

05/04/17

Bronfman Torah: commentary on the Torah that draws on the lives, skills, and insights of our community

[View this email in your browser](#)

The Sin-Offering and Return

Elon Swartz '12 | Bronfman Torah | Acharey Mot-Kedoshim 2017

Elon Swartz (Bronfman '12) is a junior at Princeton University who studies philosophy. He is originally from Los Angeles, CA.

In this week's Torah portion, we encounter the *hattat*, an offering familiar to us from throughout Leviticus. Since this week's Torah portion serves as the biblical backbone for *Yom Kippur*, the holiday of *teshuva* (return), our understanding of the *hattat*, or sin offering, will have implications on our approach to *teshuva*. According to the late American bible scholar Jacob Milgrom, the object of every *hattat* offering in Leviticus is "the sanctuary and its sancta."^[1] Milgrom claims that the particular *hattat* ritual of this week's portion is required to purge the innermost sanctuary; he thinks that intentional sins create a dynamic impurity (an impurity capable of movement) that penetrates the innermost sanctuary, a contamination that can only be purged by the "goat marked for the Lord."^[2] In Milgrom's estimation, the "slain *hattat* purges the sanctuary" of the dynamic impurity created by intentional sin.^[3] Since it concerns an impurity that moves and ultimately clings to innermost sanctuary rather than a process of return, Milgrom's understanding of the *hattat* seemingly commits us to a depersonalized approach to *teshuva*.

Milgrom's claim, however, is unsubstantiated by the text; no passages within the chapter connect the slain *hattat* to intentional sin. We may find a better explanation

05/04/17

for the *hattat* of this week's portion by turning to other chapters of Leviticus that involve the *hattat* offering. Verses 14 and 15 of Leviticus 8 describe the *hattat* offering brought by Moses during the inauguration of the sanctuary and its sancta – "Aaron and his sons laid their hands upon the head of the bull of sin offering, and it was slaughtered. Moses took the blood and with his finger put some on each of the horns of the altar...then he poured out the blood at the base of the altar. Thus he consecrated it...to make expiation upon it." [4] Seemingly, some form of "expiation," a variation of the word *kipper*, occurs as a result of the *hattat* of inauguration.

Unlike other instances of *kipper*, this particular mention of the word follows neither sin nor the contraction of physical impurity. Verses 34 and 35, which mark the conclusion of the inaugural ceremony, state the overarching purpose of the rituals of inauguration – "Everything done today, the Lord has commanded to be done, to make expiation for you. You shall remain at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting day and night, keeping the Lord's charge that you may not die." [5] In this summary, *kipper* once more appears in the form of the word "expiation." In this instance, the word serves as an explanation for "everything done" during the inauguration of the sancta. Moreover, the passages link *kipper* to the "Lord's charge," a commandment that, in some way, allows the Israelites to avoid death (see Leviticus 15).

This week's Torah portion begins by recounting the incident of the death of Aaron's sons – "The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, who died when they drew too close to the presence of the Lord. The Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron that he is not to come at will into the Shrine...lest he die...Thus only shall Aaron enter the Shrine—with a bull of the herd for a sin offering.'" [6]

According to the passages, Aaron undertakes the ritual of the slain *hattat* as a response to the death of his two sons; since Aaron's sons die as a result of unmediated contact with the sacred realm, God commands that Aaron's contact with the innermost sanctum take place within a very particular ritual context. Seemingly, then, the slain *hattat* offering is Aaron's means of purging all of the sancta of the very sort of deconsecration wrought by his sons' unwarranted contact. Without such purification, the prospect of death looms heavily over Aaron. Since both the slain *hattat* of Leviticus 16 and the inaugural *hattat* ritual of Leviticus

8 are framed by wider discussions of death prevention, a connection likely exists between purgation as it is described in each chapter.

The passages of Leviticus 8 that include the word *kipper* mention, not transgression or physical impurity, but consecration of the not-yet sacred sanctuary and its sancta. Seemingly, the *hattat* of Leviticus 16 purges the innermost sanctuary following acts of deconsecration, and the *hattat* of Leviticus 8 inaugurates the very consecration that is ultimately defiled. In other words, the inaugural *hattat* ritual is an act of consecration, and Aaron's slain *hattat* constitutes a reconsecration of sorts; the latter offering purges defilement from that which has been consecrated and subsequently deconsecrated. Thus, the ritual procedure of the slain *hattat* returns the entire sacred realm to its initial state of consecration, to its original status following the inaugural ceremony. While Milgrom asserts that the *hattat* of Leviticus 16 cleanses a dynamic impurity created by wanton transgression, it more likely purges a direct contamination, a life-threatening deconsecration of that which has been consecrated.

I find this approach to Leviticus 16 both textually compelling and personally meaningful. An analysis that emphasizes the reconsecration of that which has been deconsecrated provides an interesting model for *teshuva* (return). Perhaps *teshuva* entails not only inner contemplation regarding interpersonal development but an outer demonstration in which the subject returns to the site of fracture and harkens back to the time before (and of) that fracture.

[1] Jacob Milgrom, "Israel's Sanctuary: The Priestly Picture of Dorian Gray," in *Studies in the Cultic Theology and Terminology*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983), 390-391.

[2] *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 244.

[3] Milgrom, 396.

[4] *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 222.

[5] *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 224.

[6] *Ibid.*

05/04/17

Continue the conversation. *Send Elon your thoughts: elonswartz@gmail.com.*

P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact stefanie@byfi.org. We look forward to hearing from you.



Copyright © 2017 BYFI, All rights reserved.
You are connected to The Bronfman Fellowship

[Forward to a friend](#)

Our mailing address is:
418 Broadway, 2nd Floor
Albany, NY 12207

[unsubscribe from this list](#) [update subscription preferences](#)