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Parshat Acharei Mot

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**THE POWER OF THE KOHEN GADOL STEMS FROM THE POWER OF THE PEOPLE**

*By Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

Parshas Acharei Mos is the parsha which details the ritual of the *Avodas Yom haKippurim* [Yom Kippur Service] in the *Beis HaMikdash*. That is why we read from this parsha on Yom Kippur morning, and the entire Tractate Yoma revolves around how to exegetically interpret the *pesukim* in this week's Torah reading. If that is the case, we would expect the parsha to have begun with *pasuk* 16:2, "And Hashem said to Moshe: Speak to Aaron your brother – he may not come at all times into the Sanctuary, within the Curtain...". And yet, the opening *pasuk* in the parsha is the one which precedes this introduction to the *Avodas Yom haKippurim*.

The Parsha begins: "Hashem spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, when they approached before Hashem, and they died." [Vayikra 16:1] Why is this *pasuk* here? Nadav and Avihu died earlier in Parshas Shemini. Offhand, we would say it is non-germane to the whole subject of *Avodas Yom HaKippurim*. Rashi raises this issue. Rashi explains by way of a parable, in the name of the Tanna Rav Elazar ben Azarya:

It can be compared to a sick person to whom a doctor entered to treat. The doctor said to him "Do not eat cold food, and do not lie in a damp, chilly place." Another doctor came and said to him, "Do not eat cold food and do not lie in a damp, chilly place, so that you will not die the way that So-and-So died." This second doctor motivated him to follow his instructions more than the first doctor. That is why it says "after the death of Aaron's two sons"; "And Hashem said to Moshe: Speak to Aaron, your brother – he may not come..." so that he will not die, the way that his sons died.

Figuratively speaking, Hashem was putting the Fear of G-d into Aharon here: "You better do this right, so you won't die like Nadav and Avihu died!" This is Rashi's approach.

However, the example given needs to be analyzed. Let us say a person comes into a doctor and has emphysema. The doctor will tell him, "You know, you have to stop smoking." Another person will come into the doctor with high cholesterol. Will the doctor tell him "You know, that other fellow died from emphysema. You better watch it too!"? The patient will rightly respond, "That has nothing to do with me. I don't have emphysema; I have high cholesterol!"

The fact that the Torah mentions "After the death of Aharon's two sons" is not directly germane to the *Avodas Yom haKippurim*. How is that supposed to put the fear of death into Aharon when he performs the *Avodas Yom haKippurim*? Why did Nadav and Avihu die? It was because they offered a "foreign fire" before Hashem. Aharon is not going to do that!

Chazal actually have an entire list of suggestions as to why Nadav and Avihu died: They died because they "taught the *halacha* in front of their master"; they died because they did not get married and have children; they died because they drank wine before entering the *Bais Hamikdash*. All these reasons are cited about Aharon's sons. Those reasons were not applicable to Aharon, and they were not applicable to *Avodas Yom haKippurim*. So this whole parable Rashi presents is problematic. The example being cited (the death of Nadav and Avihu) is not germane to Aharon, and would not seem to scare, or in any other way motivate him, to properly perform the *Avodas Yom haKippurim*.

Obviously, we must say that Nadav and Avihu did do something related to the *Avodas Yom haKippurim*. Somehow, proper *Avodas Yom haKippurim* must be placed at the exact opposite end of the spiritual spectrum from that which Nadav and Avihu did.

The Sefer Tiferes Shlomo clarifies Rashi's intention. The fact that the Torah says that the righteous Nadav and Avihu brought "a foreign fire before Hashem" is a very difficult issue, particularly inasmuch as Chazal give a host of other reasons for which they were punished, as stated above. What is the connection between their bringing a "foreign fire" and doing all the other things listed by Chazal? The Tiferes Shlomo's contention is that their primary *aveira* [sin], and all the derivatives thereof, stemmed from one thing: "...when they drew near before Hashem and they died." [Vayikra 16:1]

They had this burning passion to come close before the *Ribono shel Olam* in their own way. They perceived that the way the rest of *Klal Yisrael* conducted themselves was all fine and good for the masses (the '*hamon am*'). They did not consider themselves to be part of the 'proletariat.' They felt, "We are higher. We have a different protocol than everyone else." They saw themselves — by virtue of their having "drawn near before Hashem" — to be separated from the people. That is why they did not take the fire from the outer Altar the way they were supposed to. They said to themselves: What is the "Outer Altar"? That is the Public Altar. We do not want to have anything to do with the public.

That, too, is why they did not get married. "Regular people need to get married. We are above that. We want to be closer to the *Ribono shel Olam*." That is why they did not want to have children. "Children? They are a pain! Diapers! This, that — we do not need that. That is not the way to get close to the *Ribono shel Olam*." Therefore, the common denominator of all their shortcomings is linked to this perception of their wanting to have their own approach to G-d, stemming from their feeling of being uniquely close to Him. They wanted to be separate from the people.

*Avodas Yom HaKippurim* is the opposite of that. The Kohen Gadol enters the *Kodesh Hakodashim* [Holy of Holies] once a year, on Yom Kippur. The Kli Yakar explains that he is permitted to go into this holy place on Yom Kippur because on that day *Klal Yisrael* is pure. The Kohen Gadol, who represents *Klal Yisrael*, can only enter then because of the holiness of the entire nation on that unique day. He does not enter as an individual. He enters as the representative of the people, because of his connection to the people.

This is the connection between the warning to Aharon before beginning the *Avodas Yom HaKippurim*, and the reminder of the death of his two sons. They did not see themselves as connected to — and representatives of — the rest of the nation. Rather, they died as a result of seeking personal closeness to the Almighty.

The concern of the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur must be the concern of '*amcha*' — the regular people, for the spiritual power of the *Kohen Gadol* is from the spiritual power of the people.

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## Keep Climbing

By Rabbi Eli Scheller

*Aaron shall come to the tent of meeting - he shall remove the linen vestments that he had worn when he entered the sanctuary... He shall immerse himself in the water in a sacred place and don his vestments. (Lev. 18:23, 24)*

On Yom Kippur while performing the service in the *Kodesh Kodoshim* (holy of holies), the *Kohen Gadol* would wear special white linen garments. Whenever he would don those white vestments or change into his regular vestments he immersed himself in a *mikveh*. One normally immerses when he's in the process of elevating himself. If so, why did the *Kohen Gadol* immerse himself when he changed back into his regular vestments - wasn't he decreasing his level of holiness by changing back into his regular clothes?

Every good deed is supposed to elevate a person and bring him to new heights. Every Yom Tov that passes is not another Yom Tov gone - it's another Yom Tov in your pocket. The special qualities of that particular Yom Tov are supposed to bring you to a different plane and make you into a changed person. All the commandments you perform should be on a higher level than before.

After the *Kohen Gadol* wore the holy white garments he became so elevated that even the regular service he performed afterwards was on a higher level. The regular service went up a notch and he therefore immersed himself before donning his regular vestments.

In life a person needs to keep climbing to greater heights. His understanding of Judaism needs to be constantly deepened and not remain stagnant. His performance in mitzvot and appreciation for prayer should be advancing constantly.

## Goats on You

*By Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

I am always intrigued by the way the Torah can teach something Kabbalistic, and not make a big deal about it. As a result, people don't as well and just learn it on a Pshat level, the simplest level of explanation. Obviously the ENTIRE Torah is Kabbalistic. As the Ramban points out, the entire Torah is one long Name of God, aside from all the Names that are mentioned in the Torah. You can't get any more Kabbalistic than that.

True as that is, still, it is possible to ignore that fact because the Torah reads just fine as a straightforward narrative. Some mitzvos may be beyond our understanding at this time, but most people can accept that without having to get Kabbalistic. As we said at Mt. Sinai, "We will do and [when possible] we will [also] understand." The parentheses were mine, but they seem to be an accurate assessment from over the ages.

One mitzvah that is somewhat of an exception is the goat to Azazel on Yom Kippur. Part of the Yom Kippur service in the Temple was to choose two identical goats—literally twins—and send one for slaughter to God and the other off a cliff to Azazel.

If they were twin goats, what determined which one went where? The Torah tells us: [Aharon] shall take the two he goats, and place them before God at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. Aharon shall place lots upon the two he goats: one lot "For God," and the other lot, "For Azazel." Aharon shall bring the he goat upon which the lot, "For God," came up, and designate it as a sin offering. The he goat upon which the lot "For Azazel" came up, shall be placed while still alive, before God, to [initiate] atonement upon it, and to send it away to Azazel, into the desert. (Vayikra 16:6-10)

Thus the fate of each goat was determined, not by man, but by God. Aharon may have chosen the lots, but it was Divine Providence that determined how they came out.

The question is, if the goats were identical, why did it make a difference which goat went to God, and which one went to Azazel? Was there a blemish in one goat that could not be seen without first killing it, which was not possible in this case since it had to be sent alive off the cliff? After all, could the two goats really be identical in EVERY way? Wouldn't genetics guarantee that one was healthier than the other, or better than its twin in some way? Perhaps this sacrifice required a level of perfection that man could not guarantee but God could.

The question can be answered on more than one level. Recently I heard one answer that is as profound as it is simple, and very relevant to raising children. The person was speaking about children who come from Torah observant homes but who do not continue in the Torah way. One of the most common names used for such children is "OTD," which stands for "Off the [Torah] Derech—Way."

The speaker used the question about the goats to illustrate an important point he was making. He pointed out how, when people see a child from a Torah family turn secular, they assume that something went wrong in the chinuch—education. Or, they assume something is wrong with the child. Why else would a child not want to be frum? Likewise, when children grow up and continue in the Torah way, they assume the opposite. They think that the child remained observant because he had the proper chinuch, the proper family upbringing. Why else would a child remain religious, especially in today's world?

Though each assumption is often correct, closer investigation reveals that this is not always the case. In many situations, two different children can have "identical" upbringings, and experience the same kind of chinuch, and yet end up going in two different spiritual directions. It can and often turns out that the reason why one child remained true to Torah is the reason why another did not. Of course, people do not like to hear such things. It makes the whole process of raising children too mysterious, too chancy. Parents like to believe that they have more control over the outcome of their children than they actually do. The "success" that some families have with their children seems to suggest that they are right.

The speaker said that the goats teach us otherwise. They tell us that two children can be, for all intents and perhaps, identical in upbringing and chinuch, and yet end up going in two different directions. One can end up going "to God," and one can end up going "to Azazel," that is, in a spiritually destructive path.

The reason for the difference? Nothing we can see. Nothing we can determine. Divine Providence. Something only God can see. Something only God understands. Something only God knows.

**“And Aharon shall bring his sin offering bull, and initiate atonement for himself and for his household” (16:6)**

Why does the Kohen Gadol bring a separate korban on behalf of his family? Why are they not part of the korbanos that he brings for the entire nation? The posuk teaches us that a man is held responsible for the sins of his family. The head of the household is responsible to supervise his family and make sure that they are doing the right thing. He has to be a good role model for his family and correct them when necessary. Additionally, the Torah teaches us that even a communal leader cannot forget that his primary responsibility is to his family. Everyone should try to get involved in helping out in their community, but it should not be done at the expense of their family. Looking after the needs of our spouse and children and helping them grow spiritually must be our main focus.

**“Any person shall not be in the Tent of Meeting when he comes to provide atonement in the Sanctuary until his departure; he shall provide atonement for himself, for his household, and for the entire congregation of Israel” (16:17)**

Why does the Torah write that “any person should not be in the Tent of Meeting?” The Vilna Gaon explains that the Torah is hinting to the fact that any part of the person, i.e. the Kohen Gadol, should not be in the Mishkan. He should not have any part of himself in the Mishkan on Yom Kippur. He should only view himself as a representative of the Jewish people. This is important to remember any time that one is doing a public service. He should remember that he is only doing his work on behalf of others and should not do so for himself.

**“For on this day He shall effect atonement for you to cleanse you. Before Hashem, you shall be cleansed from all your sins” (16:30)**

Rabbeinu Bachya writes that this posuk is a guarantee from Hashem that the special day of Yom Kippur will bring atonement to the Jewish people for all generations. It is a day designated for atonement, and the Jewish people are purified from all their sins on that day. (Sins committed against another person are only pardoned after asking for and receiving forgiveness from the victim, but sins against Hashem are cleansed by repentance and Yom Kippur.) It is a great kindness of Hashem to designate a day each year on which we can wipe our slate clean by acknowledging the contamination caused by our sins. We often fail to recognize that sin has such negative effects on a person and we do not realize how dirty we are. Yom Kippur affords us the opportunity to remove the stains and restore our souls to their original state. That is what makes Yom Kippur such a unique and amazing day.

**“Therefore, I said to the Children of Israel: None of you shall eat blood, and the stranger who sojourns among you shall not eat blood” (17:12)**

Why are we not allowed to consume blood? Rabbeinu Bachya writes that blood represents the life force of the animal and it is not appropriate to mix the nature of the animal's life into our own human nature. We, who have received the Torah, need to be extra careful to preserve the purity of our bodies so that we can absorb its lessons. We are commanded to train ourselves to have a soft and compassionate nature, but if we were to eat blood, it would infuse us with a sense of cruelty and toughness, similar to an animal. The food that a person eats enters his body and affects his nature, especially blood, which is not so easily digested.

**“No man shall come near to any of his close relatives, to uncover nakedness. I am Hashem” (18:6)**

Rambam writes that people have a tendency to desire forbidden relationships. There never was and never will be a time period in history where people are not struggling with this temptation. Therefore, it is appropriate for a person to suppress these desires and train himself in extra measures of holiness and purity of thought, adopting a mindset that will enable him to be saved from this sin. We should be especially careful to avoid behaviors that lead to these sins, such as being alone with women or becoming intoxicated. On the other hand, one of the best methods to ensure purity is marriage. One of the challenges of our generation is how to fulfill this Rambam. We should think of practical ways to train ourselves to have pure thoughts and devise ways in which we can make an effort to ward off this temptation.

*By Rabbi Mayer Friedman*

## A Holy, Delicate Land

By Rabbi Ari Kahn

Perhaps reading the parasha from a post-Pesach perspective impacts what we see, but there are one or two comments in this week's parasha that are particularly apt for this time of year - after the seder, when all of us felt as if we had been redeemed from Egypt.

The book of Vayikra is almost completely devoid of chronological and geographical reference points, giving the book a certain feel of timelessness. Nonetheless, we do know that the context, both geographically and historically, is somewhere between Egypt and the Promised Land:

Do not follow the ways of the Land of Egypt where you lived, nor of the Land of Canaan, where I will be bringing you. Do not follow [any] of their customs. (Vayikra 18:3)

As an introduction to a set of laws that create a new morality, the Torah warns against the practices of these depraved nations, and then proceeds to list forbidden sexual relations and practices. At the end of the list, an additional consideration is introduced: Not only are these behaviors wrong from the Torah's perspective, but the Land of Israel - the Holy Land - cannot tolerate depravity of this sort:

Do not let yourselves be defiled by any of these acts. It was as a result of these behaviors that the nations that I am driving away before you became defiled. The land became defiled, and I held them responsible for the sins committed there, and the Land vomited out its inhabitants... The people who lived in the land before you did all these disgusting perversions and defiled the land. But [you shall not cause] the land to vomit you out by defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was there before you. (Vayikra 18:24-28)

There is a price to be paid for holiness; the spiritual constitution of the Land of Israel cannot tolerate sin - certainly not certain types of sin. It was this profound holiness, reflected in the laws unique to the Land of Israel (particularly the agricultural laws, designed to create a more caring and cohesive society) that scared off many a settler throughout the centuries. "Am I on a high enough spiritual level," they wondered, "to live in such a holy place?" They additional laws, and the more exacting level of Divine scrutiny, were frightening. After all, this land is described as a place of unique character and characteristics:

The land you are about to occupy is not like Egypt, the place you left, where you could plant seeds and irrigate it by yourself, like a vegetable garden. Rather, the land which you are crossing into is a land of mountains and valleys, which can be irrigated only by the rain. It is therefore a land constantly under Almighty God's scrutiny; the eyes of the Almighty your God are on it at all times, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year. (Dvarim 11:10-12)

God's constant scrutiny is daunting; who could possibly live under such pressure? Who would willingly subject himself to that? Nonetheless, the tradeoff - the opportunity to live in "God's palace," to be close to the Divine, seems like an offer one cannot possibly refuse.

Those who make that leap, those who cross over and settle in the Promised Land, may be tempted see others in a harsh, critical light, and to hold them up to impossibly high standards: "Perhaps **they** are unworthy, perhaps **they** will cause all of us to be expelled." Such self-righteous posturing was anticipated years ago by a famous Kabbalist, Rabbi Avraham Azzulai. Looking back at the verses in this week's parashah, Rabbi Azzulai drew the opposite conclusion regarding the "others" who live in this land, those perceived as not that holy enough or deserving enough:

And you should know that every person who lives in the Land of Israel is considered a *tzaddik* (righteous person), including those who do not appear to be *tzaddikim*. For if he was not righteous, the land would expel him, as it says "a land that vomits out its inhabitants." Since the land did not vomit him out, he is certainly righteous, even though he appears to be wicked.

The Land of Israel is indeed a holy land, and when we look at *ourselves*, each of us should make sure that we live up to God's standards. In order to merit living in the Holy Land, we must reject the sordid behavior of the Egyptians and the Canaanites, and follow the way of God. However, when we look at *others*, we must never question *their* right to be in the Holy Land. The fact that the land "tolerates" their presence is proof enough that they are deserving, and holy.

## **Rabbi Akiva's Students and the Omer**

*by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen*

The period of the Omer is characterized by mourning over the tragic deaths of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students. The Talmud explains that they were punished because they did not give sufficient honor to each other. However, the Midrash offers a different explanation. It states that they died because they were unwilling to share their Torah with others. How can these two seemingly contradictory Rabbinic sources be resolved?

In truth, it is possible that both failings emanate from the same source: They both came about as a result of a slight lack of appreciation for the importance of Torah. The root of their failure to attribute sufficient honor to their fellow Torah scholars was a lacking in some small way in appreciation of the importance of Torah and the accompanying honor one must give those who learn it.

It would seem that the Midrash's criticism that they did not that they did not share their Torah could also emanate from a lack of respect for the importance of Torah. This is borne out from the following gemara, as explained by the Maharal. In Shelach, the Torah, in describing one who worships idols, says that "he disgraced the word of Hashem." The gemara in Sanhedrin ascribes this degrading description to a number of other negative forms of behavior such as denying that the Torah is from God. The gemara adds; "Rebbe Meir says; one who learns Torah and does not teach it is included in the category of, 'for he disgraced the word of HaShem'." It is very difficult to understand why learning and not teaching can be placed in the same category as truly terrible sins such as denying that the Torah is from God! The Maharal explains that the honor of the Torah is greatly enhanced when one spreads the word of Hashem to others. One who does not do so prevents Torah from being learnt by others. Therefore, he disgraces the word of Hashem because through his inaction he hinders the enhancement of God's honor. We see from the Maharal that a failure to teach others is indicative of a lack of true concern of the honor of the Torah.

With this understanding, it seems that the gemara and Midrash are not arguing – both agree that Rebbe Akiva's students were lacking in a slight degree in the appropriate appreciation for Torah. The consequences of these sins were so significant that all of these great men died, and as a result the gemara tells us that the world was desolate of Torah. This would seem to be a measure for measure punishment of their inability to spread Torah to others – since they did not teach Torah, they were punished that with their deaths, the continuation of the Torah would be under severe threat.

This is not the only example where we see that a lack of teaching Torah was the cause of great desolation. The gemara in Avoda Zara describes the first two thousand years of existence as being years of desolation. This period ended when Avraham began to teach Torah to the world. At that time, the 'period of Torah began'. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein notes that there were individuals who learnt Torah before Avraham, accordingly he asks how this period can be described as being one of spiritual desolation? He explains that since these men were not going out to teach others, it was impossible for Torah to spread throughout the world. Thus, even though there were individuals learning Torah, it was a time of great desolation. The desolation only ended when Avraham began teaching the world.

We have seen how the failure to honor and spread Torah led to the devastating tragedy of the death of 24,000 Torah scholars. It is little surprise that the rectification of the sin was that the new students should spread Torah. Accordingly, the Midrash informs us of Rebbe Akiva's exhortation to his new students. He told them. "do not be like the first students." The Midrash continues that that when they heard this, "they immediately got up and filled all the land of Israel with Torah."

Based on all the above, we have a new perspective about the reasons for the practice of mourning the deaths of the 24,000 students before Lag B'Omer. Some commentaries have pointed out that we do not mourn the deaths of people for longer than twelve months, no matter how great they are. In the Omer we are not mourning the deaths of the student, rather the devastating loss of Torah that came about as a result of their deaths. By mourning this loss of Torah, we can hopefully increase our appreciation for the Torah and the need to spread it to all Jews.