

Echoes of Eden

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Parashat Aharei Mot 5774

Rectification

The parasha begins with an ominous frame of reference: “After the deaths of the two sons of Aharon.” The deaths of Nadav and Avihu are recounted earlier in the Book of Vayikra, although some five chapters, laden with commandments, separate the tragic events of day of the Tabernacle’s consecration from the Torah’s response to those events in our present parasha. In fact, the content of the commandments that are transmitted in this parasha may be regarded as no less ominous than the events that frame them: In this chapter, God conveys the laws that constitute the Yom Kippur service. The Day of Atonement, first instituted here, will be a constant in Jewish life for all time, yet this first Yom Kippur must have raised mixed feelings for Aharon. On the one hand, Yom Kippur marks the day that Moshe obtain forgiveness from God for the sin of the golden calf; on the other hand, Aharon played no small part in that sin.

We find ourselves at a strange intersection of the two great tragedies in Aharon’s life: the deaths of his children and the sin of the golden calf. One wonders if the thought ever crossed his mind that these events might be connected.

From our perspective, the Yom Kippur ritual seems to contain echoes of both of these tragedies. The sin committed by Nadav and Avihu that led to their deaths was bringing incense that they were not commanded to bring. Conversely, the climactic moment of the Yom Kippur service is the entry of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies and ignites the incense to create a cloud, as per the precise instructions recorded in this parashah. On Yom Kippur, this cloud and the scent it carries somehow facilitate

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forgiveness, whereas in the case of Aharon's sons, the result was the polar opposite.

A cloud of a different kind was a central aspect of the Revelation at Sinai. The cloud was a visual representation of God Himself descending, as it were, to the physical plane in order to rendezvous with His people and give them the Torah. Later, Moshe ascended into the cloud to bring down the Tablets of Stone, the physical testament to the Revelation. While Moshe was at the summit of Mount Sinai, the sin of the golden calf unfolded; as a result, the Tablets were shattered. Thus, in a very real sense, the giving of the Torah, the completion of the process that began as the cloud descended on the mountain, was "ruined" by the golden calf. The cloud dissipated, as did the protective clouds that had accompanied the Israelites as they left Egypt. Only on the tenth day of Tishrei, precisely one year before the events recorded in Parashat Aharei Mot, on the day that would become known as Yom Kippur, the people were forgiven and Moshe was given a new set of Tablets...and as a result, the clouds which protected the Jewish people soon returned. Now, on that same date one year later, Aharon and his descendants are commanded to recreate the cloud, to enter the Holy of Holies in a cloud of incense. This cloud, on this day, will effectuate forgiveness.

In the Yom Kippur ritual, God elegantly addressed both failings: By commanding Aharon to bring incense, God instructed Aharon to do what his sons had done, with one crucial difference: They had now received a commandment. There would be no free-style, spontaneous worship; approaching the holiest place on earth would be permitted only through precise adherence to the Word of God. On the other hand, the cloud of incense would recreate the atmosphere at Mount Sinai on the day the Torah was first given. Yom Kippur captures both the exalted moment before the sin of the golden calf and the

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day the Torah was finally received – the day God forgave them for their terrible transgression and Moshe descended with the second Tablets of Testimony. This same day becomes, for all time, a day on which we can return to a more pure state, cleanse ourselves of our sins, and make a new commitment to accepting God’s commandments – which is the very core of repentance, the very essence of the day. God even accepts our clumsy, misguided attempts to relate to Him by transforming those very same actions into commandments that lie at the heart of the Day of Atonement, creating the dynamic that recasts our sins as mitzvot.

By commanding Aharon to do precisely what his sons had done – to recreate the cloud of Revelation and seek out intimacy with the Divine – God allows each and every one of us to experience that intimacy every Yom Kippur. When we approach this intermingling of holiness and intimacy properly, even the most profound transgressions can be forgiven.

For a more in depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/04/parshiot-acharei-motkedoshim.html>

Torah for Pesach:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/04/torah-for-pesach.html>