

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

The Holy One blessed is He is exacting with those that surround him (i.e. the very righteous) even to the extent of a strand of hair" (Bava Kama 50a). In other words, G-d punishes those closest to Him for even the most minor of infractions. The Toldos Yitzchok (R' Yitzchok Caro, who was R' Yosef Caro's uncle) uses this to explain the first verse in Parashas Acharay Mos; Nadav and Avihu died for a (relatively) minor sin specifically "because they were close to G-d" (Vayikra 16:1).

Why is it, though, that G-d plays hardball with those closest to him? It would seem that, if anything, He should be tougher on those that aren't so righteous. Those that are very righteous should perhaps be cut a little slack, not treated harsher!

The Toldos Yitzchok brings three reasons why G-d is more exacting with those closest to him. The third reason he brings (going in reverse order) is that "a small sin is large for someone that fears G-d and has turned away from evil." It is precisely because the individual has reached such a high level that his sin is considered so large. This could be because more is expected of him, or because the damage done by his smaller sin is as great or greater than that of a larger sin committed by another. This would certainly apply to Nadav and Avihu, so it is possible that they were punished with death for doing something that might have received a lesser punishment (or even been overlooked) had it been done by less righteous people.

The second reason given is that being more exacting is actually beneficial for the sinner, and is therefore a (sort of) favor that G-d does for the more righteous. Rather than letting the amount of punishment due pile up and be given in one shot, He metes it out little by little, as it is accumulated. The Toldos Yitzchok expands upon a parable used by the Talmud (Avodah Zarah 4a) of a wealthy individual that lent money to two people. The one he likes he collects from little by little, using smaller payments to make it easier, whereas from the one he dislikes he demands payment in full knowing that he will be unable to pay and will be jailed for defaulting. Similarly, G-d punishes the righteous in smaller doses, for each little thing, rather than letting him off the hook until the big payback comes.



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This reason is interesting, on several fronts. First of all, unlike the others, according to this the punishment for the minor infraction done by the righteous is not necessarily greater than that received by the less righteous for the same action. Only the timing is different (immediate, in small doses vs. one severe punishment for numerous sins at once). It can be compared to the Talmud's explaining (Kiddushin 39b) that G-d punishes the righteous in this world so that only reward remains for the next world, and pays any reward due to the wicked in this world so that they get none in the next (except that the Toldos Yitzchok seems to be comparing two ways of punishing in this world, possibly because he is comparing the righteous with the not-as-righteous, while the Talmud is comparing the righteous to the wicked).

Rav Eliyahu Dessler (Michtav me'Eliyahu II, pg. 75) also explains that G-d is more exacting with those close to Him for their own benefit, but takes a different approach. He defines one close to G-d as an individual that serves G-d "lishmah" (i.e. for the right reasons), and says that only those on such a level merit individualized divine supervision. This "divine intervention" includes messages sent so that the individual will examine (or re-examine) his deeds, in order to improve them. By punishing the righteous for even small mistakes, the message is sent that this is an area that needs improvement.

It would seem that this approach, as well as the Toldos Yitzchok's second reason, would not apply to Nadav and Avihu, as their punishment was immediate and severe. The first reason that the Toldos Yitzchok gives, though, would explain how their "closeness" to G-d caused their "minor" infraction to be dealt with so severely.

Just as Rav Dessler said that only those close to G-d merit His individualized supervision, the Toldos Yitzchok says that "the righteous are before Him at all times and He watches over them constantly. Therefore, every sin that he commits- even if it is a very small one- he gets punished for immediately. And he that is far from G-d [He] isn't as concerned about sinning, and it is as if He doesn't see it."

Most of the time, the commentators (e.g. Rambam, Ramban, Rabbeinu Bachya) use the principle of G-d's divine intervention being limited to those close to Him to explain how they are protected from the dangers that life presents (while others can suffer consequences beyond the specific punishments their

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actions deserve- as they actually deserve whatever happens to them as "punishment" for not reaching that level of closeness- see Meiri on Sotah 2a). The Toldos Yitzchok is adding that attaining that level provides not only divine protection, but also a higher standard to live up to. True, the only "punishments" will be those specifically deserved, but they include punishment for even minor infractions. And while this may often be beneficial (as it includes the reminder to improve that Rav Dessler refers to), it cost Nadav and Avihu their lives.

After giving his three reasons why G-d is more exacting with the righteous, the Toldos Yitzchok says that the Source comforted (the mourning) Aharon by telling him that it was only because his sons were so close to Him that they died. In the process, the Toldos Yitzchok provides us with great insight into how G-d runs the world. © 2004 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Why does the Torah conclude the mandate to honor the elderly with the words "I am the Lord (ani Hashem)"? (Leviticus 19:32) What is the connection between the elderly and recognizing God?

Often it is the case that the elderly suffer from simple neglect. In other words, one could pay little attention to the elderly, claiming to be unaware of their needs. In the words of Rashi "I might think that one can close his eyes as though he did not see him [the elderly]?" Therefore, the Torah states "I am the Lord." God is everywhere, and sees everything, and God also knows the motives within the heart of every human being. He knows who is deceiving the elderly, making believe not to see them.

Another possibility: The term, "the Lord (Hashem)" is really a compound of the verbs "was,"

"is," and "will be." God is, after all, above time. As such, He is all at once past, present and future.

This concept teaches an important lesson concerning treatment of the elderly. In contemporary society, the elderly are, by and large, cut off. This happens because, as individuals become older, less is expected of them. In turn, the elderly begin to expect less of themselves and perceive themselves as being less important. The consequence is a policy of isolation in which the elderly are kept out of sight in their homes, institutions or retirement centers.

Judaism sees it differently. The elderly, through their wisdom, experience maturity and creativity have much to contribute to the larger world. Writing about older years, Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel says, "old age [should] not be regarded as the age of stagnation, but as the age of opportunities for inner growth...They are indeed formative years, rich in possibilities to unlearn the follies of a lifetime, to see through inbred self deceptions, to deepen understanding and compassion, to widen the horizon of honesty, to refine the sense of fairness."

Whereas most of society promotes a philosophy of pushing the elderly out, Judaism believes in the philosophy of absolute inclusion and embrace, an approach of complete interaction of the old with the young. Hence, the Torah concludes this mandate with "I am the Lord." As God is of all ages, so too should all ages interface and so too can all ages make significant contributions to society.

Rabbi Benjamin Blech offers one other insight which explains the addendum "I am the Lord." He argues that God is telling us that since He is the oldest in the universe, He is particularly concerned about those who share this divine quality of age and He is concerned about how they are treated.

I have always believed the maxim that the test of a community is the way it treats its most vulnerable members-a category that surely includes the elderly. If the vulnerable are mistreated, the victims are not the only ones being harmed. The victimizers lose, too, and so does the community. God is hurt as well, because by disrespecting the elderly, we show disrespect to God. © 2004 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah presents the Jewish nation in a most unique context. In his last words of prophecy the prophet Amos describes the Jewish people in a very peculiar manner. He says in the name of Hashem, "Aren't you likened to the Kushites, to be Mine?" (9:7) Who are Kushites and in what way are the Jewish people compared to them? Chazal in the Yalkut Shimonii(157) interpret the term Kushites to refer to the Ethiopian community whose skin color is distinctly different than all other nations. This physical distinction

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renders it virtually impossible for the Kushites to intermingle with anyone without maintaining their national identity. Chazal continue that in this same manner the Jewish people are distinctly different than all other nations. The moral and ethical code of the observant Jewish people inhibits them from intermingling with the nations of the world. The drastic skin color contrast of the Ethiopians serves as a striking analogy to the drastic ethical contrast between the Jewish people and all other nations.

The prophet continues and reminds the Jewish people that it is this distinct ethical conduct which renders them Hashem's chosen people. After likening the Jewish people to the Kushites, the prophet completes his analogy with the profound words, "to be Mine". The Metzudos Dovid (9:7) explains this to mean that we are Hashem's people exclusively because of our distinguished ethical conduct. He adds that we will remain Hashem's special nation as long as we possess elevated ethical standards. The prophet then draws our attention to our earliest origins and says, "Didn't Hashem bring you up from the land of Egypt?" (ad loc.) Malbim explains that these words allude to the distinguished qualities of the Jewish people in whose merit they were liberated from Egypt. Although they existed for two hundred years in the corrupt and immoral Egyptian environment they remained a distinct and distinguished entity. Their moral code of dress and speech reflected their pure attitudes about life which made intermingling with the Egyptians a virtual impossibility. For the most part, their Jewish values were not corrupted or distorted which allowed the Jews to remain distinguished and elevated.

The prophet concludes our haftorah with this theme and promises our ultimate redemption from our extended exile. Amos says, "On that day I will establish the kingdom of Dovid.... so that you, upon whom My name rests, will inherit Edom and all nations." (9:11,12) Our identity with Hashem as a nation upon whom His name rests, will play a significant role in our final redemption. The Jewish people will inherit their archenemy Edom soley because of their identity with Hashem. Our elevated standards of morality will truly earn us the title of His people and in this merit we will be finally liberated from the world's corrupt influence and environment.

This special lesson reflects the essence of this week's parsha, Kedoshim, which embodies Hashem's lofty call to us for spiritual elevation. The Torah begins and says, "Be holy for I, Hashem, am Holy." (Vayikra 19:2) Nachmanides (ad loc.) shares with us his classic insight into this mitzva. "Be holy", says the Ramban, "refers to the introduction of sanctity and spirituality into every dimension of our lives." Even our physical and mundane activities should be directed towards Hashem. We are forbidden to excessively indulge in worldly pleasures and are expected to limit our passions and pleasures to productive and accomplishing acts.

Morality and spirituality should encompass our entire being and our every action should ultimately become the service of Hashem. This philosophy is diametrically opposed to that of the nations of the world. To them physical pleasure and enjoyment have no restrictions or limitations and religion does not govern their passions or cravings. As said, our standards of morality are truly unique and it is this factor that elevates us and distinguishes us from amongst the nations of the world.

The parsha concludes with this message and says, "And you shall be holy unto Me for I am holy and I have separated you from the nations to be Mine." As stated, we are Hashem's people because of our holiness—elevated moral and ethical standards—which truly separate us from the nations of the world. And in this merit we will soon experience our final redemption and be a nation unto Him, privileged to remain in His presence for eternity. © 2003 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi?

This week's double Parsha contains some of the most important Mitzvos in the Torah. The laws of Yom Kippur are discussed in Achrei Mos, and in Kedoshim we have some very central mitzvos between man and man. The following is one of many.

"You shall not oppress your fellow man nor rob him; you shall not let a hired man's wages abide with you until morning." (Leviticus 19:13) In Hebrew that reads: "Lo talin pe'ulat sachir eetcha ad boker."

"It shall not abide—Rashi: [The word 'talin'] is feminine gender and it refers to 'wages.'"

Rashi makes an important grammatical point. The meaning of the word "talin" is ambiguous. The prefix letter "t" can mean one of two things: (1) You shall not cause to abide (2nd person singular). (2) It (the wages) shall not abide (3rd person singular feminine). The word "wages" is feminine in Hebrew).

Rashi tells us that the correct translation here is choice #2. Note that our translation of the verse above is not according to Rashi, there we used choice #1, as do many translations. But according to Rashi it should read: "You shall not oppress your fellow man nor rob him; the wages of a hired man shall not abide by you until morning." But then, considering the whole verse, you should have a question on Rashi.

A Question: The verse uses the prefix "t" before this to mean "you" ("You shall not oppress, you shall not rob..."). Why does Rashi switch, in mid-verse, the meaning of the "t" prefix from "you" to "it (wages)"?

You must be somewhat familiar with Hebrew grammar to answer this one. Can you? There are several reasons that forced Rashi to make the choice he did. What are they?

Some Answers:

1. If the meaning were "You shall not let the wages abide..." Then the Hebrew should have added

the word "et" before the direct object "wages." In biblical Hebrew the "et" is placed before the direct object, like this: "lo talin et pe'ulat sachir eetcha ad boker."

2. The words "You shall not let abide..." imply intentionality, that is, you shall not keep the hired man's wages until morning (on purpose). But if that were the correct meaning, then the word "eetcha"—"with you" is redundant. Where else would you keep it, if not "with you"? It would have been more appropriate to simply say: "lo talin et pe'ulat sachir ad boker." The addition of the word "with you" implies that you left it with you by accident or due to forgetfulness.

3. Conceptually we must say that the prohibition is against unintentional and inconsiderate forgetting to pay your workers' wages on time but not against intentionally withholding wages. If it were intentional it would be identical with the first prohibition in this verse of "lo ta'ashok et rei'echa" in this verse which Rashi himself tells us means "do not withhold wages of a hired man."

For these reasons Rashi chose to interpret the words "lo talin" as he did.

But if the prohibition is against unintentional forgetting you should have a question. What would you ask?

A Question: How can the Torah prohibit an unintentional act? By definition, the person did not do the transgression on purpose, so how can it be prohibited and if transgressed, why should the person be punished?

An Answer: This is precisely the point. The Torah makes us aware of the eventuality of forgetting to pay a workman on time. By making a person culpable for such inconsiderate forgetting, the Torah increases the chance that the person will be more considerate and less forgetful.

This too is probably the reason this prohibition is included in Parshat Kedoshim, as Rashi said at the beginning of the Parsha: "be far removed from transgression." © 2004 Dr. A. Bonchek and aish.com

RABBI NOSSON CHAIM LEFF

Sfas Emes

This parsha presents Klal Yisroel with numerous mitzvos. Rashi notes that many of these mitzvos are introduced with the words: "... Ani HaShem Elokeichem." ("I am HaShem, your God." (See Rashi's comment on the pasuk (18: 2).

Rashi is echoing a remark by the Mechilta, which notes another case where mitzvos are presented the same way that they are presented in our parsha. Where? The Aseres Hadibros (the Ten Commandments) are also introduced with the same prefatory phrase (Shemos, 20:2): "Anochi HaShem Elokecha..." ("I am HaShem, your God").

The Mechilta there comments: We can understand this introductory statement in terms of the

following mashal.. A king entered the capital city of a country that had just become part of his kingdom. His courtiers advised him to promulgate decrees to his new subjects. The king replied: there is no point in issuing my commands now. First, let my subjects accept my kingship; only then will it make sense to issue my decrees.

I have presented this Medrash in accordance with its plain/simple meaning (pshat pashut). But the Sfas Emes reads this Mechilta very differently. As he sees it, the world does not function in a two-stage process like the one just proposed.. (That is: Stage 1. People accept the king's rule; and then;

Stage 2: People agree to abide by his decrees.)

Rather, issuing the decrees—and having them accepted—is itself the process by which the subjects accept the king's sovereignty. The Sfas Emes explains that the purpose of the mitzvos is precisely to give us an opportunity to accept HaShem as our ruler. That is, one may ask: why do we do mitzvos? The Sfas Emes's answer is: because HaShem commands us to do them. Thus, performing mitzvos is—so to speak—our way to place a crown on HaShem's head.

Following up on this thought, the Sfas Emes addresses a question that the Torah leaves unanswered. That puzzling issue is: what did Nahdav and Avihu do that was wrong (Vayikra, 10, 1-2)? The Sfas Emes explains that they went off the track because they did something "ahsher LO tziva..."—that HaShem had NOT commanded (Vayikra, 10:1). In other words, their misbehavior lay in their performing a religious act that was not an expression of their subordination to HaShem.

This perspective on Nahdav and Avihu is supported if we take a careful look at the text. The Torah recounts the story of Nahdav and Avihu after it presents a lengthy series of things that Moshe and Aharon had done "ka'asher tziva HaShem". That is, Moshe and Aharon did what they did solely for the sake of being in accordance with HaShem's will. The contrast with Nahdav and Avihu is clear.

Why does the Sfas Emes give this topic so much attention? First, because it clarifies the episode of Nahdav and Avihu. Second, because this discussion leads to an interpretation of the meaning of mitzvos. And finally, because this context gives the Sfas Emes the opportunity to discuss the connection between two key features of Yiddishkeit—our relationship with HaShem and our commitment to perform mitzvos. As the Sfas Emes has explained, mitzvos are the means by which we develop and maintain our relationship with HaShem.

Continuing, the Sfas Emes discusses a famous pasuk (Vayikra, 18, 5): "... asher ya'aaseh osahm ha'ahdam vachai bahehm." (ArtScroll: "You shall observe My decrees and My laws, which man shall carry out and by which he shall live...") The Sfas Emes reads this text in a non-pshat mode as follows. He

understands the phrase "va'chai bahem" to mean "he shall give life" rather than "he shall live". (That is, he reads the word "vachai" as a transitive verb—po'al yotzei—rather than as an intransitive verb—po'al omeid). Thus, the Sfas Emes reads this pasuk as telling us that by doing mitzvos, we give chiyus—a concept that includes joy as well as life—to the whole world.

How does this work? We know—from the earlier part of the ma'amar --- that doing mitzvos is the way we accept HaShem's kingship. Now the Sfas Emes adds that mitzvos encompass all human activity. Hence, by doing mitzvos we can bring all creation closer to HaShem. By doing HaShem's will—i.e., accepting His authority—we can bring life and joy to the world.

For a brief comment on a key issue, we go now to the Sfas Emes of 5635, paragraph 1: (Vayikra, 18, 3) "Ke'ma'aseh Eretz Mitzrayim... lo ta'asu... u'be'chukosei'hem lo tei'lei'chu". (ArtScroll: "Do not perform the practice of the land of Egypt... and do not follow their traditions".) The Sfas Emes reads this last phrase ("u'be'chukosei'hem...") as follows. The root of "u'beCHUKOseihem" is the same as the root of the word "chuka". A "chuka" is a practice or behavior that has no meaning. Thus, the Torah is telling us that the people of Egypt live their lives with "chukos"—i.e., behavior without meaning.

Why? Because they do not have mitzvos, and thus they lack access to life's inner content—the pe'nimiyus. We can do the same things that they do—the mechanics of living—but since we have mitzvos, our lives have meaning. The mitzvos enable us to form a relationship with HaShem, a relationship that gives structure and content to our lives.

Parshas Kedoshim, 5631

This week's parsha begins (Vayikra, 19:2): "...Kedoshim tiyu ki kadosh ahni HaShem Elokeichem..." (ArtScroll: "You shall be holy, for holy am I, HaShem your God.") Another word that we encounter in the English translations is "sanctify". Before beginning with the Sfas Emes, we should be clear what these key words really mean. Consulting a dictionary on the word "sanctify" does not help, for it merely tells us that "to sanctify" means "to make holy." Clearly, these words about holiness and sanctity are crucial. What do they actually mean?

In his commentary on our pasuk the Malbim tells us that "kedusha" means conducting ourselves in a manner "lema'ala min hateva"—in a manner above nature (teva). That is, living his/her life in accordance with "teva" a person would smack his lips as he ate non-kosher food, would happily engage in illicit relationships; and would revel in speaking ill of people behind their back. In telling us to live lives of kedusha, the Torah is enjoining us to abstain from such "natural" behavior.

The Malbim's definition of "kedusha" works well in the phrase "for holy am I, HaShem". HaShem is

literally "supernatural"—"lema'ala min hateva." This definition also dovetails well with a comment of the Toras Kohanim on this pasuk. The Toras Kohanim sees a reciprocal relationship between HaShem's kedusha and our kedusha. That is, if we live "lema'ala min hateva," HaShem will treat us in a like manner, enabling us to "beat the odds" in our own activities. An example comes readily to mind. Consider the remarkable case of a man who was hired by a multinational bank. "Remarkable" in what way? Remarkable inasmuch he had no MBA—in fact, no BA; but nevertheless landed (and retained!) a banking job for which "ahl pi teva" (in the natural order of things) only an MBA would have been eligible. Note that in popular parlance, this man would have also been considered "lucky". Although both perspectives see this man as "beating the odds" a world of difference separates the two descriptions. Being "lucky" implies a random, mindless selection process. By contrast, selection via kedusha is the ultimate in purposeful, rational hashgacha peratis.

Clarifying the meaning of key concepts such as "kedusha" is helpful for understanding parshas Kedoshim. With this background in hand, we turn now to the Sfas Emes's first ma'amar on Kedoshim.

Parshas Kedoshim begins with a pasuk that is both truly memorable and truly puzzling. As translated by ArtScroll (and in a similar way by R. Hirsch), the pasuk says: "You shall be holy, for holy am I, Hashem, your God."

The Sfas Emes articulates the puzzling part as: How can the level of sanctity attainable by a human even be mentioned in the same sentence as the sanctity of HaShem? Apparently, this question also bothered the Medrash and the Zohar. The Sfas Emes reports their response to this question. The statement "You shall be holy" is conventionally understood as an exhortation. But the Zohar (and the Sfas Emes) point out that this key statement can also be read as a promise. In other words, we have here a promise that HaShem can and will help us reach a proper level of sanctity. Why and how? Because of His special relation with Klal Yisroel, each of us has special chiyus from HaShem. And with that unique chiyus, "bekocheinu lehiskadeish gam be'olam hazeh" (That is: we can sanctify ourselves even in this world.)

The Sfas Emes takes us even further. Thus, he emphasizes that we can sanctify our lives even though we live our lives in the world of nature; that is, in a world in which HaShem's Presence is hidden. Continuing with this idea, the Sfas Emes cites the second paragraph of this week's Medrash Raba. The Medrash there works with a pasuk in Tehillim (92:9): "Ve'ata marom le'olam, HaShem." (ArtScroll: "But You remain forever exalted, HaShem.") The Medrash there comments: "Le'olam yadcha ba'eleyona." (literally, "Yours [HaShem] is always the upper hand.")

The Medrash reads this pasuk as a tzidduk hadin (acceptance and affirmation of the justice of HaShem's judgments—regardless of our own preferences.) By contrast, the Sfas Emes reads the text in Tehillim as: "All life and all existence come from You, on high and hidden". A fair question at this point is: how does the Sfas Emes's nonpshat reading of this pasuk fit into the context and the flow of thoughts in this ma'amar? I suggest the following answer. The preceding sentences discuss our capacity to achieve kedusha. A person reading these sentences might get the erroneous impression that what we have here is a humanistic perspective on Man's greatness. For this reason, the Sfas Emes quotes the pasuk in Tehilim, to remind us that "Le'ola yadcha ba'elyona".

The Sfas Emes leads us forward,, pointing out that Shabbos gives us special access to kedusha, as evidenced by the Shabbos liturgy: "Vayekadesh oso" and "Vekidashto mikal hazemanim." That is, on Shabbos it is easier to be aware of HaShem's Presence, giving life and vibrancy to all creation. And because Shabbos is connected with vibrancy that is lema'ala min hateva (literally, "supernatural"), Shabbos can enable us to extend kedusha to the world of nature and time. More generally, the Sfas Emes emphasizes that we can also serve HaShem in our everyday activities. HaShem's mitzvos are performed only through action, not through contemplation. We know from the beracha said before doing a mitzva that mitzvos can sanctify us. The Sfas Emes now takes us a step further. He tells us that by doing mitzvos, we can impart kedusha "bama'aseh mamash" (to the very midst of our life of action). To conclude, we note that the Sfas Emes calls up a well-known pasuk (Vayikra, 18:5):

"... chukosai u'mishpatai... asher ya'aseh osam... vechai bahem." By our performance of mitzvos, the mitzvos can give chiyus (vitality) to all our actions.

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RABBI ZVI MILLER

The Salant Foundation

We would assume that the logical sequence of repentance would entail first cleansing oneself from transgression, followed by the granting of forgiveness by HaShem.

However when the Torah (Vayikra 16:30) speaks about Yom Kippur it first states: For on this day He shall provide atonement for you-and then-from all your sins.shall you purify yourselves. Here, the atonement of HaShem precedes the cleansing of man. Why is the order is reversed?

HaShem created man straight. In his natural state-equally balanced between good and evil-it was easy for man to chose good. However, once he sinned, the negative impulse was intensified. Then it became difficult for man to choose good.

Nevertheless, when HaShem sees that man wants to do teshuvah He grants him a special, wondrous favor! HaShem removes the impurity from the heart of man in order to empower him with the strength to repent. Hence once a person sincerely desires to do teshuvah Hashem shall provide atonement. He cleanses our hearts so that we can come close to Him, even before we purify ourselves!

This kindness of HaShem is especially manifest on Yom Kippur when the entire Klal Yisrael is seeking atonement. In the Ani Ma'e'min prayer we say, 'The Merciful One-Who extends mercy before anger'. This means that HaShem mercifully grants us purity of heart even before we repent from our sins. According to strict justice, as long as we did not repent HaShem should be angry with us. However, in His endless compassion He considers our desire to repent sufficient cause to cleanse us from our impurities-so that we will be able to perform teshuvah.

Now that we know this great secret, we understand why we cry out on Yom Kippur, 'HaShem-awaken your Mercy.' If we move ourselves with a heartfelt desire to return to HaShem-then HaShem will open the gates of mercy. He will cleanse our souls so that we have the purity and fortitude to do complete teshuvah.

Implement: Open your heart to accept the unbounded mercy and forgiveness of HaShem. © 2004 Rabbi Z. Miller & The Salant Foundation

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

In the beginning of the Torah portion of Acharei, G-d tells Moshe to command Aharon "not to come at all times to the Holy of Holies, beyond the curtain" [Vayikra 16:2] unless he has first performed a series of rituals whose goal is atonement for Bnei Yisrael. At first glance, this seems to imply that Aharon is forbidden to enter "at all times" unless he has first performed the required rituals, but that in principle there is no limitation on the number of times that he can enter the holy site.

However, at the end of the chapter, we are told that these rituals must be performed on Yom Kippur. "Let this be a permanent law for you, on the tenth day of the seventh month... For on this day he will atone for you, to cleanse you. You shall be purified from all your sins... Let this be a permanent law, to atone for Bnei Yisrael from all their sins one time each year." [16:29,30,34]. Does this mean that the High Priest is only permitted to enter the Holy of Holies once a year and no more?

Most of the commentators understood that this is indeed the case (see, for example, Rashi and the Ramban). This also appears in the Midrash at the beginning of the book of Vayikra. "I might be led to believe that he can perform these rituals whenever he

wants to in order to enter the Holy of Holies. However, we must derive the law from the end of the passage, 'one time each year.' He must enter once a year and not whenever he wants to." This assumes that the purpose of entering the Holy of Holies is atonement for Bnei Yisrael, and this can be accomplished only one time during the year, on Yom Kippur.

However, based on the straightforward interpretation of the passage, perhaps there is no contradiction between the beginning, which implies that entry is forbidden "at all times" but is permitted now and then, and the end, which limits the entry to Yom Kippur. It may be that there are two different paths that permit entry into the holy site. On Yom Kippur, as noted above, the purpose of entry, which is an obligation, is atonement of Bnei Yisrael. However, on the other days of the year, the High Priest can enter the Holy of Holies if he sees a need for doing so. In this case, atonement for Bnei Yisrael is not a goal but rather a means to an end, which cannot be achieved in any other way. This is explicitly written in the Midrash:

"Rabbi Yehuda Ben Rabbi Simon said: Moshe was greatly upset by this, he was afraid that Aharon had been rejected from his greatness... So the Almighty said to Moshe: It is not as you think... Rather, whenever he wants to he may enter, as long as he performs these rituals." [Vayikra Rabba 27:1]. (Note that according to the GRA this privilege was given only to Aharon himself and not to any of the subsequent High Priests.)

This approach can teach us something about the unique status of the High Priest. On one hand, he is allowed to enter the holiest of all sites at any time that he desires, in the presence of the Almighty. This is a privilege that has not been granted to anybody else in Bnei Yisrael. On the other hand, this "entry permit" is conditional on his performing—together with the rest of the nation—a set of rituals that leads to atonement for the nation. The Torah does not give any possibility of achieving the highest possible religious experience if it is in isolation, severing the ties with the rest of the nation of Yisrael.

The Mashiach is "the Fallen One"

by Rabbi Asher Binyamini, Head of Merkaz Neriya, Torah Garin in Kiryat Malachi

This week's Torah portion involves the holy rituals of Yom Kippur. These are the high point of the service in the Temple, combining the holiest place in the world, the holiest day of the year, and the service performed by the holiest of all men, the High Priest.

The Torah introduces the discussion of this important service with a reminder of the tragic deaths of Aharon's two sons. Why does it do this?

Evidently this is needed for the proper observance on Yom Kippur, for several reasons:

(1) Special caution is needed before entering the Holy of Holies, and this includes the service on Yom Kippur. This can be seen from the fact that the sons

died even though they were close to G-d ("I will be sanctified by those close to me" [Vayikra 10:3]).

(2) In order for the service to succeed, it is necessary to learn from Nadav and Avihu their high level of yearning, enthusiasm, desire, and dedication to the service of G-d. The fact that they died indeed shows us how careful we must be in performing the rituals. However, this must be not through suppression of holy feelings but rather through strengthening the feeling of holiness, since the Kohen acts as a messenger of Yisrael, the beloved of the Almighty.

(3) Finally, this teaches us that in order to achieve the high point of devotion and service, it is necessary to overcome any pitfalls that may occur along the way.

The nation of Yisrael in our generation has risen up in the face of one crisis after another. This path of renewal has brought us to the highest possible spiritual level. Just as the nation rose up from the terrible slavery of Egypt and was transformed into a nation of G-d, so did they recover from the deaths of the sons to the epitome of the approach to G-d, on Yom Kippur. Similarly, the nation will rise up, now and in the future, overcoming all of the instances of crisis and failure on the way to a complete redemption.

The Mashiach is called "the fallen one" [Sanhedrin 96b]. He is the offspring of the past instances of crisis and of downfall. It is this ability to rise up and return to a standing position that imbues the nation with the spirit of eternity and readies us to be redeemed as a nation of G-d.

Let us hope and pray that we will soon be privileged to see the renewal of the nation, leading to a complete redemption.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Why does our sacred Bible single out idolatry as the most heinous of all evils, devote two of the ten commandments to its prohibition, and insist that it is a pollution which must be extirpated and eradicated from the Holy Land of Israel (Exodus 23:24)? After all, since we believe that the Divine is beyond human comprehension in any case—even to the extent that the great Jewish philosopher-theologian Maimonides argues that we can only say what G-d is not since we mortals are unable to even begin to grasp what He is (the doctrine of Negative Attributes in his Guide for the Perplexed)—why should it matter to the Almighty how some mere simple-minded people may choose to attempt to define Him or worship Him? Further, is there a modern application of idolatry for our own times? Is it possible that the most dangerous and deleterious expression of idolatry is at the very vortex of the Israeli-Arab conflict today? I truly believe that it is—and at stake in our struggle is not only our Jewish

homeland, but is also the very soul and future of Western civilization and the entire free world.

Our Biblical portion this week opens with the words: "And the Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron when they came (too) close before G-d and they died... Speak to Aaron your brother not to come at any time (you wish) into the Sacred (precinct of kodesh)... so that he not die....(only) in this (prescribed) manner shall Aaron enter the sacred (precinct of kodesh)..." (Leviticus 16:1-3). With these words, G-d is explaining one of the most inexplicable and tragic events in the entire Bible, a tragedy of which we read just two weeks ago: at the height of the celebration of the dedication of the Desert Sanctuary, when G-d sent His Divine fire of acceptance to consume the offering of the Israelites amidst the ecstatic exultation and prostration of grateful worshippers, the two sons of the High Priest Aaron participated in the atmosphere of Divine devotion and dedication by bringing an extra sacrifice of fire and incense, "a strange fire which (G-d) had not commanded them;" the Divine response was swift and merciless: "A fire came out from before G-d and consumed them; and they died before the Lord." (Leviticus 10:1-3).

The commentaries are perplexed as to the reason for what seems to be such an extreme punishment for a sincere act of religious devotion. What should it matter if the fire-sacrifice had not been commanded? Ought not a spontaneous act of Divine commitment be rewarded even more than a prescribed religious ritual, which may be performed more out of duty than dedication?

I believe that in these introductory words to our Torah portion of Acharei Mot telling Aaron not to come at will into kodesh lest he (too) die, we have the beginning of an explanation. The Hebrew word for sacrifice is korban, from the root krv which means to draw near, to come close. And indeed, after Nadav and Avihu are consumed by the fire, Moses explained to Aaron, "It is as the Lord has said, "By those who are near (close to) Me, shall I be sanctified." These ambiguous words are now being interpreted: Come near to G-d, Aaron, but not too near. Mortals may not take liberties with G-d, dare not decide on their own the proper method of Divine devotion and dedication. Only G-d Himself decides on the manner He is to be worshipped, when and how and to what extent His devotees are to come close to Him.

Remember that the medium of korban or sacrifice which brings near (to G-d) is fire; and while fire is the source of creativity, one dare not get too close to the flames, it is dangerous folly to "play with fire." Fire can elevate and purify, but it can also devour and destroy. One can be warmed by fire, but one can also be burnt by fire. The Hebrew word for Sanctuary, mikdash-and indeed the very term kodesh, holy derives from two words, moked esh, the altar's hearth of fire

(Leviticus 6:1). Moses may well have been saying to Aaron, in the name of G-d, "By those who come too close to Me, I become an altar's hearth of consuming fire." And so did G-d become for Nadav and Avihu, who took untoward liberties by coming (too) close to G-d by offering an unprescribed fire!

This interpretation is especially relevant in light of an act of "godly devotion" which our double Torah portion vigorously condemns twice and then once again in the Book of Deuteronomy-and it is an act of idolatrous godly devotion involving fire! Within the context of, "I am the Lord your G-d; Like the deeds of the land of Egypt... you shall not do... and like the deeds of the Land of Canaan... you shall not do, and in accordance with their statutes you shall not walk"-paralleling the Biblical introduction to the command to extirpate idolatry (Exodus 23:24) -- the Bible forbids all forms of sexual immorality, (giving your seed to impure pastures), and then commands: "And of your seed you shall not give to pass him over to Molech, so that you not desecrate the name of G-d...." (Leviticus 18:1-21) This prohibition is expanded upon and repeated (Leviticus 20:1-3), and then even further reinforced, "there shall not be found among you anyone who immolates his son or daughter in fire" (Leviticus 18:10). The Talmud explains that parents would give their children to priests who would burn them in fire as an act of religious devotion (Ramban, Leviticus 18:21).

Idolatry is called avodah zara, a foreign act of worship-and not a foreign theology or philosophy. The Bible itself forbids us to act like the inhabitants of Egypt and Canaan when it commands the destruction of idols-apparently because idolatry inspired cruel and evil action. The great Talmudic commentary and halakhic authority, Rabbi Menahem Meiri, defines idolaters as those "who are polluted in their practices and disgusting in their moral traits"-not those who worship statues! (Bet HaBeHira to B.T. Avodah Zarah, beginning of second chapter).

From this perspective, the worst idolaters today are the Palestinians, who send their children to their death as suicide bombers in the name of Allah, and not only to destroy themselves in the conflagration but also to take to their deaths innocent men, women and children-in the midst of a Passover Seder, or family bat mitzvah, or celebration over pizza. Belief in G-d does not necessarily produce ethical monotheism; zealous fire of fanatic death bombs in the name of G-d transforms that god into the worst Satan of evil and terror imaginable. The future of the entire free world depends upon the ability of Israel-hopefully with the help of the United States but chiefly with the help of the true G-d of life and love-to effectively extirpate and eradicate the strange and demonic fire of Palestinian suicide bombers! © 2002 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin