

Introduction to Tractate Yoma

Of the eight chapters of tractate *Yoma*, the first seven review Leviticus 16 and provide a narrative bearing interpolated materials of the sacrificial rite of the Day of Atonement. The eighth chapter does little more, taking up the rules of “affliction of soul,” that is, fasting.

- I. The conduct of the temple rite on the Day of Atonement
 - A. Preparing the high priest for the Day of Atonement
 - B. Clearing the ashes from the altar
 - C. The daily whole offering on the Day of Atonement
 - D. The high priest’s personal offering for the Day of Atonement
 - E. The two goats and other offerings on the Day of Atonement
 - F. The scapegoat and its rule
 - G. The rite concludes with reading from the Torah and with prayer
- II. The laws of the Day of Atonement
 - A. Not eating, not drinking
 - B. Repentance and atonement

Only when we reach the concluding statements of the law in *Yoma* do we move beyond the reprise of the Torah’s narrative. And then the presentation of the law tells us what is at stake; the prophetic reading of the cult. The Mishnah, which is repeated within the Bavli, states the law as follows:

He who says, “I shall sin and repent, sin and repent”—they give him no chance to do repentance. . . . “I will sin and the Day of Atonement will atone,”—the Day of Atonement does not atone. For transgressions done between man and the Omnipresent, the Day of Atonement atones. For transgressions between man and man, the Day of Atonement atones, only if the man will regain the good will of his friend. This exegesis did R. Eleazar b. Azariah state: “*From all your sins shall you be clean before the Lord* (Lev. 16:30)—for transgressions between man and the Omnipresent does the Day of Atonement atone. For transgressions between man and his fellow, the Day of Atonement atones, only if the man will regain the good will of his friend.” Said R. Aqiba, “Happy are you, O Israel. Before whom are you made clean, and who makes you clean? It is your Father who is in heaven, as it says, *And I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean* (Eze. 36:25). And it says, *O Lord, the hope [miqweh = immersion pool] of Israel* (Jer. 17:13)—Just as the immersion pool cleans the unclean, so the Holy One, blessed be he, cleans Israel.”

Mishnah tractate *Yoma* 8:9

Sages understood the prophets’ critique not as a repudiation of the cult but as a refinement of it, and in the very context of their account of the blood-rite, they invoke the prophets’ norms alongside the Torah’s; Jeremiah’s call to repentance, Isaiah’s reflections on the role of death in the penitential process, and Ezekiel’s insistence on purity of spirit.

These flow into the exposition of the law. The rites of atonement do not work *ex opere operato*, but only conditionally, and it is the attitude and intention of the Israelite that sets that condition. The rites atone and so does death, but only when joined with repentance. And repentance reaches its climax in the cleansing effect of the occasion, the Day of Atonement itself. But the entire system realizes its promise of reconciliation with God only on one condition: the Israelite must hold the right attitude to begin with.