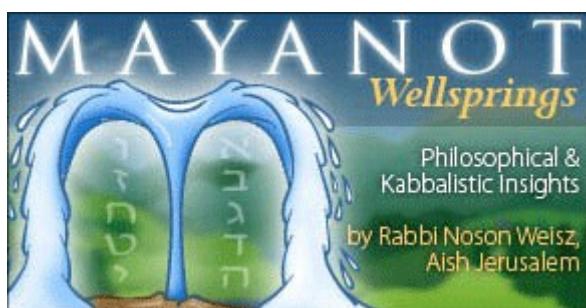


## In This Issue

- **Mayanot by Rabbi Noson Weisz**
- **M'oray Ha'Aish by Rabbi Ari Kahn**
- **Covenant and Conversation by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks**
- **The Guiding Light by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen**



## The Scapegoat

*"The goat will bear upon itself all their inequities..." (Leviticus 16:22)*

Our Parsha begins with the discussion of one of the most perplexing ceremonies in the Torah; the offering of a "scapegoat" to atone for our sins – the goat that is pushed over the cliff on the Day of Atonement and carries away all the sins of the Jewish people on its back.

Maimonides tells us that the "scapegoat":

...[Has the capacity to] atone for all the sins in the Torah, whether they be light or grave, whether the transgression was committed unintentionally or with deliberation, whether the sin is known to the perpetrator or whether it is not ... (Laws of Repentance 1:2)

By way of explanation the Midrash offers the following idea:

This goat [the scapegoat, called *sair* in Hebrew] refers to Esau, as it is written: *"but my brother Esau is a hairy [written as *soir* in Hebrew] man"* (Genesis 27:11) [The Hebrew words *sair*, "goat," and *soir*, "hairy" are spelled identically.]

[It is further written]: *"The goat will bear upon itself all their inequities (avonotam).*" In Hebrew the word *avonotam* can be split into two words *avonot tam*, meaning "the inequities of the innocent." This is a reference to Jacob about whom it is written: *"Jacob was a wholesome (tam) man"* (Genesis 25:27). The word *tam* in Hebrew means wholesome or innocent. (Bereishis Rabba 65:15)

The scapegoat represents Esau, and the Midrash suggests that this explains how it works; the sins committed by Israel are somehow traceable back to Jacob, as we are all his descendants. Jacob's sins can somehow be blamed on Esau, and therefore it makes sense that the goat, which represents Esau, carries away all of Israel's sins. Is there any way we can bring these seemingly strange concepts a little closer to earth?

## HUMAN SCAPEGOATS

This week's Torah portion opens with an incident involving human deaths that is reminiscent of the scapegoat concept:

*"God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, who brought an [unauthorized] offering before God and they died." (Leviticus 16:1)*

As we might recall from Parshat Shmini (Leviticus, Chap. 10) Aaron's sons were consumed by fire when they entered the Holy of Holies unbidden in an attempt to bring an unauthorized incense offering.

Moses offered Aaron the following words of consolation:

*"Of this did God speak, saying: 'I will be sanctified through those who are nearest Me, thus I will be honored before the entire people.' And Aaron was silent."* (Leviticus 10:3)

The Talmud interprets the meaning of this verse with the help of a Midrash:

Moses told Aaron: "Aaron, my brother, I knew that the Temple would be sanctified through someone very holy and close to God. I thought it had to be either you or me ... but now I see that they, Nadav and Avihu, are greater than we are [as they were selected]." (Talmud, Zevochim 115b)

Moses consoles Aaron with the thought that the deaths of Aaron's two sons were required to sanctify the Temple. Apparently two of the holiest Jews alive had to die in order for the Temple to be properly sanctified. Moses thought that he and Aaron would be selected, and he was somewhat surprised when Aaron's two sons were chosen instead. If so, Nadav and

Avihu were also scapegoats of a sort; their deaths were required to inaugurate the Temple for the rest of us.

Although bringing the unauthorized incense is explicitly stated as the reason for their deaths, the Talmud is suggesting that it was not the ultimate reason. While Nadav and Avihu would not have died had they done nothing wrong, the punishment of their sin took into account the fact that their deaths would have secondary effect; there was something still missing in the Temple and their deaths were needed to supply the missing factor.

How can people's deaths do that? What was missing? Doesn't the Torah abhor the very idea of human sacrifice?!

The scapegoat concept is integral to atonement. To understand it better, we must understand atonement better. Atonement is the conclusion of a long process that begins with repentance. To understand atonement better we must do a little work on repentance first.

## REPENTANCE AS A PROCESS

Atonement is conditional upon repentance, and repentance has definite rules. At the very beginning of the Laws of Repentance, when he is discussing the rules of repentance, Maimonides explains that repentance requires confession, and that confession contains three elements:

1. Admitting to having committed the sin.
2. Expressing sincere regret for having

committed it.

3. Making a firm commitment never to do it again.

Without a confession that contains all these elements, complete atonement is impossible to attain no matter how sincere the sinner may be in his heart concerning his or her repentance.

Maimonides discusses the issue of repentance specifically in the context of the Day of Atonement in the second Chapter (*ibid.*):

The Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, is a time of repentance for everyone – for the individual as well as the congregation. It marks the final stage of forgiveness and pardon for Israel and therefore, everyone is commanded to repent and confess on Yom Kippur ... The confession that Israel has adopted to say on Yom Kippur is: But we have sinned, and this is the essence of confession.

(Laws of Repentance 2:7-8)

It is perplexing to note that two of the three elements Maimonides himself earlier stressed as being essential requirements of confession are missing from the Yom Kippur confession he cites – the expression of regret over having sinned, and the commitment never to repeat the sin. If Israel as a nation adopts a standard form confession to recite in order to fulfill the repentance requirement of the day of Atonement and incorporates it into the public prayer all Jews are told to recite, how is it possible that the more important

aspects of confession are missing from it?

## WHY CONFESS?

Let us begin by attempting to understand the role confession plays in the repentance process. We Jews do not confess our sins to a priest who is empowered to give us absolution. Given that repentance really takes place in the heart, what possible role does confession play in it?

Repentance is based on change. A person's actions reflect his beliefs, his character and his personality. Repentance is about changing one or all of the above: If we would enunciate the penitent's claim to forgiveness it would probably sound something like this, "I am no longer the person who committed the sin. I have changed, and the sin I committed no longer expresses the person I am. I look back at the person who committed the sin, and I no longer recognize myself in him or her. Since the new 'me' cannot be identified with the sin it isn't fair to punish me."

When this statement reflects the inner actuality of the speaker, God accepts it and takes note of the change. Since the person has changed, and the sin no longer reflects his character and personality, it is irrational to hold the person of today morally responsible and liable for the acts of a person who no longer exists; God duly pardons the sin.

## THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

Unlike God, we humans are unable to see into people's hearts; we can only see each

other's deeds; we are therefore unable to factor repentance effectively into human justice systems. But most of us do appreciate the rationale of linking repentance to forgiveness. We generally agree that the essence of a person is character, and when there is a profound character change in someone, we are dealing with a brand new person. Most of us can relate to the principle of atonement – if a sinner becomes a genuinely different person from who he was when he or she committed the sin we can all see the justice of excusing him or her from having to suffer the consequences.

In effect then, repentance involves the shedding of old character traits. We are unable to alter our height, our I.Q., or our age, but we are able to change our characters. When we repent we are changing our inner furniture, leaving only the outer shell intact. In the view of most of us, such a change makes us another person entirely.

We cannot shed our character traits without tinkering with the innermost core of our beings, throwing out parts of the old operating system that was in charge of directing the drives and motivations that prompted us to sin. To step away from our old selves we need to shed these old motivators like a snake sloughs off his worn out layer of skin and emerge with a brand new operating system that drives us toward the good.

Speech is the only method at our disposal for externalizing our inner selves. It is through the medium of speech that we

express the feelings in our hearts and the thoughts in our minds. When they are expressed they become part of the outer world in a sense. Verbalizing our feelings of repentance by confessing the sins we have committed is our way of discarding old thoughts and attitudes; we eject the feelings that prompted the commission of our sins by speaking them out; we symbolically throw them out of our inner environment wrapped in the packages of our words.

## THE DIFFICULTY OF CHANGE

Change is difficult. We often regret our actions as soon as we complete them, but rarely do we succeed in really changing ourselves. Most often we repeat our past mistakes and regret them each time all over again. The third requirement of repentance, the resolution 'never to do this again' is the sticking point that generally defeats our sincere desire to become better people. As everyone who owns a computer knows, when there is something basically wrong with your operating system you are in big trouble. We need serious help to change. This is where the Day of Atonement comes in.

Let us attempt to trace how Yom Kippur operates by looking at the Temple service and applying the spiritual symbols to the individual Jewish heart.

On Yom Kippur, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, and performed precisely the same act that caused the deaths of Aaron's sons. We are reminded at the very outset:

*"And God said to Moses: Speak*

*to Aaron your brother – he shall not come at all times into the Sanctuary (the Holy of Holies) within the curtain, in front of the cover that is on the Ark, so that he should not die; for in a cloud will I appear on the Ark-cover."* (Leviticus 16:2)

Rashi explains:

Why did God couple the death of Aaron's sons with the commandment restricting Aaron's entry into the Holy of Holies? Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah compared this to a sick person who had to be cautioned not to eat cold food or sleep in a damp place. One doctor merely gave him the instructions without elaboration, but a second doctor told him, "Unless you avoid cold food and damp places, you will die as so-and-so died." Clearly the second doctor's warning was more effective. (Sifra)

The first part of this week's Torah portion is devoted to describing the special conditions that are required to render Aaron's annual entry into the Holy of Holies safe.

## HOLY OF HOLIES

In order to understand the significance of entering the Holy of Holies, we have to remember how we ourselves are put together spiritually.

Tradition teaches that the human soul has five levels, of which the lower three are connected to our physical selves. And it is these three that concern us here. At the core of our being we are a *neshama*, which

is always connected to God to such a great extent that it is difficult to tell where the Divine Presence ends and the person begins. Although our *neshama* is the core of our being, we are not self-conscious on the level of *neshama*; we are only self-conscious on the bottom two levels of our souls, the *Ruach* and the *nefesh*.

The *neshama* is connected to our *ruach*, our spiritual self. We are all self aware as spiritual beings; we can all imagine ourselves as living without our bodies, and we all have a sense of morality and right and wrong that we know is above all materialistic considerations. The *ruach* is connected to our *nefesh*, the life force that burns within us and is the engine that drives us, the materialistic part of our beings.

The Temple is put together in the same way. The outermost level is called the *Azara*, and that is where the animal sacrifices are all brought. This level parallels the *nefesh*. It is connected to the *Heichal*, a much more spiritual place. No animal sacrifices are ever offered there. The incense is offered in the *Heichal*, that is where the Menorah is to be found; the Holy bread that stays warm and fresh from Shabbat to Shabbat is there. It is clearly a more spiritual part of the Temple, but we still have daily access to it just as we do to our own spirituality. This level parallels the *ruach*.

Finally within the innermost recesses of the *Heichal* is the Holy of Holies; a separate alcove that is curtained off; the Holy Ark is kept there and this is the place that the *Shechinah* inhabits; we do not have daily

access to this part of the Temple at all. The only person who ever enters it is the High Priest, and even he is only allowed to enter once a year. This lack of access is clearly an existential expression of our lack of access to our own *neshamot*.

## DEFINING YOURSELF

The symbolism is clear; the High priest who enters the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur must enter it on the level of *neshama*.

Life is problematic only because we are not really sure about how to define ourselves. Were we able to see ourselves clearly as *neshamot* and were we therefore conscious of our unbreakable attachment to God, the point of our lives would be quite clear to us; we wouldn't be at all confused as to why we exist and what we are supposed to do with our lives. But God decreed that we must live with free will, and therefore the awareness of how our life depends on our attachment to God at the source of our beings is withheld from our self-consciousness.

Instead we are placed in a situation of existential conflict; our raging life force, the *nefesh*, and our spiritual side, the *ruach*, are always contending with each other pulling us in different directions. The ceaseless conflict confuses us; none of us are sure of who and what we are. No one wants to deny their real selves and live the wrong life; our confusion about who we are is the source of our sins. The eternal confusion is the dilemma that forms the backdrop against which we must exercise our free will.

Our state of oblivion regarding the existence of our *neshama*, the highest level of our soul that is always attached to God renders us incapable of reaching clarity about who we are and clearing up our confusion.

Stepping into the Holy of Holies means becoming self-conscious as *neshamot*. The fog of confusion is instantly dissipated and replaced by total clarity of vision. To enjoy such clarity runs contrary to the purpose of living in this world. To enter the Holy of Holies is to step out of life as God decreed that it must be lived here in this world of difficult choices. When Nadav and Avihu took this step, they terminated the point of their continued existence in the world of choice and therefore left it; they died.

But they sanctified the Temple in the process. They demonstrated the existence of the Temple on the level of *neshama*, they demonstrated the existence of their own Neshamot, the state of the attachment of the *neshama* to God, and how this relationship is mirrored by the Holy of Holies in the Temple. To us plain folks the cause of their death would perhaps have remained a total mystery; but to the 'generation of the wise' who stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai the lesson taught by their deaths was obvious, and revealed the power of the heretofore missing dimension of the Temple, the Holy of Holies.

## THE GIFT OF YOM KIPPUR

We are at the cusp of Yom Kippur. The level of clarity to which Nadav and Avihu aspired may not be possible to hang on to in this

earthly life, but the occasional attainment of such a level of clarity is a matter of necessity for every Jew. We must be able to obtain an occasional glimpse of our true origins, otherwise the accumulation of the errors of existence will move us steadily further and further away from our *neshamot*, from the point of our attachment to God until the way back becomes so cluttered with the debris of our mistakes that the return journey becomes impossible to attempt.

Existence in a state of irreconcilable confusion is just as purposeless as existence in a total state of clarity. Neither state allows for the existence of free will. If we totally lost the ability to find our way back to our origins we would also lose the point of our existence.

That is why God gave us Yom Kippur. On this one special day, God allows us to step out of our ordinary selves and offers us a glimpse of our true connection to Him. Our representative, the Kohen Gadol, is allowed to become self-aware on the level of *neshama*. This allows us all to get a glimpse of who we really are and points the way back to our origins by temporarily resolving our inner conflicts and allowing us to reach clarity. We can push out the things that separate us from God as long as we are under the inspiration of the clarity offered by the entry of the Kohen Gadol into the Holy of Holies.

Armed with this information we can easily comprehend the difference between the confession of the ordinary penitent, and the confession we utter on Yom Kippur. In the

confusion of ordinary life, when we are not self aware on the level of *neshama*, changing our characters and redefining ourselves is a heroic process. The attainment of the level of sincere regret and the ability to form a firm resolution never to return to past misdeeds – the necessary concomitants of *all* character change – are extremely arduous tasks. Therefore, repentance is extremely difficult to attain, and the penitent must reach very lofty spiritual levels on the basis of his own efforts.

On Yom Kippur – when we are offered a glimpse of our origins and the confusion of self-definition is largely eliminated – the rejection of all our negatives becomes a matter of course. We are able to push out all our sinful activities as unreflective of our true selves, because we are provided a glimpse of who we really are. The confession of Yom Kippur is simply that we have sinned. We regret our inequities and can truly resolve never to return to them, not because we have developed the determination and resolve necessary for the achievement of internal change, but because of the clear vision of ourselves that the Holiness of the day provides. The character change of Yom Kippur may be very temporary but it is nevertheless very real.

## THE SCAPEGOAT REVISITED

Isaac's twin sons, Jacob and Esau, were spiritually more powerful than we are. They attained the absolute clarity of vision that comes from total self-definition without the

help of Divine intervention, through the exercise of their own freedom of choice. Jacob defined himself as a *neshama* – Jacob was a 'wholesome man', totally consistent and whole and free of contradictions. Esau declared, "Look I am going to die," thus defining himself as a creature of this world only, a man of the field.

We do not possess the spiritual strength to arrive at the clarity of vision that allows such sharp self-definition, but on Yom Kippur, the original distinction between Jacob and Esau reestablishes itself in all of us with God's help. We, the descendants of Jacob, regain our forefather Jacob's original wholesomeness. Our total lack of confusion highlights the opposite side of the coin as well. All of a sudden we are a billion percent clear that we are not Esau, and we realize that the spiritual problems we face the rest of the year comes from the lack of clarity about not being Esau. This then is the secret behind the idea of the "scapegoat."

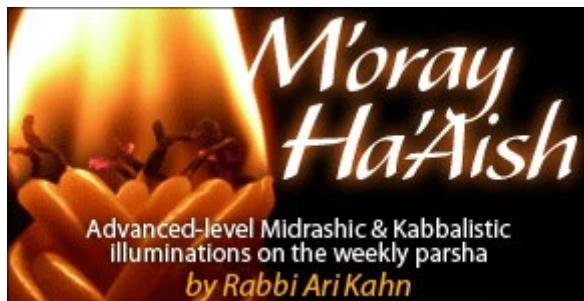
The loss of the Temple and the Holy of Holies, the fact that we can no longer sacrifice the "scapegoat" does not mean that we have entirely lost Yom Kippur. But we have bodies; we are inhabitants of a world of action, not spirit. God gave us a Temple and sacrifices because He knows that we are always hampered by the inability to translate our thoughts into deeds. Today, Yom Kipur still helps us to attain the spiritual level of true repentance, but the absence of the physical entry of the Kohen Godol into the Holy of Holies and the lack of the actual scapegoat, makes it much more difficult for us to hang on to the

inspiration provided by this great uplift.

## THE SECRET OF RETENTION

The answer is to focus on the positive. On Yom Kippur, when we reach the level of *neshama* we should take upon ourselves one single Mitzvah that we will observe throughout the year on the level that we would observe all our Mitzvoth if we managed to hang on to the clarity of Yom Kippur. It would be foolish to select a difficult Mitzvah; even as we stand before God on Yom Kippur on the level of *neshama*, we are perfectly aware that tomorrow we will not even remember how it felt. A good example of an easy mitzvah: a single blessing; to always recite the blessing over water with the utmost focus and attention.

A small step perhaps, but it nevertheless allows us to keep the level of *neshama* as an actuality in our lives during the year. Connection to holiness means rejection of the opposite. If we retain a small point of holiness, we also retain a small point of separation from the level of Esau. The essence of the scapegoat is complete detachment from what he represents. If we are totally detached from the level of Esau, the actions that arise out of the connection to him do not truly represent us.



## A Nation of Priests

From the beginning of the book of Vayikra, our attention has been focused on the Mishkan and the rituals to be performed in it. When viewed as a corpus, the myriad laws that comprise "Leviticus" up to this point establish the Mishkan as the epicenter of the Jewish People – both in the geographical sense, as it was positioned in the encampment in the desert, and, as a result, in the symbolic sense, as the center of Jewish life. The various instances of *tum'ah* (usually translated as "impurity") enumerated in Vayikra are expressions of this Mishkan-centric reality. *Tum'ah* and the Mishkan are irreconcilable, and when an individual becomes impure, a process that restores him or her to a state *taharah* is required before reentry into the Mishkan is once again possible.

Aharei Mot begins with the service to be performed each year on Yom Kippur. Even today, we are well-acquainted with the meaning of this day and its detailed ritual of atonement: On Yom Kippur, the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) follows the instructions laid out in Parashat Aharei Mot in order to heal the relationship between man and God. However, a careful reading reveals that although Yom Kippur focuses on expunging the sins accrued by the Jewish

People over the course of the year, it is equally concerned with atoning for the sin of allowing the Mishkan itself to become impure.

This dual focus might lead us to the conclusion that the laws of purity and impurity enumerated in Vayikra are pertinent only insofar as the Mishkan is concerned – an orientation reflected in the moniker "Leviticus" – while outside the Mishkan, holiness was less important, if not altogether irrelevant.

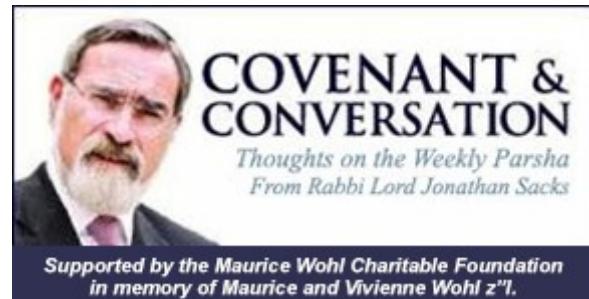
The second section of Parashat Aharei Mot proves otherwise.

Following the discussion of the Yom Kippur service, Aharei Mot focuses on forbidden sexual liaisons. The shift in focus is abrupt, and it is significant for a number of reasons: First and foremost, orgiastic celebrations and other sexually depraved practices were common elements of ancient "religious" cultic practice. By creating clear, immutable categories of permitted and forbidden relationships, the Torah severely curtailed sexual behavior, making cultic licentiousness impossible.

However, the significance of these laws goes beyond the creation of new norms for religious expression. The laws enumerated in Parashat Aharei Mot go beyond the confines of the Mishkan; these are not exclusively "temple" laws that regulate cultic practice. The prohibitions against sexual depravity were not only a consideration "before God" in the Mishkan or, later, in the Temple; these laws go far beyond eschewing the cultic and fertility rites common in the ancient world. These

same norms, we are taught, apply to each and every one of us, in each and every home, each and every relationship and interaction. Here, then, lies the greater message: *Tum'ah* and *taharah* are as applicable in the Temple as they are outside of the Temple. The Jewish home is a place of holiness; adultery, incest, and bestiality are unacceptable anywhere and everywhere.

From the moment they stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and prepared themselves to receive and obey Torah law, the Jewish People became not only a "treasured nation," a "holy nation"- but "a kingdom of priests." (Shmot 19:5-6) This is no simple turn of phrase; it indicates that the entire People, men women and children, all have the status of priests (*kohanim*) at all times, in their normal lives, and not because they perform specific rituals in the Temple. To be sure, the rituals described in Leviticus could be performed only in the Mishkan (and, later, in the Temple in Jerusalem), but the laws of *tum'ah* and *taharah* were not limited to the Temple. The Jewish People were given laws of purity that would create holiness in their personal lives as well, and each and every Jewish home was imbued with this holiness. Each and every home became a sort of temple, and just as pagan sexual practices were not permitted in the Mishkan, so, too, these practices are forbidden in every home, assuring that the entire nation is holy – every person, in every locale, truly God's "treasured nation" – "a kingdom of priests."



## Judaism's Three Voices

The nineteenth chapter of Vayikra, with which our parsha begins, is one of the supreme statements of the ethics of the Torah. It's about the right, the good and the holy, and it contains some of Judaism's greatest moral commands: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," and "Let the stranger who lives among you be like your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt."

But the chapter is also surpassingly strange. It contains what looks like a random jumble of commands, many of which have nothing whatever to do with ethics and only the most tenuous connection with holiness:

- Do not mate different kinds of animals.
- Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed.
- Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material. (Ex. 19:19)

- Do not eat any meat with the blood still in it.
- Do not practise divination or sorcery.
- Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard. (Ex. 19:26-28)

And so on. What have these to do with the right, the good and the holy? To understand this we have to engage in an enormous leap of insight into the unique moral/social/spiritual vision of the Torah, so unlike anything we find elsewhere.

The West has had many attempts at defining a moral system. Some focused on rationality, others on emotions like sympathy and empathy. For some the central principle was service to the state, for others moral duty, for yet others the greatest happiness of the greatest number. These are all forms of moral simplicity.

Judaism insists on the opposite: moral complexity. The moral life isn't easy. Sometimes duties or loyalties clash. Sometimes reason says one thing, emotion another. More fundamentally, Judaism identified three distinct moral sensibilities each of which has its own voice and vocabulary. They are [1] the ethics of the king, [2] the ethics of the priest and [3] the ethics of the prophet.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel talk about their distinctive sensibilities:

For the teaching of the law [Torah] by the priest will not cease, nor will counsel [etzah] from the wise [chakham], nor the word [davar] from the prophets.  
(Jer. 18:18)

They will go searching for a vision [chazon] from the prophet, priestly instruction in the law [Torah] will cease, the counsel [etzah] of the elders will come to an end. (Ez. 7:26)

Priests think in terms of Torah. Prophets have "the word" or "a vision." Elders and the wise have *etzah*. What does this mean?

Kings and their courts are associated in Judaism with wisdom – *chokhma*, *etzah* and their synonyms. Several books of Tanakh, most conspicuously Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (Kohelet), are books of "wisdom" of which the supreme exemplar was King Solomon. Wisdom in Judaism is the most universal form of knowledge, and the Wisdom literature is the closest the Hebrew Bible comes to the other literature of the ancient Near East, as well as the Hellenistic sages. It is practical, pragmatic, based on experience and observation; it is judicious, prudent. It is a prescription for a life that is safe and sound, without excess or extremes, but hardly dramatic or transformative. That is the voice of wisdom, the virtue of kings.

The prophetic voice is quite different, impassioned, vivid, radical in its critique of the misuse of power and the exploitative pursuit of wealth. The prophet speaks on behalf of the people, the poor, the downtrodden, the abused. He (or she) thinks of the moral life in terms of relationships: between God and humanity and between human beings themselves. The key terms for the prophet are *tzedek* (distributive justice), *mishpat* (retributive justice), *chesed* (loving kindness) and *rachamim* (mercy, compassion). The prophet has emotional intelligence, sympathy and empathy, and feels the plight of the lonely and oppressed. Prophecy is never abstract. It doesn't think in terms of universals. It responds to the here and now

of time and place. The priest hears the word of God for all time. The prophet hears the word of God for this time.

The ethic of the priest, and of holiness generally, is different again. The key activities of the priest are *lehavdil* – to discriminate, distinguish and divide – and *lehorot* – to instruct people in the law, both generally as teachers and in specific instances as judges. The key words of the priest are *kodesh* and *chol* (holy and secular), *tamei* and *tahor* (impure and pure). The single most important passage in the Torah that speaks in the priestly voice is Chapter 1 of Bereishit, the narrative of creation. Here too a key verb is *lehavdil*, to divide, which appears five times. God divides between light and dark, the upper and lower waters, and day and night. Other key words are "bless" – God blesses the animals, humankind, and the seventh day; and "sanctify" (*kadesh*) – at the end of creation God sanctifies the Shabbat. Overwhelmingly elsewhere in the Torah the verb *lehavdil* and the root *kadosh* occur in a priestly context; and it is the priests who bless the people.

The task of the priest, like God at creation, is to bring order out of chaos. The priest establishes boundaries in both time and space. There are holy times and holy places, and each time and place has its own integrity, its own setting in the total scheme of things. The kohen's protest is against the blurring of boundaries so common in pagan religions – between gods and humans, between life and death, between the sexes and so on. A sin, for the kohen, is an act in the wrong place, and its

punishment is exile, being cast out of your rightful place. A good society, for the kohen, is one in which everything is in its proper place, and the kohen has special sensitivity toward the stranger, the person who has no place of his or her own.

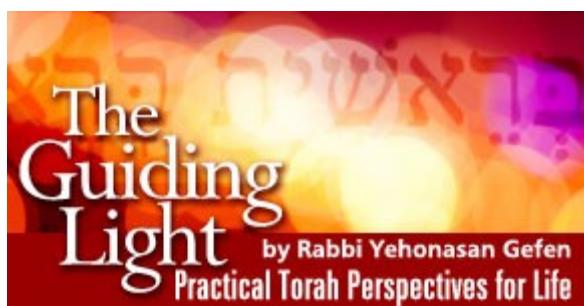
The strange collection of commands in Kedoshim thus turns out not to be strange at all. The holiness code sees love and justice as part of a total vision of an ordered universe in which each thing, person and act has their rightful place, and it is this order that is threatened when the boundary between different kinds of animals, grain, fabrics is breached; when the human body is lacerated; or when people eat blood, the sign of death, in order to feed life.

In the secular West we are familiar with the voice of wisdom. It is common ground between the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and the great sages from Aristotle to Marcus Aurelius to Montaigne. We know, too, the prophetic voice and what Einstein called its "almost fanatical love of justice." We are far less familiar with the priestly idea that just as there is a scientific order to nature, so there is a moral order, and it consists in keeping separate the things that are separate, and maintaining the boundaries that respect the integrity of the world God created and seven times pronounced good.

The priestly voice is not marginal to Judaism. It is central, essential. It is the voice of the Torah's first chapter. It is the voice that defined the Jewish vocation as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." It dominates Vayikra, the central book of the

Torah. And whereas the prophetic spirit lives on in aggadah, the priestly voice prevails in halakhah. And the very name Torah – from the verb lehorot – is a priestly word.

Perhaps the idea of ecology, one of the key discoveries of modern times, will allow us to understand better the priestly vision and its code of holiness, both of which see ethics not just as practical wisdom or prophetic justice but also as honouring the deep structure – the sacred ontology – of being. An ordered universe is a moral universe, a world at peace with its Creator and itself.



## Rabbi Akiva's Students and the Omer

The period of the Omer is characterized by mourning over the tragic deaths of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students. The Talmud explains that they were punished because they did not give sufficient honor to each other.<sup>1</sup> However, the Midrash offers a different explanation. It states that they died because they were unwilling to share their Torah with others. How can these two seemingly contradictory Rabbinic sources be resolved?

In truth, it is possible that both failings

emanate from the same source: They both came about as a result of a slight lack of appreciation for the importance of Torah<sup>2</sup>. The root of their failure to attribute sufficient honor to their fellow Torah scholars was a lacking in some small way in appreciation of the importance of Torah and the accompanying honor one must give those who learn it.

It would seem that the Midrash's criticism that they did not share their Torah could also emanate from a lack of respect for the importance of Torah. This is borne out from the following gemara, as explained by the Maharal. In Shelach, the Torah, in describing one who worships idols, says that "he disgraced the word of Hashem." The gemara in Sanhedrin ascribes this degrading description to a number of other negative forms of behavior such as denying that the Torah is from God. The gemara adds; "Rebbe Meir says; one who learns Torah and does not teach it is included in the category of, 'for he disgraced the word of HaShem'<sup>3</sup>." It is very difficult to understand why learning and not teaching can be placed in the same category as truly terrible sins such as denying that the Torah is from God<sup>4</sup>! The Maharal explains that the honor of the Torah is greatly enhanced when one spreads the word of Hashem to others. One who does not do so prevents Torah from being learnt by others. Therefore, he disgraces the word of Hashem because through his inaction he hinders the enhancement of God's honor<sup>5</sup>. We see from the Maharal that a failure to teach others is indicative of a lack of true concern

of the honor of the Torah.<sup>6</sup>

With this understanding, it seems that the gemara and Midrash are not arguing – both agree that Rebbe Akiva's students were lacking in a slight degree in the appropriate appreciation for Torah. The consequences of these sins were so significant that all of these great men died, and as a result the gemara tells us that the world was desolate of Torah. This would seem to be a measure for measure punishment of their inability to spread Torah to others – since they did not teach Torah, they were punished that with their deaths, the continuation of the Torah would be under severe threat.

This is not the only example where we see that a lack of teaching Torah was the cause of great desolation. The gemara in Avoda Zara describes the first two thousand years of existence as being years of desolation<sup>7</sup>. This period ended when Avraham began to teach Torah to the world. At that time, the 'period of Torah began'. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein notes that there were individuals who learnt Torah before Avraham, accordingly he asks how this period can be described as being one of spiritual desolation? He explains that since these men were not going out to teach others, it was impossible for Torah to spread throughout the world. Thus, even though there were individuals learning Torah, it was a time of great desolation. The desolation only ended when Avraham began teaching the world.<sup>8</sup>

We have seen how the failure to honor and spread Torah led to the devastating tragedy of the death of 24,000 Torah scholars. It is

little surprise that the rectification of the sin was that the new students should spread Torah. Accordingly, the Midrash informs us of Rebbe Akiva's exhortation to his new students. He told them. "do not be like the first students." The Midrash continues that that when they heard this, "they immediately got up and filled all the land of Israel with Torah."<sup>9</sup>

Based on all the above, we have a new perspective about the reasons for the practice of mourning the deaths of the 24,000 students before Lag B'Omer. Some commentaries have pointed out that we do not mourn the deaths of people for longer than twelve months, no matter how great they are. In the Omer we are not mourning the deaths of the student, rather the devastating loss of Torah that came about as a result of their deaths. By mourning this loss of Torah, we can hopefully increase our appreciation for the Torah and the need to spread it to all Jews.

1. Yevamot, 62b.
2. Of course, it should not be forgotten that Rebbe Akiva's student were surely on an extremely high level and their actual failings were very small. However, because of their lofty level, they were judged very severely. However, as is often the case, the Sages magnify their sins so that we can relate to them on our level.
3. Sanhedrin, 99a.
4. See the gemara for the other sins included in this derogatory verse.
5. In Jewish thought, passivity from doing good is considered doing bad.
6. Maharal, Chiddushei Aggadot, Sanhedrin, 99a.
7. Avoda Zara, 9a.
8. Darash Moshe, Parshat Lech Lecha.
9. Kohelet Rabbah

See more great  
parsha essays at:  
[www.aish.com/tp/](http://www.aish.com/tp/)