

Meshech Chochmah Parshas Acharei Mos

Yom Kippur, the Parah Adumah and the Breaking of the Luchos

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן... בְּזֹאת יָבֹא אַהֲרֹן אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ

Hashem spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon... With this shall Aharon come into the Sanctuary (16:1-3)

Three Statements of Chazal regarding the Death of Tzaddikim

The Yerushalmi in Maseches Yoma¹ records three statements regarding the passing of tzaddikim, the first of which is based in our pasuk:

1. Commenting on the Torah's juxtaposition of the mention of the death of Aharon's sons and the avodah of Yom Kippur, the Yerushalmi states that just as Yom Kippur atones, so, too, the death of tzaddikim atones.
2. In a similar vein, the juxtaposition of the Torah's account of the death of Miriam to its presentation of the laws of the Parah Adumah² teaches that just as the ashes of Parah Adumah effect atonement for Israel, so, too, the death of tzaddikim effects atonement for Israel.
3. Finally, the Yerushalmi notes the juxtaposition of the Torah's account of the death of Aharon with it mentioning the breaking of the *luchos*,³ commenting: This is to teach you that the death of tzaddikim is as difficult before Hashem as the breaking of the *luchos*.

What is the meaning behind these three statements regarding the passing of tzaddikim, the first two of which seem essentially the same?

A Time of Divine Favor

The Meshech Chochmah explains that each of these statements reflects a distinct element that may pertain to the passing of a tzaddik.

The first element can be found in Yom Kippur. The special quality of Yom Kippur is that it is an **עת רצון**, a time of Divine favor, during which Hashem is particularly

¹ 1:1

² Bamidbar perek 19-20.

³ Devarim 9:17-20.

well disposed toward granting the Jewish People atonement. So too, when a tzaddik passes away, Hashem rejoices over the return of a pure soul having completed its mission on earth. As such, it is also an עת רצון when atonement can be more easily fulfilled, just as on Yom Kippur.

There is a proviso, however. Yom Kippur only effects atonement for a person who approaches the day with due reverence, not someone who relates to it flippantly.⁴ Likewise, the passing of a tzaddik only signifies an עת רצון for someone who reveres the tzaddik, while one who has no such reverence cannot partake of the עת רצון that exists upon his passing.

Reflection and Introspection

A second quality that accompanies the passing of a tzaddik is in the area of reflection and spiritual stock-taking. The procedure of sprinkling the Parah Adumah ashes is administered to someone who has come into close contact with a dead body. This encounter engenders within a person a consciousness of his mortality, which should lead him to take stock of the way he is leading his life. Likewise, when a tzaddik passes away, it is time for all to reflect on their own lives, for even someone as righteous as the departed was unable to escape death.⁵ Additionally, the tzaddik may have exerted protective merit on those around him while he was alive, as well as praying for their wellbeing. In the absence of this merit, people will be roused to attain more merits by virtue of their own actions.⁶

Removing a Source of Indictment

A third element of atonement within the passing of a tzaddik relates not so much to what happens when he passes away, but to what would have happened had he remained in this world.

There are times when a person's status and that of his actions is assessed relative to others in his environs. Thus, we find, for example, Noach is referred to as a "perfect tzaddik in his generations,"⁷ which Chazal⁸ explain to mean relative to

⁴ See Shavuot 13a.

⁵ In the words of the Gemara (Moed Katan 25b): "If a flame has taken hold [even] of the cedar trees, what, then can the shrubs growing from the wall do?"

⁶ See Sanhedrin 37a where it recounts that there was a group of wayward individuals for whose wellbeing R' Zeira would pray. When he passed away, they said "Who, now, will pray for us?", and they were moved to do teshuvah.

⁷ Bereishis 6:9.

⁸ See Sanhedrin 108a.

the wicked people in his time, while had he lived in Avraham's generation he would not have been considered a tzaddik. Conversely, we find that the woman of the household where Eliyahu enjoyed hospitality complained to him "You have come here to recall my wrongdoing!"⁹ Meaning, that before Eliyahu came she was considered righteous, but now, in his elevated presence, she was considered relatively lacking in merit.¹⁰

Therefore, if there is a tzaddik whose conduct – and exhortations – are ignored by those around him, his presence serves to indict their actions. Since Hashem wishes to see His people exonerated, He removes the tzaddik from their midst, so that the only people to whom they can be compared are the nations of the world, relative to whom they can now be assessed as tzaddikim. In this regard, the Meshech Chochmah cites the comment of the Sifrei¹¹ on the pasuk in Devarim¹² "You contended with him at Mei Merivah" – You arranged a pretext for him. Since Aharon's¹³ level was so far above that of the new generation that had been born in the wilderness, his presence was an indictment of them and hence, Hashem "conspired" to arrange trying circumstances at Mei Merivah such as would justify him leaving the world.

This concept finds a parallel in Moshe breaking the *luchos*. Chazal¹⁴ explain that the *luchos* represented the sealing of our relationship with Hashem which is compared to that of husband and wife. Having made the Golden Calf, the worship of which is tantamount to "adultery" in our marriage with Hashem, that relationship would serve only to condemn us all the more. Hence, Moshe chose to break the *luchos*, thereby removing that aspect of the relationship and sparing us that further level of condemnation. Thus, the Yerushalmi states that the passing of a tzaddik is like the breaking of the *luchos*, as in this respect, it achieves the same goal.

⁹ Melachim I, 17:18.

¹⁰ Yalkut Shimoni to Melachim ibid. In this vein, the Gemara (Yoma 35b) states that "Hillel indicts the poor," i.e. his efforts to learn Torah in spite of his poverty serve as a criticism for others who cite their poverty as the reason for their neglect of Torah study.

¹¹ Devarim sec. 349.

¹² 33:8.

¹³ [The beginning of that pasuk ("תוּמִיךָ וְאוֹרֵיךָ לְאִישׁ חִסִּידֶיךָ") refers to Aharon.]

¹⁴ Shemos Rabbah 43:1.

The Yom Kippur Service during the Forty Years in the Wilderness

דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן אַחִיךָ וְאֵל יִבְא בְּכֹל עֵת אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ... בְּזֹאת יָבֹא אַהֲרֹן אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ

*Speak to Aharon, your brother, he shall not come at all times into the Sanctuary...
With this shall Aharon come into the Sanctuary (16:2-3)*

The opening section of our parsha details the special order of avodah that takes place on Yom Kippur. Commenting on the words in our pasuk that that Aharon is not allowed to enter the *Kodesh Hakodashim* (Holy of Holies) at all times, the Midrash states:¹⁵

“Said Rav Yudan bar Simon, Moshe suffered great distress when he was told concerning Aharon “he shall not enter the Kodesh [HaKodashim] at all times”. A “time” (עת) 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).’”

This statement is most astonishing. The Torah explicitly concludes this chapter¹⁶ by stating that the order of korbanos described therein is *for one day in the year only* – Yom Kippur! How, then, can the Midrash say that it was applicable on any other day of the year that Aharon desired to enter the *Kodesh Hakodashim*?

Life in the Midbar and Life after the Midbar

The Vilna Gaon¹⁷ explains that the Midrash’s statement refers to Aharon specifically, for it is only with regards to his descendants that this avodah is restricted to Yom Kippur. Indeed, it is for this very reason the Torah mentions Yom Kippur specifically at the end of the section, where it states: “ וְהָיְתָה זֵאת – לְכֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְכַפֵּר עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל... אַחַת בַּשָּׁנָה *– This shall be for you an eternal decree, to atone for the children of Israel... once a year.*” As if to say:

¹⁵ Vayikra Rabbah 21:17.

¹⁶ Pasuk 34.

¹⁷ The Meshech Chochmah cites this explanation of the Vilna Gaon in the name of the work *Gevii Gevia Hakesef*. See also *Chochmas Adam* in the section at the end of the sefer entitled *Matzeivas Moshe* who also cites and discusses the Vilna Gaon’s explanation.

Whereas for Aharon, this order of avodah is relevant on any day of the year, for future generations (חֻקַּת עוֹלָם) it will apply only once a year.¹⁸

“For in a cloud I will appear”

The Meshech Chochmah explains the unique status of the forty years in the Wilderness with respect to these korbanos by referring to a comment of the Seforno in Parshas Emor,¹⁹ relating to the offering of the *ketores* and the lighting of the menorah. Although these procedures can be performed by a regular Kohen, the pesukim describing them nonetheless make specific reference to Aharon. The Seforno explains that throughout the years in the midbar, the Mishkan had the status of Yom Kippur *every day*. The exalted level of Yom Kippur is described in the beginning of our parsha:²⁰ “For in a cloud I will appear.” The pasuk at the end of Chumash Shemos²¹ informs us that the Mishkan in the Wilderness had a cloud hovering over it constantly! Therefore, says the Seforno, in the same way that on Yom Kippur, all parts of the *avodah* are performed specifically by the Kohen Gadol, so too, on a daily basis during those forty years; therefore, the pasuk states that “Aharon” specifically should offer the *ketores* and light the menorah.

Says the Meshech Chochmah: Since “Yom Kippur conditions” pertained in the Mishkan every day throughout those forty years, we can now understand how Aharon had the possibility of performing the avodah that would later be restricted to Yom Kippur – on any given day! Moreover, he adds, according to this analysis, it is apparent that this possibility existed not only for Aharon, but also for Elazar, his son, who was the Kohen Gadol in the Mishkan for the final eight months of Bnei Yisrael’s stay in the midbar.

Taking this matter one stage further, the Meshech Chochmah proceeds to explain not only how it was possible to offer these “Yom Kippur” korbanos on other days in the midbar, but also why it was necessary. The primary effect of these korbanos is referred to in our parsha as “atoning for the sanctuary,”²² and

¹⁸ In other words, the term “חֻקַּת עוֹלָם” does not represent a continuation of present conditions for all future generations; rather, it reflects the parameters for future generation in contrast to those that pertain in the initial period of the midbar.

¹⁹ Vayikra 24:3.

²⁰ Pasuk 2.

²¹ 40:38.

²² Pasuk 33.

“atoning for the impurity of Bnei Yisrael,”²³ i.e. for *korbanos* offered in the Mishkan in a state of *tumah*.²⁴ According to the opinion of R’ Yishmael,²⁵ meat was only permitted for consumption in the midbar when the animal was brought as a korban. Hence, there were much larger numbers of people offering *korbanos* in the Mishkan on a regular basis, bringing with it a much greater likelihood of something being offered in a state of *tumah*. This made it appropriate to perform the avodah that atones for such impurity on a more regular basis than the once a year which would suffice in all subsequent generations.

²³ Pasuk 16.

²⁴ See Shavuos 2a-b and Zevachim 6b.

²⁵ Chulin 17a.