

**Leviticus 16**  
*The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) (part 1)*

**Prologue: a solemn warning from God (16:1–2)**

1. Before the instructions proper begin, they are prefaced by a solemn warning from God that links this day to the sin of Nadab and Abihu, who were put to death by the Lord after offering unauthorized sacrifices (10:1–4).
2. Not even Aaron, the high priest, has a right to enter God's awesome throne room whenever he chooses.
3. Even he may dare to enter only when God invites him to do so on this one day in the year. The sin of presumption would lead to death.
4. Although not restricted to this place, there was a sense in which God lived in the Most Holy Place among his people.
5. This innermost room of the Tent was shielded from the Holy Place by a curtain.
6. The room housed the rectangular box known as the ark of the covenant.
7. The lid of the box served as a mercy-seat (nrsv) or atonement cover (niv).
8. From this place God presided in majesty and grace over Israel.
9. It was here that Aaron was to visit annually to make atonement for Israel.

**Drawing near: instructions from God (16:3–14)**

10. To enter the Most Holy Place was to expose oneself to the risk that God's dynamic holiness might break out and strike one dead.
11. Strict adherence to the prescribed preparations and procedures was required.
  - a. he must follow these instructions fully (v.3)

**Preparation of the high priest (16:3–4)**

12. Three things were required of Aaron by way of personal preparation.

13. First, he was to make ready a bull and a ram to offer as his personal sin and burnt offerings (v.3)
14. Secondly, he was to change his clothes.
15. On this occasion he was to set aside the splendid robes of his office and appear before God in a sacred linen tunic, with linen undergarments next to his body ... a linen sash around him and with a linen turban on his head (v. 4).
16. While some see this as a symbol of the purity that would be expected of anyone entering God's presence, most see it as a mark of humility, a sign of one 'stripped of all pretenses' and status, the garment is the garment of a slave.
17. Thirdly, the high priest was to bathe himself with water before he dressed himself in the garments.
18. In later years the preparation of the high priest was taken so seriously that it was commenced seven days before the Day of Atonement fell due. (*Mishnah*, p. 265)

### **Preparation of the sacrifices (16:5–10)**

19. Aaron had to prepare not only himself, but the materials needed in the ceremonies (five unblemished animals had to be gathered).
- a. Two rams were needed (one for his own burnt offering and one for that offered for the people).
  - b. A young bull for his own sin offering.
  - c. Aaron is to cast lots for the two goats—one for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat (v. 8).
20. The goat that was chosen to be the scapegoat is said to be for Azazel.
- a. The Hebrew term is more than likely to be a compound of 'ēz ('goat') and 'āzal ('to go' or 'be led away'). (אֶזָּאזֵל 'ăzā(')·zēl Azazel).

b. Or it might refer to the demonic ruler of the wilderness, a desert demon, or perhaps the leader of fallen angels.

- i. ‘a goat for the Lord’ and ‘a goat for Azazel’, and that this is how later Jewish interpreters understood it.
- ii. The interpretation might be seen positively, however, if it is understood that what God is doing is returning evil to its source and removing it completely from Israel.

### **Preparation of the way into the Most Holy Place (16:11–14)**

21. Still the careful preparations are not complete. On this day, and this day alone, the high priest is to enter the Most Holy Place and officiate in the immediate presence of God himself.

22. God’s holiness, emanating from his seat on the lid of the covenant ark, is a tangible force.

23. He was to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of finely ground (that is, high-quality) fragrant incense with him as he entered behind the curtain (v.12).

24. The fire and the incense served as a smokescreen forming a wall of **protection**, hiding God from Aaron.

25. One further act is necessary before Aaron can present the offerings of purification on behalf of the people, and that is his need to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering (v. 11).

26. He follows the stipulated procedures for the high priest’s sin offering, laid down in Leviticus 4:3–12, with the exception that, on this special day, the blood of the bull is sprinkled on the front of the atonement cover (v. 14) instead of on the outside of the curtain as usual.

All these initial instructions leave one with a powerful impression of God as majestic in holiness. They thus begin to disclose the problem that the Day of Atonement was designed to address. The holy God has been offended in manifold ways by his people, and their offences have led to a growing mountain of defilement that must be removed. The uncleanness will not just disappear, it must be cleansed; the offences will not just go away, they must be taken away. And that is what the Day of Atonement is designed to accomplish.

The Message of Leviticus: Free to Be Holy

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