

ACHAREI MOS (LEVITICUS 16:1-20:27)

Cardiac Judaism

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Yom Kippur, one the topics of this week's Torah Portion, is a wonderful day. True, it WILL cost you a few calories. You stand in Shul all day wearing slippers or some other non-leather footwear you bought at Walmart right before sundown. The Yizkor appeal may cost you a few dollars.

But look what you get in exchange:

"...on this day, he (the High Priest) will provide atonement for you to cleanse you; from all your sins before G-d you will be cleansed. (Leviticus, 16:30)

The Torah describes in great detail the very busy schedule of the Kohain Gadol, the High Priest, on Yom Kippur. There were ritual immersions and offerings of goats, bulls, and incense. By the end of the day, the High Priest succeeded in achieving forgiveness for the sins of his People.

What a system! You can sin with impunity! Do whatever your heart desires! The Torah is telling us that once the Kohain performs the requisite ceremonies on Yom Kippur, all is forgiven! (In our current situation, with the Temple in ruins, the synagogue service on Yom Kippur takes the place of the High Priest's actions.)

Is this what Judaism is all about?! Do whatever you want, just make sure the High Priest gets you forgiven for it on Yom Kippur?!

Let's re-read the verse we read above:

"...on this day, he will provide atonement for you to cleanse you; from all your sins BEFORE G-D YOU WILL BE CLEANSED."

The High Priest's Service is an essential component in achieving forgiveness on Yom Kippur. But it doesn't work in a vacuum. *"BEFORE G-D YOU WILL BE CLEANSED."*

The Kli Yakar explains this verse to mean that *"BEFORE"* the atonement can happen, *"YOU WILL BE CLEANSED."* Before you can expect the Kohain's ceremonies to accomplish forgiveness for your sins, you have to show G-d that you are sorry! You have to actually stop sinning! And it can't be a superficial repentance: *"BEFORE G-D you will be cleansed."* It's got to be for real. G-d knows a phony when He sees one.

Judaism is filled with ceremonies. There are lots of prayers and blessings that are recited throughout the day. There are Mezuzahs on our doors and Tefillin that we wear. The purpose of a Mitzvah is to serve as part of a meaningful relationship with our Creator. A Judaism that is all ceremony and no heart is empty and almost meaningless.

The above statement is a risky one; it could easily be misinterpreted. After all, if the main emphasis of Jewish ritual is the heart, why bother with the ritual? Wouldn't I accomplish the same thing by being proud to be Jewish and identifying with Israel? Do I really need to observe Shabbos and keep Kosher? Can't I just be a "cardiac Jew" – a Jew at heart?

The Torah obligates us to serve G-d to the best of our ability. We SHOULD put our full heart and soul into every Mitzvah that we do. The fact that we can't do a particular Mitzvah perfectly doesn't exempt us from trying.

A body without a heart is dead. A heart without a body is equally dead.

Have a great Shabbos.

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