

Shabbat Table Talk

Yom Kippur, 28 September 2009

Torah readings: Leviticus 16:1-34; Numbers 29:7-11; Leviticus 18:1-30

Haftarah: Isaiah 57:14 – 58:14; Book of Jonah; Micah 7:18-20

God says to Israel: ‘Open to Me a gate of repentance no bigger than the point of a needle, and I will open to you a gate [of forgiveness] wide enough to drive wagons and carts through.’ (Plaut, 869, from medieval commentary *Canticle Rabbah*).

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the high point of the Jewish liturgical calendar, the tenth and final of the High Holy Days that began with the Jewish New Year. This "gate of repentance", though rooted in ancient purification rites, still sustains a modern-day community by focusing on each person's relationship with God and with one another. Plaut states: "It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of *Yom Kippur* in the life of the Jewish people. Even the religiously indifferent respond to its call and crowd the synagogues...Before seeking divine forgiveness, Jews have often settled quarrels and disagreements among themselves" (858).

It is instructive to look at the origin of this atonement ritual since its detail, as prescribed in Leviticus 16 and Numbers 29, seem so incomprehensible to our modern ears. The ritual as described in scripture bears a striking resemblance to an ancient Babylonian rite for purifying the temple, which was also carried out during a New Year festival of several days. Common features of the two rituals include 1) a freshly bathed High Priest dressed in linen, carrying a smoking censer and performing a sprinkling rite in the sanctuary; 2) the removal of impurity by means of slaughtered animals; 3) the impurity of the participants engaged in the ritual and 4) a ritual of personal confession and penitence – in Babylon for the king, in Israel for the High Priest (Milgrom, 164).

These similarities tell us that the religion of the Israelites was influenced to a significant degree by the cultures around them. That is not surprising, if we are aware enough to realize how much that is also true for ourselves. On closer inspection there are also some interesting differences between the Israelite and Babylonian ceremonies, and it is from those differences that we learn the most about the particular values and world-view of the Israelites

Perhaps the most significant is that in the Babylonian rite the confession part of the ritual focused only on the king. The king's penitential tears meant the god Bel was well disposed towards the king whereas no tears predicted his downfall. In the Israelite ritual the High Priest confessed his own sin, but ultimately it was the whole community that was purified as the priest transferred the collective sins onto the goat which was then banished to the wilderness. Milgrom claims that "Israel uniquely elevated the people and their behavior to being worthy of divine scrutiny" (164), suggesting that "...in Babylon the viability of the society depended solely on the worthiness of the king; in Israel the national destiny is equated with the moral condition of the people..." (165).

The Israelite concern that the immoral behavior of the people was an obstacle to temple purity can also be contrasted with a Babylonian emphasis on demonic intruders as the obstacle. This contrast is not absolute, since most scholars agree that the name *Azazel* (the person or place to which the banished goat is sent in the Israelite ritual) refers to an ancient demonic figure (Plaut, 859). However, there is a safeguard against the possibility that the community would thus be seen as placating the demon. It is the LORD who chooses the goat (16:9-10) rather than the High Priest as drawing lots does this. The focus continues to be on the sins of the community. Fox notes: "Appropriately, in modern Hebrew *lekh la-azazel* is the equivalent of English 'go to hell' or 'get lost.' Regardless of the precise meaning of *Azazel*, that is, in fact, what the community wants to happen to its sins."

The Israelites' emphasis on the role of the community may have increased over time. In

Leviticus 16 the first instructions are given by Moses only to the High Priest, Aaron, but beginning in verse 29 (perhaps a later addition) the community itself is addressed, and their participation mandated. "It shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall practice self-denial; it is a law for all time" (16:31). Self-denial was interpreted broadly to mean fasting from food, water, bathing, sex, or wearing sandals (Plaut, 868) not a small commitment on the part of the community. But the social nature of *Yom Kippur* is perhaps most clearly indicated by Leviticus 25:9, where it is stated that the Sabbath of Sabbaths – the 50th Jubilee year when debts are forgiven and land is redistributed – is to be proclaimed with the sound of the *shofar* at the end of the Day of Atonement. Milgrom (165) suggests that celebrating the connection of this day with the social restoration of the Jubilee Year was a main feature of the earliest practice of *Yom Kippur*, and that the more solemn observance with its emphasis on self denial came about later.

We cannot trace exactly when and how the ancient purity rites were adapted and directed increasingly towards moral and community concerns. The post-exilic prophet Isaiah is explicit that religious rites – even participatory ones like fasting – have no benefit apart from moral attitudes and behavior and social justice. The trumpet that traditionally announces a fast or the year of Jubilee is here invoked to announce the sins of the people (58:1), and God calls for repentance and forgiveness in its fullest social form: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" Isaiah declares that Sabbath/Jubilee justice is the basis of God's restoration and purification of the community.

As products of modern society it is easy to dismiss the ancient rites of community purification as hocus-pocus. However we face the same challenges as the Israelites did to find ways to restore ourselves and our communities from the internal and external consequences of sin and injustice. The Israelites saw this as so important that priests were willing to risk their lives once a year by entering the forbidden Holy of Holies. Tradition has it that at the end of this hazardous day the High Priest would throw a banquet for his friends and family, celebrating the fact that he had come out alive (Plaut, 868).

The Jewish observance of *Yom Kippur* continues to hold up the joyful possibility that it is when we do what can appear to be risky that of taking personal and communal sin seriously that healing and forgiveness can truly be realized and celebrated. We can continue to be challenged by the connection between the Day of Atonement and the announcement of Jubilee as stated in Leviticus, and by Isaiah's confirmation that Sabbaths with justice are the basis of a restored society. Whatever the rituals we choose, we are invited to open that narrow gate of repentance through which God will drive the wagons of forgiveness and carts of healing.

For Reflection and Discussion: 1. What are the ways that our religious ceremonies reflect the culture around us? Are there ways that our religious rituals challenge the culture or move us in new directions? 2. Do the forgiveness rituals of our religious communities call for a level of risk that evokes authentic celebration? 3. Do the forgiveness rituals of our religious communities take seriously both personal and communal participation in sin, and the healing and restoration needed at both levels?

Bibliography: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, (New York, 1983); Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Minneapolis, 2004); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York, 2006).

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