

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SIR JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

“On this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins” (Lev. 16:30).

On the holiest day of the year, the Day of Atonement, the holiest of people, the High Priest, entered the holiest of places, the Holy of Holies, and made atonement for all Israel. It was a moment on which the fate of Israel depended. For their destiny depended on G-d; and G-d in turn sought their obedience. Yet a sinless nation is inconceivable. That would be a nation of angels, not women and men. So a people needs rituals of collective repentance and remorse, times at which it asks G-d for forgiveness. That is what the Day of Atonement was when the Temple stood.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for us to understand the crisis represented by the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in the year 70CE. It was, to be sure, a military and political disaster. That, we have no difficulty in imagining. But it was also a spiritual catastrophe. Judaism and the Jewish people survived. We would not be here otherwise. But that survival was by no means assured at the time. How does a nation defined in terms of a religion centred on the Temple and its sacrifices live on after the loss of its most basic institutions? That is the question of questions.

The destruction of the First Temple was no less tragic. But in those days, Israel had prophets-men like Jeremiah and Ezekiel-who gave the people hope. There were no such prophets in the first century CE. To the contrary, from the time of the Maccabees onwards, prophecy gave way to apocalypse: visions of the end of days far removed from the normal course of history. The prophets, despite the grandeur of their visions, were for the most part political realists. The apocalyptic visionaries were not. They envisaged a metaphysical transformation. The cosmos would be convulsed by violent confrontation. There would be a massive final battle between the forces of good and evil. As one of the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in Qumran put it: "the heavenly host will give forth in great voice, the foundations of the world will be shaken, and a war of the mighty ones of the heavens will spread throughout the world".

People foresaw disaster. Josephus tells us about one of them. Four years before the war against Rome, "at a time of exceptional peace and prosperity", a certain Jeshua son of Ananias, "a very ordinary yokel", began to cry "Woe to Jerusalem" wherever he went. People beat him; the authorities had him sentenced to corporal punishment; yet he continued his lament undaunted: "All the time till the war broke out he never approached another citizen or was seen in conversation, but daily as if he had learned a prayer by heart he recited his lament: 'Woe to Jerusalem'... For seven years and five months he went on ceaselessly, his voice as strong as ever and his vigour unabated", until he was killed by a rock flung by a Roman engine during the siege.

What does a nation do in the wake of "sacrificial crisis", the loss of its rituals of atonement? We are in a position to trace this precisely, because of the exceptionally candid confession of one who chose another way, Paul of Tarsus, the first and greatest theologian of Christianity.

Paul tells us that he was obsessed by guilt. He said of himself that he was "sold as a slave to sin". The good he sought to do, he failed to do. The sin he sought to avoid, he committed. The very fact that he was commanded to do something, provoked in him the opposite reaction, an overwhelming desire to do it. So powerful was this antinomian streak within him that it led him to conceive of a religion without commands at all-quite unlike the sermon on the mount, in which the founder of Christianity said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets... I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven..."

Paul famously attributed the sinful nature of humanity to the first sin of the first human being, Adam. This sin was lifted by the death of the Messiah. Heaven itself had sacrificed the son of G-d to atone for the sin of man. G-d became the High Priest, and His son the sacrifice.

Paul lived and taught shortly before the destruction of the Second Temple, but his teaching-like that of the members of the Qumran sect and Josephus' visionary Jeshua-fully anticipates that catastrophe and constitutes a pre-emptive response to it. What would

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happen when there were no more physical sacrifices to atone for the guilt of the nation? In their place, for Paul, would come the metaphysical sacrifice of the son-of-G-d. In Paul, sacrifice is transcendentalized, turned from an event in time and space to one beyond time and space, operative always.

Judaism could not take this route, for many reasons. First, because the message of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) is that G-d does not allow us (let alone Him) to sacrifice sons. Second, because not one, but all, members of the people of the covenant are sons or daughters of G-d: "My child, My firstborn, Israel" (Exodus 4:22). Third, because despite the many messianic movements to which it has given rise, the Jewish answer to the question, "Has the Messiah come?" is always, "Not Yet". While there is still violence and injustice in the world, we cannot accept the consolation of believing that we live in a post-messianic age.

Only against this background can we appreciate the astonishing leap implicit in the famous statement of Rabbi Akiva: "Rabbi Akiva said: Happy are you, Israel. Who is it before whom you are purified and who purifies you? Your Father in heaven. As it is said: And I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean. And it further says: You hope of Israel, the Lord. Just as a fountain purifies the impure, so does the Holy One, blessed be He, purify Israel."

According to Rabbi Akiva specifically, and rabbinic thought generally, in the absence of a Temple, a High Priest and sacrifices, all we need to do is repent, to do teshuvah, to acknowledge our sins, to commit ourselves not to repeat them in the future, and to ask G-d to forgive us. Nothing else is required: not a Temple, not a priest, and not a sacrifice. G-d Himself purifies us. There is no need for an intermediary. What Christianity transcendentalized, Judaism democratized. As the Yiddish dramatist S. Ansky put it: Where there is true turning to G-d, every person becomes a priest, every prayer a sacrifice, every day a Day of Atonement and every place a Holy of Holies.

This really was the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity. At stake were two quite different ways of understanding the human person, the nature of sin, the concept of guilt and its atonement, and the mediated or unmediated relationship between us and G-d. Judaism could not accept the concept of

"original sin" since Jeremiah and Ezekiel had taught, six centuries before the birth of Christianity, that sin is not transferred across the generations. Nor did it need a metaphysical substitute for sacrifice, believing as it did in the words of the Psalmist (Ps. 51:17): "The sacrifices of G-d are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O G-d, you will not despise". We are all sons or daughters of G-d, who is close to all who call Him in truth. That is how one of the greatest tragedies to hit the Jewish people led to an unprecedented closeness between G-d and us, unmediated by a High Priest, unaccompanied by any sacrifice, achieved by nothing more or less than turning to G-d with all our heart, asking for forgiveness and trusting in His love. © 2010 Rabbi Sir J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd G-d spoke to Moshe after the death of two of Aharon's sons, when they came close before G-d and they died. And G-d said to Moshe, 'speak to Aharon your brother, and he shall not enter the holy - inside the curtain, in front of the cover that is on the ark - at all times, and he shall not die.' Much has been written about these two verses (Vayikra 16:1-2), specifically about what the two different communications indicated by G-d first "speaking" to Moshe (16:1) and then "saying" something to him (16:2) were. Toras Kohanim provides two answers (the first one quoted by Rashi); other answers are suggested by the Baal Haturim, Sefornu (similar to Malbim's approach, although he tries to incorporate it into the first approach of Toras Kohanim while Sefornu acknowledges that they are two totally separate approaches and the Maharal disproves this approach), Kli Yakar and Toldos Yitzchok (see also Or Hachayim; other commentators make suggestions as well).

Explaining what the first communication, which doesn't seem to be included in the text, was, is but one of the difficulties with this verse. Other questions (also asked by the commentators) include why we are told when this communication occurred (after the death of Aharon's sons), why we are told the reason they died, why we are given a different reason here than the one given earlier (bringing a "strange fire"), and why it is repeated that "they died" when earlier in the verse their death was already mentioned.

After Nadav and Avihu died, Aharon continued doing the required Mishkan service. Those offerings that were unique to that first day of the Mishkan's operation were treated the same as if the tragedy hadn't occurred (as per Moshe's instructions, see 10:12-15). There was one offering, though, the she-goat brought on every Rosh Chodesh, that was completely burnt, even though normally part of it is eaten by the Kohanim. This was done because an "onun," someone who lost a close relative that day, is not allowed to eat any

offerings. Even though an exception was made for those offerings unique to that first day of the Mishkan, since this offering would be brought every Rosh Chodesh, the same law that applied for all future Roshay Chodesh applied here as well.

Initially, Moshe was upset that this offering was not eaten (10:16-19), but after Aharon explained why (10:20), Moshe agreed that it was handled properly. A chaver asked how it was possible for Aharon to have known what should be done while Moshe did not. I mentioned to him what the Or Hachayim says on the words "darosh darash Moshe" (10:16), that Moshe was unsure whether this offering should be eaten because it was brought on this unique day, or if it should be burned because this type of offering would be brought in the future as well, and that Chazal (Vayikra Rabbah 13:1) tell us that Moshe's error (when he told Elazar and Isamar that they should have eaten this offering) was a result of his getting angry. Nevertheless, it is still a bit surprising that it was obvious enough to Aharon that this offering should be burned that he didn't even check with Moshe to verify it (and I don't recall Aharon being taken to task for not doing so), yet Moshe was unsure of what should be done.

Another question that could be asked is why Moshe didn't just ask G-d what to do, as he did whenever he had any other questions (such as what should be done with the "mekoshaish" and the "mekalel," and whether the daughters of Tzelafchad should inherit the Land, although some commentators understand these situations not as Moshe not knowing the law, but teaching others to always check with a higher authority). This question is not that difficult, though, as one should always think through a question before asking the higher authority (see Alay Shor II), and it's possible that Moshe was going to ask G-d what to do but hadn't finished trying to make his own determination when he found out that that the offering had already been burnt. Nevertheless, with time being of the essence, it is interesting that Moshe didn't get the situation clarified (by asking G-d) right away rather than being stymied trying to figure it out on his own.

After Nadav and Avihu died, Moshe told Aharon that he thought it would be them (Moshe and Aharon) that died (see Rashi on 10:3), as he knew the extreme sanctity of the Temple would only become known when those close to G-d wouldn't take the proper precautions to preserve this sanctity and would suffer the consequences. Instead, it was Nadav and Avihu that weren't careful enough when they brought the "strange fire." Their death taught everyone, Moshe and Aharon included, how cautious one must be before approaching G-d and His Temple. It is therefore possible that Moshe, who had intimate access to G-d and until now had approached Him whenever he wanted, was being more cautious than ever, and was afraid to just get into "prophecy mode" to connect with G-d in order to ask him what should be done with this offering. Being the

perfect transmitter of the law, Moshe wasn't accustomed to making his own determination of the law; whenever he was unsure, he just asked G-d directly. But now he was afraid to, and was trying to make this determination on his own. Because this was new to him, he was more tentative about it than others; whereas Aharon knew that this offering couldn't be eaten because it would be brought in the future, Moshe spent more time thinking it through. Had he not gotten angry he would have reached the same conclusion, and in the end he agreed with Aharon, but because Moshe was afraid to approach G-d after witnessing what happened to Nadav and Avihu and he was not used to making his own determination based on previously given guidelines, it took Moshe longer to reach this conclusion than it took Aharon.

The procedure to be followed on Yom Kippur, the subject of what was "said" to Moshe, was (according to most) taught on the same day that Nadav and Avihu died (the Ramban says it was the day after). If Moshe was afraid to approach G-d after seeing what happened to Nadav and Avihu, this was likely the first communication between G-d and Moshe after the tragedy. Therefore, the Torah tells us that "G-d spoke to Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons," i.e. this was their first communication since the tragedy. There wasn't (necessarily) a particular message that was communicated to Moshe in this verse; it may have been the same communication that will be elaborated upon in the following verses. There is no problem with it being just one communication despite a separate "dibur" and "amira" to Moshe, as the first is telling us that their communications was now resuming (after having being temporarily halted), and the second is telling us what this communication was about. The timing of this communication was included because it tells us that this was the first communication since Aharon's sons had died, the reason for their deaths was given, and specifically that it was a result of their getting too close, as well as the result of their getting too close (their deaths) because it was the severe consequences of getting too close that caused Moshe's hesitancy to approach G-d.

The verses can be read quite easily now: "And G-d spoke to Moshe [for the first time] since Aharon's sons had died. [Their communications had been halted] because [Nadav and Avihu] got too close to G-d and they died [because they got too close]. And [this is the subject of that first communication, what] G-d said to Moshe." © 2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

We have just concluded the cycle of depressing, dismaying and dizzying days which carry us from depths of despair to heights of rapture: the journey from Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Day) through

Yom Hazikaron (Memorial Day) to Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israel Independence Day). The leitmotif which informs these special days of mourning and celebrations is Kiddush Hashem: the martyrdom of Jews in the crematoria and on the battlefields of Israel reborn.

The word Kadosh expresses the overarching goal and defining characteristic of our nation and the central commandment of this week's Biblical portion to reflect a "definition" (as it were) of G-d Himself: "Speak to the entire witness-congregation of the children of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, because I, the Lord your G-d, am holy" (Lev.19:2).

Rudolf Otto, in his groundbreaking work "The Idea of the Holy," sees G-d's holiness as expressing the "mystical numinous" - a wholly otherness and awesome uniqueness. G-d is above and beyond the material or physical. He is totally free of the fetters and limitations of nature and instinctual human nature.

From this perspective, human beings achieve holiness when they too are free of the blandishments and seductions of immoral sexual drives, greed-induced bribes of money and power, and petty concerns of fame, envy and jealousy. When a Jew sacrifices his life for the eternal and spiritual values of his faith, he indeed becomes a Kadosh, a holy individual, having surrendered this physical world and his physical life for the eternity of bearing testimony to his faith and connecting with the Divine.

For Judaism, however, true holiness is to be achieved by living one's life in dedication to G-d's laws rather than by giving up one's life for the sake of those laws. The primary example of this is Isaac the son of Abraham, who is referred to by the Midrash as a "whole burnt offering" even after he descends from the binding on Mount Moriah when G-d commanded Abraham not to sacrifice his son, or even to cast his hand against the lad, but rather to dedicate Isaac to G-d in life!

What is the path to achieve holiness in daily living? It is by serving G-d through fulfillment of His commandments, and especially by loving our fellow human being. This is the fulfillment of the commandment that Rabbi Akiva called "the greatest rule of the Torah," the command which follows the charge to be holy: "You must love your neighbor as you love yourself, I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:18).

Instinctively, every human being sees himself as the center of the universe, and always looks out for "number one." A newborn baby starts out totally self-absorbed, seeing the entire world as an extension of him or herself. To love another means to leave room for another, to give of oneself to the other, to take from one's material possessions in order to make certain that the other is provided for. Indeed, the Hebrew word for love, ahavah, comes from the root verb "hav" which means "give."

When we make the blessing of sanctification (Kiddush, from Kadosh) over wine at the advent of every Sabbath and Festival, we take the wine goblet in

the palm of our open hand, enclosing it with cupped fingers, but keeping our hand open to give to others. All of the assembled drink from that goblet of wine; there can be no sanctification without giving and loving.

The very commandment of Kiddushin, sanctified engagement between a bride and groom, emanates from the charge to "love your neighbor as you love yourself," (B.T. Kiddushin 41a). This is confirmed in one of the blessings under the nuptial canopy: "Rejoice, beloved and loving neighbors..." Marriage is the most intensive expression of loving one's neighbor as one loves oneself, as each spouse constantly gives to one another and actually merges as one in sexual union, producing a child who combines parts of each of them!

G-d is the source of sanctity; the ultimate Lover and the ultimate Giver. The Kabbalah teaches that G-d constricted and constrained Himself (as it were) to leave room for the other (tzimtzum); and He did this (as it were) because as Rav Haim Vital explains, the G-d of consummate love must have people other than Himself to love. These must be people with the capacity to choose against His will in order to truly be other, to be His partners and not His pawns. And it is His love for and belief in us which will eventually empower us to choose in accordance with His will and partner with Him in perfecting the world in the Kingship of the Divine...

To be like G-d and to walk in His ways means for us to love and to give to others just as He loves and gives to us. The following two Talmudic passages define G-d and sanctity in terms of His love and gifting to us: "Rabbi Hama the son of Rabbi Hanina said: What is the meaning of the verse, 'Follow the Lord your G-d' (Deut 13:5)? If the Divine Presence is a devouring fire, how is that possible? He answered that just as G-d clothes the naked [as He clothed Adam and Eve after they sinned], so must you clothe the naked; just as He visited the sick [Abraham, after his circumcision] so must you visit the sick, just as He comforts the mourner [as He comforted Isaac after Abraham's death], so you must comfort the mourner and just as He buried the dead [G-d buried Moses], so must you bury the dead" (B.T. Sotah 14a).

And in the context of proper respect due to a President of the Sanhedrin, we are taught that when the rabbis were feasting at Rabban Gamliel's son's wedding, Rabban Gamliel, the President of the Sanhedrin, stood up and served them wine. He poured Rabbi Eliezer a glass of wine, but he would not accept it; he served Rabbi Yehoshua, who did accept. Rabbi Eliezer chided Rabbi Yehoshua, "How can you remain seated and permit the great Rabban Gamliel to stand and serve you wine?" Rabbi Yehoshua countered that Abraham our Father was greater than Rabban Gamliel, and he stood and served three Arab wanderers [so the angels appeared to be], "so why is it not fitting for the great Rabban Gamliel to serve us?" Rabbi Zadok had the last word: "...Does not the Holy One Blessed be He cause the winds to blow, raise up the clouds, bring

down the rain, cause the earth to sprout vegetation, and set a table with food before every human being? If so, why not permit Rabban Gamliel to stand and serve us as well?" (B.T. Kiddushin 32b).

It now should be clear why every Sefardi Prayer Book opens with a prayer of Rav Haim Vital, in preparation for prayer and closeness to G-d on the basis of the verse "You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." To be holy is to learn from G-d to love and serve your fellow human beings. © 2010 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah in both of these parshiyot of the week seems to place a great deal of concentration on issues of sexuality and intimacy. Human sexual behavior in the eyes of the Torah forms one of the three bases of civilization and of a human being's relationship to its creator. The Torah views it as a matter of both physical and spiritual life and death.

In a very detailed fashion, the Torah outlines for us the liaisons between humans that are permitted and forbidden. These laws have been the basis of Jewish life and of much of the rest of humankind as well for millennia on end. The world has witnessed great swings in what is accepted as acceptable social and sexual behavior. However the principles of the Torah have remained unchanged, proven safeguards to family and society.

The Torah recognized sexuality as one of the driving forces of human existence. It literally is the primary force of human creativity. Such a powerful force needs to be guided and harnessed for good purposes. Unchecked it can lead to destruction and disaster.

So the Torah regulated it and channeled it into productivity and creativity and away from wanton behavior and disastrous promiscuity. Today's society has set much looser norms in these matters and therefore the entire family structure, which is the backbone of society, is being endangered. The rabbis of the Talmud, foreseeing such a periodic decline in morality and sexual behavior, insisted that these laws be read publicly on Yom Kippur. The way to holiness and purity and to forgiveness lies in the observance of this code of behavior.

The Roman Catholic Church is currently deeply embroiled in its scandal of priestly pedophilia. Our society is also not free of this scourge that traumatizes and damages the lives of all involved, usually in a permanent fashion. When the perpetrators of such behavior hide behind religion and long frocks the damage done to society and faith is even greater.

There is no nice pedophile and these people should certainly not be protected at the potential expense of other victims. A society that tolerates such malefactors is complicit in the immorality and evil of

their behavior. The Torah points out the severity of their behavior by indicating the severity of punishment that they are held to.

To the Torah it is clearly a matter of life and death that is involved and this type of serious judgment is intended to set a standard of behavior and of probity for the entire community. Because of the strength of this physical drive within us, the Talmud warned us that no one is above temptation or abuse of trust. And, therefore, no one should be seen as being somehow above the law in these matters as well.

There is no escaping the standards of behavior that the Torah has set for us in these matters. And to emphasize the matter, these standards are repeated again in the Torah in order that we may benefit from this guidance and aspire truly to holiness and purity in ourselves, our families and community. © 2010 *Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

From a literal perspective, the names of portions are nothing more than the first major word of the part of the Torah that is read during the week. It can, however, be argued that deep meaning actually lies within the names themselves. The two portions we read this week-Acharei Mot that literally means after death, and Kedoshim that means holiness, are fine examples of this phenomenon.

What is the challenge that presents itself after death? In my early years of the rabbinate, I always felt that my challenge as a spiritual leader was to sit with bereaved families and help them undo the pain they were feeling. Death is a kind of darkness, a deep darkness. My role, I thought, was to remove that darkness.

But after my mother died, I stood before my congregation and apologized. Through that painful experience, I came to realize that the goal of removal is simply unrealistic. The goal is rather to find a way to cope with the suffering that comes with termination. I compared it to the following: Imagine walking into a dark room for the first time. Not knowing one's way or one's place, one trips over the furniture, unaware of which way to turn. However, after days and weeks and months and years, when one walks into that very same dark room, although the darkness still exists, with time we learn how to negotiate the furniture and we can make our way.

The truth is that after suffering a great loss, one is actually blessed if one constantly feels the darkness of the pain of termination. Such an emotion is reflective of the power of the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased. If there is no sense of darkness, it

could mean that that sense of connection has been blurred-even lost. The challenge, however, as one continues to feel the darkness, is learning how to cope, to use the analogy, learning where the furniture is and while feeling the darkness, finding a way to move about.

The last time I was at my mother's grave, my dear sister Suri, a woman of profound spirituality, turned to me and said, "Mommy is far away." I keep thinking of that comment. My mother died on Yom Kippur 1983. It is certainly a long time ago. In a certain sense my sister was right-with every year the soul seems to move further and further away.

While not denying that reality, our portions this week remind us that after life (Acharei Mot), there can always be Kedoshim - a sense of continuum that is expressed through holiness. How so? The challenge of death is to keep the person who has died alive in spirit. Indeed the Talmud says, there are some people who are actually living yet are not really alive-they're only going through the motions. On the flip side, there are others who, although physically dead, continue to live through the teachings they left behind and through those whom they have touched in life.

In Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik's Halakhic Man, his introductory page includes the Talmudic statement that in a moment of great personal conflict, the biblical Yosef (Joseph) looked up and, in the window saw the image of his father Ya'akov (Jacob). It was Rav Soloveitchik's way of saying that his writing and teachings continue to be powerfully influenced by his late father, Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik.

I bless you and ask you to bless me that we always remember those who have passed on, like walking through the darkened room full of furniture. And I pray that we always feel those who are closest tapping us on the shoulder and helping us along the complex path of life. © 2010 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

Two identical goats awaited the High Priest in the Temple courtyard on Yom Kippur. The multitudinous spectators watched with bated breath as the High Priest was presented with a box that contained two slips of paper, the lots that would determine the respective fates of the two goats. He reached into the box, drew the lots and placed them on the heads of the goats. One goat was now designated "for G-d," the other for Azazel.

The High Priest proceeded to ritually slaughter the goat that was "for G-d." He collected its blood, sprinkled it on the holy altar and offered up the goat as a sanctified sacrifice to G-d. The other goat was led out of the courtyard in to the open country to a distant mountainside covered with jagged rocks. The goat was

pushed over the precipice, and as it tumbled down the mountainside it was torn to pieces by the sharp rocky protrusions.

What was the significance of this ritual? Why was it considered one of the highlights of the Yom Kippur service, the holiest day of the year? The commentators explain that the two goats symbolize the two divergent roads along which a person can travel through his lifetime on this earth-the road of spirituality and the road of materialism.

The road to spiritual growth is arduous and difficult. It requires much sacrifice. But in the end, perseverance brings fulfillment and eternal rewards as the exalted spirit connects with the Above. Most of us have felt at one time or another a moment of spiritual transcendence and remember the profound exhilaration as it resonated in their hearts and souls. This is the greatest pleasure a human being can experience, and it is represented by the goat that is designated "for G-d" and sacrificed on the altar.

The road to material success, on the other hand, is more accessible. It provides constant gratification for the body's physical needs and lulls us into a false sense of security. But this road ultimately leads to destruction, to a life wasted on the pleasures of the moment and deprived of the supreme and enduring pleasures of the spirit. At the end, it falls off the final precipice and disintegrates into nothingness.

Yom Kippur is the day when these two roads intersect. It is a defining moment in a person's life. Once again, he stands at the crossroads. Once, he must make the hard choices that will affect not only his life on this earth but the eternal condition of his indestructible soul.

A weary traveler, thirsty and covered with dust, sat by the side of the highway in the broiling sun. Suddenly, he heard a rumble in the distance. He looked up and saw a cloud of dust approaching. As it drew near, he saw that it was a beautiful carriage drawn by four handsome white horses. As the carriage drew nearer, it came to a halt, and a rich man stepped out.

"My good fellow," he said to the weary traveler, "can I offer you a ride? It is much too hot to walk when you can ride in comfort."

"Thank you, sir," said the traveler, "but I must decline your kind offer."

"But why?" said the rich man. "I am not asking you for anything. I'm just offering to help a man in obvious distress."

"And I thank you for it," said the traveler. "But you see, we are not traveling in the same direction. You are traveling south, but I am headed north. We have different destinations."

In our own lives, we need to ask ourselves if we are headed north or south. We need to ask ourselves if spiritual aspirations are our ultimate goal or if we are completely focused on material accomplishments. We need to ask ourselves if we are really content to take

the easy way, the point of least resistance, or if we are prepared to make hard choices and sacrifices. Let us remember that the road to materialism ends in disappointment, while the road to spiritual growth ultimately delivers everlasting reward.

The Secret of Clairvoyance

You won't bump into many sorcerers and wizards on the streets of New York or Chicago, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. There are innumerable reports about the feats of practitioners of the occult. Granted that a good many of them are nonsense, but some are probably true. Where there's smoke, there has to be at least some fire.

The Torah acknowledges the existence of sorcerers and wizard, as well as an entire list of other occult practices, such as witchcraft, divination and necromancy, and strictly prohibits them in the strongest possible terms. Reading through this long list is an eerie, bone-chilling experience, and when it is over, we stumble across a strange juxtaposition.

What is the first commandment the Torah gives us after the subject of the occult comes to an end? It is the prohibition against cursing one's father or mother. The commentators are puzzled. What is the connection between this cursing a parent and the occult?

Let us now consider for a moment the Torah prohibition against the occult. Imagine a person at a major crossroads in his life. Face with difficult decisions, confused, he wants desperately to know what the future holds in store. So what does he do? He consults a necromancer or another occult diviner of the future. Why is this such a terrible sin?

The commentators explain that it is actually possible to discover the future by ascending the Kabbalistic ladder through the fifty levels of holiness to the ultimate level of divine inspiration. This is actually the secret explanation of the powers of the occult. All things in the world exist in dichotomies in order to provide people with free will. If there is a holy path to clairvoyance, then the Almighty will create, as a counterpoint, an unholy path to clairvoyance. Therefore, when a person seeks clairvoyance on the unholy path of the occult, he is in essence rejecting the holy path to clairvoyance, which leads directly to the embrace of the Almighty.

This is what the Torah is telling us by the juxtaposition of the prohibition against cursing parents to the prohibition against the occult. Do not think for a moment that occult practices are a harmless, nondenominational spiritual experience. They are a rejection of the Almighty, just like cursing your parents instead of blessing them is a rejection of the people to whom you owe most in the world.

A young traveling in a distant land man sought out a famous guru. The guru, painfully thin and wearing only a stained dhoti, received the young man while sitting cross-legged on the dirt floor of his hut. He stared

at the young man with large, liquid eyes and told him all about his past and his future. The young man was astounded.

Upon returning home, the young man visited a great sage and told him about the guru. "Interesting," said the sage, "but tell me, how did he treat his wife?"

"Well, he was a little sharp and abrupt with her."

"Then he is nothing. His powers come from unholy sources. If he were a man of genuine spirituality and elevation of the soul, he would treat his wife with more consideration."

In our own lives, living as we do in such an intensely materialistic society, we are witnessing a great upsurge of interest in things spiritual, as is to be expected. But unfortunately, much of this interest is being diverted into unholy channels. People who are accustomed to seeking easy fixes for material pleasure are now seeking out the occult and other ersatz spiritual experiences as easy fixes for spiritual fulfillment. We even hear about degenerate media celebrities dabbling in the Kabbalah. It is all a farce. There is no easy path to true spirituality, nor is there a substitute for it. If we want real spiritual fulfillment, we must embrace the Torah, its values and its ideals. This is the only path that leads to the Almighty Himself. © 2010 Rabbi N. Reich and torah.org

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

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Parshas Achrei Mos contains the list of forbidden sexual relationships. Vayikra 18:18 contains the Biblical prohibition for a person to marry his wife's sister. In expressing this prohibition, the Torah uses the word "litzror" [to make a co-wife].

The Ramba"n comments: This verb expresses the reason for this prohibition. Most of the forbidden relations (e.g.-mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, etc.) were simply forbidden without stating a reason. However, the Torah does state a reason by a sister-in-law, namely that it is inappropriate to make two sisters into co-wives of the same husband. These two women should ideally love one another. Placing them into a situation of rivalry will inevitably cause those who should have been best of friends to have a hostile relationship with one another.

The Ramba"n continues: The Torah does not state this regarding a daughter or mother of one's wife, because they remain forbidden even after his wife's death (unlike the situation with the sisters, where a sister is permitted to marry her brother-in-law if her sister-his first wife? dies). The Ramba"n distinguishes between the "ervah" of two sisters and that of other relations. Here the Torah did not forbid the marriage because of "ervah" but because of the social harm it would bring to the sibling relationship, which at any rate

is subject to rivalry. To avoid aggravating that natural sibling rivalry to intolerable levels, the Torah forbade a man to simultaneously be married to two sisters. The proof that this prohibition is different than all the others (and that it is not because of "ervah" or "she'er basar" [close relationship] but for some other reason) is the very fact that the prohibition expires upon the death of one of the sisters.

We learn two novel ideas from this Ramba"n. First, we see from the fact that the Torah includes this prohibition in the chapter of forbidden relationships (arayos) that the Torah treats the matter of causing sisters to hate one another with the same severity as it treats the cardinal sin of arayos.

Second, we see how important it is in the eyes of the Torah for children to get along with one another. The Torah bans two sisters from marrying the same person for the simple reason that the Torah does not want siblings to fight with each other. Whether we are ourselves siblings or whether we are parents who have children who are siblings, we all know that this is indeed a very big challenge. © 2010 Rabbi Y. Frand and torah.org

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 Shimoni (157) interpret the term Kushites to refer to the Ethiopian community whose skin color is distinctly different than all other nations. This physical distinction 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 solely 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. © 2010 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org

