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THE MISHKAN AND ATONEMENT

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Atonement/kapparah is an odd notion. Retribution accomplishes justice by harming in proportion to harm done. Compensation accomplishes justice by providing a good equal to the past wrong. Repentance evades the requirements of justice by disassociating sinner from sin, or perhaps by disassociating the present person from the past sinner. But how does atonement accomplish or evade justice?

One possibility is that atonement is a symbolization of one or more of the other three. It accomplishes a sort of poetic justice.

For example, the classic Biblical form of atonement, animal sacrifice, is understood as symbolically causing the death of the sacrifice's owner. In other words, it provides symbolic retribution.

Rituals that function symbolically rather than literally are especially vulnerable to becoming meaningless rote. How can animal sacrifice accomplish any kind of justice if the owner does not in any way identify with the death of his or her animal?

In other words: In this understanding, atonement is really symbolic repentance. Like repentance, it functions ironically; by taking responsibility for our actions, we disassociate ourselves from them.

Some forms of atonement are even more elaborately but problematically theorized. For example, the eglah arufah ritual (Devarim 21:7-9) provides communal atonement for murder by denying responsibility at least in the most direct sense: "our hands did not shed this blood, and our eyes did not see. (Therefore?) atone for your nation, Hashem, which you have redeemed . . ." All this after literally washing hands over the dead animal. Here atonement seems to be a form of symbolized innocence.

Over the past several months, I've noticed several traditional commentaries advance claims of atonement that really bothered me. For example, after Mosheh descends from Sinai to find the Golden Calf (Shemot 34:26-28)

וַיַּעֲמֵד מֹשֶׁה בְּשַׁעַר הַמִּחָנָה וַיֹּאמֶר:

"מִי לִיחָקֵק – אֵלַי!"

וַיֹּאסְפוּ אֵלָיו כָּל־בְּנֵי לֵוִי:

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם:

"כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

שְׁיִמּוּ אִישׁ־חַרְבּוֹ עַל־יָרְכוֹ

עֲבְרוּ וְשׁוּבוּ מִשַּׁעַר לְשַׁעַר בְּמַחְנֵה

וְהָרְגוּ אִישׁ־אֶת־אָחִיו וְאִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ וְאִישׁ אֶת־

קָרְבוֹ:

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כַּכָּהֵן מֹשֶׁה

וַיִּפֹּל מִן־הַעֵמֶם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כִּשְׁלֹשֹׁת אֶלְפֵי אִישׁ:

Mosheh stood at the gate of the camp and said:

"Whosoever is for G-d, to me!"

All the Sons of Levi gathered to him.

He said to them:

"Thus said Hashem G-d of Israel:

Place each man his sword on his thigh

Pass forth and back from gate to gate in the camp

and kill each man his brother, each man his fellow, each man his intimate."

The Sons of Levi did as Mosheh

commanded

There fell from the nation that day around three thousand men.

Just about all traditional commentaries insist that Mosheh was not commanding an indiscriminate or random massacre. Therefore, the three thousand casualties must have been the uniquely worst sinners regarding the Calf. But if only Levi gathered to Mosheh, and only three thousand were killed, what were the rest of the Jews doing while the Sons of Levi carried out their orders?

Seforno (32:27) answers as follows:

עברו ושובו משער לשער –

לכפר על הבלתי חוטאים שלא מיהו בחוטאים,

וזה: שכמו שלא מיהו בחוטאים, כן לא ימחו

בהורגיהם:

Pass forth and back from gate to gate –

in order to atone for those who did not sin

but did not protest against the sinners

in that just as they did not protest against

the sinner,

so too they would not protest against those

who killed them.

What form of atonement is there in acting consistently? I can see how the second passivity might reveal that the first passivity reflected weakness of character rather than religious error, but of that is the case, how does the second atone for

the first! The second reveals the very same character flaw as the first! One should atone for inaction via action. Repeated inaction shows no internal change at all.

An example in last week's parshah was more even troubling. Last week's essay focused on a phrase in 35:22: וַיָּבֹאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים עַל-הַנָּשִׂים, which seems to suggest that the rush to donate materials led men and women to mingle physically. I noted several reinterpretations of על הנשים that avoid the implication of mingling, while the Zohar acknowledges that it happened and condemns it.

It seems obvious that the precious goods used to build the Mishkan are intended as atonement for the gold of the Calf, and that Mosheh and G-d asked for donations as atonement for the willingness to donate for the Calf. Yet the Zohar challenges this: I suggest that it sees the intermingling of the sexes as a slightly veiled continuation of the erotic behavior at the Calf festival, ויקומו לצחק.

Now there is certainly a sense of atonement in which the same quality previously used for evil is now used for good. For example, the Sons of Levi's volunteering to serve as Mosheh's enforcers seems an atonement for their eponym's violence at Shekhem, while the sons of Shimon fail to rally to Mosheh's banner and therefore never escape Yaakov's "blessing". But would the Levites volunteer service have atoned if they had exceeded their orders, or if they had used the occasion to gratify other base desires? I assume not.

The interpretation that really disturbed me seems to be Tosafistic. Here's one formulation, from the anthology Daat Zekeinim:

ויבואו האנשים על הנשים –
כלומר: לשלול מהן תכשיטיהן, כדכתיב חח
וכזם
ואעפ"כ - הנשים שמחות וזהירות במלאכת
שמים, כדכתיב כל הנשים אשר נשא לבן
אותנה
לפיכך: זכו הנשים שלא לעשות מלאכה בראש
חדש,
לפי שבמעשה העגל לקחו תכשיטיהן בעל
כרחן, כדמשמע מדכתיב ויתפרקו וגו'
ובמעשה המשכן שמחו בבתינה,
לפיכך נתן להם ר"ח ל"ט.
וני"ל דזהו ר"ח ניסן שבו הוקם המשכן,
ואגב אותו ר"ח – משמרות כל ר"ח השנה.

The men came על the women –
meaning: to despoil the women of their
adornments, as Scripture says etc.

but nonetheless – the women were joyous
and meticulous in the work for Heaven, as
Scripture says etc.

Therefore: the women merited not doing
work on Rosh Chodesh
because in the making of the Calf they (- the
men) took their (=the women's)
adornments against their (=the women's)
wills, as Scripture implies etc.
but in the making of the Mishkan they (=the
women) were happy to give them,
therefore he gave them Rosh Chodesh as a
holiday.
(it seems to me that this must refer to Rosh
Chodesh Nissan, on which the Mishkan was
erected,
and as a result of that Rosh Chodesh – they
observe all the Rosh Chodeshs of the year.

It seems to me that the women being okay with the
outcome does not mean that they were okay with the method.
By attempting to seize the women's jewelry for the Mishkan,
as they had for the Calf, the men were repeating an aspect of
their sin rather than atoning for it. True atonement would
have required asking the women's opinion, and perhaps even
being bound by it.

In the end, there is poetic justice in the Mishkan becoming
a male space that atones for the sin of the Calf – because
women do not need to atone for the calf. But the Tosafistic
interpretation also makes the Mishkan a disturbing memorial
of men's failure to understand the full dimensions of their
sin. Atonement is symbolic partial repentance.

Sefer Shemot opens with women's bravery in defying
Pharaoh. It closes on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, which Daat
Zekeinim suggests is the original women's holiday,
celebrating their defiance of their own men in the matter of
the Calf. Perhaps someday the men's atonement will be
complete.

PLEASE NOTE: Rabbi Klapper will iyH be giving
shiurim at yeshivot, midrashoth, and communities in Israel
from March 7-14. If you'd like a schedule, please email a
request to moderntorahleadership@gmail.com. We'll also
try to keep an updated schedule posted on the CMTL
Facebook page. IF YOU KNOW OF STUDENTS IN
ISRAEL WHO SHOULD MEET RABBI KLAPPER,
AND/OR ARE GOOD FITS FOR THE SUMMER BEIT
MIDRASH, PLEASE ENCOURAGE THEM TO
ATTEND HIS SHIURIM, AND PLEASE TELL US HOW
TO BE IN TOUCH WITH THEM.

Shabbat Shalom!

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