

**The Greatness of the Kohen Gadol**  
**Acharei Mos/Kedoshim, 5781**  
**Shmuel Herzfeld**

This week in our daf yomi studies we encountered a statement from a rabbi named, R. Yochanan b. Torta. His name is highly unusual. It translates as “Rabbi Yochanan, the **Son of an Ox.**”

The Midrash fills in the gaps as to how he came to have such an unusual name (cited by Tosafot Yeshanim to Yoma, 9a). The backstory is that Yochanan was originally not Jewish (and, so too, Yochanan was not originally his name). What happened was that one time, he had bought an ox from a Jew on a Sunday and the ox dutifully plowed the field every day from Sunday-Friday. However, when Shabbat arrived and Yochanan brought the ox out to work the land, the dutiful ox suddenly refused to work. No matter how hard everyone tried to cajole the ox into doing his job, the ox still refused to work. Yochanan was very upset and he immediately summoned the Jew who sold him the ox and asked him why the ox was not working.

The Jew assessed the situation and then bent down and whispered into the ear of the ox. He told the ox: “Until now you belonged to me. As a Jew I am commanded to keep the shabbat, and therefore you were not allowed to work on Shabbat. But now because I was forced to sell you, you no longer work for me and you are now no longer required to keep Shabbat.” When the ox heard this, he stood up and began to work.

Once Yochanan saw that the ox was working, he demanded to know what exactly the Jew had whispered in his ear. The Jew said: “I promise you that I did not whisper any incantation or witchcraft. I simply told the ox that since he is no longer owned by a Jew, he no longer is obligated to keep the Shabbat.” When Yochanan heard this, he said to himself, “If an ox can recognize the importance of serving our creator on Shabbat, how much more so must a human.” Yochanan immediately decided to convert and become Jewish.

This is an unusual and intriguing tale. But there is actually a similar tale as it relates to our parasha. Connected to our parasha, is another story about an animal that refused to cooperate out of a desire to serve Hashem, and only after someone whispered in its ear did it acquiesce.

Says the Torah:

*“Aaron shall take the two he-goats and let them stand before Hashem at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” (16:7).*

The Midrash tells us that when Eliyahu Hanavi was challenging the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, he selected one bull for himself to bring as a sacrifice to Hashem and a second bull for the prophets of Baal to offer as a sacrifice. However, the bull that was selected for Baal refused

to move and join with the prophets of Baal because that bull did not wish to serve the false god, Baal.

Eliyahu Hanavi had to convince the bull that in order to prove that Baal was a false god it was necessary for the bull to agree to participate in the service. So Eliyahu spoke gently to the bull and said, “Just like when I will bring the first bull, and a fire will come down from Heaven to consume the bull and therefore everyone will see that Hashem is the true Gd and Heaven will be sanctified, so too, through you as well agreeing to be offered to Baal, and a fire *not* coming down to consume you, Heaven will be sanctified. For when the fire does not come down from heaven to consume you as you sit upon the altar of Baal, everyone will surely know that Baal is a false god.”

The midrash continues that this is also what happened with respect to the two goats on Yom Kippur. The Torah tells us that on Yom Kippur, lots (*goraot*) were drawn between two identical goats with the lottery deciding that one of the goats should be offered to Hashem, and that the other goat should be sent off to Azazel. But, here too, on the occasion of the first ever Yom Kippur, which took place with Aaron in the wilderness, the goat that was to be sent off to Azazel refused to go. The goat designated for Azazel argued as follows: “Since the other goat – the one that was supposed to be offered to Hashem—looks almost exactly the same as me, let that other goat be sent off to Azazel instead so that I can be the goat chosen to serve Hashem.” For this reason, Aaron had to bend down and whisper into the goat’s ear that even though it had been selected for Azazel, it too, was serving Hashem by going off to Azazel.

This midrash is derived from the verse: ‘He shall take two goats’—this means Aaron should ‘take them with words.’ And ‘he shall stand them before Hashem’—this means that he should remind them that both of them are ‘standing before Hashem in service of Hashem.’ Even through the goat that is sent off, is sent to Azazel, nonetheless, the Glory of Heaven is increased (*Sefer Shevet Mussar*, by R. Eliyahu b. Avraham, written in 1722).

These midrashim to me represent the idea of the psalmist, “let all souls praise You” (Psalms, 150:6). The Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur in the wilderness, Elijah on Mount Carmel, Shabbat as celebrated by this Jewish farmer, all represent pure moments of incredible spirituality. When such moments happen, their brilliance shines forth to the world with such clarity that even animals, like a goat and an ox can sense this pure spirituality and desire to join.

The goat of Azazel expressing a willingness to serve Hashem represents an attraction to Yom Kippur in its all glory. How incredible must have been that service that Aaron performed in the Mishkan! Oh, what I would give to witness a Yom Kippur service led by Aaron in the Mishkan! How inspiring to see the Kohen Gadol perform this sacred service! Of course, the goat wants to join, for who wouldn’t!

At the same time, these midrashim also make another point—a subversive one. The Kohen Gadol’s rituals are only meaningful with the right intent. It is the right intent that distinguishes between a service to Baal and a service to Hashem. The point is not the specific ritual but that

we must do whatever Gd asks of us. Thus, the goat was sent off to Azazel in service of Gd, and the bull must go up on the altar of Baal in service of Hashem. Just like an animal may sometimes need to go up on an altar to Baal *in order to serve Hashem*, the inverse is also true. Sometimes, tragically, the service of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur could actually turn into a service to an idolatrous god. Without the right intent, the rituals of the Kohen Gadol are meaningless.

Yoma is the tractate of the Talmud that discusses the service of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur. It opens with the phrase, "Seven days prior to Yom Kippur we separate the Kohen Gadol from his house and sequester him in the *Parhedrin* Chamber" (Yoma, 2a).

*Parhedrin* is a word that means bureaucrat. In other words, the Kohen Gadol is sequestered in the Chamber of the Bureaucrats. The Talmud asks the question: "Why do we place the Kohen Gadol in the Chamber of the Bureaucrats when it should be called the Chamber of the Princes?" The Talmud answers that indeed initially the room where the Kohen Gadol was sequestered was called the Chamber of the Princes, but then the Kohen Gadol became a position associated with corruption and a position that was purchased by the highest bidder and so it was called *parhedrin*, as the officers of the King are frequently replaced every year, just like the Kohen Gadol was often replaced (Yoma, 9a).

As the Talmud writes:

*But the years of the wicked will be shortened; that is a reference to the Second Temple, which stood for four hundred and twenty years and in which over three hundred High Priests served. In calculating the tenures of the High Priests, deduct from the figure of four hundred and twenty years forty years that Shimon HaTzaddik served, and eighty years that Yoḥanan the High Priest served, ten years that Yishmael ben Pavi served, and some say eleven years that Rabbi Elazar ben Ḥarsum served. These men were all righteous and were privileged to serve extended terms. After deducting those one hundred and thirty or one hundred and forty-one years, go out and calculate from this point forward and conclude: Each and every one of the remaining High Priests did not complete his year in office, as the number of remaining High Priests is greater than the number of years remaining (Yoma, 9a).*

Many of these Kohanim who did not complete their years were presumably Saducees who were engaged in a major polemic with the Sages as to the proper way to serve in the Beit Hamikdash.

The mishnah says that on the eve of Yom Kippur the Sages would investigate the true intent of the Kohen Gadol:

*The Sages provided the High Priest with Elders selected from the Elders of the court, and they would read before him the order of the service of the day of Yom Kippur. And they would say to him: My Master, High Priest. Read the order of the service with your own mouth, as perhaps you forgot this reading or perhaps you did not learn to read. The Gemara wonders about the depiction in the mishna of the Elders questioning the High Priest as to whether he forgot this*

*reading or perhaps did not learn to read. Granted, perhaps he forgot, that is fine, as it is conceivable that he is not accustomed to reading the Torah and might have forgotten this portion. However, is it conceivable that perhaps the High Priest did not learn to read? Do we appoint a High Priest of that sort who never learned the Bible? .... Here, the mishna is referring to the Second Temple, where...the High Priest was not well-versed in the Bible. As Rav Asi said: The wealthy Marta, daughter of Baitos, brought a half-se'a of dinars in to King Yannai for the fact that he appointed Yehoshua ben Gamla as High Priest. This is an example of the appointment of High Priests by means of bribery and gifts. Since that was the practice, a totally ignorant High Priest could have been appointed (Yoma, 18a).*

The Kohen Gadol is capable of being the purest of the pure; so pure that even an animal can sense his spirituality. Sadly, he is also capable of being a corrupt figure that represents the worst of religiosity that an even an animal can sniff out and see right through.

The challenge of religious Jews is to stay true to the core message of the religious that can lead us to pure spirituality and to avoid the dangerous elements of religion that can lead to a corrupt spiritual experience.

This too, can be seen by a debate between the Sages and the Sadducees about what to us might seem like an esoteric aspect of the Yom Kippur ritual.

*“The Sages taught in a baraita: ‘And he shall put the incense upon the fire before the Lord’ (Leviticus 16:13); this means that he should not prepare by placing the incense outside, in the Sanctuary, and bring into the Holy of Holies a coal pan holding the burning incense. This was emphasized in order to exclude the opinion of the Sadducees, who say that he should prepare the incense outside and then bring it in” (Yoma, 53a).*

The Sadducees argued that incense was supposed to be poured onto a sacred fire while the Kohen Gadol was still outside the Holy of Holies and only afterwards would he carry the fire and smoke from the fiery incense inside the Holy of Holies. On the other hand, the Sages argued the reverse. The incense was only supposed to be poured onto the coals to make smoke once the Kohen Gadol was already standing inside the Holy of Holies.

This became a major polemic between the Sadducees and the Sages and is one of the main reasons why the Kohen Gadol was sequestered and vetted so carefully before he actually performed the Yom Kippur service.

Was there really a difference where the Kohen Gadol lit the fire?

The Derash ve-Haiyun explains that the real difference is does the fire come from inside our core or from an external source. The Sadducees tried to bring an external fire into the Holy of Holies. The Sages said that our spirituality must emanate from a fire the originates in the Holy of Holies.

This is not only a message for the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur. It is a message for all us. All day, and every day, we are constantly bombarded by different messages. Our job as Jews is to distinguish between these messages. What we do and how we do it has to be based upon a core of Torah. Our fire must come from Torah and then influence our actions so that we too can whisper our secrets to the next generation.

*You can now watch a Youtube recording of Rabbi Herzfeld's D'var Torah:*  
<https://youtu.be/o7xOJ6ElgCg>