

# OF DEATH, SELFLESSNESS, AND SERVICE

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

The beginning of this week's Parsha presents the Avodah (service) of Yom Kippur the order of the services that had to be performed by the Kohain Gadol on Yom Kippur. It is the section of the Torah that is read on Yom Kippur day; it is the main text of the Chazan's (cantor) Yom Kippur Musaf service; and it is the biblical source for Tractate Yoma.

Why did G-d introduce the Avodah of Yom Kippur with a reference to the deaths of Nadav and Avihu? (16:1) G-d spoke to Moshe after the deaths of the two sons of Aharon.

The deaths of Nadav and Avihu occurred at the inauguration of the Mishkan (tabernacle) and the consecration of the Mizbeach (altar). They died while attempting to bring a "strange fire that G-d had not commanded." They died while entering the Holy of Holies bearing the Ketores (spice) offering. They died while doing a service and entering a place exclusive to their father, the position of Kohain Gadol, and the day of Yom Kippur. They died by the same fire that lit the Mizbeach for the first time.

The Mishkan was commanded and constructed as a response to the sin of the Golden Calf. The Bnai Yisroel (Jews) sinned with the Egel and Moshe shattered the first Luchos (tablets); therefore, G-d instructed the Jews to build the Mishkan.

Moshe returned from Mt. Sinai on the first Yom Kippur bearing the second Luchos. The Jews then knew that G-d had forgiven them for the sin of the Egel Hazahav. The next morning, the 11th of Tishrei, G-d instructed the nation to begin constructing the Mishkan. The first day of Nissan - six months after leaving Egypt, the day the Mishkan was completed, the day it was inaugurated, was the moment that heralded G-d's willingness to again be close with His children. Make for Me a Mishkan so that I may dwell in their midst." That was the moment! That was when G-d decided to once again dwell in their midst!

The Mishkan, and the Batei Mikdash (Temples) that followed, were the exclusive place for bringing Korbanos (offerings) and attaining full atonement. Whether the sins of individuals or the sins of the nation, complete Teshuva, (repentance) complete return to the closeness of G-d, could only be accomplished in the Mishkan and on the Mizbeach. Whether offerings of devotion and sin (Olah Chatas) or offerings of peace and appreciation (Todah Shelamim), the Mishkan and the Mizbeach were the single place on earth where such overtures of love and loyalty were acceptable. In succinct terms, the sin of the Egel, the day of Yom Kippur, G-d's forgiveness, the Mishkan, the Mizbeach, and the deaths of Nadav and Avihu were all intrinsically and intricately linked to each

other.

When G-d made the original Adam, He took the earth from the place on the Temple Mount where the Mizbeach would one day stand. The message of that Medresh is obvious. The human condition demands constant attention to the relationship between the individual and the Creator. Humans are fallible, humans will sin; therefore, humans must have the means for seeking and attaining forgiveness. Therefore Adam was fashioned from the earth beneath the Mizbeach.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, defines who and what we are. It is the most important day in the calendar because it is the day when we individually and collectively address our fallibility, our failures, our mortality, and our desire to be as close to G-d as humanly possible. It is a 24-hour period, the basic time-unit of mortal existence, when we engage in the most comprehensive, introspective, and hopefully honest evaluation of our relationship with our selves, our nation, the world, and G-d. However, there are two components to every sin that must be addressed before complete forgiveness is possible. There is the individual component of sin and there is the national component of sin.

The individual component of sin is our failure to do what we are supposed to do in relation to G-d. Each of us has a mission. Each of us was gifted with unique talents. Each of us is confronted with unique challenges. Each of us also has general obligations and responsibilities to our families, societies, our G-d, and ourselves. To the extent that we do what we are supposed to do and do not do what we are not supposed to do is the degree to which we must seek forgiveness from G-d.

The national component of sin is the effect our individual failures have on the collective mission of our nation and world. G-d did not give the Torah to an individual. G-d did not give the Torah to a family. G-d specifically waited until the children of Avraham and Sarah had grown to be a nation before He gave the Torah.

The interplay of individual and national sin is easily explained with an analogy. Most of us have engaged in team sports. Teams are comprised of two components: the individual talents of each player and their ability to function together as a team. Both components are essential for success on the court or field of engagement. Individual talent without teamwork and teamwork without individual talent are both prescriptions for failure. However, if both are possible and an individual player fails to perform to expectation, the failure must be addressed on both fronts. As an individual the player must answer to himself and his coach. As a member of the team he must answer to the team and to all those who were let down by his failure.

G-d gave the Torah to a team. He gave it to the Jewish nation with the expectations that each individual would do what they were personally obligated to do and that the nation as a whole would become who they were supposed to become and do what they were supposed to do. When a member of the nation personally sins he or she fails themselves, he or she fails the nation, and he or she fails all those who depend on the Jewish nation to be who they are supposed to be and do what

they are supposed to do.

The two components of sin, the personal and the national, require Teshuva and forgiveness. However, as individuals, we can only accomplish the personal component of Teshuva and forgiveness. As individuals, we cannot accomplish the national component of Teshuva and forgiveness. The only way to attain forgiveness for the national component of all our sins is through the office of the Kohain, the Kohain Gadol, the Mizbeach, and the Bais Hamikdash. So long as those essential elements and tools are missing we can never accomplish true and complete national Teshuva.

The national forgiveness must come from the nation. If an individual sins against another individual he or she must ask their victim for personal forgiveness. However, the victim can only forgive their own hurt; they cannot forgive the sinner for the hurt done to someone else. How does the nation forgive? Who can forgive for the nation?

The Kohanim, the children of Aharon, were the ones chosen to forgive the individual on behalf of the nation. To accomplish this, the Kohanim had to function as representatives of the nation. Emulating their father, Aharon Hakohain, they had to learn to love and care for every single Jew. As Kohanim, they had to function within the confines of the Mishkan and Bais Hamikdash. Korbanos could only be brought in the national setting of the Mishkan and Bais Hamikdash.

Added laws of Tumah (impurity) and Taharah (purity) restricted their personal behavior, and they had to be exceedingly careful in everything they said or did. Their clothing, the vestments of the Kohanim, did not belong to them. They belonged to the nation and were purchased from funds raised from the nation. The tools and utensils used in the service of the Temple had to belong to the Temple. They could not belong to an individual, Kohain, or anyone else.

When facilitating the offering of a Korban the Kohain had to focus all his attention on the specific needs of the person bringing the Korban. Then, on behalf of the petitioner, the Kohain would ascend the ramp of the Mizbeach and approach the burning pyre. It was the Kohain who drew near to the flame. It was the Kohain who figuratively approached G-d and offered himself into the service of the Creator. To do so the Kohain had to lose himself in service to the nation. To do so the Kohain had to define himself as a faceless, nameless, functionary whose entire being was devoted to the needs of his people and G-d. To do so the Kohain had to disappear beneath the folds of his Talis (prayer shawl) and stand before the nation as an indistinguishable servant facilitating the relationship between the individual, his people, and G-d.

(Note: A Talis was not worn during the Temple service. The imagery of the Kohain enveloped in his Talis refers to the present day duchaning ceremony when the Kohanim bless the congregation during the holiday davening.)

In the absence of the Bais Hamikdash and the Mizbeach we are bereft of the means for attaining complete forgiveness. We can attend to the individual component of sin; but we cannot accomplish

forgiveness for the national component of each and every sin.

Nadav and Avihu sinned and therefore died because they acted and served as individuals. They did not act as indistinguishable servants and facilitators between the individual, the nation, and G-d. They took their own fire pans, their own spices, their own coals, and they followed the dictates and desires, no matter how noble and well intended, of their own hearts. Therefore, they had to die.

However, in contrast to Nadav and Avihu, the silence of Aharon was deafening. Within the echoes of his silence could be heard the roar of his nation proclaiming "Nasseh V'Nishmah!" (We will first do as commanded and then attempt to understand the reason for G-d's commandment) as Aharon the Kohain Gadol ceased to be an individual and became the embodiment of the nation. It wasn't that Aharon did not feel the pain and the loss. It was simply that his personal feelings became, for the moment, inconsequential. Only as the non-individual Kohain Gadol could Aharon hope to effect forgiveness of the nation. Only as a non-individual could Aharon hope to enter the inner sanctuary of G-d's home on the holiest day of the year Yom Kippur. Only as a non-individual was Aharon silent in the face of such devastating personal tragedy.

In contrast with the sin of Nadav and Avihu the Torah introduced the service of Yom Kippur by mentioning their deaths. Their mission was to lose their independent identities and become representatives of the nation. They sinned and died because they refused to give up their individuality. On the other hand, Yom Kippur is all about the individual correcting himself so that the nation is corrected as well. Captured in the being of the Kohain Gadol is the power of one man to embody an entire nation. Reflected in the service of that one man is the realization that each of us can do and must do the same. Individuality is valued only to the extent that it is sanctified in service of the nation. Our greatest strength is in unity and being one. Our greatest challenge is to be unified as one.

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