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6 Aaron is to offer his own bull of sin offering, to make expiation for himself and for his household. 7 Aaron shall take the two he-goats and let them stand before the Lord at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; 8 and he shall place lots upon the two goats, one marked for the Lord and the other marked for Azazel. 9 Aaron shall bring forward the goat designated by lot for the Lord, which he is to offer as a sin offering; 10 while the goat designated by lot for Azazel shall be left standing alive before the Lord, to make expiation with it and to send it off to the wilderness for Azazel.

11 Aaron shall then offer his bull of sin offering, to make expiation for himself and his household. He shall slaughter his bull of sin offering, 12 and he shall take a panful of glowing coals scooped from the altar before the Lord, and two handfuls of finely ground aromatic incense, and bring this behind the curtain. 13 He shall put the incense on the fire before the Lord, so that the cloud from the incense screens the cover that is over [the Ark of] the Pact, lest he die. 14 He shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger over the cover on the east side; and in front of the cover he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times. 15 He shall then slaughter the people's goat of sin offering, bring its blood behind the curtain, and do with its blood as he has done with the blood of the bull: he shall sprinkle it over the cover and in front of the cover.

16 Thus he shall purge the Shrine of the uncleanness and transgression of the Israelites, whatever their sins; and he shall do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which abides with them in the midst of their uncleanness. 17 When he goes in to make expiation in the Shrine, nobody else shall be in the Tent of Meeting until he comes out.

When he has made expiation for himself and his household, and for the whole congregation of Israel, 18 he shall go out to the altar that is before the Lord and purge it: he shall take some of the blood of the bull and of the goat and apply it to each of the horns of the altar; 19 and the rest of the blood he shall sprinkle on it with his finger seven times. Thus he shall cleanse it of the uncleanness of the Israelites and consecrate it.

20 When he has finished purging the Shrine, the Tent of Meeting, and the altar, the live goat shall be brought forward. 21 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. 22 Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

23 And Aaron shall go into the Tent of Meeting, take off the linen vestments that he put on when he entered the Shrine, and leave them there. 24 He shall bathe his body in water in the holy precinct and put on his vestments; then he shall come out and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people, making expiation for himself and for the people. 25 The fat of the sin offering he shall turn into smoke on the altar.

26 He who set the Azazel-goat free shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water; after that he may reenter the camp.

27 The bull of sin offering and the goat of sin offering whose blood was brought in to purge the Shrine shall be taken outside the camp; and their hides, flesh, and dung shall be consumed in fire. 28 He who burned them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water; after that he may re-enter the camp.

29 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, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you.

30 For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be clean before the Lord. 31 It shall be a sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall practice self-denial; it is a law for all time. 32 The priest who has been anointed and ordained to serve as priest in place of his father shall make expiation. He shall put on the linen vestments, the sacral vestments. 33 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. 34 This shall be to you a law for all time: to make atonement for the Israelites for all their sins once a year. And Moses did as the Lord had commanded him.



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Context

Parashat Acharei Mot opens with a detailed account of the sacred Temple service of the most holy day of the Jewish Year, Yom haKippurim, the Day of Atonement. Against this background, sacrifices outside the Temple are regulated carefully; they must be brought to the Temple, and their blood must not be consumed for it *is* or represents the soul, and it is used for expiation. Acharei Mot concludes with a long list of forbidden sexual relations—among family members related by blood and by marriage. A person committing these transgressions is cut off from the people of Israel.

Explorations

Immediately following the discussion about human bodily *tumah* and *taharah*, our parasha describes the intricate process of the service of the Kohen Gadol—High Priest within the Temple on Yom Kippur. The service involves the Kohen, Aharon, entering into the most sacred enclosure within the Temple, the Holy of Holies. During the day, the Kohen Gadol confesses on behalf of him/herself and his/her own family, on behalf of the priests, and on behalf of the nation. S/he brings special sacrifices, washes and changes from stunning gold garments into simple white linen ones to enter the inner sanctum.

The Torah states that no person is permitted into this most holy and dangerous place except the High Priest on the most awesome day of the year, at the appointed hour. Each time s/he emerges, the assembled throngs listen expectantly to him/her utter the sacred four-letter Name of God, and prostrate themselves. This is the Name for which many substitute *HaShem*, “the Name” (see Yoma 39b). According to the Talmud, the people wait anxiously to learn of the success of the service, rejoicing at the ecstatic spectacle of her/his shining face. Through this process, the Israelites aspire to achieve atonement for transgressions that interfere with divine holiness dwelling within the camp.

After the destruction of the Temple, its ritual and meaning became the subject of long discussion and elaboration throughout rabbinic literature. According to some rabbinic interpretations, the Temple is modeled on the human body, a parallel to Creation. In his commentary on Exodus 26.1, 12th century Spanish commentator Ibn Ezra cites the 10th century Babylonian [Saadia Gaon](#)'s view of the Mishkan as a microcosm of the universe and macrocosm of the human being. Saadia lays out eighteen parallels between the frame and utensils of the Mishkan, the Creation, and the human being. For example, the Mishkan curtains divide its spaces in a hierarchical way, similarly to the sky dividing the earth from the heavens. In the human body, the diaphragm separates the 'higher' organs of respiration from the 'lower' organs of digestion. Rav Saadia states a nesting analogy, "In the world is humanity, in the Mishkan is the Kohen Gadol, and in the human being is the heart."

In his study of Jewish sources concerned with the Temple, scholar Raphael Patai explains the close correspondence between the Temple and the human body (*Man and Temple in Ancient Jewish Myth and Ritual*, London, New York: T. Nelson, 1947). Every element of the Temple has a corresponding body part. The supportive structural columns and beams are the rib cage and pelvic skeleton of the *Mishkan*—enclosing and protecting the sensitive inner organs.



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Once the Temple became a theoretical system rather than a literal one, a key purpose for studying it is to find ways to gain access to *kedusha*-holiness without the Temple and its priestly cult. The biblical and many rabbinic descriptions focus on the mythic *Avoda* service—one High Priest performs it in the sacred Temple sanctuary—an exclusive domain that was completely inaccessible to the people. The rabbinic effort to replace the sacrifices and services with prayers and rituals for which every Jew is obligated *democratizes* the Temple functions. By interpreting the architecture and services, we find a very accessible system in which every Jew can participate, on Yom Kippur and every day. One of the key aspects of the Temple model is that rather than transcending our bodies and this world, and our souls traveling *upward* into upper divine spheres, we move *inward* into the deepest spaces. The sensual materials of flesh and blood, and fragrant aroma of the incense evoke physical engagement.

Building on these rabbinic ideas, the Yom Kippur *Avoda* may be read closely in terms of the body analogy—both physiology and function. The innermost sanctum of the Temple, the Holy of Holies signifies the divine womb. Into that fertile enclosure, the Kohen Gadol enters to seek intimacy with the Creator. Study and intention, ritual offerings, immersion, and dressing are elaborate preparation for the ultimate divine encounter. The incense arouses the divine beloved, subtly veiling the partners from one another in a seductive dance. The Kohen Gadol is the member of the people charged to express their desire for union. In the place that symbolizes ovulation, intercourse, menstruation, and gestation, the service of the Kohen Gadol intends to elicit blessing, fruitfulness, and divine abundance.

Within the womb, s/he enacts a ceremony that replicates the menstrual process—sprinkling blood and purifying the sacred body. The sacred body has absorbed and accumulated the imperfections and finiteness of human behavior; the shedding of the sacrificial blood is parallel to the menstrual shedding of unfulfilled potential for new life. At the conclusion of both, regeneration begins, preparation for renewed fertility. The goat to Azazel is a stillborn life who bears human iniquity and the inadequacy of Creation to contain the Infinite.

I use inclusive language about the High Priest to introduce a gender inclusive approach to the Temple service. While it would be obvious to impute that the Kohen Gadol performs a *male* ritual function within a *female* inclosure, my purpose is not to focus on a simplistic sacred sexual physiology. Jewish mystical literatures depict so-called *feminine* and *masculine* energies, and, like most spiritual systems, use sexual imagery to describe sublime human-divine yearning and union. Buddhist Tantra, Hinduism, Sufism, Christianity, and Jewish mysticism all depict ecstatic religious experience in sexual terms. Mystical texts often discuss specific potencies or dispositions using abstract gender concepts, whereas people, our behavior, and relationships are complex combinations of many potencies and desires. Often, people misinterpret these elaborate sexual images, thinking that they can refer literally to human women and men. Even in terms of biology, strictly stereotyped gendered ideas are inadequate. Female, for example, is not a passive *receiver*. She *gives* half of the genetic procreative material, *receives* the male material, gestates, and nurtures new life. The fertile female breast pours forth sweet effluent—an image similar to the divine abundance that nurses Creation, and not completely unlike male ejaculation. The way we relate erotic ideas to the divine reveals as much about ourselves and our sexuality as it does about God.



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We can interpret the Kohen Gadol administering and enacting the *Avoda* as a sacred divine union within a female-gendered enclosure of the Temple body.

Questions for Discussion

- Discuss your interpretations of different elements of the embodied prayer service of Yom Kippur such as bathing, clothing—gold and linen, *vidui*-confession, sacrifice, sprinkling, the Name, prostration, rejoicing. How do you relate to these elements, and how can they become more relevant to you?
- Compare and contrast the significance of menstrual blood in Parashat Metzora with the sacrificial blood used in the Temple service; explain.
- Christian texts explicitly state that the body is a temple, for example, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own” (1 Corinthians 6:19). This view is also expressed by Plato and many philosophers such as Novalis (1772-1801), “There is but one temple in the universe and that is the body of man.” How do or do you not relate to your body as a temple? Explain in terms of form and function.
- Consider how reading a central concept of the Torah in relation to female bodies affects your attitudes to yourself, to the Torah, and to holiness.

Study Links

- [Here](#) is a summary of the *Avoda*—Yom Kippur service according to the Torah with Rashi's interpretation.
- [This site](#) explains some details about the Holy of Holies—from a Lubavitch perspective.
- Anthropologists interpret many sacred male rituals as replication of female menstruation. See [this example](#) about Australian Aboriginal religion by Ronald Murray Berndt, and [this discussion](#) of menstrual blood covenant, “In ancient cultures both East and West, menstrual blood was perceived as a medium of transmission of power, wisdom and Life.”
- For 4 different musical performances of the liturgical poem, *Mareh Cohen*, celebrating the conclusion of the Yom Kippur *Avoda*, click [here](#).



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Summary of Issues

To a very large extent, the book of VaYiqra formally excludes women from sacred service within the Mishkan. Within the sacred realm, men replicate women's bodies and functions. The Yom Kippur *Avoda* service is one example of this phenomenon.

Methods & Observations

Though the Jerusalem Tabernacle and its service described in the Torah is long defunct, the replacement of the former rituals with prayer services re-enacts the sacred process in our lives. Beyond the male-centered biblical description, interpreting the form and imagery we relate layers of meaning to women's bodies and experiences.

Contact

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