



The Yom Kippur Avodah as a Template for Spiritual Practice

Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, PhD

Dr. Eliezer Diamond is the Rabbi Judah Nadich Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at The Jewish Theological Seminary. He teaches courses in rabbinic literature and introductory, intermediate, and advanced Talmud studies.

Dr. Diamond is the author of a chapter on the rabbinic period in the *Schocken Guide to Jewish Books*, and entries in the *Reader's Guide to Judaism* and *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*. He is the author of *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2003). The book provides a thorough reassessment of the role that asceticism plays in rabbinic Judaism, suggesting that asceticism is more pervasive than is generally thought. Dr. Diamond has written on prayer, asceticism, and issues of environmental law and ethics. He is currently editing a commentary on *Yerushalmi Pesachim* written by the late Professor Louis Ginzberg, as well as a book on prayer. The prayer volume will address the problem of cognitive dissonance for the contemporary worshipper and will offer readings of traditional liturgy that use midrashic methodology to find meaning and relevance in these prayers for the modern Jew. Dr. Diamond has taught in a variety of settings, including Stern College, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the 92nd Street Y, and several Ramah camps. Dr. Diamond was ordained at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University and received his doctorate in Talmud from JTS.

1. From a Hassidic discourse recorded in S. Ansky's "The Dybbuk", as cited in *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, p. 326

The world of God is great and holy.
Of all the lands of the world, the Land of Israel was set aside to be holy for us;
And in the Land of Israel, the holiest city is Jerusalem.
In Jerusalem, the holiest place was the Holy Temple;
And the holiest site in the Temple was the Holy of Holies...

Our tradition is that in the world there are seventy nations,
and, of them, Israel was set aside to be holy to the Lord.
The holiest of the people Israel is the tribe of Levites.
The holiest of the Levites are the priests;
And among the priests, the holiest was the High Priest.

The lunar year has 354 days.
Some days are set aside as holy days.
Holier than the festivals are the Shabbatot;
And the holiest of the Shabbatot is the day of Atonement –
The Shabbat of the Shabbatot.

There are seventy languages in the world,
And of them, Hebrew was chosen as our holy tongue.
The holiest of all things written in the Hebrew language is the Holy Torah.
In the Torah, the holiest part of the Ten Commandments.
And the holiest of all the words in the Ten Commandments is the name of God.

At a certain hour, on a certain day of the year, all these four holinesses met together.
This took place on the Day of Atonement, at the hour when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies and revealed the Divine Name.
And if he invoked God's name in purity, all of Israel was forgiven.

Whenever a person stands to lift up eyes to heaven, that place is a Holy of Holies.
Every human being created in God's image is a High Priest.
Each day of a person's life is the Day of Atonement...
Each one of us can face God with the language of the heart.
Each one of us can be forgiven.
Each one of us can achieve atonement and be pure in the eyes of the Lord.

2. Leviticus 16

<p>יהוה spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew too close to the presence of יהוה.</p> <p>יהוה said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come at will into the Shrine behind the curtain, in front of the cover that is upon the ark, lest he die; for I appear in the cloud over the cover...</p> <p>and he shall take a panful of glowing coals scooped from the altar before יהוה, and two handfuls of finely ground aromatic incense, and bring this behind the curtain.</p> <p>He shall put the incense on the fire before יהוה, so that the cloud from the incense screens the cover that is over [the Ark of] the Pact, lest he die.</p> <p>He shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger over the cover on the east side; and in front of the cover he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times.</p> <p>Thus he shall purge the Shrine of the impurity and transgression of the Israelites, whatever their sins; and he shall do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which abides with them in the midst of their impurity.</p> <p>And this shall be to you a law for all time: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall practice self-denial; and you shall do no manner of work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you.</p> <p>For on this day atonement shall be made for you to purify you of all your sins; you shall be pure before יהוה.</p>	<p>וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי־יְהוָה וַיָּמָתוּ:</p> <p>וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר־אֶל־אַהֲרֹן אַחִיךָ וְאַל־יָבֹא בְּכַל־עֵת אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִבַּיִת לַפָּרֹכֶת אֶל־פְּנֵי הַכַּפֹּרֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל־הָאֹרֶן וְלֹא יָמוּת כִּי בַעֲנֹן אֲרָאָה עַל־הַכַּפֹּרֶת...</p> <p>וְלָקַח מִלֵּא־הַמִּחְתָּה גֹחַל־אֵשׁ מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וּמִלֵּא חֲפָזָיו קְטֹרֶת סַמִּים דָּקָה וְהֵבִיא מִבַּיִת לַפָּרֹכֶת</p> <p>וְנָתַן אֶת־הַקְטֹרֶת עַל־הָאֵשׁ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וְכֶסֶה אֶת־עֵינָיו הַקְטֹרֶת אֶת־הַכַּפֹּרֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל־הָעֲדוּת וְלֹא יָמוּת:</p> <p>וְלָקַח מִדָּמֵם הַפָּר וְהִזָּה בְּאֶצְבָּעוֹ עַל־פְּנֵי הַכַּפֹּרֶת קֹדְמָה וְלִפְנֵי הַכַּפֹּרֶת יִזָּה שֵׁבַע־פְּעֻמִּים מִן־הַדָּם בְּאֶצְבָּעוֹ:</p> <p>וְכִפֶּר עַל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִטְמְאֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִפִּשְׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל־חַטָּאתָם וְכֵן יַעֲשֶׂה לְאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד הַשֹּׁכֵן אִתָּם בְּתוֹךְ טְמֵאתָם:</p> <p>וְהִיְתָה לָכֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּעֶשְׂרֹן לְחֹדֶשׁ תַּעֲנִי אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם וְכָל־מְלֹאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ הָאֲזָרְחַל וְהַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם:</p> <p>כִּי־בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל־חַטָּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה תִּטְהָרוּ:</p>
--	--

3. Leviticus 18: 24, 25

<p>Do not defile yourselves in any of those ways, for it is by such that the nations that I am casting out before you defiled themselves.</p> <p>Thus, the land became defiled; and I called it to account for its iniquity, and the land spewed out its inhabitants.</p>	<p>אַל־תִּטְמְאוּ בְכָל־אֱלֹהֵי כִּי בְכָל־אֱלֹהֵי גִטְמָאוּ הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר־אֲנִי מְשַׁלַּח מִפְּנֵיכֶם:</p> <p>וַתִּטְמָא הָאָרֶץ וְאֶפְקֹד עֲוֹנָהּ עָלֶיהָ וַתִּקַּא הָאָרֶץ אֶת־ יִשְׂרָאֵל:</p>
---	--

4. Berakhot 20b

<p>After citing the <i>halakha</i> that one who eats a quantity of food that does not satisfy his hunger is obligated by rabbinic law to recite Grace after Meals, the Gemara cites a related homiletic interpretation. Rav Avira taught, sometimes he said it in the name of Rabbi Ami, and sometimes he said it in the name of Rabbi Asi: The ministering angels said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, in Your Torah it is written: “The great, mighty and awesome God who favors no one and takes no bribe” (Deuteronomy 10:17),</p> <p>yet You, nevertheless, show favor to Israel, as it is written: “The Lord shall show favor to you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:26).</p> <p>He replied to them: And how can I not show favor to Israel, as I wrote for them in the Torah: “And you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 8:10), meaning that there is no obligation to bless the Lord until one is satiated;</p> <p>yet they are exacting with themselves to recite Grace after Meals even if they have eaten as much as an olive-bulk or an egg-bulk. Since they go beyond the requirements of the law, they are worthy of favor.</p>	<p>דַּרְשׁ רַב עֲוִירָא, זְמַנִּין אָמַר לֵה מְשָׁמִיָּה דְרַבִּי אָמִי וְזְמַנִּין אָמַר לֵה מְשָׁמִיָּה דְרַבִּי אָסִי: אָמְרוּ מְלַאכְיָהּ הַשְּׂרָת לְפָנֵי הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, כְּתוּב בְּתוֹרָתְךָ “אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשָּׂא פָנִים וְלֹא יִקַּח שֹׁחַד”,</p> <p>וְהֲלֹא אַתָּה נוֹשֵׂא פָנִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, דְּכָתִיב: “יִשָּׂא ה’ פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ”?</p> <p>אָמַר לָהֶם: וְכִי לֹא אָשָׂא פָנִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, שְׂכַתְּבִיתִי לָהֶם בְּתוֹרָה “וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת ה’ אֱלֹהֶיךָ”,</p> <p>וְהֵם מְדַקְדְּקִים [עַל] עַצְמָם עַד כְּזֹית וְעַד כְּבִיצָה.</p>
---	--

5. Nahmanides' commentary on Leviticus 19 :2

<p>The matter is as follows: the Torah warned against forbidden sexual relationships and forbidden foods but permitted sexual relations between spouses and the consumption of meat and wine.</p> <p>Thus, someone with hedonistic tendencies might allow oneself to be engaged sexually constantly with one's wife or one might marry many women; one might be among those who engage in gluttony and excessive drink; one will speak about vulgar matters as one wishes, for none of these is explicitly forbidden in the Torah, and thus one can be vile and still within the limits set by the Torah.</p> <p>Therefore, after Scripture specified all those activities that are absolutely forbidden, it issued a general imperative that we should separate ourselves from excess.</p>	<p>והענין כי התורה הזהירה בעריות ובמאכלים האסורים והתירה הביאה איש באשתו ואכילת הבשר והיין,</p> <p>א"כ ימצא בעל התאווה מקום להיות שטוף בזמת אשתו או נשיו הרבות, ולהיות בסובאי יין בזוללי בשר למו, וידבר כרצונו בכל הנבלות, שלא הוזכר איסור זה בתורה, והנה יהיה נבל ברשות התורה:</p> <p>לפיכך בא הכתוב, אחרי שפרט האיסורים שאסר אותם לגמרי, וצוה בדבר כללי שנהיה פרושים מן המותרות.</p>
---	--

6. Isaiah 58

<p>Cry with full throat, without restraint; Raise your voice like a ram's horn! Declare to My people their transgression, To the House of Jacob their sin. To be sure, they seek Me daily, Eager to learn My ways. Like a nation that does what is right, That has not abandoned the laws of its God, They ask Me for the right way, They are eager for the nearness of God:</p> <p>"Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?" Because on your fast day</p>	<p>קרא בגרון אל־תחשך כשופר הרם קולך והגד לעמי פשעם ולבית יעקב חטאתם: ואותי יום יום ידרשון ודעת דרכי יחפצון כגוי אשר צדקה עשה ומשפט אלהיו לא עזב ישאלוני משפטי צדק קרבת אלהים יחפצון:</p> <p>למה צמנו ולא ראית ענינו נפשנו ולא תדע הן ביום צמכם תמצאו חפץ וכל־עצביכם תנגשו:</p>
---	--

You see to your business
And oppress all your laborers!

Because you fast in strife and contention,
And you strike with a wicked fist!
Your fasting today is not such
As to make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast I desire,
A day for people to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,
A day when GOD is favorable?

No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.

It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your
home;
When you see the naked, to clothe them,
And not to ignore your own kin.

Then shall your light burst through like the
dawn
And your healing spring up quickly;
Your Vindicator shall march before you...

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
From pursuing your affairs on My holy day;
If you call the sabbath “delight,”
GOD’s holy day “honored”;
And if you honor it and go not your ways
Nor look to your affairs, nor strike bargains—

Then you can seek GOD’s favor.
I will set you astride the heights of the earth,
And let you enjoy the heritage of your father
Jacob—
For GOD’s mouth has spoken.

הֲנִי לְרִיב וּמִצָּה תִצְוֶמוּ וּלְהִכּוֹת בְּאֲגָרְיָי רָשָׁע לֹא־תִצְוֶמוּ
כִּי־יִוֵם לְהִשְׁמִיעַ בְּמִרוֹם קוֹלְכֶם:

הֲכִזָּה יִהְיֶה צוֹם אֲבֹתֵהוּ יוֹם עֲנֹת אָדָם נִפְשׁוֹ הֲלִכְרִי
כְּאֲגָמֹן רֹאשׁוֹ וְשָׁק וְאֶפֶר יֵצֵעַ הֲלִזָּה תִקְרָא־צוֹם יוֹם
רָצוֹן לַיהוָה:

הֲלוֹא זֶה צוֹם אֲבֹתֵהוּ פִתְחֵל חֲרָצְבוֹת לְשַׁע הַתֵּר
אֲגָדוֹת מוֹטָה וְשִׁלַּח רְצוּצִים חֲפְשִׁים וְכָל־מוֹטָה
תִּנְתְּקוּ:

הֲלוֹא פָרַס לְרֵעֵב לֶחֶמְךָ וְעַנְיִים מְרוּדִים תָּבִיא בֵּית כִּי־
תִרְאֶה עָרֹם וְכִסִּיתוֹ וּמִבְּשָׂרְךָ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם:

אֲזַ יִבְקַע כְּשִׁחַר אוֹרְךָ וְאַרְכֹּתֶךָ מִהֲרָה תִצְמַח וְהִלָּךְ
לְפָנֶיךָ צִדְקָה כְּבוֹד יְהוָה יֵאֱסָפֶךָ...

אִם־תִּשְׁיֵב מִשְׁבֶּת רְגְלֶךָ עֲשׂוֹת חֲפָצֶךָ בְּיוֹם קִדְשִׁי
וְקִרְאתָ לְשִׁבֶּת עֲנֵג לְקִדּוֹשׁ יְהוָה מְכַבֵּד וְכַבְּדָתוֹ מִעֲשׂוֹת
דְּרָכֶיךָ מִמִּצְוֹת חֲפָצֶךָ וְדַבַּר דְּבָר:

אֲזַ תִּתְעַבֵּל עַל־יְהוָה וְהִרְכַּבְתִּיךָ עַל־[בְּמִתִּי] (בְּמוֹתִי)
אֲרָץ וְהֵאֲכִלְתִּיךָ נִחְלַת יַעֲקֹב אָבִיךָ כִּי כִּי יְהוָה דְּבָר:

7. Deuteronomy 5

<p>Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as your God יהוה has commanded you.</p> <p>Six days you shall labor and do all your work,</p> <p>but the seventh day is a sabbath of your God יהוה; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the stranger in your settlements, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do.</p> <p>Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and your God יהוה freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, your God יהוה has commanded you to observe the sabbath day.</p>	<p>שָׁמֹר אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ:</p> <p>שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלֶאכֶתְךָ:</p> <p>וְיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כָל־מְלֶאכֶה אַתָּה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ וְשׁוֹרְךָ וַחֲמֹרְךָ וְכָל־בְּהֵמַתְךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ לְמַעַן יָנוּחַ עַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ כָּמוֹךָ:</p> <p>זָכַרְתָּ כִּי־עַבְדַּד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיֹּצֵאֲךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִשָּׁם בְּיָד חַזָּקָה וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה עַל־כֵּן צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת:</p>
--	--