

**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT ACHAREI MOT**

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**The Entry of the *Kohen Gadol* into the *Kodesh Kodashim***

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**A. Two readings of the *parasha***

*Parashat Acharei-Mot* begins with the procedure of the *Kohen Gadol's* entry into the *Kodesh Kodashim*. It is introduced with a warning to the *Kohen Gadol* lest he treat the occasion with less than the required awe and dignity:

God spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon, when they drew near to God and they died. And God said to Moshe, "Speak to Aharon, your brother, that he not come at all times into the *Kodesh* that is inside of the curtain, before the covering which is upon the Ark, so that he will not die; for (*ki*) I appear in the cloud upon the covering."<sup>1</sup>(16:1-2)

Immediately thereafter, the Torah sets forth the way in which the *Kohen Gadol* is to enter: the sacrifices that he must bring for himself, the goats which he must take from *Bnei Yisrael*, the special garments that he is to wear, and a detailed order of service, including bringing a censer of burning coals with incense into the *Kodesh Kodashim*.

What is the connection between the order of service as set forth here and the "death of the two sons of Aharon, when they drew near to God, and they died"? Rashi explains, citing the Midrash:

This may be compared to someone who was ill, and so he went to the doctor. The doctor said to him, "Do not eat cold food, nor sleep in a damp place." Later, someone else came to the doctor, and he said to him, "Do not eat cold food and do not sleep in a damp place, so that you will not die as so-and-so died." This is a more effective deterrent than the first message. Therefore it is written, "After the death of the two sons of Aharon."

Nevertheless, it seems that there must be a more substantial connection between the actions of Aharon's sons and the special caution that is required when entering the *Kodesh Kodashim*.

Our question also pertains to a different matter. At the

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<sup>1</sup> The commentators are divided in their understanding of the latter part of the verse. Rashi and Rashbam explain the word "*ki*" to mean "for" and that the "cloud" that is mentioned here is a reference to the resting of the Divine Presence between the *keruvim* above the Ark: "[This is to be understood] according to its literal meaning: For it is from within the pillar of cloud that I appear at all times upon the covering... And if the *kohen* sees [the Divine Presence], he will die" (Rashbam). However, Ibn Ezra suggests that the word "*ki*" means "but" or "rather" and that the "cloud" is the physical cloud created by the incense, by means of which the *Kohen Gadol* is able to enter the *Kodesh Kodashim*, as explained further on in the *parasha*: "Such that the cloud of incense will cover the covering that is upon the Testimony, in order that he will not die" (16:13).

end of the *parasha* we find a number of verses concerning the obligation of the *Kohen Gadol's* service on Yom Kippur:

And it shall be a statute for you forever: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls and you shall perform no labor – neither the home-born nor the stranger who sojourns among you. For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to purify you; you shall be purified of all your sins before God... And this shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for *Bnei Yisrael* because of all their sins, once in the year... (16:29-34).

What do these concluding verses, dealing with Yom Kippur, have to do with the rest of the chapter? There are two possible explanations: We might conclude that the Torah first tells us how the *Kohen Gadol* is to enter the *Kodesh Kodashim*, and then afterwards explains when this is to be done – only "once in the year," on Yom Kippur. Alternatively, we might determine that these concluding verses simply tell us that once a year, on Yom Kippur, the *Kohen Gadol* **must** enter the *Kodesh Kodashim*, and when he does so he must follow the order set down in the *parasha* – without ruling out the possibility of the *Kohen Gadol* entering on other occasions, as long as he follows the prescribed procedure.

Both readings are discussed and debated in the *midrashei Chazal* and the commentators. Since it is very difficult to choose between these two interpretations, we will examine each of them separately and try to understand its significance, including its connection to the death of the two sons of Aharon.

**B. "Whenever he wants to enter, he may enter"**

Let us begin with the approach that is more prevalent among *Chazal*, although – surprisingly – most of the *Rishonim* reject it. According to this approach, the *parasha* comes to limit only the manner in which the *Kohen Gadol* is to enter the *Kodesh Kodashim*, but not the timing. According to the following *midrash*, Moshe had thought that from now on, Aharon would not be permitted to enter regularly, but God assures him that this is not so:

R. Yehuda said in the name of R. Simon: Moshe was greatly troubled over this. He said, "Woe is me! Perhaps Aharon, my brother, has been removed from His Presence?"... God said to Moshe, "It is not as you think... Rather, whenever he wishes to enter, he may enter, but he should enter according to this procedure." (*Vayikra Rabba, parasha 21:7*)

Another *midrash* teaches:

Thus Aharon would enter the *Kodesh Kodashim* at all times, and were it not for the many merits that entered with him and aided him, he could not have entered. Why? Because the ministering angels were there. (*Shemot Rabba, parasha 38*)

According to this approach, there were actually two "tracks" for the *Kohen Gadol* to enter the *Kodesh Kodashim*. There was an obligatory entrance once a year, on Yom Kippur, and there was a voluntary track, whereby he could enter whenever he wished to. What is the nature of this second track?

Apparently, the *Kohen Gadol* might have reasons of his own to enter the *Kodesh Kodashim* – perhaps just for the opportunity to stand in the place of the Divine Presence, and perhaps to pray for the needs of himself, his family, and all of Israel. The message of the *parasha* is its view of the *Kohen Gadol* as a "*shaliach tzibbur*" rather than as a private individual. The Torah places no limitations on the reasons for which he might decide to enter, but it demands that he involve all of *Am Yisrael* in doing so – both on the practical level, by taking sacrifices from the nation, as well as on the level of his own intentions, as entry into the *Kodesh Kodashim* is conditional upon atonement "for himself and for the people" (16:24).

This requirement is apparently closely related to the sin of the sons of Aharon mentioned at the beginning of the *parasha*. In our *shiur* on *Parashat Shemini*, we saw that the Torah emphasizes the contrast between the actions of Aharon and his sons in chapter 9, all of which were carried out exactly as God had commanded Moshe, and the "strange fire" offered by Nadav and Avihu, an act "which He had not commanded them" (10:1). But beyond not having been commanded by God, the offering of a strange fire also represented extreme individualism, a stark contrast to Aharon's actions. The series of actions performed by Aharon on this great day was characterized by the sense of partnership between himself and *Am Yisrael*. The word "*ha-am*" ("the people") appears seven times in chapter 9, and is thus to be regarded as a key word. Moreover, the actions of the eighth day correspond to the command set forth in our chapter in many respects, including two parallels pertaining to partnership between the *kohanim* and the people. First, both *parashiot* speak of sacrifices taken both from Aharon and from the people. In our *parasha* we read:

With this shall Aharon come to the *Kodesh*: with a young bullock for a sin-offering, and a ram for a burnt offering... And from the congregation of *Bnei Yisrael* he shall take two he-goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering. (16:3-5)

Concerning the eighth day, we read:

And it was on the eighth day that Moshe called Aharon, and his sons, and the elders of Israel. And he said to Aharon: "Take for yourself a bull-calf for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt-offering – without blemish – and offer them before God. And speak to *Bnei Yisrael*, saying, 'Take a he-goat for a sin-offering and a calf and a lamb, both of the first year, without blemish, for a burnt offering.'" (9:1-3)

Second, in both instances there is a need for atonement for *Bnei Yisrael*. In our *parasha* we find:

And he shall make atonement for himself and for his household and for the whole community of Israel (16:17).

On the eighth day, Moshe tells Aharon:

"... And make atonement for yourself and for the people, and perform the offering of the people, and make atonement for them" (9:7).

This partnership between the *kohanim* and the people is altogether lacking in the actions of Nadav and Avihu, who act on their own initiative, according to their own ideas, and in partnership with no one. They sought for themselves their own private religious experience, separate from *Am Yisrael*, and for this they were punished severely. The *tikkun* for their sin is the integration of the private religious experience of the *Kohen Gadol*

with a sense of connection to the people and his identity and role as their emissary. The *Kohen Gadol's* right to enter the *Kodesh Kodashim* and to experience the uplifting and sanctity of this proximity to the Divine Presence arises not from his personal status, but rather from his role as the representative of *Am Yisrael*. For this reason, he can enter only if the nation is a full partner in the process.

### C. "He enters once a year"

The other reading of the *parasha* appears in the later *Midrash Ha-Gadol* at the beginning of *parashat Vayikra* (1:2):

Can [the *Kohen Gadol* enter the *Kodesh Kodashim*] whenever he wishes to, following this order? We learn [that this is not so] from the end [of the verse]: "once in the year" – once in the year he enters; he does not enter whenever he wishes to.

According to this approach, the concluding verses of the *parasha* do indeed limit the *Kohen Gadol's* entry into the *Kodesh Kodashim* to just once a year, on Yom Kippur.

Interestingly, most of the commentators adopt this approach. Rashi, for example, writes:

"With this shall Aharon come" – And even then, not at all times, but only on Yom Kippur, as specified at the end of the *parasha* (verse 29): "In the seventh month, on the tenth of the month."

Similarly, the Ramban writes:

The reason for [the words] "at all times" is that since Yom Kippur has already been mentioned previously, as it is written, "Aharon shall make atonement upon its corners once in the year" (*Shemot* 30:10), the text therefore says here: He shall not come into the *Kodesh* at all times, but rather only thus – that is, on the day when he is to offer these sacrifices for atonement. And then the *parasha* goes on to specify what he brings when he enters, as it is written, "And he shall bring inside of the curtain" (verse 12), and it specifies the day – it must be "on the tenth of the seventh month" (verse 29), and it repeats again that this will be "once in the year" (verse 34).

According to this approach, it seems that the sin of Nadav and Avihu leads not only to regulation of the conditions under which the *Kohen Gadol* may enter the *Kodesh Kodashim* – through a series of actions expressing the connection between himself and *Am Yisrael* – but also to the cancellation of his right to enter at his own initiative, whenever he so chooses. From now on, he may enter only once a year, on Yom Kippur. What is the connection between the sin of Nadav and Avihu, and the limitation of the entry of the *Kohen Gadol* into the *Kodesh Kodashim* to one day in the year?

There are two possible ways of explaining this.

We might posit that the limitation is directly connected to the sin. This approach might be anchored in another aspect of the sin of Aharon's sons: their lack of proper awe. The *midrash* teaches: "Filled with joy upon seeing the new fire, they decided to add love to the love already present" (*Torat Kohanim, Shemini, parasha* 1). Their sin was based in the fact that they became carried away with love and were devoid of the proper balance in relation to fear and awe of God, and part of the "*tikkun*" for their sin was therefore a distancing between God and man. The Torah

thus forbids the *Kohen Gadol* altogether from entering the place where the Divine Presence rests – except for just one day in the year, Yom Kippur, when he and the entire nation undergo an obligatory process of atonement.

However, we might explain the limitation in a different way – as the result of the need for a special process which will allow the *Kohen Gadol's* entry. According to this approach, in principle there is no reason to limit the entry of the *Kohen Gadol* into the *Kodesh Kodashim*. However, from this point on, his entry is conditional upon the performance of the order of service set forth in our *parasha*, and such a unique process, which brings atonement to all of *Am Yisrael* for all their sins, can be carried out only once a year. Accordingly, the fact that from now on Aharon can no longer enter "at all times," but rather only on Yom Kippur, is not the direct result of the sin of Nadav and Avihu, but rather an indirect result. Since entry into the *Kodesh Kodashim* now involves such a complex and unique process, which can be carried out only once a year, Aharon will henceforth be able to enter no more than once a year.

Support for this interpretation may be found in the concluding verse of the command concerning the incense altar:

And Aharon shall make atonement upon its horns once in the year; with the blood of the sin-offering for atonement once in the year shall he make atonement upon it, for all your generations. (*Shemot* 30:10)

This command was issued, of course, prior to the sin of Nadav and Avihu, and if "once in the year" means "once in the year and no more," then even before the sin it was clear that the atonement process of Yom Kippur could be performed only once a year. The limiting of the *Kohen Gadol's* entry to just one day is thus simply the result of the conditioning of his entry on this process of atonement.

Even according to this second understanding of the *parasha*, the emphasis is on the sense of awe. According to this direction of interpretation, the *parasha* comes to tell us that atonement for *Am Yisrael* is not something that can be undertaken at any time. The necessary degree of awe requires that we avoid a high frequency of such powerful processes in the bond between *Am Yisrael* and God.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Sefer Chokhmat Adam* (end of *Sha'ar Ha-Simcha*) cites a suggestion that combines these two approaches in the name of the Vilna Gaon. This approach posits that that the track that facilitates entry into the *Kodesh Kodashim* at all times, even not on Yom Kippur, is meant for Aharon alone, but not for his successors: "The other *Kohanim Gedolim* are prohibited from entering the *Kodesh Kodashim* other than on Yom Kippur, but Aharon was permitted to enter at any time, so long as did so in accordance with the order set forth in this *parasha*." The Vilna Gaon arrives at this distinction based on the fact that throughout the *parasha*, it is Aharon's name that is mentioned, while in the verses dealing with Yom Kippur, no mention is made of his name. Instead, we read: "The *kohen* who will be anointed and who will be consecrated to serve as *kohen* in his father's stead shall make atonement and shall wear the linen garments, the garments of sanctity" (16:32). The Vilna Gaon extends this understanding also to the end of the *parasha*: "And he did as God had commanded Moshe." In his view, the verse is saying that immediately after the command, Aharon entered the *Kodesh Kodashim*, in accordance with the order of service described in the *parasha*. (He also brings further proofs for this interpretation.) According to his approach, we may therefore say that the right to enter the *Kodesh Kodashim* at any time was reserved for Aharon, who always acted "as God had commanded Moshe." When it came to his descendants, concerning whom there is no guarantee that they would follow his example – after all, his own sons had stumbled and demonstrated a deficiency in their fear of God – entry was restricted to Yom Kippur alone.

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