



A New Poem for this Moment

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Can we atone? Can we clean the slate and move forward? The promise of biblical and rabbinic purification rites, particularly those involving blood, is that the answer is “yes.” As the book of Leviticus says, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation for your lives upon the altar; it is the blood, as life, that effects expiation.” (17:11). Blood (and death) can help us achieve atonement, wiping away our pasts and enabling us to pursue a better future unencumbered.

One of the central scenes of the Yom Kippur service in the Temple was the High Priest sprinkling blood eight times in the Holy of Holies, once upward and seven times downward, counting as he went: “One, one and one, one and two, one and three, one and four, one and five, one and six, one and seven” (Mishnah Yoma 5:3, translation from *Oxford Annotated Mishnah*; this rabbinic text was recently popularized by the musician [Yishai Ribo](#)). At the conclusion of the Yom Kippur service, as the Mishnah has it, a crimson strap would turn white, and the Jews would know they had been forgiven, in line with Isaiah 1:18: “Though your sins are like crimson, they shall turn white like snow” (Mishnah Yoma 6:8).

I began writing the poem below in May 2021, amidst a flare-up of ethno-national violence in Israeli cities, and I found myself returning to it in the weeks that have followed October 7. It is somewhat less sanguine about the capacity of blood to clean the slate and enable people to move on. The urgent claim of the images I put forth is that perhaps the blood goes nowhere, nothing turns from crimson to white, and perhaps the lives lost—sacrificed—simply pool around the altar. The heavens are sealed like an iron wall, while the altar gapes as if hungry rather than redemptive.

This is in part a pushback against an understandable impulse to sanctify—and thereby justify—death as sacrifice. Death is a source of great meaninglessness, and it can be a relief to have something to say explaining why someone died or had to die. Not in itself objectionable, the attribution of meaning to death always threatens to become an *embrace* of death, either as the romanticization and idealization of a meaningful death or as a legitimate means for reaching one particular end or another. The atonement promised by the biblical blood rites may be a divine grace, a kindness for frail creatures who often fail to live up to our own ideals. Its logic—the claim that blood and death can achieve some positive aim—can be quite scary, particularly in concrete political and military realities.

This poem first came to me in the language of the Yom Kippur liturgy exactly because of the latter’s cyclical, repetitive nature. In my lifetime, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has often felt similarly cyclical. Now though, it feels like it may be pervaded with deep sense of “stuckness”—there’s too much history, too much blood already spilt, and we are drowning in place. If some Jewish theologians have seen ritual’s repetitive nature as emblematic of eternity, it may also

capture something of the interminable. We don't just count drops of blood, we count bodies, and we can't seem to stop.

I can end only with the finest utopia the biblical prophets ever had to offer:

בִּלְעַד הַמָּוֹת לְנֹצֵחַ וּמָחָה אֲדַנִּי יְהוָה דְּמָעָה מֵעַל כָּל־פָּנִים (ישעיהו כה: ח)

He will destroy death forever. My Lord God will wipe the tears away from all faces. (Isaiah 25:8)

כפרה Kapparah

אֶחָת וְאַחַת	One and another ¹
הוא זֹרֵק הַדָּם וְהַדָּם נִזְרָק	He sprinkles the blood ² The blood is sprinkled
וְהוּא מְשַׁמֵּיעַ, כְּפָרָה	<i>Kapparah</i> , he intones
אֶחָת וּשְׁתַּיִם	Two and another
הַטְּפוֹת יוֹרְדוֹת בְּרִזְל שׁוֹרֶף עַל לְחָיֵי וְזוֹרֵם לְתוֹךְ זְלִיגַת הַדָּם הַמְחַלֵּיק בַּחוּצוֹת	The drops land Hot iron On my cheeks Streaming to mix With the blood That licks the streets
סוֹפֵר הַחֲלָלִים ¹¹	Counting the dead
הִיסוּרִים לֹא מְמַרְקִים וְהַדָּם לֹא מְכַפֵּר	Suffering cannot atone ³ The blood cannot atone ⁴
אֶחָת וְשְׁלוֹשׁ	Three and another
(מֶלַח בְּרִית עוֹלָם דְּמַעוֹתָיו : יָבֵשׁ עַל מְקוֹם הַטְּבִיחַ)	(Salt of the constant covenant ⁵ His tears: dry on the slaughter-site ⁶)
אֶחָת וְאַרְבַּע	Four and another
הַגּוֹפִים נְשָׂרְפִים כָּלִיל וְלֹא עוֹלִים וְהָאֶפֶר נִשָּׂאָר עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ	The bodies burned whole do not ascend ⁷ The ashes stay on the altar ⁸

וּמִתְבוֹסֵס בַּדָּם ¹²	Pooling in the blood
אֶחָת וְחֲמִשָּׁה	Five and another
וְהַמִּזְבֵּחַ נִפְעָר תַּחַת שָׁמַיִם כְּבָרָזָל בְּצִמְאוֹן לֹא מְרִוּהָ	The altar gapes ⁹ Under iron skies ¹⁰ Its thirst unslaked
אֶחָת וְשֵׁשׁ	Six and another
וְהַדָּם לֹא מְכַפֵּר וְאֵנַחְנוּ טוֹבְעִים	And the blood cannot atone And we are drowning
אֶחָת וְשִׁבְעָה	And another

Notes

1. Mishnah Yoma 5:3, and featuring in the musaf liturgy for Yom Kippur.
2. Sprinkling the blood features in many of the biblical sacrificial rites, but for Yom Kippur, see Leviticus 16:14. The biblical verb הזה is replaced in rabbinic literature by the verb זרק (also biblical, but less common in this context).
3. Contra one opinion on Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 5a.
4. Contra Leviticus 17:11, and the biblical blood rites more broadly.
5. Based on Numbers 18:19 & Leviticus 2:13.
6. “Slaughter-site” is based on the Buber-Rosenzweig translation of מזבח as “Schlachtstatt” (literally, “slaughter place”), rather than “altar,” which they saw as too sterile to capture the original meaning of the Biblical term.
7. Perhaps the paradigmatic biblical offering, the עולה, the “whole burnt offering,” represents the sacrificing of life for religious ends.
8. In contrast to the ritual removal of the ashes from the altar (Leviticus 6:2–4), here nothing is removed, everything continues to lie right where it is.
9. Rabbinic texts often describe runoff pipes at the base of the altar using anthropomorphic terminology, as if the altar had orifices open to consume the blood of the sacrificial rites. See

Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 49a–b; Mishnah Middot 3:2; Tosefta Sukkah 3:14. And yet, the blood pools before our eyes, mixing with the ashes.

10. Leviticus 26:19, and cf. Deuteronomy 28:23.

11. The Hebrew חלל (as opposed to מת) is the Biblical and modern Hebrew term used for someone who dies in battle (Numbers 19:16) and also resonates with the cultic context as the word for a priest who loses his priestly sanctity (b. Makkot 2a).

12. Based on Ezekiel 16:6, where the vision is one of the Jewish people at a “rock bottom” moment in which God saves them, beginning their redemption. Here there is only silence.

The Hebrew of this poem was [originally published](#) as part of Gluya Magazine’s collection of responses to Oct. 7th.

