

ACHAREI MOS (LEVITICUS 16:1-20:27)

From the Summit to the Gutter

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

This week's Torah Portion opens by describing the Yom Kippur Service in the Temple. Not surprisingly, this opening section is also the annual Torah Reading for Yom Kippur morning.

Yom Kippur is a sublime day of immense holiness. On Yom Kippur, G-d is especially close with His People, and offers this day as a time to atone for our sins. The Kohain Gadol, High Priest, spent the day conducting the Service. On this holiest day of the year, the High Priest made his annual visit to the Holy of Holies, a section of the Temple that was off-limits to him the rest of the year, and off-limits to the rest of the nation at all times.

The High Priest burnt incense in the Holy of Holies. According to Tradition, if his thoughts were not totally pure during his visit to the Holy of Holies, he would be struck down on the spot, and would have to be removed via a rope that was attached to his leg.

When the High Priest left the Holy of Holies, his face radiated with holiness. It was a time of joy and sanctity. The People of Israel rejoiced at the fact that they had been forgiven for all the sins of the past year. It was a time of rededication to G-d's Torah.

The end of this week's Torah Portion is a sharp contrast to the beginning. This section, which is read on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, admonishes us not to imitate our old neighbors:

Do not follow the ways of Egypt, where you once lived . . . (Leviticus, 18:3) That in itself fits in with the Yom Kippur theme. However, as the expression goes, the Devil is in the details.

The Torah goes on to list a sordid inventory of forbidden intimate relationships. From incest to bestiality, and everything in between, the Torah warns us not to engage in activities that will lead to our expulsion from the Land of Israel.

QUESTION: Does the Torah really have to address such behavior on Yom Kippur? We are fasting. We are depriving ourselves of creature comforts and spending the day immersed in thoughts of holiness and devotion. We have confessed our transgressions of the past year and promised to avoid the pitfalls of sin in the coming year. We have witnessed the purity of the High Priest coming out of the Holy of Holies. We are on a spiritual high. Is this the time to talk about resisting X-rated temptations??!!

Absolutely!

Imagine going to a banquet where all your favorite foods are available in unlimited quantities. You go from table to table, sampling this smorgasbord of culinary delights. Meats and sides, appetizers and desserts fill you up beyond your capacity to eat. You are happy. You are satiated. You are stuffed . . . Wait several hours and what happens? You are hungry! A full-course meal can satiate you for a little while, but after a while it needs to be reinforced. The same is true when it comes to holiness.

Rabbi Eliezer Shach observed that spiritual inspiration has a very limited shelf life. The fact that one has gone through a Yom Kippur, with all of its holiness, does not mean that he will remain at that level for very long. Human nature does not allow us to maintain a spiritual high without continued encouragement.

Even after watching the High Priest exit the Holy of Holies, we need to be reminded to avoid engaging in the lowest, basest, most degenerate behavior. A person should never fool himself into thinking that he is immune from the tendency to sin. He constantly needs reinforcement.

Rabbi Shach points out that the Torah is telling us to avoid ALL aspects of the Egyptian approach to life. G-d devastated Egypt with the Ten Plagues. The Pharaoh repeatedly repented and promised to release the Hebrews. As soon as each Plague was gone, so was the Pharaoh's contrition. So much for long-term inspiration!

[For a contemporary comparison: In 1991, the U.S.-led coalition "convinced" Saddam Hussein that it was time to stop persecuting people. He learned his lesson, right?]

Some of us can last longer than others without food or sleep. Some of us can go under water and hold our breaths for a mere ten or fifteen seconds. Others can stay under water for a minute or two, or longer! But eventually, we all need to come up for air. Spirituality, says Rabbi Shach, is no different. We all need to constantly recharge our batteries.

If you will listen to My Commandments that I am commanding you today... (Deuteronomy, 11:13). The emphasis of the word "*today*" is to teach us that every day we should accept our responsibilities anew. Never assume that just because I learned yesterday that I need to follow the Torah, that I don't need to be reminded today.

The Torah is read every Saturday, morning and afternoon. It is also read Monday and Thursday mornings. Moses wanted to be sure that we would never go three days without a communal Torah Reading. The Shabbos-Monday-Thursday schedule insures that we never miss our spiritual "shot in the arm."

People are capable of accomplishing great things. They are also capable of accomplishing terrible things. By constantly renewing our dedication to Torah, we remind ourselves how to tell the difference.

Have a great Shabbos.

