



THE PARSHA EXPERIMENT: PARSHAT ACHAREI MOT HOW DO YOM KIPPUR RITUALS SAVE US FROM SINS?

This guide corresponds to the video: [How Do Yom Kippur Rituals Atone For Our Sins?](#)

SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

- I. This week, we learn about the detailed Yom Kippur ritual that took place in the Tabernacle.
 - a. We associate Yom Kippur with prayer and sitting in synagogue all day.
 - b. But back then, it involved goats, lotteries, sacrifices; sprinkling blood, incense, clouds.
 - c. And the purpose of all of these rituals is to, somehow, grant forgiveness for all of the sins we did throughout the year.
 - i. But how? How does killing goats and sprinkling blood save us from sins?
 - ii. It sounds magical and irrational.
 - d. And if it is forgiveness we're after - what happened to good-old-fashioned repentance?
 - i. Actually trying to change yourself and become a better person?
 - ii. At some point in the Yom Kippur ritual, the priest does confess the sins of the people, but it's just a small part of the elaborate service - just one verse out of 30 describe the ins and outs of rituals involving blood and sacrifice.
 - e. What are we to make of this strange forgiveness-granting ritual? And how do we relate to it when our experience of Yom Kippur is just so different.

- II. There's actually one verse that describes what the strange Yom Kippur service is meant to accomplish, but it actually may confuse us more.
 - a. If we can understand this sentence, we might see how the service works: "For on this day, you shall be granted atonement, to purify you, from all of your sins" (Lev. 16:30)
 - b. To grant atonement to purify you from your sins.
 - i. In this context, don't those really mean the same thing?
 - ii. If the verse would have said, "For on this day, you will be granted atonement from all of your sins," would you have said, "What about purity? Will we also be purified from all of our sins?" Or if the verse said that you would be purified from your sins, would you have said – "We need atonement!"?
 - iii. What is the relationship between purity and atonement?
 - c. And things really start to fall apart when we reconsider that word, Kapparah.
 - i. We always assume atonement - Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement.
 - ii. That makes sense whenever it's used in context of sins.
 1. But, there are other times when the word is used where translating it as "atonement" just doesn't work.
 - a. For example, when one brings an olah offering, it's done לכפר עליו. But the olah is a voluntary offering, not brought for sins!
 - b. Similarly, a yoledet, a women who has just given birth, has to bring sacrifices, עֲלִיָּהּ וְכִפָּר - it grants her a kappara.

- c. A zav - one who has abnormal bodily discharge - also goes through a ritual which concludes with עָלִיוּ וְכִפָּר.
 - d. As we discussed, both the yoledet and the zav are tamei - ritually impure, but childbirth and having discharge are not sins. And yet, both people need kapparah. So kapparah can't just mean atonement.
 - iii. So let's try and find a definition that works.
 - 1. As we try to understand kapparah and the rituals that help one achieve it, we can understand a better meaning of the Yom Kippur service.
 - 2. There are instances in which the meaning of כִּפָּר is unmistakable.
 - a. The cover for the ark that held the tablets, is called the כַּפֶּרֶת.
 - b. Additionally, back in Genesis, when Noah was commanded to build his ark, God said, "Cover it, inside and out, with a covering" (Genesis 6:14)
 - d. So, that's our first clue: כִּפָּר means "cover."
 - i. Now let's plug that definition into the verse in our parsha - that would mean that Yom Kippur comes not to atone, but to cover us from our sins.
 - ii. What does it mean to be covered from sins? Is it like some magical shield?
 - 1. And what about the cases that don't involve sin, what's being covered?
- III. To crack the kapparah code, we'll need another clue...
 - a. In Numbers, when discussing justice for murderers, the Torah warns us: "Don't take ransom for the life of a murderer, he is guilty and deserving of death" (Numbers 35:31)
 - i. Here, כִּפָּר means ransom—we can't let a murderer buy his way out of justice.
 - ii. So which is it? How can the word "cover" also mean "ransom?"
 - b. It seems that the ransom money that he would give somehow represents him.
 - i. The word "cover" works this way in English - If I am at a restaurant and I meet some friends for dinner, I can tell the manager that "I'll cover them" - and the manager understands that I am going to pay for them.
 - ii. To cover for someone means to substitute for them - to stand in their place.
 - 1. They owe you money? Now I owe you money. I am covering them.
 - c. All the cases of kapparah in the Torah include an object or vehicle for substitution.
 - i. Kapparah is a process in which we have an object symbolically represent us.
 - ii. That process is different in each case, but let's just look at an example: semicha
 - 1. When one brings an olah, including those offered in the Yom Kippur service, he leans his hands on the head of the offering to cover for him.
 - 2. The process of leaning my hands on the animal's head symbolically signifies the animal's substitution for me.
 - 3. The animal stands in my place. But why?
- IV. We didn't understand why one who brings a voluntary olah offering should need kapparah.
 - a. In last year's Vayikra, Rabbi Fohrman explained that the olah is an expression of awe.
 - i. When I realize how great God really is, that He's the Sources of everything, I'm overwhelmed, and all I can do is see everything I have as God's, not mine
 - b. In fact, the Olah is the only offering in which all of it is completely offered up to God - none of it is consumed by the Kohanim or the giver.
 - i. When the giver rests his hands on the animal, it's לכַּפֵּר עָלָיו, the animal stands in the place of the giver

- ii. When it is offered up completely to God, it is as if he is saying, “God - everything in the world is yours - I willingly give everything up to You... including myself.”
 - iii. The rituals through which we do kapparrah are designed to achieve that substitution, and help us express that emotion of utter abandonment to God, in a very tangible way.

- V. Another case that we had trouble understanding was the yoledet and zav --- two examples of people who are ritually impure. What does kapparrah mean there?
 - a. Last week, we explained that tumah is designed to force us to confront our mortality.
 - i. Death should be the most poignant reminder to us that we’re not eternal - only God is - but we often don’t internalize that.
 - ii. The rituals of tumah give us a way to re-align our perspectives and realize that God is the great giver of life, and we are encouraged to cling to Him.
 - b. And in the case of a yoledet and zav, we now understand how that works.
 - i. Both a yoeledet and zav bring a korban, and the offering covers for them.
 - ii. If we apply our understanding of kapparrah - as substitution, it seems that the animal stands in their place.
 - 1. And then think about what happens -- imagine yourself bringing an animal to the Tabernacle as a symbolic representation of you.
 - 2. And then, suddenly, the animal is slaughtered and offered up to God.
 - 3. That experience would really push you to confront your own mortality.
 - 4. That animal represented you
 - 5. Your life could have ended just as quickly, but for the grace of God.
 - 6. Your offering of that animal, of yourself to God, helps you remember that God is the Source of your Life.
 - 7. The very idea of the animal covering for you - kapparrah - is what pushes you to realize your mortality and it’s the mechanism through which tahara is achieved.

- VI. Now let’s return to Yom Kippur.
 - a. Somehow, the ritual of Yom Kippur is meant be mechaper - to cover for our sins.
 - b. How does that work?
 - i. How do the day’s rituals provide a cover for the wrongs we have committed?
 - ii. When one sins, he essentially chooses his own morality over God’s.
 - iii. He demonstrates that he thinks that he makes the rules, not God.
 - iv. He really pushes God out of the picture.
 - c. As we mentioned last week, the concept of Tumah is related to sin; God actually invokes the word tumah with respect to sin.
 - i. Regarding sexuality and idolatry, God says: “Don’t make yourself tamei by transgressing these” (Leviticus 18:24)
 - ii. One doesn’t attain a ritual status of tumah by transgressing sins, but by using the same word, the Torah seems to be telling us that committing sins is akin becoming tamei on purpose...
 - 1. When one sins, he chooses his own morality over God’s.
 - 2. He pretends that he’s the eternal being, like we do when we ignore the spiritual message of a confrontation with death.
 - d. It seems that sin is spiritually akin to someone choosing to stay in a state of tumah - A state of denial of the source of all life.

- i. If kapparah is meant to cover sin, then how should it work?
 - ii. Somehow, it must bring one towards tahara - purity.
 - iii. If sin expresses a denial of God and a false sense of mastery over this world, then kapparah must express the opposite -- a complete acceptance of human limitation and of God as the master and source of all life.
- e. Kapparah is the mechanism for how that is achieved
 - i. On the simplest level, when a person sins, strict Divine justice would say that he should be held culpable.
 - ii. But God also deals with us mercifully, so He allows a substitute.
 - iii. The animals used in the Yom Kippur ritual stand in in our place.
 - iv. They cover for our mistakes and take the punishment that we deserve.
- f. But it's even deeper than just letting the animal absorb our punishment.
 - i. When we symbolically see ourselves in the animal, we're essentially saying that that we want to let go of who we were.
 1. We've made mistakes.
 2. We don't pretend the sin never happened -- we acknowledge it.
 3. And then we choose to separate ourselves from it.
 4. We symbolically transfer our old selves into the animal.
 5. And when we dedicate the animal to the service of God - like with the olah offerings - we really dedicate ourselves up to God.
 6. That's achieving tahara - the ultimate way of admitting our own limitations and recognizing God as Master.
 7. So, while sin brings one towards tumah, the illusion of our own mastery -- Kapparah, substitution, helps one achieve tahara, the recognition of God's mastery.

- VII. With this in mind, let's go back to the verse describing the purpose of the Yom Kippur service:
- a. "For on this day, you shall be covered by the substitution service, so that you might achieve purity from all of your sins."
 - i. Kappara helps us recognize God, corrects the false perspective of chet, and facilitates our purification, our tahara.
 - ii. That's what Yom Kippur is all about: recognizing that God is the Source of all life, and realigning our lives with that reality.
 - b. The Torah clearly places a very heavy emphasis on ritual as a vehicle to express ourselves before God.
 - i. But ritual is not enough - Maimonides teaches us in his Laws of Repentance that without acknowledgement of your sin and a commitment to do better in the future, the sacrifice you bring is meaningless.
 - ii. But now, we are in a better position to understand how God wants us to approach our misdeeds, and we can understand what a gift this day of atonement, the day of covering, really is.
 - iii. Once a year, when we pray on Yom Kippur in place of the service that once was, we might symbolically cast aside our former selves, and offer ourselves to God.
 - iv. We might make sure to recognize God as the Source of our lives and achieve forgiveness, rebirth, and purity, and we might be joyful and thankful for the gift of Yom Kippur.