

A Few Thoughts on the Double-Parashah Acharei Mot/Kedoshim (Leviticus 16:1 - 20:27; Amos 9:7-15) April 23, 2021
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The rash act of Aaron's two eldest sons and their subsequent deaths seem to have generated stricter attention to form and content, especially regarding the rites connected with the sin offering. Chapter 16 is the Torah reading for Yom Kippur morning, and the atonement rites it outlines in exquisite detail are reenacted at the end of the service in the Avodah, bringing this aspect of our collective history to life much like the Pesach Seder does for the Exodus. While we can readily identify with the Exodus, it is difficult for us to imagine the profound spiritual significance of the elaborate atonement ritual that was performed once a year, on the 10th day of the 7th month – i.e., Yom Kippur. Only on this day was the High Priest permitted to enter the innermost chamber of the Temple in order to draw as close to HaShem as a human is able, a perilous undertaking in light of what happened to the two overenthusiastic young sons of Aaron. Therefore, every step had to be followed with the utmost precision, with nothing left to chance.

Those of us who are participating in the worldwide *Daf Yomi*, the 7-year cycle of daily Talmud readings, which began anew in January 2020, have just arrived at the tractate *Yoma*, a long and intricate discussion of the atonement rites laid out in Chapter 16. Because the role of the High Priest as intermediary between the people and HaShem required the highest standard of perfection, he had to undergo a 7-day period of training every year. Musicians, athletes, and others in professions requiring skillful precision understand this. Because the mechanics of every move must be so well engrained that the mind is free to concentrate on the larger picture, this rigorous training encompasses both physical as well as the mental/psychological aspects. For musicians and for the High Priest, the goal is to be able to act as a conduit between two worlds. The Talmud tells us that the High Priest was sequestered in order to remain in a state of absolute purity, and another priest was designated to take his place should he become disqualified due to an impurity or another circumstance beyond his control. A delightful discussion follows: "Rabbi Yehudah says: The Sages would even designate another wife for him lest his wife die, as it is stated 'And it will atone for him and for his house' [Lev. 16:6]; the Sages interpreted the term: his house, that is, his wife. The priest must be married in order to fulfill this commandment. Due to the concern lest his wife die, another wife was designated to address that possibility. The Rabbis said to Rabbi Yehuda: If so, that this is a concern, there is no end to the matter, as what if the designated replacement wife dies? This possibility need not be a source of concern." For all their painstaking attention to detail, our sages did have the ability to differentiate between the sublime and the ridiculous. We would do well to learn from them!

The atonement ritual is highly structured. The entire population, Israelites and resident aliens alike, are to abstain from food and work in order to fully concentrate on the singular importance of this day. Everyone is included, and no one is above the law, least of all, the High Priest, whose office requires him to adhere to the highest standards. The High Priest, who is not only a representative of the people, but also, and above all, one of them, must lead by example. Rashi teaches that the bull for the sin offering had to be purchased with the High Priest's own money rather than from public funds. In order to be a worthy representative of his people before HaShem, the High Priest had to first be invested in his own atonement, and not merely as a requirement of his office. The order of the confessions is significant: First the High Priest confesses for himself, then for his household. Finally, after having restored balance on a personal level, he is ready to make atonement for the people. Herein lies the one of the most important and enduring teachings of these ancient rituals. Atonement begins with the individual and radiates outward. If we are not in tune with ourselves, we cannot possibly be in tune with the rest of the world or with HaShem. And we must take the first step. Whereas Pesach commemorates HaShem's reaching out to us and freeing us from slavery, Yom Kippur is the day we reach out to HaShem to renew our eternal covenant, first as individuals, and then in community. We no longer need the arcane rituals of the Temple. Instead, we have special prayers of communal confession that contain a huge laundry list of possible infractions. If we have done our homework, we know which ones apply to us personally, and we are able to engage in the process of restoring balance with ourselves, our world, and HaShem. And we have all the instructions we need in our Torah. The blessing we say after a public Torah reading spells it out: "Blessed are You HaShem, King of the universe, who gave us the Torah of truth and implanted within us eternal life." The eternal life is that tiny Divine spark within us that connects us to HaShem. Psalm 42 is a poignant illustration of how we humans must engage it and reach out to HaShem. "As the hart cries longingly for rivulets of water, so does my soul cry longingly to You, O God. ... Deep calls to deep to the sound of Your water channels ..." The precision we require is deep and honest desire to fulfill our potential as human beings.

Shabbat shalom!