YK day 5774 Avodah and Avodah zara

Today’s Torah reading describes the first Yom Kippur, a day of a ritual purging of the mishkan, the traveling Shrine is the predecessor to the bet HaMikdash, the Temple in Jerusalem. This day of Kippuring –purging -is necessary because there was a malfunction in the operating system of the mishkan, which had been inaugurated a few chapters back.

On that day - opening day - Nadav and Ahivu, two of Aaron’s four sons died at the hand of God in punishment for bringing alien fire –aish zar - to the altar. This bringing of alien fire and their subsequent deaths infected the mishkan operating system with a deadly virus.

To avoid panic Moshe has the boys’ bodies removed quickly from the Mishkan and offers Aaron a sentence of consolation. Aaron’s reaction is silence.

Moshe the mumbler offers some empty consolation and Aaron, the orator, remains silent.

Aaron is known in our tradition as the spokesman for Moshe in their efforts to liberate the Israelites from Egypt. He is painted in rabbinic lore as the paradigm of peacemaker- an ohev shalom and rodef shalom- He who loves peace and pursues it.
But what kind of peace can Aaron pursue when his two sons die in front of him?

What kept him silent? Why no outpouring of wails and of tears? What was hidden in Aaron’s silence? If we conjure up his thoughts perhaps we can explain Aaron’s fortitude in the face of tragedy and how he processed his deep pain and anger.

Aaron, in his silence, searches for something to grab onto; to some semblance of understanding his way of Service?

“Moshe, my dear brother said that those close to me will be an offering. But didn’t Father Abraham learn the lesson he shared with us about human sacrifice? Moshe tried to console but I have no words to respond. Why did have to die? Why did they do what they did? What motivated such a dangerous action? Perhaps it is my fault”

The last time alien worship was introduced after our journey from Egypt was at the foot of the Mountain; the mountain Horeb in the desert of Sinai; the episode of the Golden Calf.

Aaron’s memory returned to that scene in his mind, to his failed attempt to mediate between those who had faith that his brother would return from atop the mountain and the others who feared he was gone forever. “There, too, I was silent” Aaron thought in his silence.” I eventually gave in and, with the excuse of using delaying tactics, had participated in the casting of the mold from which the Golden Calf was lifted. Perhaps this is my punishment for my silence then.”

“But my brother Moshe retained his trust in me and appointed me to this role of Kohen Gadol and trained me and my 4 sons in the rituals of the mishkan once it will built.”
But his failure in the Golden Calf incident always weighed heavily on his shoulders. He analyzed and analyzed the event in his mind many times a day. What can I learn from all of this?

In his silence Aaron tried to understand the cause of the Golden calf incident. “It was the fear of Moses’s absence, the loss of the leader who had brought them out of bondage -a dread that they are lost sheep without a shepherd –leads them to anger. It was this anger that created the Golden Calf –the archetype of idolatry- avodah zara –alien service –alien worship.”

In his silence he thought that this was the core of the malfunction that in the course of the avodah –the service- he began on that inauguration day for the mishkan had been affected and infected with anger.

Perhaps, he thought in his continued silence that Nadav and Avihu had brought alien fire because they were angry with him for his weakness as the Golden calf incident unfolded. Perhaps they were afraid that they weren’t up to the execution of the Avodah –the service- and this anger fueled by fear.

In the case of the Golden Calf - atonement was found in the deep relationship of At-One- Ment between God and Moshe. In the Torah they are covenantal partners and Moses initiates the process of forgiveness for the Golden calf by reminding God of his own essence. Moshe demanded to see his partner face to face –when that failed he was given the hey to atonement- the 13 attributes of God –a formula we us today’s This atonement - derived from the covenantal relationship between Moshe and the Divine Source of Life This partnership was based on opposition to alien fire –to avodah zara- to idolatry. The 13 Divine aspects are revealed as the key to atonement and we will sing it many times over YK. There was certainly
room for emotions in the Mishkan but it seemed anger was only permitted to God, God of
snarling and smoking nostrils constantly smelling our souls: On YK we offer up the sweetness of
our existence to move God from anger to mercy.

Rabbi Shimon ben Eliezer, a well-known Talmudic sage equates anger as avodah zara- alien
service. In Tractate Shabbat 105b. we read:

"Surely it was taught, R. Simeon b. Eliezer said in the name of Halfa b. Agra in R. Johanan b.
Nuri's name: He who rends his garments in his anger, he who breaks his vessels in his anger, and
he who scatters his money in his anger, regard him as an idolater, because such are the wiles of
the Tempter: Today he says to him, 'Do this'; tomorrow he tells him, 'Do that,' until he bids him,
'Go and serve idols,' and he goes and serves [them].

An interesting comment on this passage comes from The Radziner Rebbe. Rabbi Gershon
Henoch Leiner (1839-1891). He comments that in all likelihood, we will all be 'tested' in the area
of Avodah Zarah sometime in our lives. He quotes the same passage from the Tractate Shabbat
that "Any person who loses his temper, it is as if he worshipped idols." He sets up a foreign god.
What foreign god is in a person's own midst? This foreign god is the person's own ego. When a
person becomes angry, that is a form of Avodah Sarah.

Part of the reason why a person becomes angry is because things are not going "his way". A
person becomes angry when he wants something to happen or someone to listen to him and it
does not happen. Why do I become so angry? : Because my will has been thwarted. I feel that
things should go "my way". The underlying reason why a person becomes angry is because his
image of himself is too great. This is a subtle form of Avodah Zarah. What foreign god is in a
person's own midst? This foreign god is the person's own ego. When a person becomes angry, that is a form of Avodah Zarah.

An incident is told about the Vizhnitzer Rebbe (1860-1938), that helps make our point that true \textit{Avodah} can be turned into \textit{Avodah Zara} in an instant.

The Vizhnitzer once went to bake matzos on Erev Pesach [the day before Passover]. Baking matzos Erev Pesach is a very tricky business. If anything goes wrong, one can encounter a problem of Chometz [unleavened bread]. One of the people who was baking the matzos did something wrong and someone else became very angry with him. The Rebbe asked, "Why are you becoming so angry?" The person responded, "But Rebbe, Chametz is prohibited in even the smallest quantity (b'mah-shehu)." The Rebbe responded (in Yiddish) "The smallest quantity of anger is worse that the smallest quantity of chometz". We fail to realize the severity of the sin of losing one's temper. The Gemara equates it with Avodah Zarah. The Gemara does not equate just 'any' prohibition with Avodah Zarah.

Anger is the dangerous and unstable component in the human make-up – it can turn Avodah service- to Avodah zara- idolatry.

According to the Torah, idolatry can best be defined as the deification of any created thing, be it an object, concept, philosophy, or individual. The object of deification, therefore, becomes the focal point of one’s life. By focusing on the falsely deified thing, one thus loses focus of the
True source of all – HaShem. Never the less, avodah zarah is a very seductive passion, and one wonders why HaShem does not remove it.

**Avodah Zarah 4** The sages while in Rome were asked, “If [God] does not want avodah zarah why does He not abolish it?” They replied, “Had they [the idol worshippers] been worshipping things the world does not need He would have done so. They, however, are worshipping the sun, moon, stars and signs [zodiac]. Should the world be destroyed because of fools?” They [the questioners] said, “Let Him destroy the [worshipped] things that are not necessary for the world leaving those that are.” They replied, “That would further strengthen their worshippers. That would further strengthen the legitimacy of the ones that were not destroyed, as gods.”

To worship the fragment and not the whole; to compartmentalize our lives and let the fragments take over;

So what is it ends Aaron’s silence and permits him to enter into the intricate process of purging the Temple, his entire household and all the people of their transgressions?

How did he find the fortitude to go on as he faced his loss? How do we make it through our losses?

Aaron makes it through and after processing his anger he leaves his silence:

19 And Aaron spoke unto Moses: ‘Behold, this day have they offered their sin-offering and their burnt-offering before the LORD, and there have befallen me such things as these; and if I had eaten the sin-offering to-day, would it have been well-pleasing in the sight of the LORD?

But he didn’t forgive or forget his loss. We never do. And the Torah couldn’t forget: Our reading begins:

1 And the LORD spoke unto Moses, after the death of the two
Aaron, the first Kohen Gadol, makes it through his ordeal by carrying on his mission in life.

This mission was carried in a simple message which we sing in our Sanctuary meditation following the Amidah. Its penultimate phrase is ve-asu li mikdash veshachanti betocham – make for me a sanctuary and I will dwell among them. This was the impetus to build a Sanctuary so that the Divine can dwell in us who built it.

It is three step mission- his legacy to all of us whether we descend from kohanim or not.

The power of the mishkan and its Service was found in its ability to capture the imagination and creativity of a community to create a structure (in this case a portable one) of amazing beauty and artisanship. The mishkan testifies to all of the marvelous contributions of time, treasure and talent that it takes to set up a mishkan with all of appurtenances. A mishkan’s purpose was to get us to work together.

The second purpose is to serve as a hub around which our people gather – the mishkan was also called Tent of Meeting (ohel mo’ed) – not only a place where heaven kisses earth, and the Divine kisses us”; a place where the shekhina lies with her lover, and not only a place of offerings, both animal and vegetable; but rather a place for us to meet each other in a way that emphasizes, the Spark of the Divine within each of us. The mishkan becomes a tent of meeting – a congregation.

The final and most profound mission of the mishkan fit right into Aaron’s personality as a peacemaker – a reconciler of hearts to each other. Deep in his heart he knew it was in this place, the mishkan and later in the Temple in Jerusalem, that the Flow of Divine Love will be channeled by the kohanim – who are both transmitters and transformers of the three fold
blessing of the Kohanim. This blessing conquers anger and defeats fear as it evokes love and caring. It is most ancient and widely used blessing: The threefold blessing found (Numbers 6:24–26):

May the LORD (YHWH) bless you and guard you -

יְבָרֶכְךָ יהוה מִשְׁמַרְךָ

May the LORD make His face shed light upon you and be gracious unto you.

וְיִשְמְרֶךָ אֵלֶי יָאֵר יהוה פָנָיו

May the LORD lift up His face unto you and give you peace -

וְיָשֵם לְךָ שָלוֹם יִשָא יהוה פָנָיו

May Adonai bless you and protect you.....and grant you peace

Every generation of Jews has sought this blessing. We didn’t always find it. The Avodah in the Temple (under the Roman Occupation) had become Avodah zara. The anger in the years prior to the destruction of the Temple was vicious militated against peace within the Judean community – fragments of it advocated war and its dire consequences are still with us- but it might have also been a blessing fulfilled- it fostered the creation of Judaism out Israelite religion.

This blessing has become a part of our lives. As part of the Friday night table ritual: our children bow their heads and their parents lay hands upon them, then they utter this blessing, the blessing of bringing peace into the world as the ancient Kohanim did in the bet-Hamikdash, the
Temple now destroyed—long ago. The blessing lives on as one kisses the top of a child’s head to ratify the blessing made.

This is a blessing and prayer, and, of course, it can be offered at any time and in any place.

There is no other blessing that we need to so much.

So Aaron models for us a way for many of us to overcome the anger that pollutes our service: living our lives serving a higher purpose.

Aaron remained true to his higher purpose. Liberation, he felt, wasn’t enough—without a higher purpose many still remain enslaved. Let my people go! became a slogan, but the next word sheya’avoony—so that shall serve me, is not also resonant with us. sheya’avoony -you are free to serve a higher purpose.

Anger prevents the flow of blessing- anger shuts off the capacity to receive blessing. Anger prevents us from giving out blessings heartily into the world every day and every moment.—I heard a teaching that said that the reason Kohanim are not permitted to come in contact with the dead is that an encounter with death and with loss paves a path for anger. Anger stops up our ability to entertain the ideas of others—Anger distorts the world into “us” and “them”.

For a moment let’s look at an institution whose mission is to carry on our Sacred Service: the Congress: does this institution fulfill any of three part mission of the mishkan? It cannot fulfill any of them because all the Avodah in this institution turns to Avodah zara. It is a place of anger, of blind ideologies and destructive egos. Our public institutions are failing because of fear and anger. And this anger is on both sides of the aisle. Avodah zara is worshipping the ego—and it is hard to overcome this occupational hazard of those who forget that we have elected them—and expect that their commitment to the Avodah—the service not be colored by ego—
but, instead, by doing what is best for as many people as possible. I hope the institution will over the next decades be healed from decades of fear and anger and bring it a place of peacemaking. Only then will we be able to look at ourselves with appreciation and love.

Many of us struggle with anger in our lives. It is often the cause of our distraction from our mission of making our lives strive for higher purpose. I struggle with it too.

Anger is a non-constructive behavior born out of fear, anxiety, embarrassment and pain. Anger is a way to lash out and release these feelings usually on people they are close to us.

I struggle with feelings of deep loss that engender anger and I use my commitment to the Jewish future to overcome it; as a way to detach from my anger so it doesn’t turn my Avodah into Avodah zara. Having a goal larger than ourselves can serve as a way of channeling anger and using its energy for building rather than destroying. It is appalling to see those who see themselves as servants of the Sacred Service so filled by anger; they can never be vessels of blessings for others and not even for themselves.

We see so much anger around us: on the news particularly -where there is so much anger that human life is destroyed without hesitation. Their Avodah has been distorted with anger. They have forgotten their higher purpose and thus remain enslaved to hate. Those who dwell in anger are idolaters.

Let me leave you with a teaching of the Slonimer Rebbe. Rebbe Shlomo Noakh Berezovsky, who died in the year 2000 at the age of 89. He, became the Rebbe in 1981. He came from Europe to
Tal Aviv in 1940. He spent most of his life trying to recapture the remnants of his Hasidic ancestors who and their teachings that were destroyed.

He is widely known and read as the author of *Sefer Netviot Shalom* – the Paths of Peace. Simply speaking, the Slonimer’s teaching, strangely enough in a fairly conformist Hasidic setting, was self–actualization – the demand to be our true selves. I doubt he was influenced by Abraham Maslow, but who knows.

The Slonimer defines Avodah zara – idolatry – as doing someone else’s Avodah – of living someone else’s life: of submitting to external expectations and pressure. He was convinced, as I am that the only way to grow spiritually is to attach ourselves to our own path and dreams. This conglomerate of individual identities permits us to build communities of Sacred Service – to make our Avodah immune to our inflated egos and its subsequent idolatry. By putting individual ego needs aside we are able to create a community of individuals – not a sect of conformist followers.

This is the mishkan that we build here at TBZ. I said it before and I say it again- our goals here are not to create “good” Jews – something no sane person would attempt, but rather to allow who are seekers an ancient, admirable and wise path that we call Judaism to actualize the true you.

Yiddishkayt is, and should be, a road to Menschlichkayt. The beauty and strength of our particularism radiates out to an embracing of the life-giving Universe; our particularism makes demands of us and helps us in forming of vital commitments to the life of this planet. This is what the Avodah, as an ideal, was all about; its goal as we shall be reading our Avodah service is
to be cleansed of our shortcomings and failures. To be drenched love of self and others, to
struggle with the angers we all possess.

To find, as I said on the 2nd day RH, a rational faith that is comprised of gratitude, well-placed
trust and hope.

Let us all be sealed in the Book of Life.