

Parshas Acharei Mos

- Avrohom Gordimer.

Good intentions and the death of Aharon's sons

This week's parshah commences with the prohibition of entry to the Kodesh Ha-Kodoshim (Holy of Holies) without authorization; such sanction is granted exclusively on Yom Kippur and only to the Kohen Gadol. This rule is introduced by the phrase, "And Hashem spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon, when they approached before Hashem and died." (16:1) Rashi (ibid.) quotes Toras Kohanim which explains that the Torah invokes the demise of Nadav and Avihu in order to strengthen its warning about entry to the Kodesh Ha-Kodoshim, for they died as a result of illegal passage.

The parshah continues with the details of the Yom Kippur avodah (service) and observances, followed by the issur (prohibition) of slaughtering animals for korbonos outside of the Azarah (Court) of the Beis Ha-Mikdash. Subsequently, the parshah features the issur of consuming blood and the mitzvah of covering blood upon slaughter of livestock and fowl (Kissui Ha-Dam), and it concludes with a lengthy segment concerning Arayos (illicit relations), in which the prohibition of offering to Molech is interwoven.

Do the various themes of the parshah relate to each other?

The Torah's mention of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu is quite perplexing. Although the incident surely reinforces the severity of the issur of unauthorized entry to the Kodesh Ha-Kodoshim, we should perhaps ask why other issurim are not similarly introduced by recalling events which depict the fate of those who violate them. Is some larger message being conveyed by recounting the deaths of Aharon's sons?

The Gemara in Sanhedrin provides various interpretations of the precise act committed by Nadav and Avihu. One opinion states that they entered the Mishkan while intoxicated; another explains that they rendered an halachic decision in the presence of Moshe Rabbeinu. According to all, Nadav and Avihu had the best of intentions, and their actions were focused on serving God. However, Aharon's sons did not confine their motivations to the bounds of halacha; rather, their impulse to act upon their love of Hashem caused them to breach halachic fences.

This notion is extremely telling, for it forms the basis of Parshas Acharei Mos. The various topics of the parshah revolve around the theme of restricting our avodas Hashem (Divine service) according to specific parameters. Yom Kippur is the quintessential day of restriction. Its Mikdash routine is by far the most difficult and detailed, and the individual's observance of Yom Kippur is understandably defined by the Torah as "Inuy" - Affliction, for the restrictions upon each person are extremely tight. Yet, Yom Kippur is also the day when we come closest to God. This very closeness engenders restrictions in how we serve and approach Hashem.

Similarly, the Torah limits sacrificial sacrifice to the Mikdash as a parameter in the manner that God can be served; rather than allowing free, spontaneous sacrificial service wherever one

wishes, one is bound to a specific location. The same holds true for the mitzvah of covering blood and the issur of consuming it, as blood is reserved for use on the Mizbayach (Altar) and is therefore off limits to man (see Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim quoted by Ramban on 17:11), and blood represents the nefesh (soul) of another being which is exclusive to God (Ramban ibid.). These ideas all reflect that avodah must be limited to the boundaries set by Hashem.

The parshah concludes with Arayos (and the issur of Molech). Arayos - representative of the most extreme human passion - are understandably linked with the theme of self-restraint, and as such they appear at the end of the parshah. However, is there any greater connection between Arayos and the balance of Acharei Mos?

The Torah introduces Arayos with a warning not to behave like the heathens of Canaan (who were morally corrupt - see Rashi on 18:3 from Toras Kohanim). Why is this introduction necessary?

The haftarah begins by comparing Bnei Yisroel to other nations, inasmuch as the Jews, too, were physically redeemed but did not live up to the purpose of their redemption. Thus, they are depicted as no better than the Kushites, Arameans and others, whom God salvaged from physical destruction. (The Navi [prophet] continues with the future re-selection of Bnei Yisroel from among the nations.)

The haftarah's comparison of us to other ancient tribes is not just pointed mussar. The words of Amos reveal something at the base of Bnei Yisroel's uniqueness. Unlike other nations, whose passions are either unbridled and unrelated to their religious codes and societal norms (or - in some cases - immoral acts of passion are themselves religious rituals) - Bnei Yisroel are different, as inherent in their observances are restraint of passion and submission to Hashem. It is for this reason that the Arayos prohibitions are central to the parshah and bear an introduction which contrasts Bnei Yisroel's desired behavior with that of Canaan, for the Arayos restrictions identify and set us aside as a people, such that our existence on all levels is unique. This concept is an expansion on the uniqueness of our avodah, which comprises the first part of the parshah. It is for this reason that the issur of Molech is placed in the midst of the Arayos. Molech is an abominable act of heathen avodah, and its mention as part of the section of Arayos indicates that immoral, nonrestrictive norms which corrupt avodah also contaminate society as a whole.

May our service of Hashem be pure and our machaneh (camp) holy.