



Kapara

LOOKING FORWARD

Is the Day of Atonement a precise translation for Yom Kippur? In English, the word “atonement” implies amends for certain wrongdoing. In this sense, the Day of Atonement implies expiation for transgressions we may have committed over the course of the previous year. However, in Chumash, we find numerous instances in which the word *kippurim* is used in a very different context.

For example, in Bereishit, when G-d commands Noach to build the ark, we find the very first use of this *shoresh* (כ-פ-ר), suggesting it implies a sort of protective covering: “you shall coat it from within in and out with ‘*kofer*’ – pitch.” In Shemot (16:4), the Torah employs this same root to describe the *manna* covering the ground like frost. Later in Shemot (25:17), the special lid for the Ark of the Covenant is named the “*kaporet*” – כַּפֹּרֶת. While the typical Biblical word for a covering is כִּמְסָה, this special name כַּפֹּרֶת highlights its protective nature, for the *keruvim* on this *kaporet* are protecting the Ark (the symbol of our Covenant with G-d) – just as they protect the ‘path to the Tree of Life’ in Gan Eden (see Bereishit 3:24 and Mishlei 3:18).

Therefore, when Vayikra (23:27) informs us that the 10th day of the seventh month is *Yom HaKippurim*, there must be something ‘protective’ about that special day! This simplest understanding might be that this day protects us from punishment for our sins of the previous year. However, one could suggest a different

understanding, one that looks forward to the coming year as well, based on the first time we find the word *kippurim* in the details of the dedication ceremony of the Mishkan (Shemot 29).

Before the Priests could begin their daily service in the Mishkan, there was a need for a seven-day inaugural ceremony where the blood of a sacrificial ram was sprinkled upon them. In a similar manner, the blood of a sacrificial bull was sprinkled on the *mizbayach*. In the summary verses, this act of sprinkling the blood is referred to as *kippurim* (see 29:36).

This suggests that before the Priests can begin their service of G-d in the Mishkan, they require some sort of protection. Most likely, this ‘protection’ is necessary as G-d’s *Shechinah* will dwell in the Mishkan. This encounter with G-d is quite dangerous, for a human who is not worthy of this encounter may deserve immediate death.

In fact, in the aftermath of the Sin of the Golden Calf, G-d warned Moshe that He can no longer dwell among this stiff-necked nation, due to their rebellious nature. Had Moshe Rabeinu not interceded on their behalf, the special covenant between G-d and *Am Yisrael* would have been broken forever. However, in light of Moshe Rabeinu’s famous prayer (see Shemot 33:12-19), G-d establishes a new Covenant, this time including the option of Mercy and Forgiveness for wayward behavior, thus enabling G-d’s *Shechinah* to dwell among His

People even though they may be stiff-necked.

As Yom Kippur, the 10th of Tishrei, marks the anniversary of G-d’s declaration of His attributes of Mercy, and the re-establishment of the Covenant, it is only fitting that on this day we remind ourselves of this special privilege, that G-d continues to dwell in our midst, even though we may not always be perfect. Symbolically, the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies on this day reflects our desire to remain His loyal servants. However, to show G-d that we need ‘protection’ – as we may not be worthy of this encounter – the High Priest must perform a symbolic act of *kapara* (see Vayikra 16:16).

As every Jew is a member of this Priestly nation, we serve G-d not only in His Temple but also in our daily lives by keeping His commandments. Therefore, at the beginning of every year, we must not only ask G-d for forgiveness for our transgressions of the previous year, but we must also prepare ourselves for the spiritual challenges that will face us in the year that now begins, showing our gratitude to G-d for His attributes of Mercy that enable our relationship to remain eternal. Hence, *Yom HaKippurim* serves as a very fitting name for this holiday, as our worthiness to remain His People begins with our humble recognition that we may not always be so worthy.

Rabbi Menachem Leibtag is an internationally acclaimed Tanach scholar and online Jewish education pioneer.