

Yom Kippur 5777

Keeping an Eye on the Kohen Gadol: The image of the kohen gadol in the kodesh kodashim on Yom Kippur is majestic and daunting, like the day itself. The holiest man, in the holiest place, on the holiest day, performing duties on which the fate of our people hangs. The poignancy is enhanced by the fact that, at the critical moments, the kohen gadol was alone with his Creator: as the verse says, “No man shall be in the tent of meeting when he comes to make atonement in the sanctuary until his departure...” (Vayikra 16, 17).

Over the course of the Yom Kippur prayers, we draw on this image for inspiration, looking for moments to emulate, in our own small way, the kohen gadol’s intimacy with G-d. But it is, as they say, a hard act to follow. Reassuringly, the Mishna in Yoma gives us glimpses of the kohen gadol’s human side - a “backstage” view of the majestic rituals of Yom Kippur, if you like. The Mishna tells us that, particularly in the Second Temple period, the kohen gadol was not always such a towering figure, religiously speaking. As part of his “pre-match training” in the week before Yom Kippur, the “seder hayom” – chapter 16 of Vayikra, according to Rashi, which includes the Torah reading for Shahrith on Yom Kippur – was read to him by rabbis of the Sanhedrin, who then asked him to read it himself “in case you have forgotten it or never learned it”. (Yoma 1, 3). For a kohen gadol who could not expound – or even read - the books of Job, Ezra and Chronicles as part of this preparatory week, rabbis were brought in to expound and read before him (Yoma 1,6).

The fact that such a Kohen gadol was all on his own in the kodesh kodashim on Yom Kippur presented a particular problem from the perspective of the Mishna : how do we ensure he does the right thing when no one is there to keep an eye?

The background to the Mishna’s concerns here is a dispute between the rabbis and the Sadducees relating to what appears at first to be a fine detail of the ceremony surrounding the burning of incense in the kodesh kodashim on Yom Kippur. Rashi brings the midrashic interpretation of Vayikra 16, 2 – “... for in a cloud I [Hashem] shall appear on the kaporet [Ark cover]” – to the effect that the “cloud” referred to here is the same cloud as is referred to 11 verses later in describing the incense ceremony: “And he shall place the incense on the fire before Hashem; and the cloud of incense shall cover the kaporet...” (Vayikra 16, 13). Hence, according to

all opinions, having a cloud of incense in the kodesh kodashim was a prerequisite to G-d’s presence there with the kohen gadol on Yom Kippur. But whereas the rabbis held that the incense should be placed on the firepan and burnt only once the kohen gadol was in the kodesh kadashim (as verse 13 implies), the Sadducees interpreted verse 2 such that the kohen gadol had to first create the incense cloud outside the kodesh kodashim, and then enter it.

The rabbis’ answer to the concern that a heretic kohen gadol, alone in the sanctuary might go astray and follow the Sadducees, was to take him to an upper chamber of the Temple (called Avtinus) on erev Yom Kippur and ensure that he swear not to depart in any detail (she’lo tishane davar) from what they had taught him (Yoma 1, 5).

The Mishna shows us that behind the majestic ceremonial lay an individual who, like the rest of us, could be deeply flawed. That was perhaps part of the reason that immediately after swearing this oath, we are told that both the rabbis and the kohen gadol wept. (The Gemara’s explanation is that he wept, for being suspected of heresy, and they wept, for the punishment meted out for suspecting an innocent). But what are we to make of the rabbis’ focus on a particular detail of the ritual involving the cloud of incense in the kodesh hakodashim? On a superficial level, the precise ordering of the burning of the incense seems an odd point to focus on in the overall context of a magnificent ceremony where G-d meets man on the holiest day of the year.

But this is perhaps exactly the point: in achieving peak moments of religious experience, details matter. The spices of the incense itself are described as “daka” - finely ground (Vayikra 16, 12). The word has two powerful associations, both of which underline the same message. Incense that is sufficiently “daka” is achieved setting aside, each and every day, a small amount of the daily incense, and then grinding that over again on erev Yom Kippur. In other words, religious “highs” are built from everyday labours. And “daka” also evokes the “kol demama daka” of Eliyahu’s experience of revelation of the nature of the divine: G-d was not in the dramatics of the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in the small voice that was “daka”. Like the kohen gadol, our path to a successful Yom Kippur may run through our focusing on the small details of things we do when no one is watching.