people's eyes are affixed as one upon one man, the High Priest, as he begs for forgiveness for his nation. Their exultant cries reach a crescendo as he utters the Almighty's ineffable name, and they join the descendant of Aaron in pious penitence.

Now let us imagine Yom Kippur in the Jerusalem of 1943. All the glory that once was is now gone. The narrow courtyard that is the Wailing Wall is filled with fasting people in prayer. The doom of European Jewry seems certain; never has the Temple's destruction seemed more real. All that is allowed to the Jews of Jerusalem is a tiny alleyway adjacent to the western side of the Mount. The sun is about to set. The Day of Days comes to a close, and the worshipers plead for their people in the concluding prayer, which usually ends with the sounding of the shofar, but that is not legally allowed to them.

One eyewitness describes what happens next:

And then, from both sides of the courtyard, streamed British police armed with rifles and batons, threatening [the worshipers] with their very presence. They had come, "in the king's name," to prevent an "illegal act": the blowing of the shofar at the close of the Sabbath of Sabbaths. As the end of the prayer approached, they squeezed further into the mass of worshipers, some even elbowing their way up to the wall. And when in spite of them the shofar was heard, their fury was unrestrained. They set upon the worshipers while prayer was still in progress. They hit out

at heads; batons whistled through the air. Here and there was heard the cry of somebody injured. A song, too, burst forth: "Hatikvah." Then the police struck out in all directions and chaos reigned.

This eyewitness was Menachem Begin, who further reflected on what he had seen:

These stones are not silent. They do not cry out. They whisper. They speak softly of the Sanctuary that once stood here, of kings who knelt here once in prayer, of prophets and seers who here declaimed their message, of heroes who fell here, dying; and of how the great flame...was here kindled. This was the sanctuary, and this the country, which with its seers and kings and fighters was ours before the British were a nation. The testimony of these stones, sending out their light across the generations.

Who taught Menachem Begin to gaze at ruin and rubble in Jerusalem and to see the Temple that once was? How was he able to stand in an alleyway at the Western Wall and re-experience in his mind's eye, the glorious House of God that once was on the mountain above? The answer lies in the home in which he was raised, and it cuts to the very heart of how, through the Book of Leviticus, Jews learned never to forget Jerusalem.

Perhaps the most famous Temple ritual in the entire Torah occurs on Yom Kippur, when the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies and approaches the Ark of the Covenant. The ritual involves both purification and atonement. First, purification: though many offerings are brought on that day, perhaps the three most central animals are one bull and two goats. The bull is offered

by the High Priest on behalf of himself, his family, and his fellow priests. Separately, the two goats are brought forward, and a lottery is performed, which, in Temple times, was a form of divination, of divine designation.

And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. (Leviticus 16:8)

One goat for God. This means that its blood will be applied in the Holy of Holies. The other goat is designated for “Azazel.” This word is mysterious, but the common translation of “scapegoat” is, I think, incorrect. One possibility is that “Azazel” refers to the place to which this other goat will be sent.

The High Priest on Yom Kippur offers incense inside the Holy of Holies, thereby establishing a mystical link with God. He sprinkles the blood of his own offering and of the goat designated to God in some of the holiest parts of the Temple. He then approaches the goat of Azazel and places his hands upon its head. As Professor Jacob Milgrom has noted, here, the misdeeds of Israel throughout the year have brought impurity to the Temple or Tabernacle. The application of the blood in the Holy of Holies and other sacred parts of the Sanctuary draws the impurity out of the sacred sphere, and the impurity is then placed upon the other goat, which bears the impurity of Israel away.

And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:22)

The Talmud reports that the goat was taken into the wilderness and ultimately sent off a precipice.

This is how the Temple is purified, but there is also atonement that occurs here, repentance. As the High Priest stands above the animal, he confesses the sins of Israel and repents on behalf of his people.

And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel,

and all their transgressions in all their sins... (Leviticus 16:21)

This is striking, as Judaism usually does not endorse repentance by proxy. For example, when one brings an individual offering of atonement, one is obligated to confess before God alone. The priest places the offering on the altar, but he cannot confess for the penitent, nor does the Israelite bringing the offering confess to him.

How then can the High Priest represent the entire nation in the Temple on Yom Kippur? The answer lies in an interesting word, a biblical way of speaking about the body politic that is simultaneously social and spiritual:

And from the congregation of the children of Israel, he shall take two goats for a chatat offering. (Leviticus 16:5)

The Hebrew for the “congregation of the children of Israel” is “*adat benei Yisrael*.” A common reference to the Israelites is “*benei Yisrael*,” the “children of Israel,” but “*adat*” or “*edab*,” “congregation,” is a word linked in Hebrew to “*edut*,” “testimony.”

For Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, this term captures the metaphysical unity that can be made manifest in Israel, so that the entire people bears witness to what has happened throughout their history and to all that will come in the future. Rabbi Soloveitchik writes:

A Congregation is a collection of individuals with a single past, a common future, shared aspirations, identical yearnings for a world that is totally good and pleasant, and a singular and harmonious destiny. The beginnings of the Congregation are embedded in the tradition of the people’s ancestors at the dawn of its existence. Its end is rooted in a common vision of the end of days. The people of the Congregation are *witnesses* to the events that have passed and to the miraculous future that has not yet arrived. The Congregation encompasses not only those who are alive today but everyone who has lived and who will live

from the dawn of humanity until the end of days. The dead who have passed on are still alive within the confines of the Congregation, and those destined to be born are already alive within its jurisdiction.

Thus, on Yom Kippur, a High Priest can confess on behalf of Israel because at that point, all Israel—past, present and future—is one. All Israel is joined in metaphysical union. This is at least in part why the ritual of atonement performed in the Temple in Jerusalem on this day was a singularly spiritual high point of the Jewish year, and today it is brought to life in what is known as the “*Avodah*,” the “Service,” which is the name of the liturgy recited in synagogue on Yom Kippur. The *Avodah* describes in great detail all that the High priest did in the Temple on this day. And it tells us that when the High Priest would confess over the goat of *Azazel* on behalf of all Israel, he would cite Leviticus 16:30:

For on that day shall he make an atonement for you, to purify you, that ye may be pure from all your sins before the Lord.

But the High Priest would not say “before the Lord.” God’s ineffable name would be uttered. And the liturgy informs us of what would happen next:

And the priests and the people that stood in the Temple courtyard, when they heard the great and awesome name of God, would kneel, bow, and confess, fall on their faces and say, “Blessed is God’s sovereign name forever and ever.”

At this moment, the High Priest and Israel are united in mystical communion. Leviticus 16 is the biblical formula for Israel’s forgiveness. Thus, the chapter concludes,

And this shall be an everlasting statute unto you, to make an atonement for the children of Israel for all their sins once a year.
(Leviticus 16:34)

This verse inspires an obvious question. If this is the biblically required ritual for Israel’s annual atonement, then what is the Jewish people to do when it lacks a

Temple? The answer, in part, is that when we are unable to experience the Yom Kippur Temple service in the present, we as Jews transport ourselves back in time and re-experience it in the past. We thereby also revive our faith that we will one day experience it again in the future.

This was expressed by Menachem Begin in an extraordinary eulogy for the Jewish community of his hometown—men, women, and children who were murdered by the Nazis. Begin was born in a city now in Belarus known today as “Brest.” But to Yiddish-speaking Jews, it was always known as “Brisk.” The rabbis of Brisk for generations were members of the Soloveichik family, so Begin’s speech is particularly poignant to me. Describing his memories of the great synagogue of Brisk, Begin said in his eulogy as follows:

And on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, when all were fasting and in prayer shawls, not many remained within the walls of the synagogue. But those who stayed studied intensely the *avodah* [the liturgical poem that describes the Yom Kippur service of the Jerusalem Temple in intricate detail]. And my father would insist that especially during the recitation of the *avodah* one should stay and pray, since perhaps the holiness of this prayer equaled the holiness of all the holy prayers of the rest of the year. And the voice of the cantor blended with those of the singers: “and the priests and the people standing in the courtyard, when they heard the ineffable name leave the lips of the high priest in holiness and purity, would prostrate themselves and fall on their faces and say: ‘blessed is the name of His glorious kingdom forever and forever!’”

Those together in the synagogue said those words, Begin remembered, as if the ancient Temple services happened yesterday. The Jewish people on Yom Kippur not only refused to forget Jerusalem, not only refused to give up on the future of Jerusalem; on Yom Kippur they actually traveled back in time to ancient Jerusalem

and re-experienced the ritual of Leviticus 16. What is true of the Jewish connection to the Temple in the past is also true on the Day of Atonement for the Jewish joining of generations throughout its history. The Yom Kippur liturgy called *Kol Nidre* begins by describing the bond between the “*Yeshiva shel Ma’alab*” and the “*Yeshiva shel Matab*,” Jews in this world and in the next. And this connection can be profoundly felt.

In 1940, before arriving in the Holy Land, Begin found himself in a Soviet prison, known as Lukishki. He writes in his prison memoir describing Yom Kippur in his cell as follows:

I wondered where I would be on the next Day of Atonement. Where would my old father and mother be, and my brother and sister? And as the brain had no answer, the fearful heart replied with prayer. As I recited the words sanctified from generation to generation, as I prayed silently, I felt the impenetrable barriers that separated me and those I loved fall away...The cell vanished, the walls disappeared, and there appeared in all its splendor the great illuminated synagogue [of Brisk] and my father’s humble dwelling, lit up by love, purity, faith, and the eyes of a loving mother. *Kol Nidrei* night in an NKVD prison... even such a night can be a night of solace, even such a day can be a day of identification with all that is good in man’s life.

Begin was right to worry about his family, for in 1941 the Nazis would enter his hometown and murder his parents and his brother. The Jewish community of Brisk—the community of the Soloveichik family, the community of the Begin family, a source of pride to Lithuanian Jewry for centuries—was gone. But not entirely gone. As Begin discovered in prison, at moments when hope seems lost, one can still be sustained by the ever-present past and by the prayers “sanctified from generation to generation.”

Begin ended his eulogy for his brethren in Brisk by stressing that if Jews ultimately returned to Jerusalem,

it was in the merit of the generations of Jews that came before, those that lived in places like Brisk and refused to forget Jerusalem—who in a certain sense, traveled back to Jerusalem, whose physical feet were on the soil of Eastern Europe and other locations in the Diaspora, but whose souls sojourned to the Holy Land on Yom Kippur, so that all that was written in Leviticus 16 lived again.

Begin concluded with these words:

“And the priests and the people, standing in the courtyard of the Temple,” as if it were the day before yesterday. It’s in our spirit, gratitude to our fathers, gratitude for their love of the Land of Israel, gratitude for their prayers, gratitude for their faith in the coming of the messiah. [As the traditional statement of faith has it:] “And even though he may tarry, I nevertheless await him.” Our parents did not have the opportunity, but their children after them conquered the “beginning of redemption.” And so with love of Israel, with love for the Land of Israel and for Jerusalem, we will sanctify their scattered ashes, elevate their souls in holiness and purity, and carry in our hearts the memory of their love from generation to generation.

We are obligated never to forget our past. Yom Kippur is atonement made manifest through the metaphysical unity of the Jews. And it thereby reminds us to be united throughout our lives with those that came before.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think is special about Yom Kippur that it achieves a metaphysical unity of the Congregation of Israel—past, present, and future?
 2. Rabbi Soloveichik points out how Menachem Begin connects the Jews' return to Zion in our days with the faith of Diaspora Jewry throughout the years of exile. How did Begin's experience of Yom Kippur as a child allow him to place this understanding at the heart of his Zionism?
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