

### *The Avodah Service: Translator's Preface*

The poem *Amitz Koah*, written by the tenth-century Italian Jew Meshullam ben Kalonymous, is one of the most intricate of all the synagogue poetry recited on the Day of Atonement. It is designed as an alphabetic acrostic, with a rich and densely packed vocabulary and elaborate word-play. In places, it resembles the gnarled poetry of the book of Job.

While the poem purports to present the service of the High Priest in the days of the Second Temple, it also recounts the history of the entire world, placing the Atonement ritual in the context of the Creation of the world and the history of humankind, as well as the history of Israel down to the selection of the tribe of Levi for the priesthood in the days of desert wandering (the Exodus, however, is never mentioned—as if to suggest the need for a new “exodus” in the Atonement ritual itself).

The poem has three main movements: first the background history, told in concise stanzas sketching the events in broad outline; then the High Priest's ritual, told in elaborate detail (the author basing himself on the story of Aaron's atonement service in Leviticus 16, and on the Mishnaic treatise *Yoma*); finally, a joyous and ecstatic conclusion celebrating the perfect execution by the High Priest of his assigned rituals, and resembling numerous Biblical prophecies idealizing life in the land of Israel or looking forward to a Messianic era.

This metric translation can only be an approximation of the verbal agility and brilliance of the Hebrew original. It omits no details from the original, even where the poem lays out in minute detail the fine points of the High Priest's ritual. Many of these details will not appeal to the modern reader or worshipper, but the total effect of the poem—read by a skilled reader, or by alternating readers, and coordinated with the bowing and recitations of the synagogue congregation, preferably in Hebrew—may help to convey something of how atonement was experienced by Jews in ancient times, in the days when the Temple stood, or at least how atonement was idealized by Jews living in the Middle Ages. It is not altogether out of place today.

—J.R.

*Editors' Note: This translation was originally written for the High Holiday services of Havurat Shalom in Somerville, Massachusetts, and has been used by other havurot as well. The Center City Havurah in Philadelphia does a dramatic reading of this translation during its Yom Kippur Musaf service. Selections in Hebrew are from the High Holiday Prayer Book, compiled and arranged by Rabbi Morris Silverman, © 1986, 1979, 1951, by the Prayer Book Press of Media Judaica, Inc., Bridgeport, CT. Reprinted by permission.*

## The Avodah Service: A Metric Translation of *Amitz Koah*

*Joel Rosenberg*

[1]

**O**, SOVEREIGN OF POWER, YOU OF MIGHTY DEEDS, WHOSE ACTS NO OTHER BEING COULD PERFORM, WHO LAID THE BEAMS OF HEAVEN'S CHAMBERS ON THE ICY WATERS, YOU WHO FOUNDED EARTHLY LIFE UPON AN ABYSS:

When the world was dark with deathly shadows and with gloom, you spread down from your outer garment dawning light, and severed raging waters with an awesome crystal sky, and sealed them with your mark amid the deep, that they not cover earth again.

The earth's fair face you then unveiled, and brought forth buds and bloom—a Garden to delight your worshippers you planted at the dawn of time. You set great lights amid your glorious sky; a host of constellations you commanded to attend them.

A multitude of fish and fowl you fashioned from the ocean floor; Leviathan, the prototype of giant seabests, you reserved to feast the righteous in the World to Come. The hulk of clodded earth brought forth the creeping, breathing creatures of the land; Behemoth, dwelling in the water willows, you stored up to serve those summoned to your saintly meal.

You fetched forth food and drink, but there was none to feast; you scratched a human figure out of clay, the offprint of your royal seal—you breathed into his muddy form the purity of air from your domain; clouded with slumber, he allowed you to transform a rib of his into a partner.

Then you bade him not to touch his tongue into a fruit from off the Tree of Knowledge: he made null your bidding, foolishly misled by serpent's

wiles. He was punished with the sweat of labor, and was made to snatch his sustenance by savagery; and she, impetuous, was made to suffer pangs of birth; the wily serpent was to eat the dust.

Man's species sown and seeded, you ensconced amid the womb of woman's passion human sperm; she fruited and she bore; a farmer and a shepherd. They lined up before you with their sacrifice and tithe; you scorned the elder, and preferred the younger's gift.

The boon-companion of a womb a brother battered and beheaded; he implored your Presence, and you placed on him a sign; were any to oppose him, he could chant your Name, and with it inundate his enemies.

His heirs in arrogance erred in your very Presence, but they drowned, flushed out by flood and washed away, extinguished. Borne by pitch-seal which you closed around him, as it were, Noah was saved; his offspring you made fruitful, and they spread across the land.

The people came together and proposed to reach the sky; ensnared in seething whirlwinds, they were swept away. Beloved migrant from abroad, our Abraham declared your Presence in the world; the child of his old-age passion, Isaac, he presented to you as a pyre-gift.

Like a faultless lamb, a perfect man was chosen, Jacob, one who liked to dwell in tents and followed after you. You brought forth from his loins well-formed and handsome children, all of them the seed of Truth, in whom no defect lay.

To serve you, you chose Levi, fervent man of yours, dividing from his stock one hallowed to the Holiest of Holy chambers, one to bind the diadem of priesthood and to wear the breastplate lights, to dwell inside the House of Glory seven days.

[2]

LOYAL ATTENDANTS FOR A WEEK BEFORE THE TENTH DAY, SEPARATE THE HEAD priest as the Law prescribes. They sprinkle on him purifying water, rinse, burn incense all around him, and rehearse him in the ritual of the priestly work.

Attending him are men of wisdom, elders from the town. They murmur to him: "Read, please, with your own mouth [lest you have forgotten or have never learned, the Mishnah adds]." And on the ninth day in the morning,

they install him at the Eastern Gate and pass before him all the finest sacrificial animals appointed for the Day to come.

Near sunset, they reduce his meal, a safeguard from a ritual hazard, lest in his well-fed slumber something happen to invalidate him. Elders of the priesthood teach him how to scoop the incense in his hands to send up in a wisp of smoke inside.

They warn him to work well. The goose-bumps rise on him; he starts to weep. They, too, avert their faces and shed tears. With passages of oral teaching and with written text, they sit around him and recite to keep him wakeful through the night.

[The Mishnah adds: If he is learned, he discusses Torah; and if not, the scholars should discuss it. If he knows the Scriptures, he should read them; if not, they should read to him from Job and Ezra and the books of Chronicles. "These keep the mind alive," a commentator says.

[If he should fall asleep, the Mishnah further adds, the young priests snap their fingers, saying to him: "Lord High Priest, stand up and drive the sleep away by walking on cold pavement." Thus they keep him occupied until the hour for the daily morning prayer arrives.]

When dawn's first glimmer rises, and the watchman calls, they spread a linen veil about him to conceal him. He takes off his garment, bathes, puts on the Golden Robe. He stands, he rinses and performs the first incision on the daily morning sacrifice. A deputy completes the work. The High Priest formally accepts the blood and sprinkles it.

He then removes himself, kindles the incense, trims the wicks, performs the burning of the animal, and offers the libation. Ritual of the whole burnt-offering he finishes, performs it in the proper order. Once again, they spread the linen sheet upon him. In the "fur" room of the sanctuary, where they salt the skins, he rinses and removes his clothes. He bathes, puts on white robes, and rinses once again. Pelusian robes, worth 18 minas, and exquisite—these he wears to serve the Sovereign of Glory.

Then the bull is placed for him between the vestibule and altar, facing the West, its head turned toward the south. The priest approaches, lays his hands upon its head. He then declares his sins, concealing none of them.

*(The congregation stands)*

וְכַד הִזָּה אוֹמֵר. אָנָּה הַשֵּׁם. הִטָּאתִי. עָוִיתִי. פִּשְׁעֹתַי  
 לִפְנֵיךָ אָנִי וּבֵיתִי. אָנָּה בְשֵׁם. כַּפְּרֵנָּא. לַחֲטָאִים. וְלַעֲוֹנוֹת.  
 וְלַפְּשָׁעִים. שְׁחִטָּאתִי. וְשַׁעֲוִיתִי. וְשִׁפְשַׁעֲתִי לִפְנֵיךָ אָנִי וּבֵיתִי.  
 בְּכַתוּב בְּתוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה עֲבָדְךָ מִפִּי כְבוֹדְךָ. כִּי־בִיּוֹם הַזֶּה  
 יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה

וְהִכְהִנִּים וְהָעַם הָעוֹמְדִים בְּעֶזְרָה. כְּשֶׁהָיוּ שׁוֹמְעִים אֶת־  
 הַשֵּׁם הַנִּכְבָּד וְהַנּוֹרָא מְפֹרָשׁ יוֹצֵא מִפִּי כַהֵן גָּדוֹל בְּקֹדֶשׁה  
 וּבִטְהָרָה. הָיוּ כּוֹרְעִים וּמְשַׁתְּחָוִים וּמוֹדִים וְנוֹפְלִים עַל־  
 פְּנֵיהֶם. וְאוֹמְרִים בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד:

וְאֵף הוּא הִזָּה מִתְכַּנֵּן לְגִמּוֹר אֶת־הַשֵּׁם כְּנִגְדַּי הַמְּבָרְכִים  
 וְאוֹמֵר לָהֶם תִּטְהָרוּ: וְאַתָּה בְּטוֹבָךָ מְעוֹרֵר רַחֲמֶיךָ וְסוֹלֵחַ  
 לְאִישׁ חַסִּידְךָ:

And thus he says: "O, Holy One [and here he says the Name, whose utterance is normally forbidden], I've sinned, I've acted wickedly, I've been rebellious before you, I and my household. I beg you by your holy Name, forgive the sins which I have done, the acts of wickedness and all rebellious deeds which I have done before you, I and my household, as is written: *On this day, atonement will be made for you, to make you clean of all your sins before the LORD* [LEVITICUS 16:30]."

And then the priests and people standing in the courtyard, hearing the glorious and awesome Name recited by its letters from the mouth of the High Priest in holiness and purity, now bow. (*The congregation kneels or bows.*) They kneel acknowledgment, touch down their heads and say: *Barukh shem kevod malkhuto le-olam va-ed!* "Blessed is the Name, the Glory of his Kingdom for eternity and evermore!"

And he, the priest, in turn prolongs the recitation of the Name until the people finish blessing, and he says to them: "You shall be

clean. And you, O God, being good, arouse your mercies and forgive your pious servant."

He steps forth then, to make his way up to the east side of the courtyard. Two goats yoked together there, taken from flocks belonging to the congregation, yoked and tied together, similar in features and in size, stand ready to atone for the transgressions of a wayward people. Two gold lots are thrown into a casket; one is drawn, one for the Name on high, and one for Azazel. He cries aloud: "This is the sin offering for God." His listeners respond to him and bless the Name. He binds a scarlet ribbon on the head of the rejected one, and points it toward its destination. Once again, he draws near to his sacrificial bull; his own sins and those of his fellow priests and tribesmen he confesses before God.

*(The congregation stands)*

וְכַד הִזָּה אוֹמֵר. אָנָּה הַשֵּׁם. הִטָּאתִי. עָוִיתִי. פִּשְׁעֹתַי  
 לִפְנֵיךָ אָנִי וּבֵיתִי וּבְנֵי אֶהְרֹן עִם קְדוֹשְׁךָ. אָנָּה בְשֵׁם.  
 כַּפְּרֵנָּא. לַחֲטָאִים. וְלַעֲוֹנוֹת. וְלַפְּשָׁעִים. שְׁחִטָּאתִי.  
 וְשַׁעֲוִיתִי. וְשִׁפְשַׁעֲתִי לִפְנֵיךָ אָנִי וּבֵיתִי וּבְנֵי אֶהְרֹן עִם  
 קְדוֹשְׁךָ. בְּכַתוּב בְּתוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה עֲבָדְךָ מִפִּי כְבוֹדְךָ. כִּי־  
 בִּיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם  
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וְהִכְהִנִּים וְהָעַם הָעוֹמְדִים בְּעֶזְרָה. כְּשֶׁהָיוּ שׁוֹמְעִים אֶת־  
 הַשֵּׁם הַנִּכְבָּד וְהַנּוֹרָא. מְפֹרָשׁ יוֹצֵא מִפִּי כַהֵן גָּדוֹל בְּקֹדֶשׁה  
 וּבִטְהָרָה. הָיוּ כּוֹרְעִים וּמְשַׁתְּחָוִים וּמוֹדִים וְנוֹפְלִים עַל־  
 פְּנֵיהֶם. וְאוֹמְרִים בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד:

וְאֵף הוּא הִזָּה מִתְכַּנֵּן לְגִמּוֹר אֶת־הַשֵּׁם כְּנִגְדַּי הַמְּבָרְכִים  
 וְאוֹמֵר לָהֶם תִּטְהָרוּ: וְאַתָּה בְּטוֹבָךָ מְעוֹרֵר רַחֲמֶיךָ וְסוֹלֵחַ  
 לְשָׂבֵט מְשַׁרְתִּיךָ:

And thus he says: "O, Holy One [and here he says the Name, whose utterance is normally forbidden], I've sinned, I've acted wickedly, I've been rebellious before you, I and my household, the servants of your holy people. I beg you by your holy Name, forgive the sins which I have done, the acts of wickedness and all rebellious deeds which I have done before you, I and my household, and the sons of Aaron, priests unto your holy nation, as is written: *On this day, atonement will be made for you, to make you clean of all your sins before the LORD* [LEVITICUS 16:30]."

And then the priests and people standing in the courtyard, hearing the glorious and awesome Name recited by its letters from the mouth of the High Priest in holiness and purity, now bow. (*The congregation kneels or bows.*) They kneel acknowledgment, touch down their heads and say: *Barukh shem kevod malkhuto le-olam va-ed!* "Blessed is the Name, the Glory of his Kingdom for eternity and evermore!"

And he, the priest, in turn prolongs the recitation of the Name until the people finish blessing, and he says to them: "You shall be clean. And you, O God, being good, arouse your mercies and forgive the tribe of your servant."

He takes a sharp knife, slaughters it in the prescribed way, formally accepts the blood placed in a bowl and gives it to a deputy to stir, to keep it fluid til the time of sprinkling. He plucks the flaming coals from off the altar, takes a golden censer made in Persia, fashioned with a thin receptacle and lengthy handle, and he casts three cubes of burning coals inside. They bring to him a vessel with the finest beaten incense. He takes up two handfuls, puts them in a ladle, takes the censer in his right hand, ladle in his left, and steps forth to the curtain and draws near the arkstaves. Incense in his right hand he inserts between the staves, causing the smoke to rise. He exits.

From the deputy he takes the blood, returns and enters, and goes up between the altar staves. To sprinkle for atonement he then dips, and casts according to a number once above and seven times below.

And thus he counts: "One. One and one. One and two. One and three. One and four. One and five. One and six. One and seven."

Then he quickly exits, puts the vessel on the pedestal, and kills the offering-goat. He formally accepts the blood extended in a holy vessel, follows his steps back, and takes his prescribed place before the Ark. He sprinkles blood as he had done before with bullock's blood.

And thus he counts: "One. One and one. One and two. One and three. One and four. One and five. One and six. One and seven."

He exits and deposits it, and takes the bullock's blood. With quickened steps he moves and stands outside the veil of separation. He performs the sprinklings before the veil, and in the ordinance of the veil. With whipping sounds, he sprinkles for a second time the goat's blood.

He goes back and mingles blood of the two animals, and purifies the plated altar, sprinkling seven times to cleanse it, and once each upon the four horns at the corners. Hastily he comes near to the one surviving goat. The people's sins, both unintentional and otherwise, he then recounts to God.

(*The congregation stands*)

וְכַד הָיָה אֹמֵר. אֲנֵי הַשֵּׁם. הָטָאוּ. עֹו. פִּשְׁעוּ לְפָנֶיךָ  
עֲמָדָה בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל. אֲנֵי בְשֵׁם. כְּפָר־נֵא. לְחַטָּאִים. וְלַעֲוֹנוֹת.  
וְלַפִּשְׁעִים. שִׁחָטָאוּ. וְשָׁעוּ. וְשִׁפְשָׁעוּ לְפָנֶיךָ עֲמָדָה בֵּית  
יִשְׂרָאֵל. כְּכַתוּב בְּתוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה עַבְדְּךָ מִפִּי כְבוֹדְךָ. כִּי  
בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם  
לְפָנֵי יְהוָה

וְהַכֹּהֲנִים וְהַעֲמָדִים בְּעֲזָרָה. כְּשֶׁהָיוּ שׁוֹמְעִים אֶת  
הַשֵּׁם הַנִּכְבֵּד וְהַנּוֹרָא מִפּוֹרֵשׁ יוֹצֵא מִפִּי כֹהֵן גָּדוֹל בְּקֹדֶשׁ  
וּבְטָהֳרָה. הָיוּ כּוֹרְעִים וּמְשַׁתְּחִוּוּ וּמוֹדִים וְנוֹפְלִים עַל  
פְּנֵיהֶם. וְאוֹמְרִים בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מְלִכּוֹתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד:

וְאָף הוּא הָיָה מְתַכֵּן לְגִמּוֹר אֶת־הַשֵּׁם כְּגִנּוּר הַמְּבָרְכִים  
וְאוֹמֵר לָהֶם תִּטְהָרוּ: וְאַתָּה בְּטוֹבָךָ מְעוֹרֵר רַחֲמֶיךָ וְסוֹלֵחַ  
לְעַדְתּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And thus he says: "O, Holy One [and here he says the Name, whose utterance is normally forbidden], your people have sinned, they have acted wickedly, they have been rebellious before you, these, your people the House of Israel. I beg you by your holy Name, forgive the sins which have been done, the acts of wickedness and all rebellious deeds which your people the House of Israel have done before you, as is written: *On this day, atonement will be made for you, to make you clean of all your sins before the LORD* [LEVITICUS 16:30]."

And then the priests and people standing in the courtyard, hearing the glorious and awesome Name recited by its letters from the mouth of the High Priest in holiness and purity, now bow. (*The congregation kneels or bows.*) They kneel acknowledgment, touch down their heads and say: *Barukh shem kevod malkhuto le-olam va-ed!* "Blessed is the Name, the Glory of his Kingdom for eternity and evermore!"

And he, the priest, in turn prolongs the recitation of the Name until the people finish blessing, and he says to them: "You shall be clean. And you, O God, being good, arouse your mercies and forgive the congregation of Jeshurun."

He sends the goat away, upon a signal to a deputy, off to the wilderness to bear the stain of sins of this community into a forlorn place. Over a crest of rock he topples it, and, rolling in its fall, its bones are shattered like the smashing of a potter's vessel.

Then the High Priest takes a knife and cuts the bull and sacrificial goat. He takes away the inner parts and slung-up carcasses to burn. He calls aloud the portions of the Law applying to this day, then rinses and removes his clothes, and for a third time bathes, puts on his golden clothes, and rinses once again. He quickly kills his ram, then kills the people's ram. He dons the linen robe and enters in the inner Chamber.

Vessels for the incense he brings forth, and rinses ritually. The linen garments he takes off, and stores them permanently. Marching back, he bathes, puts on his golden garment, rinses ritually. The daily offering for the afternoon he offers, burns the incense, lights the lamps.

The ritual over, hands and feet he rinses, thus completing five immersions and ten rinsings.

[3]

NOW HIS FACE IS LIKE THE RISING OF A BRILLIANT SUN. POWERFULLY, HE DONS IN joy his clothes of honor, and the people flawlessly escort their loyal servant home, rejoicing in the news that all went well: the scarlet ribbon turned a snowy white.

Decked with salvation, clad in robe of justice, they emit a cry of joy; they call to one another blissfully and joyously. The clouds on high congeal and drop their dew. The furrows of the field flow full of water, and the fields give forth their produce. They that gather in their crops in peace give thanks.

The praises sound forth from all those who carry stalks of grain in song. The farthest reaches of the land of glory give forth music, and declare God's justice to all troops of passers-by. Indeed, the messenger has satisfied all those who sent him, and what they have yearned for has come through, like snowy breezes on a harvest day.

From their uncleanness they are washed, from taint of their wrongdoing they are purified. Now whole and perfect, they have cleared their hands—declaring that their Purifier is a fount of Living Waters. Hope of Israel, *mikveh Yisrael* (Israel's ritual bath) whose waters never fail. In purity and innocence, they're cleansed and made like new, renewed like turnings of the morning, with God's praises in their throats, singing with tongue and mouth new songs. Rejoicing, trembling, worshipping in awe the Holy One of Israel, hallowing the holy hosts of heavens, repeating choruses and dancing, beating drums and ringing bells, and sounding strings and uttering sweet song.

And, clinging to the power of God's upraised hand, together they are borne up, full of justice, drawn up to the gates on high in ecstasy, seized up by joy and happiness forever, gleeing and exulting in the Name throughout the awesome Day—triumphantly they frolic in God's presence.

Beaming their light forth like the breaking dawn, they raise their voices up in glory of the Rock of Ages. *Ashrei ha-am she-kakhav lo! Ashrei ha-am she-Adonai Elohav!* Happy is the people that enjoys it thus, and happy is the people with THE FOUNT OF LIFE for God!

Joel Rosenberg teaches Judaic Studies and World Literature at Tufts University and is the translator of the new Reconstructionist Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook. His commentary on Genesis will appear in the NRSV Bible: Harper's Study Edition. He is currently working on a series of essays about Jewish film.