

The Service of the Heart
Yom Kippur 2023-5784
Rabbi Yael Ridberg ~ Congregation Dor Hadash

I have long had a fascination with the high priest's service on Yom Kippur.

As outlined in the Mishna, the climax of the Yom Kippur service in the Temple was the entry of the Kohen Gadol into the Holy of Holies.¹ "In that instant, holiness is manifested at its highest level across intersecting axes. The representative of holiness in the people stands at the holiest moment in time within the holiest place on Earth, facing the ark of the covenant, in direct encounter with God."²

The high priest would approach his task with reverence and purposeful attention, knowing that his service of atonement would be the most powerful and important of the year.

The High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies only on Yom Kippur, and when he emerged unharmed after an intricate and precise ritual of atonement, he would pray for a bountiful new year and the welfare of all Israel.

He would make 3 confessions: or himself and his family, for the entire house of Aaron (the priests/leaders), and then the entire house of Israel, and pronounce the name of God each time. They were distinct offerings, but the concentric nature of the intentions, pointed to the interconnectedness of them, and any distinctions really dissolved in a claim of interdependence within the larger sacrificial system.³ Self – leaders – community.

I think about the High Priest because no such figure exists for us today, we have the holiday of Yom Kippur to do the work of the Priest and the Cohanim of old. But while fasting for 25 hours may not be pleasant, it's

¹ Mishna Yoma

² *The Innermost Sanctum: A High Holy Days Reader*, Hadar Institute, NYC

³ <https://hashivenu.fireside.fm/501>, podcast with Rabbis Deborah Waxman and Vivie Mayer

hardly death defying, and while beating our breasts at the *al het* may be humbling, it's hardly a life altering ritual.

The priest would put on special white garments representing the purity he wished to achieve on behalf of the people. He would change to gold garments, then back to his own clothes at the end of the Ritual.

*Like the priests of old, today we have entered the place we have entered⁴
We stand on the place where we stand, we have taken off our everyday clothes and donned white garments in preparation for this ritual.*

Even while as a congregation, we don't perform the service of Avodah as described, each of us could be, in our own way, consecrated to the same kind of Divine service, and each of us could take the opportunity to offer atonement for ourselves and our household, our leaders, and all of Israel. Thereby bringing hope, healing, and holiness into the world through our collective *teshuvah*.

The high priest clearly had enough confidence in his ritual to believe that atonement could, in fact, be affected. The Temple would be purified, the people could be forgiven, all the priests, all the people of Israel released, and Yom Kippur would end in celebration and joy buoyed by this certainty.

His obligation is for everyone else, he doesn't *just* go in for himself. He understood that showing up mattered, his intention mattered, and because of that, when he would emerge from the holy of holies, the community would surround him.

I'm not sure we could say the same thing ourselves, as we live with such *uncertainty*. We might leave Yom Kippur tonight, still unsure of what the coming year will bring. What do we really have to show for our efforts? How do we know that our efforts have been in service of something greater? What might each of us be willing to do, to sacrifice, so that when

⁴ The entire framework for this sermon is inspired by Ishay Ribo's *Seder Avodah*. All lyrics in italics are adapted verses from his song - <https://youtu.be/ECy3CMxShIQ?feature=shared>

we emerge we are different? That are motivated anew to change our ways and emerge with our faces emanating with light?

Like the image of the rainbow in the cloud—was the appearance of the Priest.

Like the love glow on the bride's face— was the appearance of the Priest.

Since we no longer have a priesthood, or a temple with a holy of holies, or a goat to send out into the wilderness carrying our sins, how might we attain the impact of priestly ritual – “For in this day, atonement shall be affected for you” – *Lifnei Adonai titharu – you will become pure.*⁵

The weight of the sins of the world is great, each of us carries some of that burden: the apathy, the intolerance, the oppression, the hatred, the discomfort and discontent. Is it possible to bear it, and still work from there and strive for a better existence for all? Can we find ourselves in the context of serving others?

We get so caught up sometimes in our perceived inability to change our habits, our ideas, and whether we really care about the world. We shrug our shoulders and wonder, what can one person do? Well, according to the Avodah service, *a lot*.

How do we get to the joyful ending that is the service of Neilah – “Coming into knowing that we can do better than we imagined; that we are more beautiful than we dreamed; that we mean more to the world than we ever thought; that our love can bring healing, and our dreams can ignite hope?”⁶

First we have to stand inside our *own* Holy of Holies. We do things today that we don't do any other day of the year. We have to try and remember In the words of Israeli composer Ishay Ribon, in his deeply affecting *Seder Avodah*:

“If a person could remember

⁵ Leviticus 16:30

⁶ <https://ikar.org/HHD/>

*All the flaws, the shortcomings
All the transgressions, all the wrongdoings,
of ourselves, our household,
our leaders and the entire world
She would surely count:
One, one and one, one and two
One and three, one and four, one and five;
She would want to give up right away
Because she wouldn't be able to bear
the bitterness, the sin
The shame, the missed opportunity
The loss... Please, O God, forgive what
I have sinned before You, I and my household,
Our leaders, and the entire community."*

At the time of the Temple, upon hearing the ineffable name of God the people would call out, "*Baruch shem kevod malchuto l'olam va'ed*" - Blessed is the name of God now and forever. They would fall prostrate on their faces, and echo the intense collective release of the ritual, blessing the potential for change.

While our holy of holies may be different, we pray for the ability to confront our failings, and the ability to engage in the work of *teshuvah* – and ultimately, to live through another year.

It is all about imagining that everything hinges on this moment. We are saving our lives, in the end. Trying to save our own lives from pettiness and vanity, pretension, and false securities; And if possible, to live a life of meaning and possibility.

We are poised on the cusp of a New Year straining to rededicate ourselves to the realization of that vision of humanity, that caring for others in as many ways as there are people to do it, is in fact *teshuvah*.

Can you imagine if by our prayers and work today, whatever ails our people, our world, our planet could be reversed by our atonement? That through our lovingkindness, goodness, compassion, and salvation we might

achieve renewal? We know it's not our responsibility to do everything, but neither can we be resigned to do nothing. *How might the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our hands change the world this year?*

Again, in the words of Ribo:

*And if a person could remember
all the kindness, the goodness,
All the mercy and all the saving grace,
Thus, he would surely count:
One, one and one, one and two,
One of the thousands
and myriad of miracles and wonders
which You have done for us, during days and nights.*

For in every moment of our lives, we can bring life and healing. We can bring Love, kindness, compassion, joy, and connection to counter the inevitable desperation, and that could really transcend the sins of the community.

The most powerful moment in the service comes upon its completion. The High Priest emerges from the intensity of the experience and returns home accompanied by the community:

Ribo's lyrics continue:

*He would leave the place he had left
And tremble in the place on which he had stood
Strip off the golden garments,
And put on his own clothes.
And all the people and the priests
would accompany him to his house
and a day of celebration for his loved ones,
for the entire community of the Children of Israel was forgiven.*

This is our hope, this is our challenge, this is how we can enter the New

Year choosing life over death, affirming good even in the face of the darkest of all evils. As when the Priest prayed for forgiveness for ever widening groups of people, concentric circles grow out from each of us, while at the same time, we are all bound together and we are all connected in our efforts.

Ashrei ha'am, shekacha lo, ashrei ha'am sh'Adonai elohav

Happy is the people for whom it is so; Happy is the people whose God is manifest in the work of teshuvah.

Baruch shem Kavod malchuto l'olam va'ed

Blessed is the godly effort to transform the world from what it is, into what it could be.

G'mar hatima Tova May our journey toward wholeness and holiness be inspired.

