



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Vayikra

Parshat Acharei Mot

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Sometimes There Are Only Questions

By Hinda Keller Farber

Acharei Mot opens with reference to the death of *Aharon's* two sons.

Why did *Aharon's* sons have to die?

The common explanation is that they were punished for bringing a “strange fire” to the *Mishkan*. These deaths may also be understood as punishment for *Aharon*. There are very few things worse than witnessing the death of a child, no less two. We know how profoundly devastated *Aharon* was, by seeing how long it took for him to even utter a sound. Why was he punished?

The death of *Aharon's* sons may have been his punishment for enabling the *הַטָּא הָעֵגֶל*. He could have taken the gold and made an altar for sacrifices to God instead of making an idol with an altar. Moreover, it appears that he may not have been totally forthcoming about what he had done: the text says that he made the calf, but his explanation to *Moshe* was that the calf emerged from the molten gold on its own.

וַאֲמַר לָהֶם לְמִי זָהָב הַתְּפַרְקוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ-לִי
וַאֲשַׁלְכֶהוּ בְּאֵשׁ וַיֵּצֵא הָעֵגֶל הַזֶּה

So I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off!’ They gave it to me and I hurled it into the fire and out came this calf!. (Shemot 32:24)

וַיִּנָּף ה' אֶת-הָעָם עַל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ
אֶת-הָעֵגֶל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אַהֲרֹן

vs.

And the Lord plagued the people, because they made the calf, which Aharon had made. (Shemot 32:35)

Just as *Aharon* deprived God of His "children" by turning them toward idolatry, perhaps God felt, *מִדָּה כְּמִדָּה*, measure for measure, that He should deprive *Aharon* of his. Ironically, it

was the *Levi'im* who immediately regretted the *הַטָּא הָעֵגֶל* (and according to tradition, didn't participate). The text says that they responded to *Moshe's* injunction, *מִי לַיהוָה אֵלַי*, whoever is for God come to me, though it does not say that in doing so they were led by *Aharon*, who was, after all, a *Levi*. Did he not regret and atone for what he had done?

The death of his *Aharon's* sons may have been his punishment for enabling the *הַטָּא הָעֵגֶל*.

It is no accident that immediately after recounting the death of *Aharon's* sons,

Acharei Mot continues with a description of the Yom Kippur service, detailing the ritual in the *Mishkan* whereby *Aharon* could provide atonement for himself as well as for all *B'nei Yisrael*.

Events recounted in the Torah aren't necessarily in order of occurrence, *אֵין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה*, there is no before or after in the Torah, so it isn't entirely clear that there was no *Mishkan* at the time of the *הַטָּא הָעֵגֶל*. If the *Mishkan* did not in fact exist at that time, *Aharon* could not have availed himself of the method of atonement described in *Acharei Mot*.

Similarly, if we consider that the sequence given in the Torah is in order of occurrence, the *הַטָּא הָעֵגֶל* occurred after the *עֲשֶׂרַת הַדְּבָרוֹת*, the Ten Commandments, were given, with the explicit prohibition of idolatry, and they were given again after *Moshe* begged for the nation's forgiveness for the *הַטָּא הָעֵגֶל*. There is no indication that even then *Aharon* repented for his role in that sin. Although no one is beyond redemption if s/he truly repents, is it possible — unlikely though it seems — that *Aharon* never did, and was thus punished through his sons?

I think it is significant that the details of the Yom Kippur service are described in *Acharei Mot* not in terms of the *Kohen Gadol* in general, but specifically commanded to *Aharon*. He was put on notice of what to do in the future, but through his sons he seems to have been punished for his action in the past.

Whatever conclusion we draw from these events, the fact is that we can only guess at God's reasons for anything that happens to us. The best we can do is what *Aharon* did -- to accept and continue living as best we can with whatever fate God has dealt us.

Hinda & Eugene moved to this community in 1978. They raised their three now-married sons here and have seven grandkids. Hinda went to what was then a second-rate Jewish day school through the eighth grade and has spent the last 30 or 40 years trying to catch up to our sons' excellent Jewish education (WDS, Ramaz).

*Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?
Please contact Steve Smith at stevenjsmith@yahoo.com*

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