

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Acharei Mos

The Avodah of Yom Kippur

The opening section of this week's parsha is well known to us as the Torah reading for Yom Kippur morning, as it details the unique *avodah* (sacrificial service) of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur.

Some Questions

Let us open our discussion by raising some basic parshanut questions regarding this section:

1. Timing: As a rule, when the Torah presents mitzvos that apply to a particular day, it first mentions the day and then proceeds to describe the mitzvah. For example, when describing Pesach, the Torah first mentions the date - "on the fifteenth day of this [first] month (of Nissan)" - and then states that it is "Chag Hamatzos", during which we are to eat matzos,¹ and so too with the other festivals. In our parsha, the order is *reversed*: the entire sequence of the *avodah* is described over the course of thirty verses without any mention first as to when this should all take place! It is only at the very end of the chapter that the Torah informs us as to the timing - "In the seventh month (Tishrei) on the tenth of the month." What is behind this reversal?
2. The Concluding words: The final words of this chapter read, "וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת־מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי אֹת מֹשֶׁה" — and [Aharon] did as Hashem commanded Moshe."² These words seem completely superfluous, for is it not obvious that Aharon would do as Hashem commanded Moshe?³

¹ Vayikra 23:6.

² Verse 34.

³ See Rashi there who explains that the verse is not referring to the fact the Aharon did the *avodah*, but rather to the way in which he performed it, namely, that it was purely in response to Hashem's command and not with any goal of self-aggrandizement.

Gold and White - Is Change in Order?

An additional question in our parsha relates to the different stages of the *avodah* as presented in the verses, in light of a tradition we have concerning those stages.

One of the unique features of the *avodah* on this day is that certain *avodahs* are performed by the Kohen Gadol while wearing his normal “Golden” garments (so called because they contain gold thread), while others are performed with him wearing pure white linen garments. The rule is that *avodahs* outside of the Kodesh Hakodashim (Holy of Holies) require the normal gold garments, while *avodahs* inside the Kodesh Hakodashim require the white garments. Each change of clothing was accompanied by the Kohen Gadol immersing in a *mikveh*, as well as washing his hands and feet both before and after. The changes of garments during the day are as follows:⁴

1. **Gold:** The morning *tamid* offering in the courtyard.
2. **White:** The sprinkling of the blood of special Yom Kippur offerings in the Kodesh Hakodashim, and the offering of *ketores* (incense) there.
3. **Gold:** Some of the *mussaf* offering plus other Yom Kippur offerings in the courtyard.
4. **White:** Returning to the Kodesh Hakodashim to remove the ladle and shovel upon which the *ketores* had been placed earlier.
5. **Gold:** The rest of the *mussaf* offerings and the afternoon *tamid* offering.

As we can see, there are five changes of garments in total. However, if we read the verses in our parsha, we will see that verse 23 which describes the re-entering the Kodesh Hakodashim (stage four) is written **immediately after** the other *avodahs* there (stage two). In other words, the verses describe all of the Kodesh Hakodashim *avodahs* together, with nothing in between! If this were the case, then the Kohen Gadol would only need to change into the white garments once, giving us a total of three changes (Gold-White-Gold) - yet we know that there are five!

⁴ [For the sake of brevity and simplicity, we have not listed all the *avodahs* done while wearing the golden garments, sufficing with a mention of those which represent *avodahs* done outside the Kodesh Hakodashim at those stages. See Rashi to verse 23 for a complete list of the different *avodahs*.]

For this reason, the Gemara⁵ states that verse 23 (the Kohen Gadol returning to the Kodesh Hakodashim) is to be understood as being written out of order, i.e. it actually takes place after other(stage three) *avodahs* that are described in later verses (24-28).

Observing all this, we are moved to ask a simple question: Why are the verses that present the order of *avodah* on Yom Kippur not written in the order in which they actually take place?

A fascinating answer to all the above questions is provided by the Vilna Gaon.⁶ Indeed, it is safe to say that after hearing his approach, the beginning of Parshas Acharei Mos may never look the same again.

The Vilna Gaon: One Chapter - Two “Parshiyos”

The basis of the Vilna Gaon’s approach is a comment of the Midrash in our parsha:⁷

“Said Rav Yudan bar Simon, Moshe suffered great distress when he was told regarding Aharon “וְאֵל יִבְאֵ בְכָל עֵת אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ – he shall not enter the Kodesh [HaKodashim] at all times” (pasuk 2). A “time” (תע) might mean an hour, a day, a year, twelve years, seventy years, forever! Said Hashem to Moshe, ‘It is not as you think ... rather, whenever he wants he may enter, provided he enters with the following order (of korbanos).’”

We see from the Midrash that the *avodah* described in the beginning of our parsha exists in two capacities:

- **For Aharon:** This was an order of *avodah* of which he could avail himself at any time in order to enter the Kodesh Hakodashim.
- **For subsequent Generations:** This order of *avodah* applies only once a year, for the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur.

⁵ Yoma 32a, cited in Rashi to verse 23 s.v. *u’pashat*.

⁶ The Vilna Gaon’s explanation is quoted by his student, R’ Binyamin Rivlin in his sefer *Gevi’i Gevia Hakesef*, and by R’ Avraham Danzig (author of *Chayei Adam*) in the section at the end of his sefer *Chochmas Adam* entitled *Matzeivas Moshe*. For further discussion of this approach, see *Haamek Davar* to verse 23, and *Kli Chemdah* and *Birkas Peretz* beginning of Parshas Acharei Mos.

⁷ Vayikra Rabbah 21:7. See also Shemos Rabbah 38:8.

It emerges that, in pure terms, it is not entirely accurate to refer to the opening section of our parsha as “the order of *avodah* for Yom Kippur.” Rather, it is more correctly defined as “the order of entering the Kodesh Hakodashim,” which for Aharon could happen at any time, while for subsequent Kohanim Gedolim is restricted to Yom Kippur.

In the Gemara

Interestingly, according to R' Yaakov Kamenetzky,⁸ there is clear support for this idea from the Gemara as well. In Maseches Gittin⁹ it states that eight sections of halachah were taught on the opening day of the Mishkan. Among these sections, the Gemara lists the beginning of Acharei Mos. Now, seemingly, the choice of those eight sections is based on the notion that they were already relevant on that day. This, however, raises an obvious difficulty, since the Mishkan was inaugurated on the first day of Nissan - more than half a year before Yom Kippur! Why was it being taught now? Rather, we see that this section was of immediate relevance, since Aharon could perform this order of *avodah* at any time, as stated by the Midrash!

Back to Our Questions

With the above idea in mind, the Vilna Gaon addresses the question we raised in the beginning of our discussion:

1. Timing: We now understand why the Torah did not present this section the way it normally does, first by mentioning the date and then describing the mitzvah. With regards to Aharon, to whom it was first communicated, this section was not limited to any particular date! It is only at the end of the chapter¹⁰ that this *avodah* is “timestamped”, as we are told that in future generations it is applicable specifically to one day in the year - Yom Kippur.

Indeed, in this light we can appreciate that when the Torah refers to Aharon throughout this chapter, it is not merely as a way of referring to the Kohen Gadol - which he happened to be at that

⁸ *Emes le'Yaakov*, Vayikra 16:2.

⁹ 60a.

¹⁰ Verses 29-34.

time; rather, it is to Aharon specifically. It is only toward the end of the chapter, when this *avodah* is being presented for Yom Kippur in future generations, the reference shifts to the Kohen Gadol.¹¹

2. The Concluding Words: This approach will give us a completely different understanding of the final words of the chapter: “And Aharon did as Hashem commanded Moshe.” We asked, is it not obvious that Aharon would fulfill a mitzvah at its appointed time, as told to him by Moshe? However, according to the Vilna Gaon, these words are not referring to Yom Kippur, but rather to Aharon immediately availing himself of the opportunity to enter the Kodesh Hakodashim with this *avodah*, which was permitted to him from that day onwards!

Was Yom Kippur Different for Aharon?

Having understood that the *avodah* in our parsha existed in two capacities, we now ask:

Was the *avodah* as performed by Aharon identical *in every way* to that of Yom Kippur?

This brings us back to the matter of changes of clothing, as described in the parsha. We noted that the verses themselves only seem to indicate three changes, whereas practically we know that there were five. Why would the Torah not write the changes in the order that they actually happened?

The answer, says the Vilna Gaon, is that the Oral Tradition which states that there are five changes of clothing relates *specifically to Yom Kippur*. In contrast, if Aharon was to perform this *avodah* on any other day of the year in order to enter the Kodesh Hakodashim, there was no such requirement. Rather, on those days, all the *avodahs* involving the white garments could be performed together, which would mean that there only needed to be three changes of garments in total - exactly as the parsha writes them!

¹¹ A simple reading of the Vilna Gaon's approach indicates that the possibility of entering the Kodesh Hakodashim at any time applied to Aharon specifically, presumably due to his unique spiritual level as the first Kohen Gadol. The Meshech Chochmah (verse 3) explains somewhat differently, based on a comment of the Seforno in the end of Parshas Emor, to the effect that during the forty years in the wilderness, the Mishkan enjoyed the elevated spiritual status on a daily basis that in future generations would exist only on Yom Kippur.

In other words, the order of the verses on a pshat level reflects the parsha as referring to Aharon specifically. What is amazing here is that these *avodahs* as they related to Aharon are not only *included* in the parsha, but they actually are *given precedence* over the yearly Yom Kippur *avodah* in terms of how the verses order them.

That is a chiddush!