

“Kach Lecha”

The first *Mishna* in *Yoma* on 2a introduces us to the idea that seven days prior to Yom Kippur the sages would remove the Kohen Gadol from his house to be sequestered in a room of the Temple designated specifically for the purpose of preparing him for the services he will perform in the Temple on Yom Kippur. The goal of the sequestration is to make sure the Kohen Gadol doesn't become *tamei*, which would disqualify him from performing his unique role of achieving atonement for both himself and the nation. Immediately we are invited to contemplate the concepts of purity, sanctity and ultimately holiness, with the Kohen Gadol being the human embodiment of both the nation's and his/our personal aspirations of achieving those lofty goals via atonement, on Yom Kippur.

Considering that an overarching goal of Judaism is a striving for *Kedusha*, and that Yom Kippur inhabits a special time of holiness in the Jewish calendar, it is instructive to try view the preparation and actions of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur through that lens. What emerges is the fascinating theme and unique convergence of sanctity of time (Yom Kippur), place (the Holy of Holies), and person (The Kohen Gadol). Additionally, the holiness of collective vs. individual is a fascinating differentiator explaining the rituals performed by the Kohen Gadol in the Temple on Yom Kippur.

Following the first *Mishna*, the subsequent *Gemara* discussion on Daf 3a, analyses the source(s) for the seven day Kohen Gadol sequestration. Rabbi Yohanan contends that the model we base the Kohen Gadol's actions on, is the *miluim* preparations performed by Aharon and his sons before the inauguration of the *Mishkan* in the desert. Of the various challenges to Rabbi Yohanan's position, the one that caught my attention was when the *Gemara* attempts to show that the Kohen brings many sacrifices at all the major festivals, implying that there is nothing especially unique about the sacrifice Aharon brought as part of the *miluim*, and hence one cannot make any special connection to the *miluim* ceremony and Yom Kippur. Rabbi Yohanan's rebuttal is striking: the sacrifice that the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur brings is uniquely connected to those from the *miluim*, because like Aharon in the desert, here too what makes Yom Kippur especially comparable is the Kohen Gadol must bring a bull and ram **from his own property**. This is based on the verses in the Torah describing the *miluim*, where it uses the phrase "*kach lecha*", for Aharon's sacrifice preparations.

But why is it critical that the sacrifice of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur be from his own possessions and not from those sacrifices brought by the nation? It is even more incongruous when you consider that the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur is representing the entire nation for atonement in probably the most publicly scrutinized ceremony of the year, where the fate of the nation rests upon the success of his petition to Hashem. So wouldn't it make more sense that he sacrifice communal owned animals on the nation's behalf much like the half-Shekel donations by the nation to the building of the *Mishkan* materially demonstrated community buy-in?

At this point, it's instructive to understand *Kedusha*. The first mention of *Kadosh* in the Torah is holiness of time. In *Bereishit*, when creation is described, it culminates in the "Shabbat of time": "God blessed the 7th day and made it Holy". It's no coincidence that the first *Mitzvah* in the Torah is the commandment to sanctify the new moon (i.e. elevate time with holiness). After creating the physical world, you might have thought the next creation would be a suitably impressive holy temple (place) in it, to manifest Hashem's glory. But in fact, the next time holiness is mentioned is at mount Sinai (a non-descript unglamorous place), when before giving the Torah, Hashem says "be unto me a Holy People". Pointedly, this is only after the people craved and demanded a holy object (place) in the episode of the golden calf, to express their (misguided) spiritual aspirations. The construction of the *Mishkan* in the desert was thus a concession from Hashem to the people's baser needs for a more tangible manifestation in physical space, of their spiritual expression – they needed a less ephemeral holiness than time, that was more relatable. And as we know from the famous verse inscribed on the Ohev Shplom shul, "*Veasu Li Mikdash Veshanchanti Betochar*" - holiness is desired by Hashem in the person, not the place. It follows that hierarchically, holiness in time is superior to holiness in place/space. We can also infer that once you are stepping down in holiness to express spirituality in the physical dimension, via sacrifices and other "place" manifestations, you need to perform that service in a very prescribed way so it doesn't lead to the equivalent of a misguided golden calf,

or as in the case of Nadav and Avihu in the dedication of the *Mishkan*, taking too much unscripted initiative, however well intended. The lower the level of holiness, the more prescribed it has to be to ensure proper performance of the service.

So where does the Kohen Gadol and his personal yet communal sacrifice on Yom Kippur fit into this hierarchical conception of holiness? To achieve personal atonement, which in his capacity as Kohen Gadol will scale up to include the nation's – a mandatory milestone on the path to holiness that can be achieved only on Yom Kippur - the Kohen Gadol's role at this potent nexus of sanctity of specific time and sanctity of specific place, is to be an avatar for each individual member of the holy-aspiring nation. He is after all an individual member of that nation too, and in that capacity his actions should mirror what any individual in that role would do, for his personal atonement. He is much more than a representative or an advocate, he is the embodiment of the people, in that time and location. And as such, he represents the fundamental dual nature of a person – a hybrid creation with an intangible soul, contained in a physical body, coexisting by design, in constant tension. In order to help resolve this tension and avoid punishment by death *Torat Kohanim* is characterized by complete and detailed prescribed ritual – no room for innovation or personal expression.

Now you can see how via the rituals on the day of Yom Kippur, wherein the pinnacle of holiness of time, person and place converge, this inherent tension of an individual soul (in this case it happens to be the Kohen Gadol's) housed in a body, is manifest. Masechet Yoma discusses at length how the Kohen Gadol is separated from his community, his family, and his home, and taken to a spiritually sanitized place in the Temple, where he is separated physically and mentally from normal day to day activity, and for seven days prepares and meditates for Yom Kippur. The Gemara says he doesn't eat during this time, to completely cleanse his body. On Yom Kippur itself he wears special clothes to further distinguish the occasion. At that point the Kohen Gadol is metaphorically a distilled-to-the-essence embodiment of all of the nation's aspirations for *Kedusha*. Like a "holy puppet", all his actions are completely scripted, prescribed and regimented in his isolated Temple location, to minimize his individual expression, and eliminate any chances of *Tuma* interceding.

And yet, despite being an avatar for the people with all these actions of separation at the various layers of connection to the world and community and family, all designed to maximize the *Kedusha* of the ritual, when it comes to the ultimate act of atonement, i.e. the sacrificing of the animal (a representative of the unholy elements of self?), the surprising commandment we learn from the *Gemara*, is it has to be the Kohen Gadol's own personal sacrifice that is brought to the *Mizbeach*.

The proverbial "last mile" of person-holiness is - and can only be - achieved by drawing from one's own, most intimate resources. With all the propping up and fine-grained setting of just the right holy conditions of time and space, these are all extrinsic to one's self:

To achieve intrinsic personal *Kedusha*, you must "*kach lecha*".

Steve Sacho