

# G-D'S ATONEMENT

*by Nechama Stampler*

## G-d's Atonement<sup>1</sup>

*And one male goat as a chatas for Hashem.*

Rashi: The midrashic explanation is that HKBH said, "Bring an atonement for Me for having reduced the moon.

Maharal: The notion of Hashem requiring atonement, and that such atonement would be achieved through a korban, has spawned animated discussion. Explanations have been offered - some poor, some adequate but not particularly satisfying.

The fuller citation<sup>2</sup> has the moon complaining to Hashem that two kings cannot share a single crown. Hashem responds by telling the moon that if this is the case, she ought to reduce herself and solve the problem. The apparent injustice requires expiation through a korban; that is the function of the Musaf chatas of our pasuk.

The two luminaries were created with a single command - "Let there be luminaries!"<sup>3</sup> Creating radically different things at the same time with a single command can make perfect sense. Each created thing has its own role, its own specialness that another does not possess. This makes each thing the "king" of its own bailiwick. By first grouping the luminaries together, Hashem implies that each of them was equally important, but only a part of the fullness of the concept of heavenly illumination. They would have to share the position, each being a co-regent. The moon complained that this would simply not work. The very nature of kingship is to unite the realm. Only a single king can take all his subjects and turn them into a single nation. In the imperfect world of imperfect people, a shared reign is not practical.

Hashem responds by telling the moon that it was correct, and would have to make way for the sun to become the sole king. Its light would remain constant, while that of the moon would wax and wane.

The moon and G-d go a few more rounds, until finally getting to the conclusion cited by Rashi. After all the explanations of why it was not unjust for the moon to have to reduce itself, the moon still had a grievance from its point of view. The "way of the world" indeed demands clarity and exclusivity. Two cannot simultaneously occupy the seat of power. While the original creation of the moon

accorded it as much significance as the sun, the way all things interact with each other demanded that one of the two luminaries step down. There were good arguments why it had to be the moon, but that did not remove the perception that the position of the moon had been sacrificed for the general good. This injustice still required a kaparah.

Here is where many of us are stymied. How could Hashem require "atonement?" And what good would a korban do in this regard? To whom does Hashem address a korban? Our incomprehension owes to serial mistranslations. We think that "kaparah" means something done to compensate for a sin. A "korban," we believe, is a gift, like that which a subject might bring to a king he has offended. A "chet" is a sin.

None of those translations are accurate. Kaparah means a removal, a cleansing. That is how Rashi treats it elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> A korban is not a "sacrifice" or a gift offered as a bribe. It literally means something that brings close. Chet does not mean sin as much as it means a deficiency, as in Yaakov's description of his having to make restitution for any and all losses to Lavan's sheep: "I would bear the deficiency."<sup>5</sup>

Putting it all together, the midrash does not in any manner or form leave room to see Hashem as "sinning," in the sense of committing an impropriety. Yet "deficiency" certainly came about through Hashem's modification of the first creation of the luminaries, leaving the moon as the smaller, lesser light. The diminution of the moon from its original position would necessarily cascade as a series of negative consequences in the spheres of influence that were originally entrusted. However we understand the original role of the moon, it was given dominion over certain phenomena. The luminaries are describes as "rulers." When the moon was reduced, it was left with less to pass along to what it presided over. The entire world - not just the moon - was rendered deficient.

The diminution of the moon is replayed every month during the waning phase. Invariably, however, this monthly diminution is followed by a reversal, in which the moon grows in apparent size. The moon's diminution results from Hashem's application of the midah of din, which restricts, confines and limits. Din, however, gives way to Hashem's chesed - an opportunity for us to draw closer to Him. We are invited to attach ourselves to Him, to avail ourselves of the new light He creates each month, through a korban, which brings people closer to Hashem. We should also observe that the opportunity for deveikus to Hashem comes about specifically because it was preceded by a period of diminution. HKBH prefers the small to the large. Because we limit ourselves, because we diminish our own stature, we are afforded an opportunity to attach ourselves to Him when He displays His midah of chesed. We don't have that opportunity when we inflate our worth and self-image.

In other words, the chet deficiency that came about through the diminution of the moon is given a kaparah is removed and cleansed on each Rosh Chodesh, when the moon begins growing anew. We are instructed to bring a korban something that draws us close to Him to seize the moment. The korban of Rosh Chodesh, then, does in fact "atone" for the "chet" of the diminution of the moon.

With our beis hamikdosh in ruins, we do not have the ability to physically bring a korban on Rosh Chodesh. Chazal teach us, however, that even in the absence of a physical beis hamikdosh, the seder korban, the protocol of display of Hashem's midos, is still very much in effect. We can respond to the periodic appearance of din by looking ahead for the certainty of a shift in the direction of chesed. When we detect this reversal, we must be ready to savor it, to internalize its light, and endeavor to attach ourselves to Him more firmly.

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Sources:

1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Bamidbar 28:15; Chidushei Aggados, Shavuot 9A; Nesivos Olam, Nesiv Gemilas Chasodim, chap. 1
  2. Chulin 60B
  3. Bereishis 1:14
  4. Bereishis 32:21
  5. Bereishis 31:39
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