

How Shall a Man Approach God?

Some Yom Kippur Thoughts

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Given at St Swithuns Church, Pymble

17 September 2006

Friday night this week is Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year and 10 days after that comes the Jewish Day of Atonement. Most notable to me about growing up in an Orthodox Jewish home was the intensity of our concern for the proper celebration of Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. On that day, unmatched in synagogue splendour, our rabbi and cantor wore the most majestic robes. The choir sang like they never sang any other day of the year, and the cantor actually knelt down and bowed low during the services. Of course we all fasted and prayed for God's mercy and forgiveness of our sins.

The Biblical background

Leviticus 16 details the laws of the Day of Atonement. The Bible calls it "a Sabbath of Sabbaths" by which we understand it to be the holiest day in our Jewish calendar. As a Jew, I always knew that even though we might neglect our duties of religious expression throughout the rest of the year, we could not do that on Yom Kippur. That awesome day required our careful attention, heartfelt prayer, complete seriousness and trust in God's mercy. We were, after all, seeking God's forgiveness-- kippur, or atonement.

Whatever else atonement might mean in modern usage, it originally was related to the word in Genesis 6 where Noah covered the ark inside and out with pitch. That word "pitch" is from the same root as *kippur*, which indicates something like a covering of tar, used for waterproofing. As Noah's ark was preserved from leaking and seepage by the pitch covering, so our sins were to be covered by the *kippur* of Yom Kippur.

We needed our sins covered to escape God's judgment. It is very serious to fall into the hands of the living God. Eventually we all must deal with God's justice. The Old Testament portion of Scripture teaches that God's justice is not something we can blink at or nullify by disbelief. It will surely come upon all the earth. Understanding that, we need somehow to be

buffered from it. We needed a covering. When we sin we justly deserve separation from God. If however, when he looks at us, our sins are covered, we do not merit judgment and can experience His blessing. This was the purpose of *kippur*.

An old Hassidic method

Throughout the ages, even after the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the Temple sacrifices, the rabbis have seemed to understand from Leviticus 17.11 that the spilling of innocent blood is required for atonement to be effected. Many Orthodox Jews around the world still practice the tradition of *shlugging kappores*, the swinging of and eventual slaying of a chicken so that its blood is spilled. They recognize that it is not enough to shake the crumbs, symbolic of sin, from our pockets on Rosh Hashanah while reading from the prophet Micah "and throw our sins into the sea" as some Jewish people do on the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah. They swing the chicken representing the sacrifice of the Temple around their head.

Some will argue that fasting is enough because it is medically proven to be a blood-depleting experience. Some maintain that internal bleeding occurs when people fast. If they believe that or that *kappores* can restore them to a right relationship with God, they fail to understand the history and majesty of the meticulous biblical requirements of Leviticus.

What does God want from us?

In Leviticus 16 and 17 God through Moses prescribes three requirements for securing atonement: The High Priest as mediator, the blood of the atonement to be sprinkled in a definite way, and the transference of sins in a certain way. Today these three are missing from the normal Jewish celebration of Yom Kippur and therefore most Jewish people are unsure about forgiveness of sins. If we do things God's way with God's prescriptions, then we are assured of God's provisions. Anything less than that leads to doubt.

1. The Mediator

Aaron was the first High Priest. His responsibilities were manifold, and he had a large cadre of priests to help him in his daily functions. But one

responsibility fell on him alone. Each Yom Kippur he was required to dress, sacrifice, and pray in a very particular way. He wore a plain robe of linen. The garment was pure white, symbolizing the purity he hoped to achieve for the Israelites. It was ordinary because God is not impressed with human pomp and pageantry. First the High Priest had to atone for his own sins in the prescribed manner and then he had to offer a sacrifice for the rest of the people.

Only that one man could perform the ritual, and only once a year. No ordinary Jew could ever go into the Holy of Holies to do that. Not even the other priests could enter that fifteen-square-foot cube where God manifested His glory. Only Israel's High Priest mediator could enter and procure that atonement.

Many modern Jews, and I was among them, think they can approach God on a whim or even in the midst of a religious event and He is somehow obliged to hear them. But no matter how sincere the approach, God who dwelled in the Holy of Holies only responded to the mediating work of the High Priest. The mediator alone was called by God to accomplish that holy task.

2. The Blood of Atonement

Even Aaron the High Priest could not approach the throne of God where the Shechinah dwelled empty-handed. He had to bring with him the blood of a bull and the blood of a goat. As Aaron was carrying the blood and sprinkling it seven times with his finger, surely some must have spilled on his white robes. This was not a day to be cheap, but to be lavish in remembering the cost of atonement. Redemption is not cheap! Not only on that day, but every time Aaron saw those linen garments he would remember the cost and God's just punishment for sin.

The veil that isolated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies was without separation. Aaron had to get not only himself and the sacrificial blood into the Holy of Holies, but also the altar of incense, which rested throughout the rest of the year in the Holy Place, but on this one day, was moved into the Holy of Holies. And once in that cubbyhole of a room, he had to sprinkle the blood in various places, especially onto the "mercy seat." In Hebrew the "mercy seat" is again the *kippur* word, for it was there that God's mercy would be dispensed in the form of atonement for the people.

A tradition developed that the High Priest not only had all those items in his hands as he went in, but also a rope around his ankle. If he did not secure atonement for himself, if he were so sinful that God judged him right there in the tent, Israel would have no atonement and no way to get the High Priest out, since he alone could enter. The rope around the ankle provided an opportunity to drag him out if necessary. It is not recorded, however, that it was ever used.

There is another tradition about another rope or thread used at Yom Kippur, probably developed during the Temple period. That rope was made of red cords, and the lore surrounding it is most mysterious. Legend says that on Yom Kippur the scarlet thread was hung outside the Temple high above the courtyard. If the High Priest secured atonement for the people, the scarlet thread turned white, perhaps a reflection of Isaiah 1.18 "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as wool." The tradition may also stem from the Joshua account of Rahab hanging the scarlet thread from her window as a signal of safe haven to the spies and the conquering Israelites in Jericho. (Joshua 2)

We find a curious declaration in the Talmud concerning the scarlet thread: Yoma 39b states that 40 years before the destruction of the Temple "the scarlet thread no longer turned white." This would correspond to the year in which Jesus died in Jerusalem. Why would the scarlet thread no longer have turned white? Because now atonement was no longer to be obtained through the blood of bulls and goats, but rather through the blood of Y'shua, the sacrificial Lamb of God.

How fitting that the Messiah should be our mediator. He is the High Priest of our confession who Himself delivered the blood atonement before the heavenly throne. He had no need to make atonement for Himself because He had never sinned, "he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth." (Isaiah 53.9) But He did make atonement for the people. How appropriate that He brought His own blood, which was perfect and sinless. Whereas the blood of bulls and goats could no longer cleanse us from sin, the blood of the eternal sacrifice definitely could-- and did! (Hebrews 10.4-10)

3. The Transference of Sins

The third requirement for Israel's atonement on Yom Kippur was the transference of sins through the laying on of hands. One of the duties of the High Priest (besides slaying one of the two goats) was to place his hands on the head of the live goat. Whatever else it might mean, it certainly included the idea of the scapegoat. The scapegoat did not exactly receive the full sentence of death; he received the sins of Israel for that year. In fact, he might more properly be called the "escapegoat." Some commentators talk about *azazel* as referring to the kingdom of darkness or hell itself. But however we define *azazel*, it is clear that when the High Priest placed his hands on the head of that goat, and sent it into *azazel* the sins of the Jewish people were transferred to it in such a way that they were no longer culpable for their sins. The goat received in itself the sins of the nation.

The "veil in the Temple was torn in half, from top to bottom." (Matthew 27.51) Why? So that the priests who were in the Holy Place could now enter the Divine Presence? No, I think not. I believe that God arose off the "mercy seat" and tore the veil. He strode through the Holy Place and out to the Outer Court into the highways and byways of our world, so that whoever believes in Him may be saved, and whoever touches the hem of His garments may know eternal life. God is now no longer tied to the Jewish Temple, but is available for all people worldwide as He makes His way throughout the planet inviting the many to know Him.

What about today?

Today if we are to satisfy the rigid commands of Almighty God according to Scripture, the three items are still necessary: the mediator, the blood and the transference of sin. Anything else is substandard. Anything else does not carry with it the assurance of sin removal that God promises. Moses could only promise Israel *kippur*, but in the Newer Testament we have the assurance of God's forgiveness. What a glorious and better covenant we have in Y'shua, a better covenant than we ever did under the Mosaic constitution. New Testament forgiveness involves not just the covering of our sins, but their actual removal as far as God is concerned. Our sins are no longer with us. They are not covered. They are gone! As far removed from us as east is from the west.

Belief in Y'shua is the only way to receive forgiveness for sins. He alone is our High Priest. He alone shed His innocent blood that we might be saved. On Him we must "lay our hands", transferring our sins to Him so they can be judged with the judgment He bore for us and be removed from us forever. And we don't come once a year for a temporary High Priest; our High Priest is available 24/7-- and He has done it!

As a Jew who has found Y'shua as my *kipporah*, I am so thankful at Yom Kippur that God loves us enough to make that forgiveness available to all, both Jews and non-Jews, and once for all time. Now, the question of my life as a youth at the end of each Yom Kippur's *neilah* service, "Forgiven?" can be replaced by the assurance of God's answer/declaration, "Forgiven!"

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