

Yom Kippur is an Earth Day

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The first time I felt a rush of The Sacred while in shul was on Rosh Hashanah about a decade ago, prostrating myself on the floor of the shul during the *Great Aleinu*. In all the noise and emotion of the day, I found an island of silence and rest lying on the floor in front of the open Ark. It would have been better to pray the *Great Aleinu* outdoors where we could feel the dirt in our hands as we bow down to creation, but the shul's clean floor was second best.

Then came Yom Kippur of that year, and of every year since, when I bring myself to the highest moment of *Avodah*, the sacred Priestly ritual of Yom Kippur. At that moment when we all submit ourselves to the name of Adonai, like generations of *Am Yisrael*, I'm back there with the Earth.

Yom Kippur can then be seen as a Jewish Earth Day: It is about our striving for an attitude of humility in the face of creation. It is about the possibility of forgiving wrongs and cleansing sins, cleansing contamination, pollution, and sorrow. It is about the reality of forgiveness and hope.

Yom Kippur's origins lie in the tragic story of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron and nephews of Moses and Miriam. Here is the story:

Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire, put fire in it, and laid incense on it;

And they offered before the Eternal alien fire, which had not been enjoined upon them. And

Fire came forth from the Eternal and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Eternal.

Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Eternal meant by saying:

Through those near to Me, I show Myself holy,

And gain glory through all the people.

And Aaron was silent. (Leviticus 10:1-3)

In her book “*Leviticus as Literature*”, Mary Douglas reads this as “...[a] parable about trespass on forbidden ground”, and situates it within the wider context of the Levitical text as embodying, in written form, the structure of the *Mishkan* (“Tabernacle”). In a nutshell, Douglas suggests that by reading Leviticus, we are invited to walk through the (memory of the) *Mishkan*, thus acquainting ourselves with its inner workings and perhaps even its secrets. She also reminds us that we find only two narrative pauses in this book, mostly about priestly ritual – and both deal with trespass and death. It would be helpful to remember at this point that Douglas understands “dirt” or contamination, as that which is out of its place in the ordered structure of society. Within the sacred structure of *Mishkan* or *Gan Eiden* (Garden of Eden), this out – of - place presence of humans, or fire, becomes a defiling contamination of holiness. We’ll get back to this a bit later on, but at this point let us notice that beyond being a story of religious trespass, this is also a story of hubris and retelling of Eve’s misadventures around the Tree of Knowledge. To understand and begin tying this story with our relationship to the Earth, we should remember that rabbinic tradition parallels the construction story of the *Mishkan* with the Creation of the world. In that sense, the *Mishkan* is parallel to the Earth, and the Priests (and perhaps all of Israel) to the guardians of the Earth, i.e. Humanity.

In Midrash *Tanchuma* we find “Why does it say; I love the habitation of Thy house, and the place where your glory dwells? Because the Tabernacle is equal to the creation of the world itself....”. In the Talmud we read “Bezalel knew how to join the letters with which heaven and earth were created,” meaning that the artist and designer Bezalel had access to the blueprint of creation on which he modeled the *Mishkan*, the meeting place with God.

However, if we have all of creation around and within us, why would God command us to build a *Mishkan*? Why do we need a Tent of Meeting when meeting can, and does happen all around us? In another Midrash, Moses asks the exact same question “the glory of the Holy One fills the upper worlds and the lower,

and God said to make for God a Tabernacle?’ to which the Eternal answers ‘I do not see things the same way as you do.... furthermore, I will come down and contract my Presence within a space of one cubit by one cubit.’....”

Contrary to my natural inclination to believe God has no measure and cannot be contained within buildings no matter how wonderful they are, there is something very compelling in this answer. In the *Mishkan*, we were given the opportunity to create a virtual structure in which to practice stewardship, a space where we could potentially learn care and caution. This space echoed the “real” world outside, but inside it we found a “condensed” presence of God, very close to our touch. Any divergence from the blueprint of creation brings with it a reaction. If in the wide space of creation, we can heat up the atmosphere and wait decades until Arctic ice begins to melt, here the fire hits us instantly.

Torah ends the story of Creation and consecration of the Earth with a human action and God’s reaction (Eve and the Tree of Knowledge), and the telling of the Creation and consecration of the *Mishkan* similarly ends with the story of priestly action and God’s reaction (Nadab, Abihu and the fire). Earth and Mishkan were both contaminated by a human act that could be read either as a mistake or as hubris. The consequence is painful in both instances because if regular/secular space can allow itself to become defiled and then wait until it is cleansed, sacred space cannot allow itself to hold dirt – contamination – defilement, and must eject that which is out of place.

Some chapters later, we return to the silently grieving father Aaron when Moses instructs him on the correct way of entering the Sacred Zone (שֶׁזֶדֶךְ, *Hakodesh*). And there, in chapter 16 of Leviticus we learn the laws of cleansing the sacred space, and of the ritual which will evolve to become Yom Kippur:

And this shall be to you a law for all time: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month,

You shall practice self-denial; and you shall do no manner of work. . . He shall purge the innermost Shrine; he shall purge the Tent of Meeting and the altar; and he shall make expiation for the priests and for all the people of the congregation. This shall be to you a law for all time: to make atonement for the Israelites for all their sins once a year. (Leviticus 16:29-34)

If ritual cleansing of the *Mishkan* was done correctly and *if* atonement was achieved, a year of plenty in all aspects of life was ensured. Why? Because this sacred structure represented the world, and the world must be purified for life to continue. **In acknowledgement of our great power in the world, it is our job as humans to perform the ritual of cleansing, on both a spiritual and very practical level.** Whereas the story of *Gan Eiden* ends with banishment and suffering, here we are offered a way to cleanse our sins and mishaps and begin again—not from an Edenic start but by continuing within our often broken, but fixable world.

Torah and mythology create an origin story from which to draw energy to do our sacred work of cleansing the Earth. Rabbi Glenn Jacob offers an in-depth exploration of *Avodah*, the sacred service of the Temple, as a model for the urgent climate work that needs to be done in our times, and he reminds us that a theology of **Purification** could be a more robust tool at this point than that of **Creation**. His distinction is important not only in that he offers us a new theology, but also in that we can use this idea to develop an active, ritual and *Halachic* (Jewish Law) response to our current climate crisis. Below are a few suggestions from within the Yom Kippur ritual as to how we may do this. .

Vidui – confession

“Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites....”(Leviticus 16:21) First, we offer a communal acknowledgment of guilt, because as we remember, Yom Kippur’s *vidui* involves the whole community speaking our sins together in the same way that in Jewish theology redemption is communal and not individual. In our days of climate crisis, mass extinction, and social upheaval, we must reconnect the “I” and the “we.” To bring a deep confession to our lips on Yom Kippur, we must first be able to imagine the terrible outcome of not recognizing our sins and offer a *Vidui for our collective guilt*.

To know where the world is broken and what we are atoning for, we must first remember what a “working planet” looks like. We need to make sure that part of our ritual is in learning and re-learning the science of

our planet—the physics, biology, zoology, geology, chemistry – the whole of the ecosystem. **That is, we must study the Torah of observing life and the universe:**

[we] should know the importance of ritual in building human community, but also understand the function of mycorrhizal fungi and soil microorganisms in the natural community in which the human community is embedded...Our culture is afflicted with a vast disconnection, an abyss of ignorance that becomes apparent whenever an issue involving the natural world arises.

As part of our preparation for the High Holidays, and perhaps even as part of our spiritual work during *aseret y'mei t'shuvah* (The ten days of atonement prior to Yom Kippur), we should make space in our communities and congregations to learn some hard science and educate ourselves on the current knowledge of our planet's rhythms and workings. It will be easier to know what we have done wrong, when we know how life on Earth is sustained.

Seir La'Azazel – the Scapegoat

“While the goat designated by lot for Azazel shall be left standing alive before YHVH, to make expiation with it and to send it off to the wilderness for Azazel... Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated man. Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.”

In the book of Leviticus, we find a description of two rituals for cleansing the “House”, the first deals with the case of a house being contaminated by *Tzaraat* (skin disease), and the second tells of the Yom Kippur ritual. In both rituals we have “twin” animals (bird and bird, he-goat and he-goat), one of which will be sacrificed to God, and the other released away from human habitation. the “twinning” of animals might not indicate two parts of a ritual happening to two animals, but rather, two aspects of the ritual happening to the “same” animal (But since we can't both kill an animal and set her free, we need to use two identical animals). The two birds in the first ritual represent a single bird (and one house) going through a ritualised process of healing. One bird is sacrificed over “living waters” and then the live bird is dipped in her blood (talk about traumatising someone!) and set free

into the field/*Sadeh*. The two goats stand next to each other as the lot is cast, and together symbolise a single goat who is enacting both the house of God (the *Mikdash* which is being cleansed) and no-mans land – both covenant with the house of God and freedom in the wilderness. By sending out a portion of ourselves (represented by the bird and the goat) into the wild, we are acknowledging the presence of chaos, pain, and fright in creation. Through this aspect of the ritual, we remind ourselves that “The world is not inherently safe; it is inherently unsafe” and that the power of God to confine chaos rather than to eliminate it is the essence of creation. By sending a part of ourselves out to the borders of our habitation, we are redefining the edges of our “home”, our place as humans, and making space for the unpredictable, non-human others who are as much a part of creation as we are. This moment of the Yom Kippur ritual reminds us of the forces that lay outside our human home but are as much part of the wider cosmic home as we are.

Like the two birds and the two he-goats. Two that are one, both part of the covenant, part of the wilderness and part of God.

I don’t suggest we reintroduce animal sacrifice into our ritual, but it is critical that we find new liturgy and ritual to help us remember the awesome power of creation around us, and appreciate the delicacy of the islands of civilization we live within.

Kodesh HaKodashim —Holy of Holies

“And he shall take a panful of glowing coals scooped from the altar before the Eternal, and two handfuls of finely ground aromatic incense, and bring this behind the curtain. He shall put the incense on the fire before the Eternal, so that the cloud from the incense screens the cover that is over [the Ark of] the Covenant, lest he die. (Leviticus, 16:12-13)

Behind the curtain and within the Holy of Holies lay the Ark of the Covenant. The Day of Atonement aims at cleansing the contamination we’ve brought onto our sacred spaces, the Mishkan, Synagogues and the Earth, and so into our covenant with God. The *Mishkan* mirrors Earth, and Eve and Adam mirror Nadab and Abihu. So what is the sacred covenant or assignment that we are breaking again and again?

“And God Eternal took the man, placing him in the Garden of Eden to till it and watch it” (Genesis 2:15).

Our original covenant, or assignment on Earth, was to “till it and watch it”—לְעֹבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ (*l'ovdah ul'shomrah*). The Hebrew here is interesting, especially relating to the word לְעֹבְדָהּ (*l'ovdah*, “to till”). The assignment לְשָׁמְרָהּ (*l'shomrah*, “to watch”) is quite understandable; we are to be wardens of this place. לְעֹבְדָהּ, on the other hand is usually understood as working the Earth, being good gardeners. But the root for עבד (*a-v-d*) has another meaning in biblical Hebrew, which is to worship. In this reading, our role is to guard the Earth and pay homage to it, that is, to realise once again the sacredness which dwells within its soil and ecosystems as the Shechinah (God's presence in the world) came and rested within the Mishkan. The Earth is the Mishkan and should now be the focal point of our spiritual and religious work as Jews.

I find Leviticus in general, and especially the scapegoat ritual, to be fascinating in the way it deals with contamination (both physical and spiritual) and purification. Similarly, much of the spiritual language around the climate crisis is apocalyptic and draws its theology and imagery from traditions where the world must be destroyed for it to be renewed (e.g. the “second coming of Christ”, the Ragnarök, *Gog* and *Magog* in our own mythology, etc.) These are theologies that call for the ruin of our world and society before new life emerges. Leviticus suggests a different way, one in which we recognise that part of our human existence is sin, mistakes, and contamination. By recognizing this fact, we are not divesting ourselves from responsibility, but rather we are taking on a much greater commitment to our original assignment here on Earth: לְעֹבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ—to till and pay homage to it. On Yom Kippur during *Seder Ha'Avodah*, bring your body down to the floor, to the ground. Touch the Earth. Feel yourself breathing, and feel the Earth breathing with you as you commit to guarding and seeing the sacredness of it all once again.