

Acharei Mot-K'doshim, Leviticus 16:1–18:30

Parashah Overview

- The duties that the head kohein must perform on Yom Kippur are delineated and the ceremony of the scapegoat is outlined. (16:1-28)
- Moses instructs Aaron about the Yom Kippur laws for fasting and atonement. (16:29-34)
- Warnings are issued against the offering of sacrifices outside the Sanctuary and the consumption of blood. (17:1-16)
- Moses condemns the sexual practices of some neighboring peoples. Certain forms of sexual relations are prohibited. (18:1-30)
- God issues a variety of commandments, instructing the Israelites on how to be a holy people. (19:1-37)
- Various sex offenses are discussed and punishments for them are presented. (20:1-27)

SUMMARY

This Shabbat we again have a double Torah portion. As described in last week's Family Shabbat Table Talk, there are more Torah portions than Sabbaths (except during a Jewish leap year when we have an additional four Sabbaths) in a Jewish year. Certain Torah portions are combined to ensure that the Torah can be read in its entirety in a year's time. This week's Torah portions are *Acharei Mot* and *K'doshim*.

Acharei Mot contains a description of the observance of Yom Kippur in biblical times as well as the rituals and laws associated with the eating of meat. *K'doshim*, contains the laws of holiness. God instructs Moses to speak to the whole Israelite community and Moses shares many of the precepts with the people including:

- you are to be holy because God is holy
- you are to revere your mother and father
- you shall keep the Sabbath
- you shall not make or worship idols
- you shall not harvest the edges of the fields nor pick up any fallen fruit so that the poor and the stranger may gather food for themselves
- you are not to steal, deal deceitfully or falsely with one another
- you are not to swear falsely using God's name
- you shall not commit robbery
- you shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind
- you shall be fair in judgment
- you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge
- you are to love your fellow as yourself
- you are to respect the elderly
- you shall not eat anything with its blood
- you shall not make gashes or marks on your body
- you will maintain honest weights and scales
- you shall treat the stranger who resides among you fairly, like one of your own citizens; you are to love the stranger as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt

God reminds the Israelites to observe all the laws and regulations and warns that if they do not they will lose possession of the Land.

COMMENTARY

K'doshim is the plural form of the Hebrew word *kadosh*, which means holy. The word holy has many meanings, among them: sacred, unique, divine, complete and separate. Holiness ties together the laws in this Torah portion. These teachings are therefore called the Holiness Code. In just a few chapters we are given a basic blueprint of appropriate religious and ethical behavior.

Nehama Leibowitz, a 20th century Israeli Torah scholar, pointed out that in all other places in the Torah, when God tells Moses to share commandments with the Israelites the wording is usually "Speak to the children of Israel and say to them...(Leviticus 1:2) or "Speak to the children of Israel, saying..." (Leviticus 12:1). In this portion we read, "And Adonai

spoke to Moses, saying 'Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: you shall be holy, for I Adonai your God, am holy.'

The phrase 'the whole Israelite community' is used. Why is the text different in this portion? Rashi, a medieval French commentator, explained that Moses would learn directly from God, then Moses would teach Aaron. Aaron's sons then came to learn from Moses, with Aaron still listening. Then the Elders would come to learn from Moses, Aaron and his sons would stay and listen. Finally all the people would come to learn from Moses. Aaron, his sons and the Elders would listen. In this way the people heard the instructions once, the Elders twice, Aaron's sons three times and Aaron four times. Yet with the giving of the Holiness Code all the community came together to learn.

Alshikh, a 16th century commentator, offered an additional explanation as to why the community was called together in this instance to learn. All the people were gathered together whether priest, Levite or ordinary Israelite to learn about these very special and important laws. This was proof that no matter what one's position in society, or one's wealth or status, each and every Jew could be holy by the observance of these laws. (*Studies in Vayikra* p.165).

In a midrash God says to Moses: "Tell the Israelites that just as I am separate, so you be separate; just as I am holy, so you be holy" (Leviticus *Rabbah* 24:4). The laws which make up the Holiness Code made the Israelites distinct from the other peoples around them. These laws told them how to treat each other and how to treat the stranger, to keep the Sabbath and to believe in one God. Observance of these laws would separate the Israelites from the surrounding nations, making the Israelites unique and special.

ACTING WITH GOD IN MIND

Philip Nadel

While reading this week's double Torah portion, Achare Mot-Kedoshim, I was struck by a curiosity in the text. At the beginning of Leviticus 18, God tells Moses to speak to the Israelites and instruct them in God's laws. Next, God addresses the Israelites in the second person: "You shall not copy...nor shall you follow...you shall observe...." (Leviticus 18:3, 4)

Then in the middle of the fifth verse, there is a shift to the third person: "You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man [*ha'adam*] shall live." (Leviticus 18:5) By the construction of the first part of verse 5, we would expect the rest of it to read "by the pursuit of which you shall live." What is the significance of this switch to the third person, which focuses our attention on *ha'adam*, the individual?

If we study the instructions for ethical behavior contained in this double Torah portion (e.g., reverence for parents, being truthful in speech and deed, sharing with the poor, honoring the elderly, caring for the stranger), we understand that Judaism envisions the creation of a good and just society through the collective efforts of the people: "Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy...." (Leviticus 19:1-2) But while Leviticus 19 teaches us that the community is obligated to work together for *tikkun olam*, Leviticus 18 is also telling us something important about the value of living morally and ethically for the individual, whereby the person, *ha'adam*, "shall live."

Daniel Gordis has written in his book *God Was Not in the Fire* that ethical behavior not only leads to a more perfect world, it also leads to God. Gordis writes: "The words we use, the charity we give, the ways we invite people into our homes, and even how we make love are all part of Jewish life's broad path to spiritual encounter." (*God Was Not in the Fire*, Touchstone Books, New York, 1995, p. 187) When we act according to the ethical teachings of Judaism, lines of connection are forged between God and us, and we can even feel God's nearness. To feed the hungry or to deal honestly in business, for example, is to act in a way in which we imagine God would act, which imbues our behavior with a divine quality.

Our yearning for spiritual fulfillment is not to be found solely in isolation from the world or in solitary meditation. In Judaism, the individual's way to holiness and to God is through living in relationship with others. Thus the Torah portion teaches us that the person who heeds God's laws "shall live," for a person's spirit and soul become enlivened and enriched from the daily encounter with God during ordinary human interactions. As each of us grows individually in spirit, ennobled by the presence of God in our actions, we are inspired to strive with the entire community to realize the Jewish vision for a world of goodness and justice.

THE STRANGE FIRE THAT IS ALL CONSUMING

Michael J. Shire

Parashat Acharei Mot begins with the following brief summary of a tragic incident that happened earlier in Leviticus 10:1-2: "God spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, who died when they drew too close to the Presence of *Adonai*." (Leviticus 16:1) The portion then continues with the rituals for Yom Kippur. (Leviticus 16:2-34) The question is: Why does the Torah recall the incident concerning Nadab and Abihu just before it discusses the most important day of the Jewish year?

Aaron had four sons, who assisted him in the rituals of the sacrifices. Bringing a *korban*, the Hebrew word for sacrifice, was the biblical way to come near, *karov*, to God. It was the way in which the Israelites brought God's Presence into the world and the means that connected them to their deity.

Nadab and Abihu, two of Aaron's four sons, carry out the specific instructions that God had given them, but God rejects their offering and kills them. What did they do wrong? The biblical text tells us that they offered before God "strange fire," which suggests that theirs was not the right kind of sacrifice. Other commentators point out that Nadab and Abihu did this without God asking them to do so and thus conclude that the brothers were trying to usurp the authority of Aaron and even of God! They did the wrong thing without asking or obtaining permission and, as a result, received the ultimate punishment. However, shortly afterward, Aaron's two other sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, make a mistake in their offering and do the opposite of what they had been instructed by God and their father, Aaron. (Leviticus 10:12-18) But in this instance, God forgives their error and shows them mercy. The question arises: Why did Aaron's first two sons have to bear such a great punishment for their error, while Aaron's two other sons were let off so lightly?

After God had consumed Nadab and Abihu in fire, God says: "Through those near to Me I show Myself holy." (Leviticus 10:3) Nadab and Abihu had tried to get too close to God and were burned by the experience. Theirs wasn't just a simple mistake like that of Eleazar and Ithamar, who had tried to follow God's and their father's directions. Rather, Nadab and Abihu's sin was that they had acted with arrogance and self-importance. Theirs was a sin that could not be forgiven since they were priests who should have been serving God's purpose and not their own. The recalling of their story at this particular place in the Torah reminds us that the rituals of Yom Kippur--a day on which we come close to God through prayer and personal sacrifice--are based on the fundamental premise that we are all a nation of priests serving God's purpose. When we commit errors in behavior and then repent, we are forgiven. But when we approach God with conceit and superiority, we demonstrate that we are no longer servants in the House of God. When God reviews our errors and mistaken ways--as *Adonai* does on Yom Kippur--God looks for humility, which enables us to change our ways and thus draw closer to God and God nearer to all.

Rabbi Michael J. Shire is the director of the Centre for Jewish Education in London, England.

YOM KIPPUR ALL YEAR LONG

Charles P. Sherman

In the first part of this week's *parashah*, *Acharei Mot/K'doshim*, the Torah's fullest description of Yom Kippur appears. (Leviticus 16:2-34) But Holy Days, holidays, and festivals develop and evolve as human life changes. The Yom Kippur we celebrate in the twenty-first century is considerably different from the ritual and ceremony described in Leviticus 16. For example, one word prominently used in this chapter is a term with which most contemporary Jews are completely unfamiliar, namely, the word "*Azazel*."

Two goats were brought before the High Priest, who cast lots to decide which of the goats was to be designated "for God" and which "for *Azazel*." Laying his hands upon the head of the goat designated "for *Azazel*," the High Priest confessed the sins of the entire congregation. This goat was then led forth to a high, rugged cliff in the wilderness, from which it was cast down as atonement for the sins of Israel.

Some translate the word "*Azazel*" as "scapegoat." But falsely charging a person, group, or thing as the cause of the evils that befall us is a relatively modern idea. It was not the way of atonement in biblical days any more than it should be in ours. We cannot attribute our shortcomings to anything or anyone else. The authors of Leviticus were neither so primitive nor so naive as to hold this goat responsible for the sins that it carried.

I am persuaded by Mordecai Kaplan that "the meaning of that ritual was that you had to get rid of evil before you tried to do good." The primary source of evil is always to be found by looking within. The need to begin with ourselves, to look within to find the cause of evil in our own midst, has not changed. We do not need *Azazel* in our day, but we do need

Yom Kippur. We also need to understand that the efficacy and value of Yom Kippur are for those who observe it during the whole year. The practice of mending our ways by approaching God with contrition and resolve to improve should not be limited to a single special day of judgment. One of our rabbis said, "A person is judged every day, every hour, every moment."

This is not to say that the observance of a special day of repentance has no value. The first Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv referred to Yom Kippur as a "Temple in time," an apt metaphor. As Professor Louis Jacobs explains, "God can be as little contained in a day as in a place. But just as human beings have found value in setting aside special places of worship for the God who is outside space and who embraces all of space, there is nothing incongruous with setting aside a portion of time for the concentrated worship of the God who is outside time and who embraces all time."

We humans are influenced and inspired by periodic reminders of the truths we profess. The original Temple, like our own temples, was erected so that God would dwell in the hearts of our people. Like our ancestors, we are moved by the impressive rituals that take place within our temples, such as those performed on Yom Kippur. But God does not, as it were, come down to earth for only one day of the year. If Yom Kippur is observed in the proper fashion-with no scapegoating but rather honest introspection and resolve to change-it will bring us nearer to God throughout the year. May our sacred spaces in our temples of time inspire us to come closer to God each and every day of our lives.

REPENTANCE AND THE WILDERNESS

Scott Hausman-Weiss

Rabbi Sherman offers us eternal lessons for the long-lasting effects that Yom Kippur can and should have on us throughout the year. Particularly poignant at the halfway mark between last Yom Kippur and the next is the envisioning of each day as an opportunity to become aware of our sins and our failings. Truly the conception that we as Jews must examine our actions with a critical eye only once a year is as false as it is pointless.

The Torah portion of the week, *Acharei Mot/K'doshim*, provides us not only with lessons about how to become aware of our failings, as Rabbi Sherman so ably teaches, but also with the means by which our atonement should take effect. In *Hilchot T'shuvah*, "The Laws of Repentance," Maimonides asks the question "What is true repentance?" He answers, "If the repentant individual has the opportunity and the ability to sin and refrains because the individual has repented rather than because the individual is afraid or because that person lacks the capacity to sin, then that is true and complete repentance." How does this week's Torah portion, with its focus on the modes that effected atonement as well as the expiation of sin in ancient times, aid us on our modern search for reflection, repentance, and transformation?

In describing the ancient mode of the Yom Kippur rituals in the Temple, the Torah states: "Aaron shall bring forward the goat designated by lot for God, which he is to offer as a sin offering [*chatat*], while the goat designated by lot for *Azazel* shall be left standing alive before God [*italics added*] to make expiation [*kapparah*] with it and to send it off to the wilderness for *Azazel*." (Leviticus 16: 9-10) This teaching begs the question Why is the goat laden with sins to be "left standing alive" while the other goat, pure and empty of the sins of the people, is sacrificed?

The Hebrew terms for these different kinds of offerings are our clues. The first goat is sacrificed to God as the *chatat*, sin offering. Its purity is the key to God's accepting this sacrifice. So, too, are our pure offerings of repentance accepted by God on Yom Kippur. The second goat is not sacrificed but remains alive. *Kapparah*, the true expiation of sin, is effected as this goat is sent out from the midst of the community, carrying with it the sins of the people. And yet this goat, laden with the sins of the people, must remain alive. So, too, are our "sorry's for what we have done" only given true validity on Yom Kippur when we carry with us the memory of our transgressions, alive in our hearts and minds, to remind us not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Yom Kippur remains with us all year long when we hear God's loving voice in two ways. The first is with the recognition that before God there is always the opportunity for repentance. The second is with the acknowledgment that our transgressions do not disappear, even with our most fervent longings for forgiveness. Rather, they must remain alive in the wilderness of our memories, to remind us about where we have gone wrong.

Scott Hausman-Weiss is the rabbi and director of Adult Jewish Outreach for Temple Emanu-El in Birmingham, AL.