



# WEEKLY PARASHA

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Parashat Acharei-Mot | April 11, 2014 / 11 Nissan 5774

## *God Who dwells in the Midst of our Impurities*

Acharei-Mot details the special *avodah*, sacrificial rites, that the High Priest would perform on Yom Kippur to affect atonement for the Jewish People. However, as the Vilna Gaon in Kol Eliyahu already noted, the Torah only introduces the connection to Yom Kippur at the very end of the lengthy description of this special *avodah*. The framing of the *avodah* is not what must be done to achieve atonement on Yom Kippur but rather what must be done when Aaron wants to enter the inner sanctum:

*Speak to Aaron your brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place inside the veil before the covering, which is upon the ark; that he die not; for I will appear in the cloud upon the covering. (Vayikra 16:2)*

Thus, says the Vilna Gaon, this is a rite that the High Priest - or, according to the Gaon, specifically Aharon, could do at any time that he would want to enter the Holy of Holies, and not die as his sons had, provided a precise ritual is followed. Understood this way, the parasha is underscoring the dangers of unbridled religious passion, of approaching God without due care and caution, and is giving a very structured way that one - the High Priest - can channel his desire for intense, intimate connection.

This approach, however, makes the *avodah* a tool for the High Priest's realization of his religious yearnings, but does not address larger communal issues. This is certainly not the simple sense of the Torah, which mandates communal sacrifices for this *avodah* and which declares that this *avodah* will cleanse the Mikdash and atone for the People. It seems, rather, that while the emphasis of the *avodah* is not on Yom Kippur, it is also not on the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies. Yes, he must enter it, but that is a means, not an end. What is the end goal? The Torah tells us in the climactic verses declared after the High Priest exits the inner sanctum:

*And he shall make atonement, vi'kipper, for the holy place, from the uncleanness of the people of Israel, and from their transgressions in all their sins; and so shall he*

*do for the Tent of Meeting, that remains among them in the midst of their uncleanness. And there shall be no man in the Tent of Meeting when he goes in to make atonement, li'khaper, in the holy place, until he comes out, having made atonement, vi'khiper, for himself, and for his household, and for all the congregation of Israel. (Vayikra 16:16-17)*

The goal is not the entering itself, not the religious experience for its own right. Neither is the goal primarily for bringing atonement and forgiveness for the Children of Israel. The goal is atoning for the Sanctuary. Well, not atoning exactly, for what atonement does the Sanctuary need? The term used here is *kaper*, a term which more precisely means cleansing, not atoning. The Sanctuary must be cleansed from the defilement that it has endured as a result of the sins of Israel.

Sins, according to the Torah, create a type of *tumah*. Sin defiles, both the person who performs it, and the person's surroundings. And how much more so does it defile the Sanctuary, the place of the Presence of God?

Thus, to cleanse the Sanctuary, and to cleanse the people, this *avodah* must be performed. The central sacrifices of this *avodah* are *chataot*, generally translated as "sin-offerings," but more accurately translated as "cleansing sacrifices." [This is why certain *tamei* people, such as a woman who has given childbirth, must bring a *chatat*. Not because she has sinned, but because the *chatat* achieves a cleansing of *tumah*. See Sotah 15a.]

The focus is not on the sin itself, but on its impact, on its defilement, and the sin-offerings, or rather, the cleansing-offerings, restore the world to as it was before, restore the person to how she was before this sin had affected her, and to restore God's Sanctuary to how it was before, so that God's Presence could continue to dwell among the People.

Now, it is worth asking how this cleansing is achieved, or

can be effective. Isn't *tumah* the antithesis of the Sanctuary? Why, then, does the *tumah* not drive God's Presence out of the Sanctuary? The question is sharpened further when we realize that of all the invalidities that can occur to sacrifices, *tumah* is the one problem that can most be tolerated. The Talmud (Menachot 25a) teaches that the *tzitz* that the High Priest wore on his forehead allowed sacrifices that were *tamei* to be acceptable after the fact. And, a fixed-time sacrifice may be brought despite *tumah*: *tumah hutra bi'tzibbur*. Why is it that of all problems, *tumah* is the very thing which must be driven from the Temple, also the very thing which can be tolerated?

The answer relates to the very nature of the Temple, of God choosing to make God's Presence dwell among the People of Israel. On the one hand, *tumah* is the antithesis of *kedusha*, and having a Mikdash in our midst creates a heavy demand that we do everything in our ability to keep *tumah* at bay. But because we are not God, because we are human, *tumah* is an inevitable part of our lives. This is certainly true terms of the ritual *tumah* that has been the focus of Vayikra – animals die, people die, women give birth to children, women menstruate, men have seminal emissions – such *tumah* is encountered every day. But perhaps more significantly, it is also true about the *tumah* that is a result of sin. To be human is to sin. No matter how valiant our attempts otherwise, to be human is to produce *tumah*.

So if *tumah* and sin are an inevitable consequence of our human existence, how can God continue to dwell among us? The answer to this is that God wishes it to be so. When, after the sin of the Golden Calf, God accedes to Moshe's request that God continue to dwell among them, God agreed to accept the reality of human sin and to dwell among us regardless. We, on our part, must do all we can to keep *tumah* away, but even when we do not, God continues to dwell among us. This is what is both acknowledged and addressed by the Yom Kippur *avodah*. God has given us this day not only to allow us to be forgiven and to start fresh. And hence, this verse of cleansing the Temple ends with an acknowledgement of the inevitability of *tumah*:

*And so he shall do to the Tent of Meeting that dwells in their midst, in the midst of their impurity.*

Of all the verses that speak about God dwelling (*shakhen*) among the Children of Israel, this is the only verse that emphasizes not that *tumah* must be kept at a distance, but rather that despite our best efforts, *tumah* will always be present to some degree. And this acknowledgement comes exactly in the section of the Torah that speaks to how it can be tolerated – because God has agreed to tolerate it, God has

accepted our humanity, and, to make the *tumah* manageable, God has given us a rite to cleanse the Temple and start over each year.

Of course, we cannot allow this Divine tolerance to undermine our awareness of God's presence. If *tumah* becomes too much of the norm, then the place will no longer be one of *kedusha*. This is why it is the *tzitz* that allows the *tumah* to be tolerated. The *tzitz*, with the words *kodesh la'Hashem*, Holy to God, worn on the forehead of the Kohen Gadol, *tamid*, continually, is a symbol of the continual consciousness of the Divine Presence. If in the presence of *tumah* the consciousness of the Divine Presence remains firm, then the *tumah* will be tolerated.

This is why it is only the Kohen Gadol who can affect the necessary cleansing. The Kohen Gadol, who symbolizes the constant awareness of God's Presence, does the rites of the Yom Kippur *avodah* without wearing the *tzitz*, because such a reminder is not necessary. The Kohen Gadol enters into the Holy of Holies, is not only reminded of God, but directly in contact with the Divine Presence. It is this connection to God, achieved through constant mindfulness and awareness, which reaches its apex on Yom Kippur. It is this connection to God that allows *tumah* not to undermine God's presence, but to be tolerated and cleansed. "With this Aharon may enter the holy place," he may concretize the connection to God, so that the Temple and the People may be cleansed.

*Tumah* in its essence it is the very thing that distances us from God, but if we work to keep God in the forefront of our consciousness, to have *kodesh la'Hashem* inscribed on our forehead, then this *tumah* will be tolerated, and God will be close to us despite our *tumah*. God, Who dwells among them, despite their impurity.

## Shabbat Shalom!

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