

PARSHAS ACHAREI MOS - INVENTING RITUAL

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Inventing Ritual¹

Maybe they had too much time on their hands. Even so, the position of the Tzadokim regarding the ketores/ incense of Yom Kippur seems bizarre.

The Tzadokim, we know, were the original schismatics who rejected the Oral Law. They had good reason to - at least in their minds. Freed from the rigorous demands of complex avodah that our genuine Chachamim describe for us, the Tzadokim could kick back and enjoy life in the here and now. Generally part of a new upper class, they owned more discretionary capital than other Jews. They wanted to enjoy their riches, and enjoy without guilt. To be sure, they needed some sort of religion - everyone had one back then. Following the Written Law seemed reasonable enough, and was far more convenient than having to worry about the myriad details that Chazal found linked to small nuances in the text when they employed the techniques of the Oral Law. Reject the Oral Law, as the Tzadokim did, and life became far less demanding.

Ketores, however, stands this analysis on its head.

The Kohen Gadol entered the Kodesh Kodoshim but once a year, on Yom Kippur. Part of the unique avodah of the day had him bring in ketores and a pan of hot coals. Once inside, he placed the ketores on the goals, producing billowing clouds of smoke that filled the holy chamber.

The Tzadokim changed the order in which the coals and ketores were handled. They ruled that the incense should be placed on the coals before the Kohen Gadol entered. The incense should already be ablaze before the Kohen brought it inside. They were quite insistent upon this, and pressed their point with determination.

This seems completely out of character - part of a strange reversal of roles. Looking at the plain reading of the text, we would instantly side with Chazal! They demand exactly what the pesukim spell out. Experience reminds us that Chazal often approach the text quite differently from what we expect from its plain sense. It would not surprise us if there were some derashah that required a different practice. The Tzadokim, however, are supposed to be the literalists, hewing to the plain drift of the Torah's verses. Yet here, where even Chazal support the plain meaning, the Tzadokim insist on a non-literal meaning. Why?

We needn't puzzle over this too long. They explained their strange position. How could it be, they

asked, that we should treat G-d in a way that we would never treat a human guest? Incense is always brought before a guest already performing its function. We would no sooner set the incense aflame in front of him than we would bring fresh eggs to a table-top burner and there prepare omelets for those seated around. Acting differently to G-d is ludicrous, they claimed. It is an affront to our sense of manners and etiquette.

This claim has some historical precedent. Looking at the relevant pesukim, we conclude that Nadav and Avihu did the same! Not only did they bring a fire and incense into the Mishkon without Hashem's instruction, they added the incense to the fire before they entered, and brought them in already combined.

There are many different opinions in Chazal regarding the transgression of Nadav and Avihu. A theme that runs through several of them is that they trusted their own understanding of what was appropriate - be it for the Mikdosh, or for their own personal spiritual growth. For various reasons, they did not see the need to question their own certainty, and to consult with Moshe and Aharon, the true spokesmen for the Divine Will.

It makes sense that their fire was called an aish zarah - a fire foreign to Hashem's expressed command. The genuine eved Hashem knows only the altar-fire of Torah. What pleases Hashem is compliance with His instructions, not with our vague sense of how we should serve him. He knows of no other **ניחוח ריח** than demonstrating to Hashem that we are prepared to scrupulously obey His commands.

Nadav and Avihu, by contrast, light their own fire. They serve Hashem through forms of their own invention. They not only bring in fire when it is not commanded, but it is their fire - not Hashem's - that they bring in.

Nadav and Avihu, however, were great people. They may have been wrong, but they did not consciously reject the Torah's truth. The Tzadokim imitated them in form but not in substance. Nadav and Avihu's mistake became their mission statement. The only way they knew to serve G-d was born of and limited by their own understanding and their own sensibility.

This amounts to a wholesale repudiation of Torah. It places Man before G-d, even in the way we serve Him. Seen this way, we understand that the Tzadokim never disappeared, or if they did, returned with a vengeance in modern times. We find them in the groups that reject the authority of the Oral Law, and mock any mitzvah that makes little sense to them, or offends their more "refined" and "developed" sense of morality. They clamor to serve G-d - but only on their own terms. Rituals exist only to express Man's need to serve something higher, they teach, and every generation invents the rituals that are meaningful to it. Retaining antiquated rituals that no longer express this need makes no sense to them.

They continue to this day to introduce foreign elements into the Mikdosh. They know, however, no

Divine fire other than the one of their own invention.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Vayikra 16:13
