



# Yom Kippur as Purification

Rabbi Reuven Taragin

## Day of purification

Though we generally associate Yom Kippur with atonement, its central thematic verse presents *tahara* (purification) as its goal: “For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins shall you be clean before Hashem” (Vayikra 16:30). On Yom Kippur, Hashem atones for our sins to purify us. This explains the request we make of Hashem in each of our Shabbat and Yom Tov prayers: וְטַהַר לִבְנֵי לְעַרְבֶדָּה בְּאֵמֶת, “purify our hearts to serve You in truth.”

Yom Kippur purifies both the *Beit HaMikdash* and the Jewish people. This is why the Yom Kippur Torah readings from *Parashat Acharai Mot* are about the *Beit HaMikdash* in the morning (chapter 16) and the Jewish people after *Mincha* (chapter 18).<sup>2</sup>

## The damage of sin

We are, of course, familiar with *tahara* as ritual purity. What does it mean in the personal spiritual context?

Understanding spiritual purity hinges on recognizing that sin defiles us. Sin is not just wrong and punishable, it also impacts who we are. *Mitzvah* fulfillment sanctifies; transgression defiles.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (*Nefesh Hachayim* 2:8) compares sin to the consumption of unhealthy foods. Just as the former damages physical health, so the latter damages spiritual health.

In addition to the spiritual plane, the Gemara in *Yoma* (39a) depicts how sin damages even one’s intellectual capacity.<sup>3</sup>

## The goal

“Create for me a pure heart, O G-d; and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (*Tehillim* 51:12).

David Hamelech taught that the heart, spirit, and soul must be purified.

*Shaarei Teshuva* (1:9) and *Mesilat Yesharim* (Chapter 17, *Midat Hatahara*) explain that *tahara* is about motivation. It is not just about what we do, but why we do it. *Tahor* people are motivated by fear of G-d and wisdom as opposed to personal desire.

This helps us understand why the Rambam (*Teshuva* 7:3) believes that *teshuva* is not only necessary to address only sin, but also improper character traits. Purification is not just about correcting particular actions, but more broadly about personal improvement.

## How we purify

The conclusion of the Yom Kippur verse – ‘*titharu*’ – commands us to purify ourselves.<sup>4</sup> The *Kohen Gadol* makes a point of reminding us of this responsibility at the height of the Yom Kippur atonement service. When the people prostrated themselves in response to his utterance of G-d’s sacred name in his *viduyim* (confessions), he directs the word ‘*titharu*’ to them. He tells them that it is not enough to observe the *Kohen’s* purification service. We need to purify ourselves. When we do so, Hashem completes the process for us.

Purifying ourselves is easier said than done. How do we do it? The Mishnah at the end of *Masechet Yoma* gives us direction by describing G-d Himself as the proverbial *mikveh* through which we are meant to purify ourselves.<sup>5</sup> Hashem is totally disconnected from all sin and defilement. By reconnecting with Him, we return to a state of purity. Like the *Kohen Gadol* who immerses himself 10 times over the course of Yom Kippur and then enters the cloud of Hashem (created by the *ketoret*) within the holiest part of Hashem’s sanctuary, we also are meant to immerse ourselves in our connection with Hashem.<sup>6</sup>

After elaborating on this notion, the Maharal<sup>7</sup> emphasizes that, just like immersion in an actual *mikveh*, we

only achieve *tahara* by connecting (which means committing) ourselves fully to Hashem. Even a small *chatzizah* (separation) renders the ‘immersion’ completely meaningless.

## The return to ourselves

On a deeper level, the purification process is actually a return to our true and natural selves. Man is created by Hashem ‘breathing’ a pure holy soul into him.<sup>8</sup> We need look no further than inside ourselves to find Hashem’s holiness. When we do so, we return to Him and facilitate the regeneration of our natural holy soul.<sup>9</sup> As we recite each morning: “My G-d, the soul You gave me is pure... You blew it into me and You preserve it within me...”

Yom Kippur is the time when this self-purification is most possible and powerful. Let’s do our best to take full advantage of the opportunity.

<sup>1</sup> Chapter 18 describes sexual sins as defiling us (verses 20, 23, and 24). The next verses (25-30) describe how these sins defile the Land as well. See also *Bamidbar* 35 which depicts murder as defiling the Land.

<sup>2</sup> This explains the centrality of purity to Yom Kippur ritual which can be seen in the need for *tevila* (10 times by the *Kohen Gadol* and customarily performed by all males before Yom Kippur) and the custom to wear white.

<sup>3</sup> See also *Or HaChayim* (*Vayikra* 11:43).

<sup>4</sup> See *Shaarei Teshuva* (2:14, 4:17) who sees this phrase as the basis of the unique obligation to do *teshuva* on Yom Kippur.

<sup>5</sup> *Shaarei Teshuva* (2:14) summarizes the process.

<sup>6</sup> See *Rambam Mikva’ot* (11:12) who also uses *mikveh* immersion as a model for personal purification. *Shaarei Teshuva* 4:17 speaks also of *teshuva* as necessary for *tahara*. Obviously, purification is only possible once we have distanced ourselves from and atoned for our sins.

<sup>7</sup> *D’rush L’Shabbat Shuva*.

<sup>8</sup> *Bereishit* 2:7 with *Rashi* and *Ramban*.

<sup>9</sup> *Orot Hateshuvah* 15:10.

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