

BEYOND COMMON (IN)CENSE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Parshas Acharei Mos:

G-d spoke to Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons, who had brought an [unauthorized] offering before G-d and died. G-d told Moshe, "Speak to your brother Aharon, and let him not enter at just any time the [Inner] Sanctuary beyond the partition concealing the Ark, so that he may not die, since I appear over the Ark cover in a cloud ..." (VaYikrah 16:1)

Parashas Acharei Mos begins with a somewhat detailed description of the Yom Kippur service, as performed in the Mishkan and Temple times. As to why the Torah was compelled to link Yom Kippur to the death of Aharon's sons, there are a number of reasons. Rashi cites the most obvious one: Nadav and Avihu died because they had entered the very same area without G-d's permission, and the mention of their deaths emphasizes the danger of doing so.

Another explanation is that the death of a tzaddik atones for the generation (Moed Katan 28a), just as Yom Kippur itself does. It could be that the death of a single tzaddik could replace the need to destroy countless individuals.

A less obvious explanation emerges out of the general theme of the entire book of VaYikrah, and is alluded to by the Yom Kippur service:

"He shall take a censer full of burning coals from off the altar before G-d, and his hands full of finely-beaten aromatic incense, and bring [them both] into the [Inner] Sanctuary beyond the cloth partition. (VaYikrah 16:12)

The incense referred to is the same as that mention in the following Talmudic statement (and also read each morning as part of the Morning Service):

The rabbis taught: How is the incense mixture formulated? Three hundred and sixty-eight maneh ... from which the Kohen Gadol would bring both his handfuls on Yom Kippur. He would return them to the mortar on the day before Yom Kippur, and grind them very thoroughly so that it would be exceptionally fine ... (Krisos 6a)

The incense used on Yom Kippur was not a different mixture of spices, specially formulated for Yom

Kippur, as one might have thought. It was, in fact, the exact same mixture of spices used for the Incense-Offering all year round, with one exception: it was ground extra fine; Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, required "extra fine" ketores (incense).

Ketores represents many things, but specifically something called "Da'as," which literally translate as "knowledge," but specifically alludes to a deeper, more spiritual understanding of the way G-d runs His world. In other words, there is da'as, and then there is Da'as, and Ketores represented the latter. It is this level of knowledge to which Shlomo HaMelech, the person known for his high level of wisdom, referred:

If you seek it like money and pursue it like hidden treasures, then you will understand fear of G-d, and you will find Da'as Elokim (the knowledge of G-d). (Mishlei 2:4)

It had been an Incense-Offering that Nadav and Avihu had brought without authorization.

What role does the grinding play in all of this? One not unlike the role grinding plays in the production of flour from wheat:

If there is no flour, then there is no Torah ... (Pirke Avos 3:21)

Flour comes from grinding wheat, which the Ultimate Wisdom made for this purpose. Through this, man is distinguished from the rest of the animals, as the Talmud states (Pesachim 118a): At the time The Holy One, Blessed is He, told Adam, "It will bring forth thorns and thistles ..." tears formed in his eyes. He said before Him, "Master of the Universe! Will I and my donkey eat from the same trough?!" What this means is that, had it not been that his food was ground finely, he would not have been able to achieve the completion of Torah (i.e., receive Torah at Mt. Sinai 26 generations later) ... (Meiri, Commentary on Pirke Avos, 3:21)

Wheat is coarse and barely food, fit primarily for animal consumption. However, by grinding wheat into flour, the wheat becomes refined and elevated to the level of food fit for humans, though it is barely edible to animals. What the Meiri is pointing out is this process is representative of a similar process in the world of ideas, one that transforms "coarse" ideas into refined ones, spiritually "coarse" individuals into godly ones.

What this means is that, like food, ideas rarely come "ready-to-eat." They must undergo a process that reveals the hidden "kernel" of truth within, the main staple of an intellectually-honest diet. In life, and especially in the realm of the intellect, very little is as it appears on the surface; truth is what emerges after "raw" truth has been ground down to its essence, a procedure known as the Talmudic process (see, "Redemption to Redemption," Part Two: Pesach, Chapter Two: The Centrality of Speech, on the Project Genesis Website).

Every day of the year ground incense was used, because all year round Da'as must be ground and refined. However, on Yom Kippur, we use finely ground Ketores/Da'as, because this is the one time of year we seek perfect atonement, and above all, kedusha (holiness). And, as the Torah is pointing

out, it is refined Da'as that is at the root of both, as we will soon discuss. Had Nadav and Avihu refined their already refined da'as even more, the Torah is telling us, like so many others before them, including Adam HaRishon himself, their mistake could have been avoided.

Shabbos Day:

Parshas Kedoshim:

G-d spoke to Moshe saying, "Speak to the assembly of the children of Israel and tell them, 'You must be holy, because I, G-d your G-d, am holy.' " (VaYikrah 19:1)

In the Chazzan's repetition of the Shemonah Esrai, there is the inclusion of Kedusha, something that can only be said within a minyan. One could ask: Shouldn't Kedusha come at the end of Shemonah Esrai, as a climax to a growth process that began with the first blessing, "You give man knowledge?" After all, all these blessings deal with basic everyday needs (knowledge, health, sustenance, etc.); holiness is something to which one ultimately aspires, and rarely achieves.

The Shemonah Esrai seems to indicate just the opposite, as if to say that holiness is the "gate" one must "pass through" in order to fulfill our most basic needs, including atonement (to which the second and third blessings refer). Holiness is like a mikvah of sorts, cleansing, purifying the person for a relationship with G-d, the Source of All Blessing. Indeed, the Rambam calls Yom Kippur (the holiest day of the year) a "mikvah" through which sincere penitents are purified.

How does holiness achieve this?

The concept of something being "kadosh" (holy) is the idea of it being "nivdal," or separate (Kiddushin 2b, Tosfos, q.v. D'assur lah), to use the language of the Maharal. As the Nefesh HaChaim (Part Three) explains, the name of G-d, "HaKodesh Baruch Hu," "The Holy One, Blessed is He," alludes to two aspects of G-d, part that is nivdal (The Holy One) and totally unaffected by the actions of men, and part that is affected by our good (or, G-d forbid, bad) deeds.

The process of separating and becoming separate is entirely intellectual. This is indicated by the Talmud, when discussing the placement of Havdalah (which separates between Shabbos and the rest of the week) in the Motzei Shabbos Shemonah Esrai:

Havdalah is said within the blessing "You give man knowledge ..." For what reason? Rabbi Yosef explained: Since Havdalah is a matter of wisdom, it was placed in the blessing that deals with wisdom. (Brochos 33a)

If so, then holiness, as defined by the Torah, is not so much the act of being separate as it is one of intellectually making distinctions (which may or may not result in actual physical separation,

depending upon the circumstance and its needs). If so, this would explain the great disparity between the Jewish concept of holiness and the non-Jewish concept of holiness, which often resulted in the slaughter of countless innocent victims.

Therefore, the pursuit of holiness in the eyes of the Torah is the pursuit of truth, and the more refined the truth becomes, the more one is able to distinguish between good and bad; ipso facto, one becomes holier. This is what the Talmud means when it writes:

A person doesn't transgress unless a spirit of insanity overcomes him. (Sota 3a)

In other words, if a person is truly clear about life, what it is about and how best to fulfill it, he not only has difficulty committing transgressions, but even if he does, he is cognizant of what was transgressed and yearns to correct it, at any cost. How can we atone for transgressions we barely relate to, and whose seriousness we can barely discern? This is the message of the following story:

The revered Sa'adyah Gaon used to travel and speak in many places to inspire Jews to do tshuva. Upon arriving at one particular town, the Gaon checked into a small inn to stay for the night before speaking the next day. After receiving the key from the Innkeeper, who was a Jew and who had not recognized his holy, but humble guest, he set out for his room to prepare for the night. The next day, the Innkeeper was among the make townspeople who came out to hear the great Sa'adyah Gaon speak, and to his horror, it was the man who had checked into his inn the day before. After the Gaon spoke, the man rushed to the platform upon which the Gaon had delivered his "shmooze," and threw himself at his feet and cried. "What is the matter, my dear fellow? Why do you cry like that? How can I help you?" the Gaon pleaded with the broken man.

"I didn't know it was you! Had I only known it was you ..." and the man cried even louder.

"But you treated me just fine," the Gaon reassured him. "I have no complaints against you ..."

"Yes, but had I known who you are, I would have treated you with even more respect!"

After his return to his own town, one evening a man could be heard outside in the snow crying like a child. The Gaon's students ran out to see who it was, and were shocked to find their master rolling in the snow, crying like a baby! "Rebi!" they cried out. "What is it?! Why do you cry like that?!"

The Gaon related the story of the Innkeeper, and concluded by adding, "I thought I had done tshuva for my past mistakes, until I learned from the Innkeeper that tshuva is dependent upon one's understanding of whom they are serving. Everyday my understanding of The Holy One, Blessed is He, grows, and I cry now because I am finally able to appreciate just how severe my mistakes have been!"

Having passed the "gate" of holiness by developing a discerning mind, we are now better able to ask G-d for the basic needs of daily life, and better able to appreciate the fact that He fulfills those needs for us.

We can also better understand why the laws of forbidden foods precede this week's parsha, and the laws of forbidden relationships end it; in each case, the Jew is forced to distinguish between what is

permissible, and what is not, something that tends to make a person more sensitive and spiritually aware.

Seudos Shlishi:

This parsha is filled with many mitzvos, diverse in nature and seemingly, without any unifying thread.

One such mitzvah is:

Do not swear falsely by My name; you will be desecrating your G-d's name. (VaYikrah 19:12)

Though many people are quick to add the words, "I swear ..." when trying to validate their statement to other people, the Torah-Jew is quick to add, "Bli neder" ("Without Vow"), to any statement that has the potential to end up desecrating the holy name of G-d. Since the formula for a vow often included invoking the name of G-d to make it binding, "Bli neder" is a way of reversing this procedure. So central is this idea that Yom Kippur begins with Kol Nidrei, which is a procedure to publicly cancel vows made during the previous year.

It is not that a Torah-Jew's word is meant to be unreliable; there are plenty of "curses" reserved for the person whose mouth does not match his heart, and who does not keep his word. It is just that we try to take the name of G-d seriously, and give it due weight by invoking it only in cases of certainty, or in other extreme situations.

To help us appreciate this, the Talmud states (Shavuos 39a):

The entire world shook when The Holy One, Blessed is He, said at Mt. Sinai, "Do not swear falsely by the name of G-d, your G-d ..." (Shemos 20:7)

Concerning all other transgressions in the Torah it says, "He will forgive," but with respect to a false oath, it says "I will not forgive."

For all other transgressions, only the sinner is punished; here the punishment extends to the family as well ...

For all other transgressions, only the sinner is punished; here the whole world is punished.

With respect to other transgressions, through the merit of the sinner's ancestors the punishment can be postponed for two or three generations; here, punishment is immediate ...

Things indestructible by fire or water are destroyed by false swearing.

And so on.

Within all of this lies the theme of Parashas Kedoshim, and all of Judaism for that matter. One of the

most remarkable things is the way many Jews are ready to "blow off" Torah Judaism out of ignorance, in spite of an unparalleled claim, one that, at the very least, should could a person cause to think.

Torah Judaism is the only "religion" in the world to claim that G-d "came down" to meet us, and, as a result, gave over His entire Torah, word-for-word, letter-by-letter, to the Jewish people. The midrash says that even after the Jewish people had told Moshe to receive the rest of Torah (after having personally received the first two of the Ten Commandments) on their behalf, still, they were able to overhear G-d talking to Moshe on Mt. Sinai.

Now, that may be a hard claim to accept for a disbeliever, but it is certainly a claim that needs to be either verified or disproved. But to do neither and to act with certainty as if G-d is not there and that Torah is not true, that is tantamount to wantonly committing spiritual suicide!

I once asked someone, who was arguing against Torah, about his background. Admittedly, his was a limited background, barely having learned Chumash with all the traditional commentaries, let alone Talmud extensively. But, he told me, that it didn't make a difference; he could see the irrelevance of Judaism from what he had seen.

So I asked him, "What if G-d is really there? What if He really did give the Torah? And what if the only reason you can't see this is because of what you don't know, not because of what you have learned? Then what?"

He stopped, and he thought about it for a moment, and then he told me, "Then I'll be in big trouble ... Big trouble."

All of sudden, the confidence was gone from his voice as he listened to and felt the weight of his own words. He realized how lightly he had actually taken the whole concept of G-d. Why? Because lightening does not come down from the sky every time a Jew transgresses; because bad people get away with murder, literally; and ultimately, because some very good people seem to needlessly suffer, and G-d seems to do nothing about it!

So the Talmud adequately deals with all those issues, and Kabballah fills in some very important gaps. But the starting point to becoming holy, and then to becoming a fitting receptacle for the light of G-d and Da'as Elokim, is to take the idea of G-d seriously, very seriously.

Melave Malkah:

Sefiros HaOmer: Part Two

What makes the counting of the Omer so mystical is the fact that it ends off with the following

paragraph (though many avoid this paragraph completely):

Master of the Universe, You commanded us through Moshe, Your servant to count the Omer-Count in order to cleanse us from our encrustations of evil and from our contaminations, as You have written in Your Torah, "You are to count from the day after the rest day, from the day you brought the Omer-Offering that is waved; they are to be seven complete weeks. Until the day after the seventh week you are to count fifty days" (VaYikrah 23:15), so that the souls of Your people Israel be cleansed of their contamination. Therefore, may it be Your will, G-d, our G-d and the G-d of our Forefathers, that in the merit of the Omer-Count that I have counted today, that there be corrected whatever blemish I have caused in the sefirah (and here we insert the sefirah that corresponds to the day itself). May I be cleansed and sanctified with the holiness of Above, and through this may abundant bounty flow in all the worlds. And may it correct our lives, spirits, and souls from all sediment and blemish; may it cleanse us and sanctify us with Your exalted holiness. Amen, Selah!

And you thought you were only counting the Omer!

First of all, what are "encrustations of evil," and where did I get them from? Secondly, what's a sefirah, and what damage did I do to it? Thirdly, why is the technical counting of the Omer so Kabbalistic?!

The begin with, during this particular period of time we are climbing spiritually from Pesach to Shavuot, from darkness to light, and from the hiddenness of G-d's hand to the revelation of it. In other words, the period of time between Pesach and Shavuot is a time of great spiritual rectification, when we "clean" out the "pipes" through which G-d's light is meant to flow down to us.

The pipe does not run uninterrupted; it has valves, spiritual valves which can be used to lessen the flow of light between G-d and us when necessary, and to increase it when we are worthy. The complete closing of even a single valve would plunge creation into non-existence. The partial closing of the valve results in what is termed "hester panim," or the "hiding" of G-d's face (presence). An open valve results in a good flow of light, miracles, and the undeniable belief in G-d (like in Egypt, at the splitting of the sea, and at Mt. Sinai). Those valves are called "sefiros," and each of the ten sefiros have different names because they cause a different level of filtering of G-d's light, and result in a different manifestation of G-d's traits.

Who controls those valves? As the Nefesh HaChaim points out, we do. Through learning Torah and doing mitzvos we cause the valves to open and the light and blessing to flow through them to us. Transgressions close the valves and block them with spiritual filth, and being denied the holy light from Above, we do become mired, making us more physical and less spiritual in everyday life.

But if there are ten sefiros, then why do we only mention seven of them, and their subsets?

The answer to that question is very deep, but in short, it is because the top three sefiros (Keter, Chochmah, and Binah) are so holy that to us they are completely imperceptible, and therefore effect

on our world is, for the moment, hidden from us. Instead we deal with the bottom seven sefiros because their effect is more noticeable on our world.

Next week we will discuss, b"H, what goes wrong in life and how it effects the sefiros, what we're supposed to be working on during this period to fix it, and how the concept of the Omer directly addresses this issue. (Hint: add up the numerical value of the word "omer" when spelled without a "vav," as it appears in the Torah in Shemos 16:32 when talking about the munn).

Shabbat Shalom.

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