

YOM KIPPUR TORAH STUDY
Ahavath Achim Synagogue, Atlanta, GA
Sept. 16, 2021 – 10 Tishrei 5782
Dr. Steve Chervin

Yishmael, My Son, Bless Me
B. Berakhot 7a

I. Introduction

II. The Priestly Service in the Temple (from the Machzor)

- https://www.sefaria.org/Machzor_Yom_Kippur_Ashkenaz%2C_Musaf_for_Yom_Kippur%2C_The_Avodah_Service?lang=bi

III. First Version of the Story (from *A Bride for One Night*, by Ruth Calderon)

IV. Questions

- Who is Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha? Why was he entering the Holy of Holies? Can a rabbi be a High Priest?
- What is the Inner Innermost Sanctum?
- What does *Achatriel Yah Adonai Tzvaot* mean??
- What do we make of the anthropomorphisms in this passage?
- Why does He say, “Yishmael, my son, bless me”??
- How does Yishmael answer God? Does he “bless” God?
- What do we learn from this story?

V. Second Version of the Story: From the Talmud (Sefaria)

<https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.7a.4?lang=bi>

VI. Third Version of the Story: Ruth Calderon’s Creative Retelling

- What does Calderon’s creative retelling, *add* to the original Talmudic story? What’s the same? What’s different?
- In what ways does Calderon transform this short snippet of Talmudic text into *literature*?

VII. Calderon’s *Reflections on the Story*

Yishmael, My Son, Bless Me

Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha said:

Once I entered into the Holy of Holies

To burn incense in the Inner Innermost sanctum

And I saw Achatriel Yah Adonai Tzvaot

Sitting on a high and lofty throne of compassion.

He said to me: Yishmael, my son, bless me.

I said to him: Master of the Universe

May it be Your will that Your mercy conquer Your anger,

That Your mercy overcome Your sterner attributes,

That You behave toward Your children with the attribute of mercy,

And that for their sake, You go beyond the boundary of judgment.

He nodded to me with His head.

What does this come to teach us?

It teaches us never to underestimate the blessing offered by an ordinary person.

—*B. Berakhot 7a*¹

Yishmael, My Son, Bless Me

The sanctuary is silent. All alone, Rabbi Yishmael crosses the twenty-two-cubit distance between the antechamber and the altar. Farther and farther inside, beyond the curtains that are always drawn, as if walking through water and coming ever closer to its source. He has already immersed himself five times in the ritual waters, and his body is as soft as a freshly laundered garment. Now, dressed in four articles of clothing like one of the regular priests, he is conscious of his exposed forehead, which is usually covered with the gold plate bearing the words "holy to the Lord." In his hands is a fire pan made of beaten gold containing

finely ground incense. Its smell enters his nostrils, and the smoke rises like a pillar, parting the hallway before him. The smoke from the incense trembles and then is still, like a solid black candle.

His mind is filled with thoughts of the cows, rams, and sheep that passed before the priests in the evening in preparation for the sacrifices. He thinks of the Jerusalem elders who came to make sure he stayed awake all night, as was the custom. Their voices can still be heard in his ears, like the roar of a distant ocean inside a conch shell. His ears are no longer his; his eyes are no longer his; his sleep is no longer his.

His whole body has become a sacred vessel. When he parts the last curtain, he can feel the tautness of the string tied around his right ankle. This is the string with which the other priests will drag out his body, should anything go awry in the Holy of Holies.

The inner sanctum is permeated by ancient smells. Yishmael has never been able to describe it to his family at home. It is different than anything he has ever experienced. He walks inside, feeling his own death like a ghostly presence. Dizzy and exhausted after a night of no sleep, he feels the weight of the day's labors on his shoulders. As if performing the steps of a complicated dance, his mind runs through the order of rituals, from the morning immersion to the confessional beside the sacrificial cow and from there to the lottery box where the goats were designated—one for God and one for the demon Azazel—and then to the cliff where the latter goat was sent off into the wilderness, and then another confession and sacrifice and another collection of blood in a bowl, followed by the removal of the fire pans.

Although he is alone in the Temple, he feels beleaguered by the priestly elders, who seem to be peering at him with expectant eyes, measuring each step he takes and each wave of his hand. He is seized by a sense of fear: What if he is not worthy? What if he makes a mistake? His mouth is filled with the words of the confessional prayer: "I have strayed, I have sinned, I have transgressed before you, I and my household. Because on this day I will atone for you to purify you of all your sins. You shall be purified before God." He remembers his hands resting on the head of the cow and the shudder that ran through the animal's body, its sharp smell, its vigor and strength. He had leaned with all his weight on its great back, trying to lose all his anxieties and doubts in the warm flesh.²

The names of the various types of blood used in sacred worship are as strange to his ears as song lyrics in a foreign tongue: blood of the skin, blood of the soul, blood of the essence. The meaning of these terms eludes him, though he has memorized what he must do: "The fire pan is in his right hand and the spoon is in his left hand, until the high priest comes between the two curtains which separate the Holy from the Holy of Holies, which are a cubit apart. He walks between them until he comes to the northernmost part. Then he turns and faces south and walks to his left along the length of the curtain until he reaches the ark." He can recite these words by heart, but they do not seem to map on to the dark hallway in which he finds himself. Where is the ark? He steps through the thick darkness into the Holy of Holies.

Yishmael senses a presence. Someone is watching him. He stands in place enveloped in the smell of the incense, his eyes gradually adjusting to the darkness. Someone is sitting there. Is there someone else in the sanctum? Did he make a wrong turn? His heart flutters as if caught in a trap. He does not feel like the high priest, on whom all of Israel's hopes are bent; he does not even feel like an ordinary priest nor even like a regular human being.

From behind the pillar of smoke, he sees light.

"Achatriel Yah Adonai Tzvaot," his lips murmur.

Across from him is a high and lofty throne. Should he prostrate himself before it? He dares to raise his eyes and is greeted by a stormy visage.

"Yishmael my son, bless me." He is being addressed by name, as a man addresses his fellow. "Yishmael"—pronounced just as his mother would say it. "My son." This is a face-to-face encounter, filled with grace, like a meeting between father and son. But bless me? What could that mean?

Yishmael does not understand what the One seated on the throne wants from him. The sound of his voice and the words that he speaks do not accord with his expectations.³ For a moment he fears that a foreign god has penetrated the inner sanctum and has sat upon the throne. But then the seated presence calls him by name. In that moment Yishmael divests himself of his role as high priest and becomes only himself. He listens. He tries to overcome his fear and his preconceived notions. He wishes to be fully attentive, freed from his anxieties.

Suddenly he understands. Yishmael is showered in blessing, and he is ready to bestow blessing on others. The words come to him with love: "May it be Your will." The words follow one another without any effort on his part, like a person praying for the well-being of a friend. "May it be Your will that Your mercy conquer Your anger, and that Your mercy overcome Your stern attributes." He enjoys this newfound generosity of spirit. He is happy that he wants to bestow goodness. He glances at the seated presence with a hint of embarrassment.

He continues: "And may You behave toward Your children with the attribute of mercy. And for their sake, may You go beyond the boundary of judgment." The seated presence nods graciously. Yishmael's doubts are assuaged. He knows what to do next. He comes to the ark and places the fire pans between the two cloths. He stacks the incense on the coals, and the whole sanctum is suddenly filled with smoke. He exits and then enters an outer chamber and offers a prayer, keeping it short. He does not want to worry the people outside, who will be concerned about the fate of the priest in that holiest of chambers at the holiest time of the year.

Truly, how splendid was the appearance of the High Priest when he exited the Holy of Holies in peace, without any harm.⁴

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*Truly, how splendid was the appearance of the High Priest when he exited the Holy of Holies in peace, without any harm.*⁴

Reflections on the Story

The Holy of Holies in the second Temple was an empty chamber. There was no ark or curtain or cherub.⁵ There was just the power of the place itself: the foundation stone of the world and the pulsing heart of the universe. Deep in the innermost chamber during the ancient rituals of Yom Kippur, the Holy One sits alone and longs for a human blessing.⁶ God is depicted here as a human character, one who wishes to escape the tragedy of His loneliness.⁷ His soul is tortured; He needs to be rescued from all the conflicting forces within Him.

The divine persona is a composite of many familiar human attributes: goodness, gentleness, jealousy, power, glory, anger, frustration, grace, and humor. What sets God apart from human beings is that all these attributes manifest

themselves simultaneously: God is at once a creator, a father, a judge, a warrior, a master, an avenger, a betrayer, and a seeker of blessing.

The Master of the Universe sits alone in his Temple and waits for redemption, which comes in the form of a human being, the high priest Rabbi Yishmael. He enters the Holy of Holies to perform the sacred incense-burning ritual. On behalf of the entire Jewish people, he comes in to the place where God, who is omnipresent, resides. He does not know that this is the place where God secludes Himself in moments of loneliness. God and man encounter each other here like characters from two totally different stories.⁸

Rabbi Yishmael's entrance into the Holy of Holies is a moment of supreme tension. If he comes out safely, he will bring abundant blessing upon the people. If he does not come out . . . The crowds wait with trepidation in the courtyard of the Temple, peering silently. Each person feels as if he is the high priest, walking with bare feet into the Temple's innermost sanctum.

Although each step has been carefully planned out for him, Yishmael is confronted by the unexpected. He sees God in the image of a human being. His fear turns to astonishment, which turns to empathy and then to generosity of spirit. Temple service alone is not enough for the Master of the Universe. God needs the heart. This is a dramatic cultural turning point, though the sages depict it with their characteristically gentle brushstrokes.

This story changes the direction in which blessing flows. Man no longer requests blessing from a silent God who hides His face from humanity; rather, God requests blessing from one of His creatures in a face-to-face encounter.⁹ This conversation allows for an intimate encounter between the divine and the human.¹⁰

Yishmael listens to the needs of the soul that stands before him and complies with its will. He blesses. God nods in gratitude, as if to say the blessing of a human being should never be light in one's eyes. What truly matters is the ability to listen and speak with love.

Rabbi Yishmael, the high priest, holds the holiest office of his generation. He encounters the Holy One Blessed Be He in the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year. The encounter could not possibly be any more Jewish. Yet nonetheless, in the revelation itself, there is nothing particularistic.¹¹ When God asks for a blessing from man and man responds, the dialogue is one of two souls. God turns to the high priest using the term *My son*, and in so doing, he transfers the conversation between them to the personal level.

The request "bless me" reveals the private, vulnerable side of God. A request for assistance from a human being allows for a religious encounter that is anarchic in the sense that it requires no hierarchy of intermediaries. The language of the divine-human conversation is not one of ritual symbols. The fire pan of incense is rendered superfluous when true revelation takes place. It falls away like clothing during the act of lovemaking.

The name Yishmael in this story can be taken to mean "the one who hears God." As such, this story can serve as a model for the type of religious encounter we might aspire to in our world today. In her poem "Without a Name" Lea Goldberg gives voice to this notion.¹²

I saw my God in the café.

He was revealed in the cigarette smoke.

Depressed, sorry and slack

He hinted: "One can still live!"

He was nothing like the one I love:

Nearer than he—and downcast,

Like the transparent shadow of starlight

He did not fill the emptiness.

By the light of a pale and reddish dusk,

Like one confessing his sins before death,

He knelt down to kiss man's feet

And to beg his forgiveness.