

CROUCHING WITH VIGOR

by Nechama Stampler

Crouching With Vigor¹

They shall clear the ash from the altar and spread a cloth of purple wool over it.

Rashi: The fire that descended from Heaven would crouch under the cloth like a lion during their travels. It would not burn the cloth, because they would turn a large copper pot over it.

Maharal: Rashi points to a two-fold oddity. Fires don't remain stable as they are moved, but are sensitive to the motion of what carries them. Furthermore, even when a fire remains in place, flames dart and jump. They hardly stay tame and docile. The fire on the mizbeach, however, remained still and in place. It lay in wait, like a crouching lion. Only because of this could it be covered by the copper pot. Had it behaved like other fires, covering it with an implement would not have been effective. Had it shown the properties of ordinary flames, containing its energy would not have worked. After a while, it would have burst out from under the cover.

The fire is not always described the way it is here depicted. According to the gemara,² during the second Temple period, the altar-fire behaved like a crouching dog, rather than a lion. The difference between them is readily understood. A crouching lion is poised to unleash far greater energy and displays far more strength than a crouching dog. The fire manifested the supernal kedushah that attached itself to its place of residence here on earth. That attachment was far weaker during the time of the second beis hamikdosh. The fire is therefore depicted as down-graded from lion to dog.

This phenomenon determined the respective fates of the two batei mikdosh. Because the kedushah of the first attached itself with greater strength, it took nothing short of the confluence of the three cardinal sins of the Torah to dislodge it. The first Temple, then, was destroyed only when Klal Yisrael sullied itself with immorality, murder and idolatry. It only took groundless enmity, however, to raze the second Temple. Because kedushah was not anchored as well in it, lesser crimes could destroy it.

Within this contrast between the two batei mikdosh lies another concept, one of profound depth.

The altar-fire of the first mikdosh crouched like a lion because it (or its altar) was called Ariel³-Hashem's lion. The fire took on aspects of the place it rested.

The leonine qualities of the first mikdosh owe to Avraham Avinu, in whose merit that mikdosh came into being. Each of the avos revealed and mastered some characteristic of G-d's so perfectly, that he

bound it to our earthly existence. Avraham's midah was chesed, which is the most basic and influential of the different midos through which we know Hashem. All other midos derive from it; it can be viewed as the powerhouse of midos - like a lion. Its prominence is reflected in its position in the Merkavah-vision of Yechezkel⁴ - squarely on the right, which implies dominance and primary placement.

Chesed, though, however important, is not the only way in which Hashem is manifest, and in which we come to know Him. Contrasting to chesed - and really deriving from it, - is din/ judgment, which is the midah of Yitzchok. The second mikdosh stood in the merit of Yitzchok, and his binding of Hashem's din to the world.

The function of din is to limit, to restrain - whether the display of Hashem's chesed that might be so overpowering as to smother, or the actions of Man that might be harmful if he allowed himself too much free rein.. Because din limits the manifestation of Hashem's chesed - the midah that is closest to His essence, it leaves room for further occluding the presence of G-d. Where Hashem's presence is hidden, there is room to ignore Him, to deny Him, to sin. Thus, all that is wrong and evil derive in a sense from din. For this reason din is called the "left," or opposite side to chesed on the right, or primary side. From this other, alternative side to the pure manifestation of Hashem's chesed come all kinds of incomplete and flawed items. Tum'ah, which is a blocking of kedushah and an environment for its opposite to thrive, is thus associated with the left, the second side.

The second beis hamikdosh was powered by the accomplishment of Yitzchok in navigating a world of restraint and limitation through law. Yitzchok could live up to the most demanding expectations of that law, even when it meant offering his own neck to the knife at the Akeidah. The kedushah he brought to the world was more subdued than that introduced by Avraham. Its fire was like a dog, rather than a lion. To Chazal, a dog was a good representation of tum'ah. The beis hamikdosh, of course, was not a source of tum'ah but the opposite. Yet the kedushah secured in the second Temple was blocked and limited relative to that of the first, like tum'ah preventing kedushah from breaking through.

Din means equality. All are equal under the law; law allows people to predict equal outcomes in comparable situations. For this reason, Yitzchok described the mikdosh as a field, an expanse that is plane and smooth, knowing no irregularities and inequalities. Avraham's place of avodah was a mountain, because his midah was decidedly not one of the smooth predictability of legal expectation. Avraham's midah was to exceed that expectation through acts of kindness, to rise above the straight and narrow.

The third beis hamikdosh will stand in the zechus of Yaakov, whose midah combines chesed and din, creating a platform more accessible to more people. This hybridization of the midos of Avraham and Yitzchok will produce a mikdosh more long-lived than its predecessors.

In pure, ethereal things, there is light. In coarse, material things the light cannot penetrate. The first

beis hamikdosh was relatively free of the limitations of the material. Therefore, spiritual light was in abundance. It had the Urim (which comes from the word ohr/ light) v'Tumim. It had the Aron (also related to the word ohr), and the Shechinah and the korban-consuming fire and the luchos. The second beis hamikdosh lacked all of them.

And Yitzchok, of course, the symbol of din, was blind.

Sources:

1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Bamidbar 4:13; Netzach Yisrael chap. 52, 55
 2. Yoma 21B
 3. Yeshaya 29:1-2; Yechezkel 43:15
 4. Yechezkel 1:10
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