

WASH AWAY OUR SINS: A Nautical Journey Through a Talmudic *Sugya*

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תלמוד בבלי יומא עז:
ואם היה מלוכלך בטיט ובצואה
רוחץ כדרכו
ואינו חושש. ...
מדיחה אשה ידה אחת במים
ונותנת פת לתינוק
ואינה חוששת. ...
ההולך להקביל פני אביו או פני רבו. ...
עובר עד צוארו במים
ואינו חושש. ...
שומרי פירות
עוברין עד צוארן במים
ואין חוששין.

Babylonian Talmud Yoma 77b

*One who is dirty from mud or excrement
may bathe normally
and need not be concerned. ...*

*A woman may wash one hand in water
to feed her child,
and need not be concerned. ...*

*One who goes to pay respects to a parent or
teacher...
may cross up to their neck
and need not be concerned. ...*

*Those who guard their fruit
may cross up to their necks
and need not be concerned.*

AMOTHER WASHES HER hands to feed her child; a student wades through water up to his neck to visit his teacher; a fruit farmer crosses a river to guard her fruit—all on Yom Kippur. Bathing is one of the central prohibitions of Yom Kippur and yet one lengthy passage of Talmud explores a myriad of exceptions. By exploring this passage, we can uncover multiple implications of water imagery for thinking about *teshuvah*, purification, and how these processes interact with our mundane lives.

ATONEMENT IN THE TORAH AND MISHNAH

The end of Leviticus 16 proposes that the means by which we achieve atonement for our sins on Yom Kippur is self-affliction:

ויקרא טז:כט-ל

²⁹וְהִיְתָה לָכֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי
בְּעֶשְׂרִי לַחֹדֶשׁ תַּעֲנֻ אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם וְכָל מְלֹאכָה
לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ הָאָזָרָח וְהַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם: ³⁰כִּי בַיּוֹם
הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטָהָר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם
לִפְנֵי ה' תִּטְהָרוּ:

Leviticus 16:29-30

²⁹And 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/
afflict yourselves; and you shall do no
manner of work, neither the citizen nor

the alien who resides among you. ³⁰For on this day atonement shall be made for you to purify you of all your sins; you shall be pure before God.

From the fact that these two verses come back to back, it seems that the affliction in verse 29 is the means by which one achieves the atonement in verse 30. The Mishnah is more specific about what this affliction should look like. It identifies six activities which should be avoided on Yom Kippur: eating, drinking, bathing, anointing, wearing shoes, and sexual relations (Mishnah Yoma 8:1).

So far, the picture we see is that in order to achieve purification before God, we desist from activities that bring us physical pleasure. This self-denial may serve as a sacrifice that helps us achieve purification and atonement. But this model can raise some difficult questions. What if I do self-denial wrong? What if I can't fast for a medical reason? What if I need to wash my hands? How can I then achieve atonement?

TRANSFORMATIVE WATERS

The curious *sugya* about bathing in Yoma 77b-78a opens up alternative avenues to explore this question. After the quoted passage on exceptions to the prohibition on bathing on Yom Kippur, the *sugya* proceeds to discuss future waters found in the prophetic books of Ezekiel and Isaiah.

At first glance it seems like these two sections of the *sugya* have little to do with each other. A careful reading, however, shows that the future waters can help us unlock new facets in the theological significance of Yom Kippur. This becomes clear when we see the verses from Ezekiel and Isaiah, brought in the second half of the *sugya*, in their biblical contexts. It turns out that the waters described by both prophets have a transformative quality.

In Ezekiel 47:1-12, the angel guiding the prophet through the reconstructed Temple shows him the waters—so high as to be uncrossable—flowing out from the Temple Mount. This is how the waters are described:

יחזקאל מז:ח-ט, יב
 הַמַּיִם הָאֵלֶּה יוֹצְאִים אֶל הַגִּלְיָה הַקְּדֻמוֹנָה
 וַיֵּרְדּוּ עַל-הָעֶרְבָה וַבָּאֻּם הַיָּמָה אֶל הַיָּמָה

הַמְּוֹצְאִים וְנִרְפְּאוּ הַמַּיִם: ⁹וְהָיָה כָּל נֶפֶשׁ
 חַיָּה אֲשֶׁר יִשְׂרָץ אֶל כָּל אֲשֶׁר יָבוֹא שָׁם נִחְלִים
 יִחְיֶה וְהָיָה הַדָּגָה רַבָּה מְאֹד כִּי בָאוּ שָׁמָּה הַמַּיִם
 הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּרְפְּאוּ וְחַי כָּל אֲשֶׁר יָבוֹא שָׁמָּה הַנֶּחֱל:
 ... ¹²וְעַל הַנֶּחֱל יַעֲלֶה עַל שְׂפָתוֹ מִזֶּה וּמִזֶּה כָּל
 עֵץ מֵאֵכָל לֹא יָבוֹל עָלָהּ וְלֹא יָתֵם פְּרִיָּו לְחַדְשֵׁי
 יָבֹכֵר כִּי מִיָּמָיו מִן הַמִּקְדָּשׁ הֵמָּה יוֹצְאִים [וְהָיָה]
 פְּרִיָּו לְמֵאֵכָל וְעָלָהּ לְתִרְוָפָה:

Ezekiel 47:8-9, 12

⁸"This water runs out to the eastern region, and flows into the Arabah; and when it comes into the sea, into the sea of foul waters,¹ the water will become wholesome. ⁹Every living creature that swarms will be able to live wherever this stream goes; the fish will be very abundant once these waters have reached there. It will be wholesome, and everything will live wherever this stream goes. ... ¹²All kinds of trees for food will grow up on both banks of the stream. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail; they will yield new fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the Temple. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing."

The Temple waters here in Ezekiel are peaceful, abundant, and nourishing. They heal physical ailments and help trees flourish.

The waters of Isaiah, however, have a different transformative power:

ישעיה לג:כא-כב, כד
 כ²¹כִּי אִם שָׁם אֲדִיר ה' לָנוּ מְקוֹם נְהָרִים וְאֲרָיִם
 רַחְבֵּי יְדִים בֶּל תִּלְךָ בּוֹ אֲנִי שֵׁט וְצִי אֲדִיר לֹא
 יַעֲבֹרְנוּ: כ²²כִּי ה' שִׁפְטֵנוּ ה' מַחְקֵנוּ ה' מִלְכָּנוּ
 הוּא יוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ: ... ²⁴וּבֹל יֵאמֶר שָׁבוּן חֲלִיתִי הָעַם
 הַיֹּשֵׁב בְּהַ נִּשְׂא עֹן:

Isaiah 33:21-22, 24

²¹For there God's greatness shall be for us like a region of rivers, of broad streams, where no floating vessels can sail and no mighty craft can travel—²²for God shall be our judge, God shall be our law-giver, God shall be our king, and shall deliver us.

1 This is understood to refer to the Dead Sea.

... ²⁴And no one who lives there shall say,
"I am sick"; it shall be inhabited by folk
whose sin has been forgiven.

In these verses, **God** is the water protecting the future Temple. Whereas in Ezekiel, the human cannot pass through the waters of the future Temple because they are too deep, in these verses God is the water, protecting Jerusalem from attack by mighty sea-faring vessels. A key expression of God's deliverance appears at the end of the section: the people will be delivered through God's power to forgive (*lit.* lift up) the burden of their sins.

THE WATERS OF YOM KIPPUR

All we seek on Yom Kippur, in the deepest way, is for our sins to be forgiven. In these verses from Isaiah, it is God's waters that lift up the burden of our sins. This feature of water evokes the final *mishnah* of Yoma:

משנה יומא ח:ט

אמר רבי עקיבא, אשְׁרִיכֶם יִשְׂרָאֵל, לִפְנֵי מִי
אַתֶּם מְטַהְרִין, וּמִי מְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם, אֲבִיכֶם
שֶׁבִשְׁמַיִם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמָר, "וְזָרַקְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם מִיַּם טְהוֹרִים
וְטָהַרְתֶּם" (יחזקאל לו:כה). וְאֹמְרָה, "מִקְוֶה
יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' " (ירמיה יז:יג), מִה מִקְוֶה מְטַהֵר
אֶת הַטְּמֵאִים, אִף הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְטַהֵר אֶת
יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Mishnah Yoma 8:9

R. Akiva said: How fortunate are you,
Israel! Before Whom are you purified,
and Who purifies you? It is your Heavenly
Parent, as it is stated: "And I will sprinkle
purifying water upon you, and you shall be
purified" (Ezekiel 36:25). And it says: "The
hope (mikveh) of Israel is God" (Jeremiah
17:13). Just as a ritual bath (mikveh)
purifies the impure, so too, the Holy Blessed
One, purifies Israel.

In this *mishnah*, we are purified before God and God is the One Who purifies us, serving as a watery *mikveh*, cleansing us of our sins. By connecting the image of God as water from Isaiah to the waters of Ezekiel, the editor of the *sugya* invites us to imagine the waters of the future Temple as a metaphor for God: like water, God purifies. This purification is physical and spiritual, and leaves us forgiven.

These associations can provide an alternative model for how we might achieve atonement for our sins on Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is a communal baptism. We are wading through a *mikveh*—and that *mikveh* is the day of Yom Kippur itself.

And the waters of that *mikveh*, I like to think, are our prayer. Standing in synagogue for hours on end and singing our hearts out like there's no tomorrow is our communal baptism. Crossing the Yom Kippur waters is not an easy task. As in the deep waters of the *sugya*, our crossing is fraught as we grapple with life and death, sin and atonement. Together we traverse waters up to our neck, hoping we will emerge unscathed. But we immerse ourselves in Yom Kippur. We let the prayers wash over us and by the end of Yom Kippur we emerge cleansed and purified. Just as we cannot control the downward flow of water from above, so too on Yom Kippur we surrender to God's mercy and receive atonement.

GRASSHOPPERS' ANTENNAE

The *sugya* closes with an evocative description of the way in which the waters of the future Temple will grow and expand:

תלמוד בבלי יומא עז:–עח.

אמר ר' פנחס משום רב הונא צפורא:
מעין היוצא מבית קדשי הקדשים
בתחילה דומה לקרני חגבים...
נעשה כחוט של שתי...
נעשה כחוט של ערב...
נעשה כפי פך קטן...
מכאן ואילך היה מתגבר ועולה...
נעשה כנחל שוטף שבו רוחצין...

Babylonian Talmud Yoma 77b-78a

R. Pinhas said in the name of Rav Huna
the Sepphorean:

The spring that issued from the Holy of
Holies:

At first it was like grasshoppers'
antennae...

it became like warp thread...

it became like weft thread...

it became like the opening of a small jug.

...

From here on out it grew and grew...

*it became like a flowing river in which they
bathe [to purify themselves]...*

The waters of the future Temple, says the *sugya*, start as a small trickle, bubbling up like grasshoppers' antennae from under the threshold of the Holy of Holies. As it moves out of the Temple, it widens and deepens until ultimately it is a flowing river in which those who are impure can immerse. In this description, we can see the *sugya* mirroring itself: the first half of the *sugya* too—with its exceptions to the prohibition on bathing—begins with small amounts of water. The quantities of water get larger until they are neck-deep. Through this mirroring, the *sugya* teaches us that all waters are connected. The purifying Temple waters of Ezekiel are literarily and cosmically linked to the water washing the hand of the mother who feeds her child. In fact, we are made of water. As water, we are all connected to the purifying waters of the future Temple. And we are all the people of Isaiah, whose sin God has lifted.

I bless us that, whatever we experience over Yom Kippur, we may emerge as though from a *mikveh*, purified, physically and spiritually; that we may feel the spaciousness of the waters of Ezekiel, and the safety of the waters of Isaiah; that we may be able to bring into our year, into our mundane waters, an echo of the sensation that God has carried us through the water and washed us clean. ♦