

REMEMBER THE AVODAH, PART 3

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

The sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, they put fire in them and placed incense upon it; and they brought before G-d an unauthorized fire that He had not commanded them. (Vayikra 10:1)

In the past, we have spoken about the special souls of Nadav and Avihu, and how, according to the Arizal, they possessed souls that could be tied back to Adam HaRishon himself:

This is the level of Kayin . . . He did not begin to become rectified until Nadav and Avihu, and this is the sod of the posuk, "We are unclean for the soul of man (nefesh adam)" (Bamidbar 9:7). Literally, it means the soul of Adam, which was given to Kayin his son, which is the Nefesh of Atzilus. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Chapter 38)

However, they are tied to Adam HaRishon in another very profound way, and the Aleph from "Vayikra," and therefore they have much to do with the concept of Avodah as well.

. . . Noach also wanted to rectify the sin of Adam HaRishon, and he placed himself into a great test but did not succeed. This is also the matter of the sin of Nadav and Avihu when they offered the unauthorized fire; they also created a test for themselves but also did not succeed. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 361)

Thus, we see that the tragic mistake and resulting death of these two brothers was not just another mistake, but connected to THE mistake, the one that occurred through the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Like Adam before them, they entered into a test of their own accord, without being commanded by G-d. Yes, their act was an avodah, but no, it was not what is called "Avodas Hashem," "Service of G-d."

For,

. . . The greatest avodah of all, that which brings the greatest pleasure of all to G-d, is when one withstands a great test, entering it for the sake of Heaven, and coming out of it in peace. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 342)

In other words, every moment of life is a test, or better yet, a choice. This is true whether we realize it or not. The choice is between doing that which G-d wants, or doing that which He does not want.

What makes life a test is that man has been created in such a way that he tends to do that which brings the greatest amount of PHYSICAL pleasure. However, physical pleasure often comes at the cost of some spiritual morale, and being virtuous often entails sacrificing either part or all of that pleasure for some higher spiritual value.

There are basically three possible scenarios in each situation of test:

- 1) The spiritual value is so clearly more important that it is obvious that the physical pleasure must be sacrificed instead, such as in the case of a man who "gives up" a game of golf to spend time with his wife and children.
- 2) The spiritual value is not so clearly important to the person, at least not more important than the physical pleasure he is about to enjoy, as in the case of a person who has only \$1.50 to buy a cold drink on a hot day, when a beggar sticks out his hand asking for tzeddakah.
- 3) The spiritual value seems so unimportant that it pales next to the opportunity for physical pleasure presenting itself, such as in the case of someone who is tired and "stuck" in bed on a cold rainy day when he knows he ought to go to synagogue and start his prayers.

In truth, there is only once scenario that goes one of the three ways, based upon the person being tested. What distinguishes one person from the next, causing one to pursue the spiritual value, and the other to abandon it for temporal pleasure? Knowledge and perspective, and the moment we hear those words, we also hear the name "Amalek" as well.

SHABBOS DAY:

A fire came forth from before G-d and consumed them, and they died before G-d. (Vayikra 10:2)

It is Amalek's fervent desire and Heavenly role, in whatever form he comes in, to try and turn Scenario #1 into Scenario #3, above, and at the very least, into Scenario #2, just as long as we can't EASILY choose the right thing to do, which is that which matters most to G-d.

He has only one way to do it, and that is to create doubt, which is why his name, in gematria, equals the Hebrew word for "doubt." He has to reduce the importance of virtue in the eye of the beholder while increasing the importance of physical pleasure. The question is, how does he do that, and SO WELL for that matter, that entire societies for millennia follow him blindly?

First, he has to remove the knowledge source that teaches about the value of spirituality. What people don't know they can't value, and more often than not they misconstrue it for something not as valuable. Who do you think downgraded Torah in the eyes of the world for so long now?

Secondly, he has to create that which talks to the body and stimulates the senses, creating a somewhat magnetic pull to sensual pleasure. He is the master of "Marketing and Advertising," knowing better than anyone else what a human's "hot buttons" are, and how to press them.

These two approaches make a wicked combination and are, obviously, the source of all sin. In fact, as is often pointed out, the Hebrew word for sin - "chet" - actually comes from a word that means to miss the mark. In other words, sin is the result of doing the right thing in the wrong way, just as Adam HaRishon did, Noach did after him, Nadav and Avihu after him, and so on and so forth throughout Jewish history.

True, it does make a difference that one's intentions were for the sake of Heaven, as in the case of Adam, Noach, Nadav and Avihu, and Shlomo HaMelech, but not that much, in the end, for each one was given tremendous punishments for the mistakes they made:

A fire came forth from before G-d and consumed them, and they died before G-d. (Vayikra 10:2)

Therefore, if sin is a result of a lack of intellectual clarity, which it obviously is, then the sacrifice brought because of it was to help restore that clarity. And, if that clarity was a result of Amalek's machinations, then the sacrifice was a counter-attack against his evil methods. Therefore, Avodah is the process of removing doubt from one's belief in G-d, removing doubt about that which He values and wants from us, and removing ourselves from situations that can overpower our appreciation of what is right and what is wrong.

The question is, how does Avodah do that, and by extension, our prayers which, for all intents and purposes, have replaced the sacrifices we once offered?

To answer this question, we can take advantage of the special Haftarah we read this Shabbos, which discusses the Parah Adumah - the Red Heifer. It was this mitzvah that brought a Jew back from the brink of the worst spiritual impurity - death itself - to the heights of great spiritual purity, permitting such a person to enter G-d's Temple - death that was caused by the sin of Adam HaRishon, and purity that he enjoyed before his sin. Which is why, as Rashi explains, it had the ability to atone for the golden calf; the heifer atones for the calf (Bamidbar 19:2).

SEUDOS SHILSHIS:

G-d spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, saying: This is the decree of the Torah . . . they shall take to you a completely red cow. (Bamidbar 19:1)

Transforming the "red cow" into the mitzvah of Parah Adumah meant slaughtering it and then reducing it to ashes, before adding it to special water. Once prepared, it was sprinkled upon the person who came into contact with the dead body, or that which came into contact with it.

The Talmud says on the following posuk:

Then Avraham answered and said, "I have taken it upon myself to speak to my G-d, yet I am but dust and ashes. (Bereishis 18:27)

Rava elucidated: Because Avraham said, "I am dust and ashes," his children merited two mitzvos - the ashes of the heifer and the dust of the Sotah. (Sotah 17a)

The ashes of the heifer we already know about. The dust of the Sotah refers to that which was taken from the floor of the Mishkan and added to the "drink" for the suspected adulteress to prove her innocence or guilt. Is there any connection between the two?

Interestingly enough, the Hebrew word for "ashes" is "eipher," spelled: ALEPH-peh-raish. The Hebrew word for "dust" is "ahfer," spelled: AYIN-peh-raish. Like the two words "ohr" that we spoke about last week, these two words are identical except for the Aleph and Ayin, while the remaining letters - peh-raish - spell the word "par," or "cow."

Even more interesting is that the word with the Aleph - eipher - is used with respect to the mitzvah that symbolizes complete devotion to G-d, whereas the word using the Ayin - ahfer - is used with respect to the suspected adulteress, the very symbol of unfaithfulness, and philosophically the symbol of idol worship. For a religious person, that can be abandonment of the spiritual for the physical than adultery, for which the punishment is either excision from the Jewish People or capital punishment.

Why is the Parah Adumah the symbol of devotion to G-d? Because, as the Torah teaches, it is a decree, a "chok," a statute whose explanation even defied the wisest man since Moshe Rabbeinu, Shlomo HaMelech:

I said about wisdom that it is far from me. (Koheles 7:23)

According to the Talmud, he was referring here to the mystery of the Parah Adumah (Yoma 14a). For, the Divine wisdom underlying this quintessential paradox and statute remains elusive at this stage of history. Therefore, acceptance of it represents acquiescence to the "mind" and "will" of G-d - and the ULTIMATE defeat of Amalek.

For, there are two ways to deal with doubt in life, and particularly doubt in G-d and Torah, Amalek's way - which much of the modern secular world has adopted - and G-d's. Amalek's approach is to drop the matter until further clarification, which means drop the matter altogether. It's a risky approach, especially if G-d is really there, but heck, think of the fun you can have until the time of reckoning! So Amalek likes to convince people.

However, G-d's way is quite basic: Investigate and keep investigating until the truth about life becomes revealed, and your doubts begin to dry up. Nothing kills Amalek more and faster than a relentless truth-seeker, whose drive for clarity outruns his desire for physical comfort.

What about in the meantime? What is an honest person to do until he can know with clarity the logic behind the "statutes," the symbol of all that we don't understand about G-d and His ways? We accept and do "them" as if we understand them. The Parah Adumah (sounds a lot like "paradox," doesn't it, which is what eluded Shlomo HaMelech) symbolized this approach; the golden calf - and the Sotah for that matter - represented Amalek's approach.

Anyone can follow G-d when it makes sense. Anyone can live by a myriad of laws when it is self-

serving to do so. But how many follow G-d when doubts arise in their minds, and how many adhere to Torah when its logic surpasses their own? If Amalek has his way, as a few as possible, which is why he just keeps attacking that "Aleph" from "Vayikra" and "kisei."

MELAVE MALKAH:

G-d told Moshe and Aharon in Egypt, "This month will be for you the begin-ning of the months; it will be the first month of the year for you." (Shemos 12:1-2)

This Shabbos is "Shabbos Mevarchin," when we announce in shul the upcoming new month, and bless it. It was only 3,315 years ago to the month that G-d told Moshe to tell the Jewish People to start paying attention to the new months, and to bless them.

The Talmud says:

Anyone who blesses the new moon is like one who has received the Divine Presence, as it says, "HaChodesh HaZeh" (Shemos 12:2), and it says over there, "Zeh Keli v'Anveihu" (Shemos 16:2). (Sanhedrin 42a)

Usually, the moon is compared to the Jewish People. However, as we see from this source, it is also compared to the Shechinah, the Divine Presence is creation, which like the moon (and the Jewish People), "waxes" and "waned."

G-d's Essence, of course, is perfect and lacks nothing, and can never be diminished. However, our perception of His Presence within creation can be strong at times, and weak at other times, to the point that we can live our lives as if G-d isn't there at all. That is why most redemptions and holidays have occurred in the middle of the month, when the moon is full.

Amalek knows to take advantage of the period of time when the moon wanes. He knows how to use the darkness of the night - exile - to sow seeds of doubt in the minds of men, and to lead them astray. Surprised are they, however, when the moon waxes again, and the reality of G-d becomes evident to all, but to many, too late.

In a sense, the period during which the light of the moon is bright can be compared to those mitzvos whose logic is "acceptable" to our minds, based upon our understanding of creation and its purpose. The dark periods of the moon's cycle, in a sense, represent the "statutes," - those mitzvos whose wisdom is "distant" from us, and the internal and external ones - those that Amalek mocks us about:

Because Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel saying, "What is this commandment and what reason is there for it?" For this reason, it calls it a "statute," implying, "It is an enactment from Me, and you have no right to criticize it." (Rashi, Bamidbar 19:1)

For, what is a statute but a glimpse into a higher level of spiritual consciousness, not one with which we are familiar in everyday life. Amalek's world is the lowest one of all, the most physical and

materialistic. Amalekian logic rejects such higher realities; Jewish emunah takes for granted that it is the only true one.

Thus, as we shall discuss next week, b'ezras Hashem Yisborach, how Avodah represents that path out of Amalek's world, a clean departure from the world of physicality and materialism, back to the world of the Aleph. The same Aleph of "Vayikra," of "kisei," and of "Adam," whose addition makes "Adam" equal to the word "geulah" and in gematria - redemption.

In fact, the spelling of "Aleph" is: aleph-lamed-peh. The same three letters can be arranged to spell the word: "peleh" - peh-lamed-aleph - which means "wonder." This, the Kabbalists explain, alludes to the fact that Aleph alludes to Keser, the highest of the Ten Sefiros, which is often called "Peleh Elyon," the "Uppermost Wonder."

Have a great Shabbos, and even greater Avodah. Amalek is strong today, and we need to know how to weaken him, in preparation for the day that he will be no more, may it happen quickly in our time.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston

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