

Leviticus

Lesson #11

The Day of Atonement

(Leviticus 16: 1-34)

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Review

In Lessons 9 & 10 we ventured into the arena of *sara'at* [traditionally translated “leprosy,” or “scaly infection” in our *Catholic Study Bible*] and “bodily discharges of a sexual nature,” two topics that made us squirm! In the graphic language and striking imagery of both topics, we discovered a deeper meaning than simple skin disease and bodily leakage: the rites and rituals involved in both laid bare the primal struggle between life and death, vitality and decay.

In Deuteronomy 30: 19, as the Israelites are about to cross the Jordan River and begin the conquest of Canaan, God emphasizes this foundational message of Exodus/Leviticus: *“I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord, your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him.”*

In Lessons 9 & 10 {Leviticus 13-15) *sara'at* and bodily discharges are symbolic of decay and death, graphic reminders of what’s at stake in God’s plan of redemption.

Preview

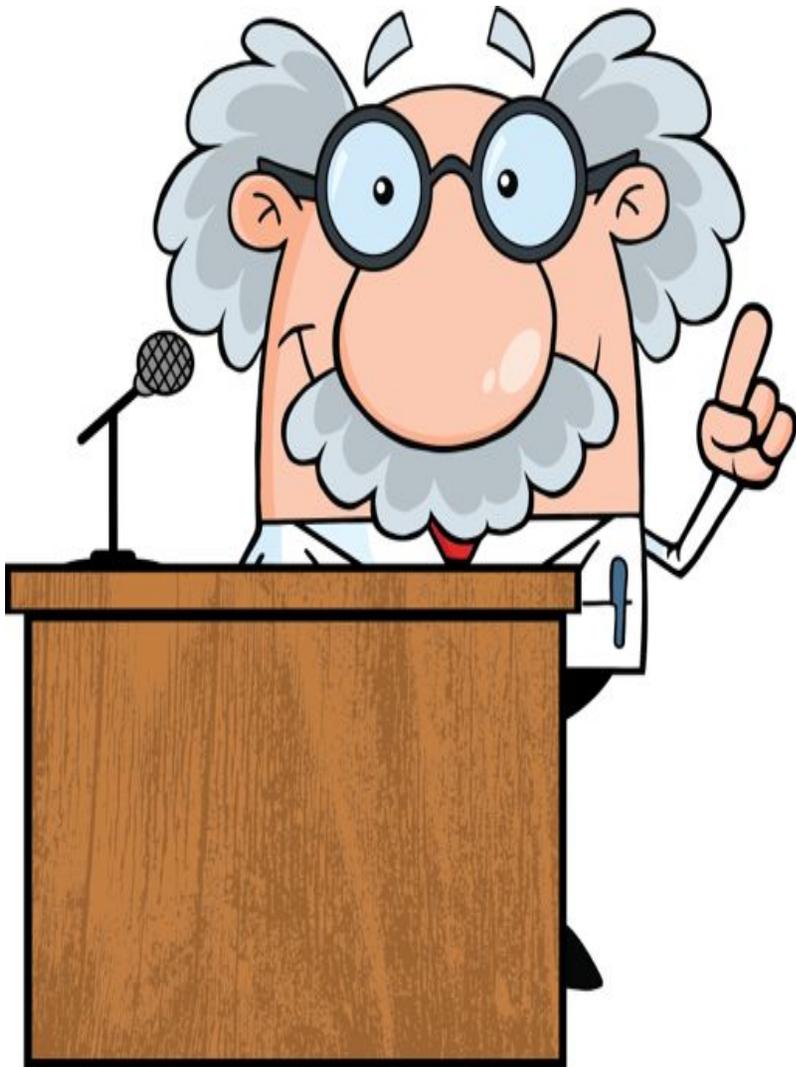
All year long Israel's sins, like a noxious cloud, have been polluting the sanctuary. Although individuals have brought purification offerings to cleanse the sanctuary of their *involuntary* sins, their offerings have had no affect on the actions of the brazen sinner who has refused to repent. His or her sins continue to pollute the sanctuary, posing the very real threat that God will abandon his dwelling place, leaving the people to fend for themselves, a nation without God. Thus, we have the annual Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*, when the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies, purifying it with a sin offering—the blood of a goat—and then transferring the pollution and the sins of the people onto the head of a second “scapegoat,” dispatching it into the wilderness, bearing the all the sins of all the people.

The Day of Atonement, or *Yom Kippur*, is the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, the day when the slate is wiped clean and the people have a fresh start with God.



To this point in our study of Leviticus, we have learned that in giving the Law at Mt. Sinai, God established ten principles by which a covenant people may live with God and one another, and by building the Tabernacle, God provided a means of access to himself through the 5 Great Sacrifices: the burnt offering, grain offering, peace offering, sin offering and guilt offering.

Properly mediated through the priesthood, the 5 great sacrifices purge the sacred space of the pollution caused by people's *inadvertent* sins.



But what of the deliberate, brazen sins that people commit, sins for which they are wholly unrepentant?

The 5 Great Sacrifices have *no affect* on such sins. And we learned that the greater the sin, the deeper and more dense its polluting effect, penetrating into the Holy of Holies itself, infecting even the ark of the covenant, thereby threatening the destruction of the entire community!

Since the sacrifice of a deliberate sinner is ineffective—*indeed, such a sinner is barred from even offering a sacrifice*—how then can the sanctuary be purified?

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The answer is *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement.

Once each year, on the 10th of Tishri, the seventh month, the High Priest risks his life by entering the Holy of Holies—an act forbidden to mortal humans—and he purifies the Holy of Holies through a smoke screen. When the High Priest emerges from the Holy of Holies, he transfers the removed pollution onto the head of a live goat. He then dispatches the goat into the wilderness, bearing the sins of the people.



Now, that is a very clever solution to a tricky problem inherent in the sacrificial system!



I feel sorry for the goat!



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The Day of Atonement

(Leviticus 16: 1-34)



Introduction (1-2)

1. Preparation (3-10)
2. Purification of the sanctuary (11-19)
3. Rite of the Scapegoat (20-22)
4. Aftermath (23-28)
5. Epilogue (29-31)

Conclusion (32-34)



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(Leviticus 16: 1-34)

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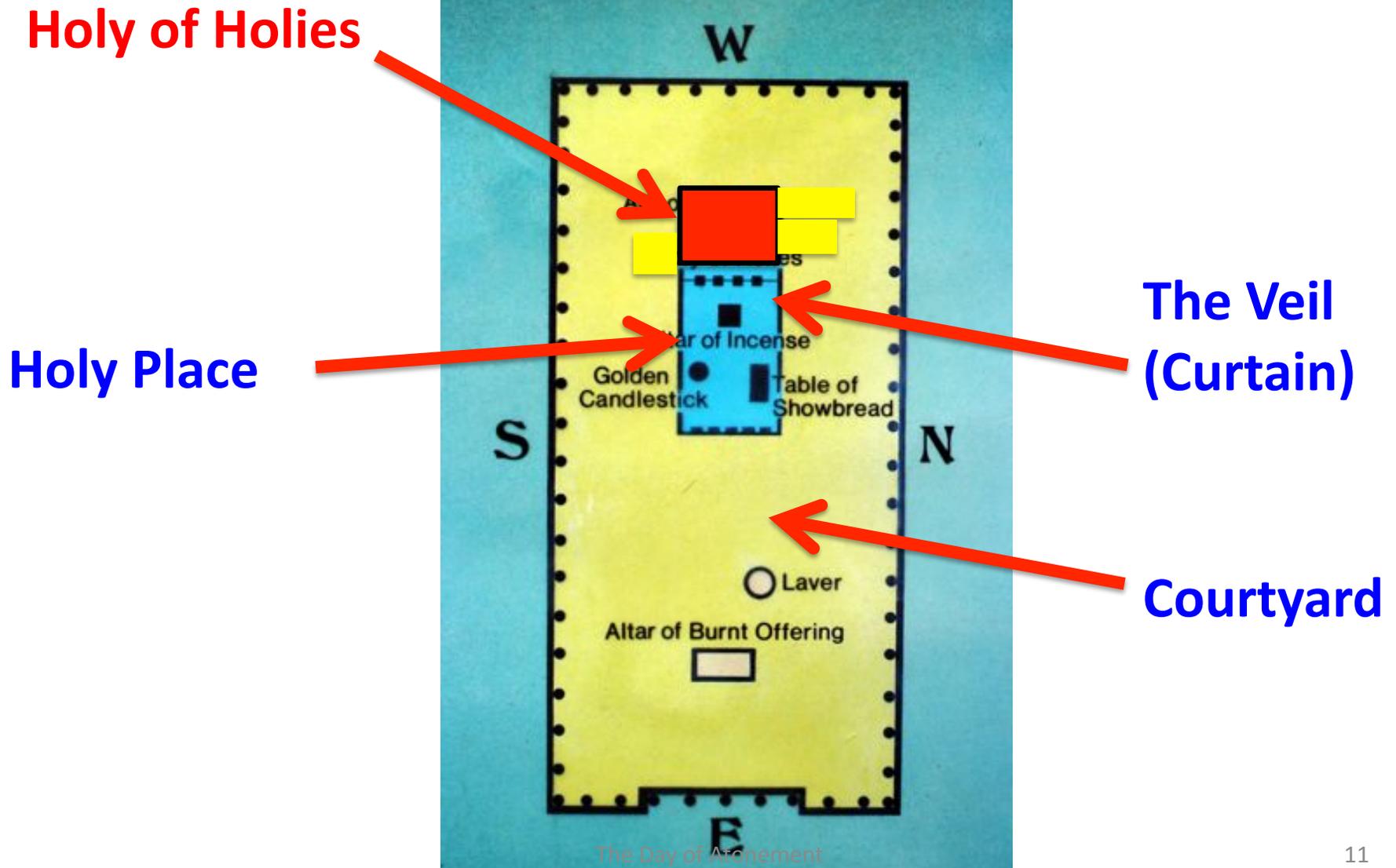
The Day of Atonement

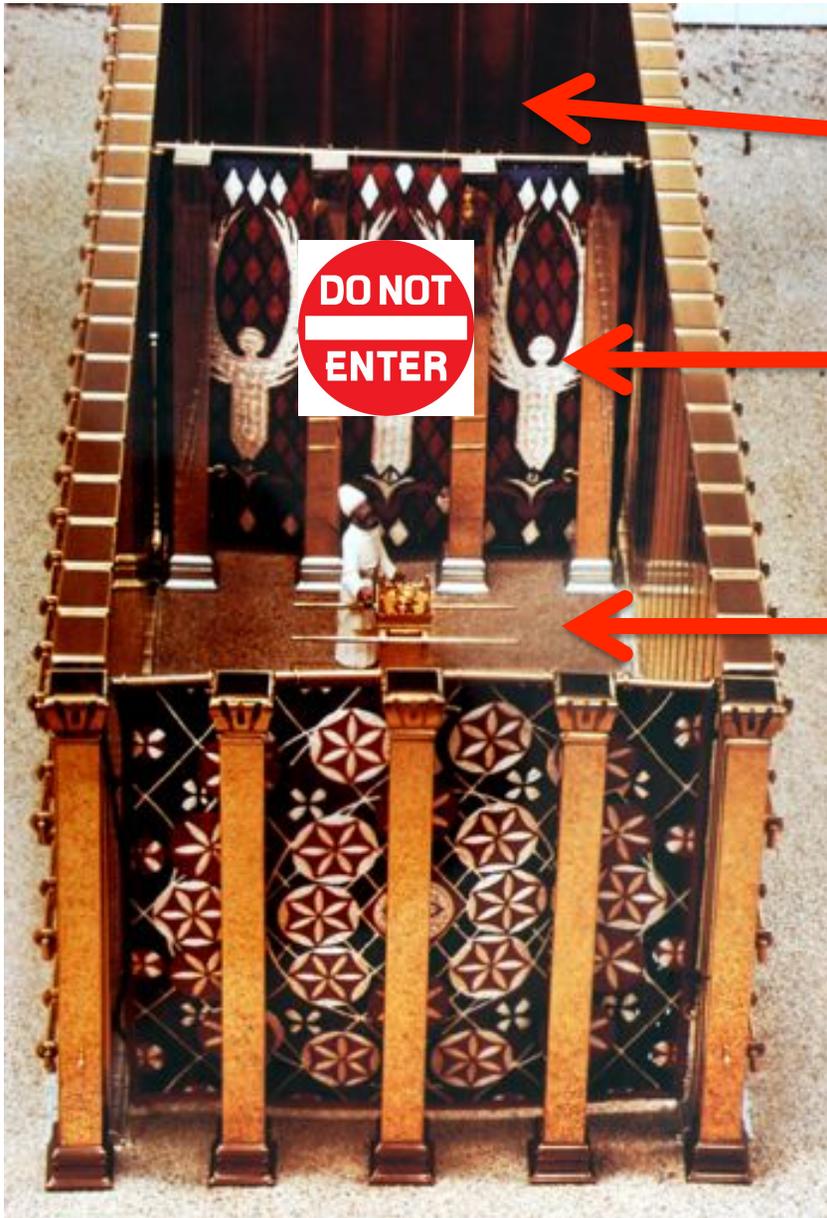
(Leviticus 16: 1-2)

Introduction

“After the death of Aaron’s two sons, who died when they encroached on the Lord’s presence, the Lord spoke to Moses and said to him: Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come whenever he pleases into the inner sanctuary, inside the veil, in front of the cover on the ark, lest he die, for I reveal myself in a cloud above the ark’s cover.”

The Tabernacle





Holy of Holies

The Veil

Holy Place

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The Ark of the Covenant



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The Day of Atonement

(Leviticus 16: 1-2)

Introduction

“After the death of Aaron’s two sons, who died when they encroached on the Lord’s presence, the Lord spoke to Moses and said to him: Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come whenever he pleases into the inner sanctuary, inside the veil, in front of the cover on the ark, lest he die, for I reveal myself in a cloud above the ark’s cover.”



Opening chapter 16 with “*After the death of Aaron’s two sons*” suggests that chapter 16, the Day of Atonement, may have originally followed chapter 10, the deaths of Nadab and Abihu; the two chapters are closely linked, perhaps the Day of Atonement being a direct, immediate response to the deaths of Nadab and Abihu.

Structurally, however, parenthetically inserting clean and unclean foods (11), childbirth (12) *sara’at* [“leprosy”] (13-14) and bodily emissions (15) between the deaths of Nadab and Abihu and the Day of Atonement broadens our understanding of the Day of Atonement, extending it beyond the specific instance of Nadab and Abihu to include the deliberate, brazen and unrepentant sins of the entire community.

It also serves as a dire warning to Aaron (and any later High Priest) to tread cautiously on such holy ground, entering the Holy of Holies with “fear and trembling.”

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The Day of Atonement

(Leviticus 16: 1-34)

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(11-19)**

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The Day of Atonement

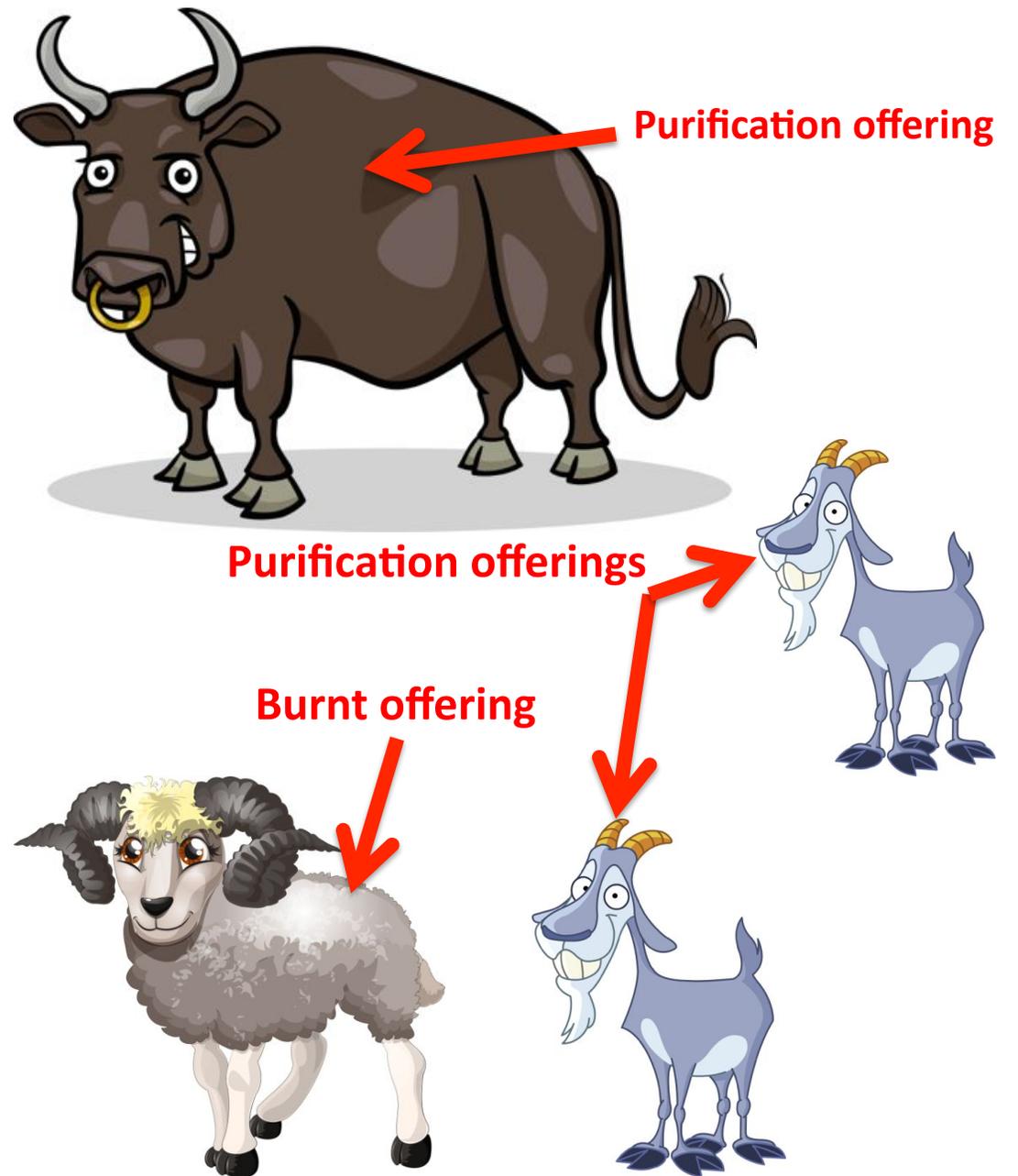
(Leviticus 16: 3-5)

Preparation

“Only in this way may Aaron enter the sanctuary. He shall bring a bull of the herd for a purification offering and a ram for a burnt offering. He shall wear the sacred linen tunic, with the linen pants underneath, gird himself with the linen sash and put on the linen turban. But since these vestments are sacred, he shall not put them on until he has first bathed his body in water. From the Israelite community he shall receive two male goats for a purification offering and one ram for a burnt offering.



Aaron, fully vested



The Day of Atonement

(Leviticus 16: 6-10)

Preparation, cont.

“Aaron shall offer the bull, his purification offering, to make atonement for himself and for his household. Taking the **two male goats** and setting them before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting, **he shall cast lots** to determine which one is for the Lord and which for **Azazel**. **The goat that is determined by lot for the Lord**, Aaron shall present and offer up as a purification offering. But **the goat determined by lot for Azazel** he shall place before the Lord alive so that he may make atonement by sending it off to Azazel in the desert.



- Aaron will place the two goats “before the Lord” at the entrance of the tent of meeting, where God will choose, by Aaron casting lots, the goat that he wishes for a purification offering.
- The remaining goat will be the “scapegoat,” sent to Azazel in the wilderness, loaded with the sins of the people.
- Azazel seems to be a vestigial remnant of Mesopotamian polytheistic belief, a wilderness-dwelling demon, emblematic of chaos and disorder, the appropriate dwelling place for the most serious of sins. Israel had, indeed, expunged the demonic as an external force in favor of sin, an internal force, but the primitive, polytheistic residue still remained, like a lingering odor.



The Day of Atonement

(Leviticus 16: 1-34)

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The Day of Atonement

(Leviticus 16: 11-14)

Purification of the Sanctuary.

“Thus shall Aaron **offer his bull** for the purification offering, to make atonement for himself and for his family. When he has slaughtered it, he shall take **a censer full of glowing embers** from the altar before the Lord, as well as **a double handful of finely ground fragrant incense**, and bringing them inside the veil, there before the Lord he shall put incense on the fire, so that a cloud of incense may **shield the cover** that is over the covenant, else he will die. Taking some of the bull’s blood, he shall **sprinkle** it with his finger on the front of the ark’s cover and likewise sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times in front of the cover.



- Before initiating the rite, Aaron first makes atonement for his own sins, and those of his family, by offering the bull as a purification offering on the bronze altar in the courtyard.
- After making atonement for himself and his family, Aaron takes “a censer full of glowing embers” from the bronze altar, whose sacred fire was kindled directly by God.
- Taking two handfuls of incense and a “smoke-raiser,” Aaron is to make a cloud of smoke, mixed with incense that will shield the ark of the covenant and the presence of God from his view. As we learned in verse 2, if Aaron enters the Holy of Holies without the thick cloud veiling his view, he will die—just as Nadab and Abihu did.
- Aaron then sprinkles the bull’s blood seven times on the ark of the covenant.

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The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16: 15-16a)

Purification of the Sanctuary, cont.

“Then he shall slaughter the goat of the **people’s purification offering**, and bringing its blood inside the veil, he shall do with it as he did with the bull’s blood, sprinkling it on the ark’s cover and in front of it. Thus he shall purge the inner sanctuary of all the Israelites’ **impurities** and **trespasses**, including all their sins.



•Aaron brings the blood of the 1st goat—the peoples purification offering—into the Holy of Holies, where he sprinkles it seven times on the ark of the covenant, purging the inner sanctum of all the Israelite's **impurities** and **trespasses**.



- **Impurities** refers to the ritual impurities described in chapters 11-15 and the moral impurities generated by violating God's commandments.

- **Trespasses** refers to those brazen sins stemming directly from open and wanton defiance of God. The Hebrew word translated "trespasses" originates in the political realm, denoting the open rebellion of a vassal against an overlord (e.g., 1 Kings 12: 19; 2 Kings 1: 1).



Moreover, the term implies the premeditated *intentional* flouting of God's law, a sin so grievous that its intense impurity not only penetrates the sacred space of the Holy of Holies, but the ark of the covenant itself, the very seat of the Godhead.

In the political realm of the Bible, such behavior is punished by death; in the sacred realm it is punished by being "cut off" from God for all eternity.

In Roman Catholic terms, the difference between "impurities" and "trespasses" are not unlike those between venial sins and mortal sins.

The Day of Atonement

(Leviticus 16: 16b-19)

Purification of the Sanctuary, cont.

“He shall do the same for the tent of meeting, which is set up among them in the midst of their uncleanness. No one else may be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters the inner sanctuary to make atonement until he departs. When he has made atonement for himself and his household, as well as for the whole Israelite assembly, he shall come out to the altar before the Lord and purge it also. Taking some of the bull’s blood and the goat’s blood, he shall put it on the horns around the altar, and with his finger sprinkle some to the blood on it seven times. Thus he shall purify it and sanctify it from the impurities of the Israelites.”



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**In Lesson #12 we will
examine the scapegoat
in depth.**

**Here we'll look at it
briefly.**

The Day of Atonement

(Leviticus 16: 20-22a)

Scapegoat

“When he has finished purging the inner sanctuary, the tent of meeting and the altar, Aaron shall bring forward the live goat. Laying **both hands** on its head, he shall confess over it all the iniquities of the Israelites and their trespasses, including all their sins, and so put them on the goat’s head. He shall then have it led into the wilderness by an attendant. The goat will carry off all their iniquities to an isolated region.”



**William Holman Hunt. *The Scapegoat* (oil on canvas), 1854.
Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, Merseyside, England.**



•In a rite that mirrors those in other ancient Mesopotamian religions, Aaron transfers the impurities resulting from deliberate, brazen and unrepentant sins onto the head of the goat, and he then sends the goat away into the wilderness. The scapegoat “takes away” the sins of [the people].

•Placing **both hands** on the goat, signifies transference, unlike the one-handed gesture of “giving to God” that we have seen in the 5 Great Sacrifices.



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The Day of Atonement

(Leviticus 16: 22b-25)

Aftermath

“When the goat is dispatched into the wilderness, Aaron shall go into the tent of meeting, strip off the linen vestments he had put on when he entered the inner sanctuary, and leave them in the tent of meeting. After bathing his body with water in a sacred place, he shall put on his regular vestments, and then come out and offer his own and the people’s burnt offering, in atonement for himself and for the people, and also burn the fat of the purification offering on the altar.



- After Aaron dispatches the scapegoat into the wilderness he takes off his vestments and bathes in water before offering his own and the people's burnt offering at the bronze altar in the courtyard. This is the only time that immersion after a sacrifice is mentioned.
- Jacob Milgrom observes that it is not to remove any impurity contracted during the scapegoat rite; rather it is to remove the "superholiness" that he contracted by entering the Holy of Holies.



I'm not so sure about that.

We read in Exodus 34: 29 that when Moses came down from Mt. Sinai after receiving the tablets of the Ten Commandments that *“he did not know that the skin of his face had become radiant while he spoke with the Lord.”*

Likewise, we read in Matthew 17: 2 that at Jesus' transfiguration, being in the presence of the Father, *“his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as light.”*

So, too, perhaps with Aaron. But why would he need to bathe to remove it?

The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16: 26-28)

Aftermath, cont.

“The man who led away the goat for Azazel shall wash his garments and bathe his body in water; only then may he enter the camp. The bull and the goat of the purification offering whose blood was brought to make atonement in the inner sanctuary, shall be taken outside the camp, where their hides and flesh and dung shall be burned in the fire. The one who burns them shall wash his garments and bathe his body in water; only then may he enter the camp.”



Both the man who leads away the goat and the man who burns the hide, flesh and dung of the purification offerings must wash their garments and bathe in water to remove any impurities they may have contracted while performing their duties.

Taking off their garments and bathing applies to Aaron, the man who leads away the goat and the man who does the burning. Taken within the context of the “Aftermath” section of Leviticus 16, this 3-fold pattern within the same unit suggests a common reason for disrobing and bathing: the possibility having been impure.



Admittedly, the High Priest is immune from contamination while performing purification rites, but, perhaps, once again . . .

Better to be safe than sorry!



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The Day of Atonement

(Leviticus 16: 29-31)

The Epilogue

“This shall be **an everlasting statute** for you: on the tenth day of the seventh month every one of you, whether a native or a resident alien, shall humble yourselves and shall do no work. For on this day atonement is made for you to make you clean: of all your sins you will be cleansed before the Lord. It shall be a sabbath of complete rest for you, on which you must humble yourselves—**an everlasting statute.**”



- Notice the elegant framing of the Epilogue by **“an everlasting statute.”**

- Notice, too, that the people are addressed for the first time; up to this point they have been referred to in the 3rd person and they have played no role whatsoever in the sanctuary ritual. Now they do.

- And notice that the Epilogue introduces fasting [in our translation, “humble yourselves”] and rest as elements of the Day of Atonement ritual.



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The Day of Atonement

(Leviticus 16: 32-34)

Conclusion

“This atonement is to be made by the priest who has been anointed and ordained to **the priesthood in succession to his father**. He shall wear the linen garments, the sacred vestments, and purge the most sacred part of the sanctuary, as well as the tent of meeting, and the altar. He shall also make atonement for the priests and all the people of the assembly. This, then, shall be an everlasting statute for you: once a year atonement shall be made on behalf of the Israelites for all their sins. And Moses did as the Lord had commanded him.”

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- Among the Israelites the priesthood was hereditary: one was born a priest, or not.
- A priest must be born of the tribe of Levi.
- The High Priest was a hereditary role as well, a descendant of Aaron.
- If the high priest had no son, the office devolved to his next-eldest brother.
- By the time of Jesus the office had become highly political, with Herod the Great nominating at least 6 different high priests!
- The priesthood functioned from the time of Aaron until the destruction of the 2nd Temple in A.D 70, roughly 1,500 years.



There are no priests in Judaism today!

After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem on 29/30 A.D. 70 the priesthood ceased operating. Without a Temple, without the sacrifices, without a priesthood, Judaism faced a crisis. How does one continue being a Jew?

Yohanan ben Zakkai (died, A.D. 90), founder of the most important Jewish religious center of the 1st century, took the lead, arguing that after the destruction of the Temple, the Sanhedrin should be replaced with religious study and animal sacrifice with prayer. His thinking greatly influenced the development of modern-day rabbinic Judaism, contributing to its survival for the next 2,000 years.

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Today, in rabbinic Judaism, the “Day of Atonement,” or *Yom Kippur*, is the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of *Yom Kippur* in the life of the Jewish people. Even Jews who are indifferent to religion respond to its call and flock to the synagogue, much as indifferent Christians show up at church on Christmas and Easter. The music, prayers, and liturgy of *Yom Kippur* are sublime. The day changes lives. The Roman Catholic, Aime Palliere, began his pilgrimage to Judaism as the result of entering a synagogue on *Yom Kippur* afternoon, and Franz Rosenzweig, a brilliant young German Jew who was about to become a Christian, became one of the noblest teachers of modern Jewry following *Yom Kippur* spent in an Orthodox synagogue in Berlin in 1913.



Yom Kippur Today

Yom Kippur begins on the evening of the 10th day of Tishri, the seventh month on the Jewish calendar, with the blowing of the *shofar*. As the sun goes down a complete fast begins: no food, no water. This continues for twenty-four hours. Synagogue services begin after sundown with the beautiful *Kol Nidre* prayer, literally, “all vows.” Set to music, *Kol Nidre* asks God for forgiveness for promises made to him that have been broken and for promises that have been made through coercion. For a Christian at *Yom Kippur* services, the latter is especially heartbreaking, for it entered the liturgy during the Middle Ages, when the Church converted Jews by means of torture and death. *Kol Nidre* asks God to forgive those who were not strong enough to resist.

Yom Kippur Today, cont.



The next day is spent entirely in the synagogue, and it includes four services: *Shaharit*, morning; *Musaj*, additional; *Minhdh*, afternoon; and *Neilah*, late afternoon. Services also include *Yizkor*, memorial prayers for the dead. Jonah provides the principal reading during *Neilah*, for it includes two important lessons: 1) God gives us a second chance, even after we willfully disobey him (“the word of the Lord came to Jonah *a second time*” – Jonah 3: 1) and 2) God’s forgiveness is not for Jews alone, but for the entire human family (Then the Lord said to Jonah: “*Should I not be concerned over the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot know their right hand from their left, not to mention the animals?*” (Jonah 4: 10-11).

Services close in the evening with the blowing of the shofar.

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Questions for discussion and thought

1. Before Aaron enters the Holy of Holies on the “Day of Atonement” what must he do?
2. How many goats are used in Leviticus, and what are they for?
3. Who (or what) is Azazel?
4. What is the difference between “impurities” and “trespasses”?
5. What happens to the scapegoat?

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Paul F. Kiene. *The Tabernacle of God in the Wilderness of Sinai*,
trans. by John S, Crandall. Grand Rapids, Michigan