



The Day of Atonement

Unlike other ceremonies throughout the year, all of the sacred tasks performed on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, had to be carried out by the High Priest himself. He alone was responsible for every aspect of the Divine service on this most holy and awesome day, which included 15 separate sacrifices as well as the menorah, incense and other services.

There was much to be done in order to prepare the High Priest for this momentous day. Just as Aaron, the first High Priest, isolated himself (“And ye shall not go out of the door of the tabernacle of the congregation in seven days, until the days of your consecration be at an end: for seven days shall he consecrate you” [Lev. 8:33]), so too the High Priest left his own home and family a full week before the advent of Yom Kippur, and withdrew to his chamber in the Holy Temple. Another priest was designated as the High Priest’s replacement in case he inadvertently became defiled and could not purify himself in time to conduct the service. An extra set of the High Priest’s “golden garments” was prepared accordingly for this potential substitute.

Throughout the week, the High Priest diligently studied the laws relating to the tasks which he had to perform on the sacred day, and he would also conduct certain aspects of the daily service himself (even though it was not his exclusive duty) in order to familiarize himself with them. For example, during these days he himself would sprinkle the blood of the daily sacrifice onto the altar in the morning and in the evening; he would offer up the incense on the golden incense altar; and he would attend to the service of the menorah (cleaning the used oil and wicks, adjusting new wicks and adding the proper measure of oil to each flame).

This was a period of intense preparation and review. Each day, the elders of the Sanhedrin (the supreme rabbinical court) would read to him from the biblical portion that relates to the service.

On the morning preceding the Day of Atonement, the High Priest stood in the Eastern Gate as the cows, rams and sheep were marched before him, scrutinizing them intently while reviewing in his mind all of the precepts he had studied regarding the order of their sacrifice, as well as other aspects of the service he would be conducting the following day.

On the Day of Atonement itself, no one was permitted to witness the High Priest actually performing the incense ser-

vice for the Bible specifically states: “And there shall be no man in the tabernacle of the congregation when he goeth in to make an atonement in the holy place, until he come out . . .” (Lev.16:17).

On the night which begins the Day of Atonement itself, the High Priest was forbidden to sleep in case he inadvertently became defiled while sleeping and was thereby rendered impure. Should such a mishap befall him, he would be unfit to conduct the service in the morning. He would stay awake the entire night and expound upon the Bible, explaining many verses according



The High Priest standing at the Eastern Gate on the morning before the Day of Atonement, as cows, rams and sheep are marched before him.

to homiletic interpretations, or others would read to him from the Books of Job, Ezra, and Chronicles. Various commentators have expressed a number of engaging opinions as to why it was these three specific books that were read aloud before the High Priest. Some point out that their content is particularly interesting, thus preventing the listener from becoming drowsy.

Whenever the High Priest felt that sleep was beginning to overcome him, the young priests-in-training would snap their fingers and declare, “Master! High Priest! Rise up, and stand