

## The Meaning of *Kappara* (Atonement) in the Torah

By Rav Yehuda Rock

*Kappara* (atonement) occupies a very important place in the Torah, particularly in the context of the Sanctuary and its sacrifices. The subject is covered for the most part in *Sefer Vayikra*, but it is actually in the story of Yaakov and Esav (in *parashat Vayishlach*) that the commentators have chosen to address the general question of the meaning of atonement.

It would seem that "atonement" is generally understood as occupying the same semantic realm as forgiveness (*selicha*) and pardon (*mechila*), i.e., as referring to a change in attitude on God's part towards man, with regard to his sins, and in the context of withholding punishment. In rabbinic literature, this meaning certainly exists. However, as we shall see, in the language of the Torah this is not what the concept means.

Our discussion will be based on a philological and exegetical examination, following which we will also be able to build a more fundamental conceptual understanding of *kappara*, pertaining to some elementary aspects of the relations between man and God.

### THE SUBJECT AND OBJECT OF *KAPPARA*

Let us begin with an analysis of the linguistic forms of the root *k-p-r* and their syntactical uses. The form that appears in the heading of this *shiur* – "*kappara*" – is not a biblical word at all; its source is in rabbinical literature. This construction is based on a form that is very common in *Tanakh* – the verb in the *pi'el* (intensive) case. The word *kappara*, as used by *Chazal*, describes the abstract result of the act of atoning. No form exists in the Torah with this precise meaning.

The verb in the *pi'el* case (together with the corresponding passive forms – *pu'al* and *hitpa'el*) – the most common form of the root in *Tanakh* – appears consistently in the context of the Sanctuary and the sacrifices. Thus, for example, with regard to the sin offering we read: "*ve-khipper alav ha-kohen*" ("the kohen shall make atonement for him" – [Vayikra 4:31](#) and elsewhere); with regard to the guilt offering we read, "*ve-hakohen yekhapper alav*" (ibid. 5:16, 26), etc. The same form appears in *parashat Vayishlach*, and it is here that we find the commentators discussing the concept. Yaakov tells his messengers, "You shall say: Also, behold, your servant, Yaakov, is behind us, for he has said – Let me appease him (*akhappera fanav*) with the offering that goes before me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me" ([Bereishit 32:21](#)).

As noted, the root is not used directly to indicate the abstract result of the *kappara*. The subject of the act of *kappara* is almost always the person who performs acts that make atonement (for instance, the kohen), or the object that

brings atonement (such as a sacrifice). The difference between the linguistic use of the root *k-p-r* and the linguistic use of the root *s-l-chis* highlighted in the context of the sin offering: "The kohen shall make atonement for him (*ve-khipper alav*) and he shall be forgiven" – it is the kohen who makes atonement (*mekhapper*) while God forgives (*sole'ach*). The act of *kappara* by the kohen leads to a result of forgiveness by God. Thus, even in the most obvious instance of *kappara* in the context of forgiveness (the sin offering), there is a clear distinction between the two concepts.

There are very few instances (seven or eight in all of the *Tanakh*) where God appears as the subject who is *mekhapper* ("makes atonement"). We must therefore conclude that *kappara* and *selicha* are two separate concepts in the Torah.

A form of the root *k-p-r* that is commonly found in the Torah is the noun, *kippur* (always in plural form – *kippurim*), a participle in the *pi'el* case. "*Kippurim*" appears as characterizing something that is used for atonement – "the ram of *kippurim*," "the money of *kippurim*" – or as a characterizing the time when acts of atonement are performed – "the day of *kippurim*." (The usual English translation, "the day of atonement," is inaccurate; a more precise rendering would be, "the day of atonings.")

In summary, from the forms and syntactical uses of the root *k-p-r* we deduce that it refers to the act or object that makes atonement.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the meaning of *kappara*, let us note another three uses of the root, with different meanings, which may be of relevance.

One form is the verb in regular case (*kal*): *kapar*. This form appears only once in *Tanakh* – in God's command to Noah: "You shall cover it (*ve-khafarta oto*)... with pitch (*kofer*)."

The second form is the noun with the accent on the first syllable: *kofer*. This word has two meanings that may be relevant to our discussion. It can refer to a certain protective substance, as in the above verse from Noah, or it can be used in the sense of a ransom (*kofer nefesh*), as in the case of the half-shekel: "Each person shall give it as a ransom for his soul" ([Shemot 30:12](#)).

The third form is the *kapporet* – the covering of the Ark of God's covenant.

RASHI: KAPPARA = WIPING AWAY

Let us now review the approaches of the various commentators, with reference to the verse in *parashat Vayishlach*: "You shall also say: Behold, your servant, Yaakov, is behind us, for he has said – Let me appease him (*akhappera fanav*) with the offering that goes before me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me" ([Bereishit 32:21](#)).

Rashi explains:

"*Akhappera fanav*" – I shall nullify his anger... It seems to me that wherever the word *kappara* appears in connection with iniquity and sin and with the word *panim*, it always means wiping away or removing. It is an Aramaic word, and is used extensively in the Talmud... In the language of the Torah, too, the basins used in the Sanctuary are referred to as "*kippurei zahav*" (*Ezra 1:10*), since the kohen cleans his hands in them, at the edge of the basin.

Rashi makes a few points here:

- The full expression, *kippur panim*, means an erasing of anger, or appeasement.
- *Kappara*, in the context of sins and transgressions, is a different use of the word, but the two uses share a common meaning. The fundamental meaning that is common to both contexts is one of "wiping away," "cleansing and removing."

What Rashi seems to be saying is that *panim* is used here in the metaphoric sense; "*kippur ha-panim*" means a wiping away of anger, while the "*kippur avon*" means a removal, or wiping away, of the sin.

The word *kippur*, in the sense of cleansing or removing, has its foundation in the Aramaic term, meaning "washing." Rashi cites parallels taken from Talmudic Aramaic, and interprets a verse in Ezra in such a way as to demonstrate a biblical parallel, too.

Rashi's approach gives rise to several difficulties:

- With regard to the most fundamental meaning of the root *k-p-r*, Rashi's interpretation has no clear basis in biblical Hebrew. He is forced to find support in Aramaic and a single verse of questionable relevance from *Tanakh*.
- As to the interpretation of *kappara* in the contexts of sin and transgression, Rashi asserts that "*kapparat avon*" means the removal of sin. If this were so, we could expect to find a number of instances where sin is mentioned in the context of *kippur*. However, the great majority of instances where the word *kippur* is used refer to man himself (for example, "and he shall make atonement for **him**" – *ve-khipper alav*). It is very seldom that sin or transgression appears as the object of the *kippur*.
- Aside from the above, according to this exegetical approach, sin and transgression in the context of *kippur* should be the direct object of the verb *le-khapper*. Indeed, there are instances of such constructions. Thus, for example, in *Yishayahu 26:9* – "Therefore, by this shall the transgression of Yaakov be atoned (*yekhupar*), and this is all the fruit to take away his sin..." The transgression is the object that must be atoned (for), and the verse even provides a corresponding phrase that speaks of removal of sin. Similarly, we find in *Tehillim*: "He is compassionate, atoning (forgiving) transgression (*yekhapper avon*)... and often turning away His anger." However, in most instances where *kippur* appears in the context of sin and transgression – including those appearances in the context of the Sanctuary and the sacrifices – sin appears as an indirect object, attached to the verb by means of prepositions - *al*, *be'ad*, and *mi*-. Thus, following the

episode of the golden calf: "Perhaps I can make atonement for (*akhappera be'ad*) their sin." In relation to sin offerings and guilt offerings we find, "The kohen shall make atonement for him for his sin (*ve-khippar alav ha-kohen mi-chatato*) and he shall be forgiven" (*Vayikra 4:26*); "And the kohen shall make atonement for him for his sin (*ve-khippar alav ha-kohen al chatato*) which he sinned, and he shall be forgiven" (ibid. 35); and also verses 5,10,13,18,26.

The same pattern is to be found in the Yom Kippur service of the Kohen Gadol: "And he shall make atonement for the Sanctuary (*ve-khippar al ha-kodesh*) for the impurities of Bnei Yisrael, and for their iniquities in all their sins" (*Vayikra 16:16*); "For on this day He will grant you atonement (*yekhapper alekhem*) from all of your sins..." (ibid. 30); "To make atonement for (*le-khapper al*) Bnei Yisrael for all their sins, once in the year" (ibid. 34). The sins are depicted in these verses as the cause that give rise to the need for *kappara*, and as influenced by the *kappara* – but the *kappara* is not the *kappara* of those sins themselves. Hence, *kippur* cannot mean "removal."

Ramban notes these problems with Rashi's interpretation:

The understanding of *kippur* as "wiping away" does not exist in Hebrew; it exists only in Aramaic. Thus, "*kippurei zahav*" was the name given to the basins in Babylon. *Forkappara* never refers to sin...

R. Yona ibn Janach and Radak, in their respective books of Hebrew roots, offer interpretations similar to that of Rashi. (So too in Radak's commentary on the Torah.) Radak appears to have been aware of the third problem listed above, and he provides the following somewhat forced explanation: "Perhaps I can atone for (*akhappera be'ad*) your sins' – meaning, perhaps I can remove your iniquities and your sins by praying on account of your sins. Or: [Perhaps] I can remove God's anger which He was angry at you because of your sins."

RAMBAN: KAPPARA = RANSOM

Ramban adopts a different exegetical approach, based on the concept of a *kofer nefesh* (ransom):

Rather, the proper interpretation is as follows... "Also, behold, your servant, Yaakov, is behind us" – he has placed us in front of him, to offer a ransom for his soul upon the occasion of beholding your honor, "with this offering" – as slaves offer a ransom when given license to come before the king. "And thereafter I shall see his face" – for "perhaps he will accept me," and grant me the honor of being among those who behold the king. All of this shows the degree of his awe of him... But where the Torah says "to atone for (*le-khapper al*) your souls," or "to make atonement for him (*le-khapper alav*) and he shall be forgiven," for his life, and it says, "I shall make atonement for (*akhappera be'ad*) your sins" – all of these are meant in the same sense as "Each person shall give a *kofer nefesh*" – meaning a ransom.

Ramban's interpretation makes a few points:

- The most fundamental meaning of the root is actually manifest in the noun, *kofer* – meaning a ransom.

· The first level of meaning of *kofer nefesh* arises from Ramban's formulation: "To offer a ransom for his soul **upon** [the occasion of] beholding your honor." The beholding of the king's countenance entails, as it were, a death sentence; a person must therefore ransom his soul – i.e., pay in return for his life.

· Since the context in which a *kofer nefesh* is given is that of royal honor, its associations invoke a further level of meaning, in that it expresses this sense of honor and awe of kingship.

· This second level reflects what Yaakov is trying to convey in his words to Esav. Thus Ramban also connects the various expressions concerning *panim* in the verse. *Panim* is a metaphor for honor. Yaakov is "*mekhapper*" the honor (*penei*) of Esav – in other words, he brings an offering as a ransom, expressing awe and honor for Esav. He thereby hopes that Esav will *yisa panim* (literally, "lift his face" – i.e., uplift Yaakov's honor by accepting him).

· In the context of the Sanctuary and the sacrifices it is mainly the first level of meaning that is implied: a ransom in the wake of sin, which requires a death penalty before the Divine Presence. Ramban explains several different expressions of *kippur* as applying to a person in light of the above. *Kippur* for a person means a ransom for his soul.

By adopting this exegetical approach, Ramban avoids the three difficulties enumerated above as arising from Rashi's interpretation. However, it must be pointed out that Ramban's explanation of Yaakov's words rests on the assumption that *panim* may be interpreted in the sense of "honor." He brings no support for this assumption, and it is doubtful that any exists.

#### IBN EZRA: KAPPARA = COVERING

Aside from the uses of the word *kippur* that have been treated thus far, there is another use that must be taken into consideration and which conforms to neither Rashi's explanation nor that of Ramban. In the order of the Yom Kippur service as set out in [Vayikra 16](#), there are a number of instances where *kippur* refers to a place – such as the Kodesh Kodashim. In these instances the cause that makes *kippur* necessary is not only sin or transgression, but also defilement or impurity. Some examples include the following verses:

And he shall make atonement for (*ve-khipper al*) the Kodesh on account of the impurities of Bnei Yisrael, and on account of their transgressions in all of their sins. And so shall he do for the Tent of Meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their impurity... (16)

And he shall go out to the altar that is before God, and make atonement for it (*ve-khipper alav*)... (18)

... And purify it and sanctify it from the impurities of Bnei Yisrael... (19)

And when he is finished making atonement (*ve-khila mi-kapper*) for the Kodesh and for the Tent of Meeting and for the altar... (20)

And he shall make atonement for (*ve-khipper et*) the holy Sanctuary, and for the Tent of Meeting and for the altar he shall make atonement (*yekhapper*), and for the kohanim and for all the people of the congregation he shall make atonement (*yekhapper*).... (33)

*Chazal* understand these verses as referring to the transgressions of man which defile the Sanctuary and its

sacrifices. The halakhic meaning of this concept is worthy of a separate discussion, but for our purposes we may say that this is clearly not the literal meaning of the verses.

Rav Sa'adya Gaon offers a metaphorical interpretation of the "impurities" in this chapter as referring to sins, and the holy places as the sites where the kohen performs the acts of atonement. In other words, the kohen makes atonement (*mekhapper*) in the Sanctuary for transgressions that are referred to here as "impurities." However, the Sanctuary appears here as the indirect object, with the preposition *al* (for), as well as appearing as the direct object (*et*). With regard to the impurities, we note that there is also a distinction here between "impurities" and "sins": "...on account of the impurities of Bnei Yisrael, and on account of their transgressions in all of their sins." Furthermore, the correlation between atonement for the holy places and the attention to the impurities proves that this is more than a mere literary device.

Ibn Ezra offers a convincing interpretation for the concept of *kippur*. Commenting on the verse in *parashat Vayishlach*, he writes:

"*Akhappera*" – I shall cover and hide, "*fanav*" – his anger.

Ibn Ezra apparently adopts the meaning of the root in the simple case, "*ve-khafarta ota ba-kofer* – you shall cover it with pitch," meaning a covering or protection. Accordingly, in commenting on the Yom Kippur service ([Vayikra 16:16](#)), he writes:

And the meaning of, "He shall atone for (*ve-khipper al*) the Kodesh" is – that the blood shall be a protection, so that [the Holy of Holies] will not be destroyed because of the impurities of those who are impure.

In other words, the impurity and the sins represent a danger to the Sanctuary, and the *kippur* of blood covers and protects it. This concept requires further clarification.

In [Yishayahu 6](#), the prophet describes how he saw God seated upon the Throne of Glory, with seraphim standing around Him, extolling God's sanctity and honor. He then continues:

And I said: Woe to me, for I am ruined; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell amongst a nation of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts...

Yishayahu is describing the tension between his proximity to God, on the one hand, and the impurity of his lips, on the other. The focus on the lips in this context is obviously connected to the fact that the prophecy is describing his consecration as a prophet. For our purposes, however, it is clear that the fear and the danger are not dependent on some particular sin that Yishayahu has committed. Rather, they arise from the "impurity" – the soiled, unclean state of mortals, which is the antithesis of closeness to God. God's honor and His sanctity require a distancing of sins and transgressions, as well as a distancing of impurities, even where they are devoid of negative moral associations.

Yishayahu continues:

One of the serafim flew to me with a live coal in its hand, which it had taken with tongs from upon the altar. And he touched it to my mouth and said: Behold, this has touched your lips, and your transgression is removed, and your sin is atoned (covered - *tekhupar*).

No specific sin or transgression is mentioned prior to this. The need for *kippur* arises by virtue of God's proximity, which entails the divine attribute of strict justice. The *kippur* is a mechanism of covering and protection that facilitates the continued proximity of God, despite the transgressions and impurities.

This is the meaning of *kippur* in the service of the Kohen Gadol. Were it not for the *kippur*, the accumulated sins and impurities of *Am Yisrael* would require the departure of the Divine Presence, or alternatively – harm by God to *Am Yisrael*. The *kippur* covers and serves as a barrier, allowing the continued presence of God "in the midst of your impurities."

When a person sins, the sin separates and forms a barrier between himself and God. In order to facilitate his continued existence amongst the nation in whose midst God dwells, without his being punished with the full power of the Divine attribute of justice, he must bring a sacrifice, so as to be "covered," or protected. In the specific case of a sin offering, when God accepts the sinner before Him, He also forgives the sinner: "And the kohen shall make atonement (or, make a protection/covering) for him, and he shall be forgiven."

The order of the service by the Kohen Gadol, on the other hand, addresses the widespread, objective phenomenon of the sins and impurities of Bnei Yisrael around the Mishkan and within it, and the consequent threat to the continued presence of God amongst the nation. The *kippur* here is meant to cover and protect the Sanctuary in the face of this danger, allowing God to continue dwelling in their midst.

To return to *parashat Vayishlach*: We have seen that Ibn Ezra interprets *fanav* as meaning "his anger." In other words, Yaakov is saying, "I shall cover over his anger" – create a barrier between his anger and myself. However, it seems that his words should be understood slightly differently: *fanav* means "his proximity," the encounter with him. The background and history of the relations between Yaakov and Esav are such that the encounter with Esav is dangerous for Yaakov (obviously, for reasons that are quite different from those that apply in the case of proximity to God), and Yaakov seeks to ensure that the encounter and proximity will not cause them to harm one another – i.e., he wants to "*le-khapper fanav*" – to create a protective barrier.

[It should be noted that in commenting on [Vayikra 1:1](#), Ibn Ezra interprets the term *kippur* in the same way as Ramban does.]

At the outset we noted that there are a few exceptional cases where it is God Who is *mekhapper*. I have found seven clear instances, out of which four are appeals by man to God with a plea for atonement (covering) for sin:

Protect (*kapper*), O Lord Your people Israel whom You redeemed. ([Devarim 21:7](#))

Matters of transgressions prevail against me; as for our iniquities - You shall cover (atone for) them (*tekhaprem*). ([Tehillim 65:4](#)).

Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Your Name, and save us and cover (*ve-khapper*) for our sins, for the sake of Your Name. ([Tehillim 79:9](#))

But Yehizkiyahu prayed for them, saying: May the good God cover (*yekhapper*) for (these...). (II *Divrei Hayamim* 30:18)

The other three instances are: [Yechezkel 16:63](#); [Yirmiyahu 18:23](#); [Tehillim 78:38](#). A further possible instance is [Devarim 32:43](#).

This would seem to be a borrowed, secondary meaning. The *kippur* of the kohen, which protects and covers over sins – sometimes entailing the result of forgiveness by God – gives rise to a meaning of *kippur* itself as forgiveness and pardon, similarly leading to a nullification of punishment. Apparently, what the appeal to God means is: I, the person who has sinned, am incapable of "covering" for myself; therefore I ask of You – please forgive me and "cover" (*kapper*) me Yourself.

This meaning stands out clearly in the verse from [Tehillim 65](#) above: "Matters of transgressions prevail against me; as for our iniquities - You shall cover (atone for) them (*tekhaprem*)." I am incapable; please do the covering for me.

As we have seen, God's glory, kingship and sanctity entail a contradiction between proximity to God and sin or impurity. In light of this, a request for forgiveness from God, without punishment, is actually a request that God's attribute of compassion prevail over His attribute of justice. It is only by virtue of this strength inherent in the power of compassion that the attribute of justice can be nullified. Thus a person may attain forgiveness and pardon – even where he lacks the ability and the strength to "*le-khapper*" – to atone (cover) for himself through the mechanisms established within the attribute of justice.

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