RABBI MEIR SOLOVEICHIK TIKVAH

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Acharei Mot, Leviticus, Chapters 16-18

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The University Seal and the Light of God

If you wander around some of the older universities in the United States, and study the official seals these institutions have etched into their buildings, you will find a fascinating feature: Hebrew—Hebrew words, with Hebrew letters, usually invoking both the names of God and the theme of light (in Hebrew, "*or*"). Go up to New Hampshire and visit Dartmouth, and you will see its seal adorned with the Hebrew name of God "*El Shaddai*" (usually translated "Almighty God"), with light radiating forth from the Hebrew words:

Even more interesting is the seal of Yale, which features an image of a book, within which appear two Hebrew words: "*urim v'tumim*," along with a Latin translation: "*lux et veritas*," "light and truth."

Why is the phrase there? The Yale professor Dan Oren points out that the words "*urim v'tumim*" appear in the verse located in the exact middle of the Torah, which means that the book is meant to represent the Pentateuch; light is a metaphor for enlightenment, reason, the search for truth. The seal, he explains, represents the belief of Yale's former leaders that biblical revelation and human reason were meant to go hand in hand.

Perhaps most interesting of all is the seal of Columbia University, which features the *shem Hashem*, the ineffable name of God—the letters *yud* and *heh* followed by *vav* and *heh* with rays of light emanating from it—along with the Hebrew words "*uri El*," "the Lord is my light."

The seal embodies the conviction that the Hebraic heritage is the ultimate source of wisdom and truth, the true source of enlightenment.

Of course, there are few today at Columbia and Yale who can read the words "*uri El*" or "*urim v'tumim*" on their seals, and even fewer who understand their context. This points to something striking: it was surely assumed by many that as faith disappeared from the domain of American universities, freedom of inquiry and the unfettered exchange of ideas would increase, but in fact the opposite has occurred. The search for truth has been replaced by other, lesser notions, with truth itself being the victim. New York University's Jonathan Haidt, an alumnus of Yale, lamented: "When I arrived at Yale in 1981, *veritas* was written in stone above Phelps Gate. We were told, 'This is an institution committed to truth.' But since the 1990s, increasing numbers of universities seem to be chiseling out 'truth' and inserting 'change.'" Haidt's reflection is all the more relevant today, as we see bona fide defenders of terror demonstrating, and harassing Jewish students, at some of the most distinguished institutions in the land.

It is therefore all the more painful to ponder the original seal of Columbia, for it embodies the biblical idea of God, and His Torah, as the source of light. The seal's significance can be better appreciated when we study our own weekly reading, wherein the light of God is experienced in the most remarkable of ways, and in the most sacred of places.

The *parashah* of *Acharei Mot* is best known for its first section, which describes the *avodah*, the service of the high priest in the Tabernacle on Yom Kippur. The ethical teachings discussed in the second part of the *parashah* continue into the subsequent reading, and will be our focus next week.

The cultic rites of Yom Kippur are complex and often misunderstood, and they must first be succinctly summarized in order for us to understand their metaphysical meaning, as well as their philosophical significance.

Let us first focus on the metaphysical aspects of this passage, drawing on the writings of Jacob Milgrom. Throughout the year, the Bible informs us, the sins of God's people bring impurity in the Temple, and it is on Yom Kippur that the place must be purified:

> Thus he shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the impurity of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions, their sins; and so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which abides with them in the midst of their impurity. (Leviticus 16:16)

It is sacrificial blood that is utilized for the purification of the sacred sphere; for blood, we are told further on in our reading, is the very symbol of life:

> For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life. (Leviticus 17:11)

On Yom Kippur, on this most sacred of days, the high priest offers a bull on behalf of himself, his household, and all priests. He also performs a lottery to select between two goats, one of which is offered on behalf of God's

people. The blood of these two offerings, the bull and the goat, are sprinkled in the Holy of Holies, purifying it of the defilement brought about by the sins of the people. That impurity is then removed from the Sanctuary and bestowed by the high priest upon the other goat in the form of a confession. All this is described at the beginning of the reading:

[L]oving particular people in a preferential way, focusing on those closest to us, actually enhances our understanding of the needs of others beyond our inner circle.

> And Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. Then he shall take the two goats, and set them before the Lord at the door of the tent of meeting; and Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord, and offer it as a sin offering; but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel. (Leviticus 16:6–10)

Often inaccurately known as the rite of "the scapegoat," what is actually occurring is that this goat—like the bird utilized in the purification of the *m'tsora* (the person suffering from a skin ailment) in the previous *parashah*—is sent away, cast into the wilderness known as Azazel, in order to remove all impurity from the sacred sphere of Jerusalem. This is the metaphysical nature of the ritual. But what is often missed is its profound moral content.

As is made clear in our contemporary Yom Kippur liturgy, a series of confessions were recited by the high priest on that day. He began by beseeching forgiveness for himself and his family. Thus we say in synagogue on Yom Kippur:

> And so [the high priest] would say, "I beg of You, O Lord, I have erred, been iniquitous, and willfully sinned before You, I and my household. I beg of You—by Your Name—atone now for the errors, iniquities, and willful sins by which I have erred, been iniquitous, and willfully sinned before You, I and my household."

After praying for his wife and children, the high priest then offered a confession, and prayer, for his fellow *kohanim*, priests. Only after completing these confessions did the high priest turn to the sins of the entire nation:

> And so he would say, "I beg of You, O Lord, they have erred, been iniquitous, and willfully sinned before You: Your people, the family of Israel."

The precisely ordered prayers are noteworthy. Here we have the high priest on Judaism's holiest day, in Judaism's holiest site. All eyes are upon him as he represents his people before God. He begins by pondering his own imperfections, his families' frailties, and their need of mercy from the Almighty. He then moves from there to ponder the *kohanim*, the Jews who are his extended family. He then prays for the entire people. The performance embodies a millennia-old insight that loving particular people in a preferential way, focusing on those closest to us, actually *enhances* our understanding of the needs of others beyond our inner circle.

The Bar-Ilan University professor Ze'ev Maghen relates in an essay that he was once sitting in a restaurant in Tel Aviv when he heard that a plane crash in East Asia killed hundreds of people. At first utterly unperturbed, he continued with his meal. He then paused and thought to himself how he would feel if those killed were Israelis, and suddenly found himself without an appetite. It is preferential love for one's own, he realized, that can lead to compassion for others:

> Preferential love is the most powerful love there is, the only truly *motivating* love there is. It is by *means* of that love—the *special* love we harbor for those close to us—that we learn how to begin to love others, who are farther away. Genuine and galvanizing empathy for "the other" is acquired most effectively and lastingly through a process which involves, first and foremost, immersion in love of self, then of family, then of friends, then of community . . . and so on. It is via *emotional analogy* to these types of strong-bond affections that one becomes capable of executing a sort of "love leap," a hyper-space transference of the strength and immediacy of the feelings one retains for his favorite people, smack onto those who have no direct claim on such sentiments.

This "love-leap" is precisely what the high priest performs: from his immediate family to his extended family, and from there to all Israel.

It is the blood of these offerings that would purify the Temple. But before the blood was sprinkled in the Holy of Holies, the high priest would enter the same supremely sacred site bearing coals and incense.

> And he shall take a pan full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small; and he shall bring it within the veil, and put the incense on the fire before the Lord, . . . (Leviticus 16:12–13)

This was known as the most difficult, perilous, and profound service of the entire year. The high priest entered the Holy of Holies bearing incense and coals; he poured the incense upon the coals, which he placed facing the Ark of the Covenant. The high priest was engulfed by the smoke and experienced an intimacy with the Almighty unlike any other. Only then was he prepared to offer the blood of the offerings in that most sacred of spaces.

To traditional Jews, this moment is famous; but few ever ask a question raised by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. In the Holy of Holies, there were no windows. How, then, did the high priest make his way to the Ark? How did he see? The answer, I think, can be found in what he held in his hands; glowing coals, in Hebrew "*gahalei esh*," taken from the altar of God. In the darkness the only glow suffusing the area came from coals of the altar of the Almighty. It was the only source of illumination, in the dark, at this most important time and this most special of places.

To put it differently, it was the light of the coals—there in the Holy of Holies, as the path was paved for God's people away from sin and towards atonement—that showed the way. When everything was on the line, those coals remind us of the very verse in the Psalms (27:1) that was once embraced by Columbia University, and reflected in its seal: "God is my light." Similarly, one also finds on Columbia's seal the Latin phrase "*in lumine tuo*

videbimus lumen," "by Your light we will see light," words which were originally given by the Jewish people to the world in Hebrew, also in the book of Psalms: "*b'orkha nir'eh or*" (36:9). These are the coals of Yom Kippur.

Thus, that one moment in the Holy of Holies, with the light of God illumining the high priest's path toward the Ark of God on the Day of Atonement, reflects what Judaism gave to the world as the safeguard against sin: the light that is the biblical moral vision. One does not need to be Jewish to recognize this. Justice Antonin Scalia, speaking at a Holocaust memorial event, reflected on the fact that Germany had once been the most cultured nation on earth, and yet this had not prevented its embrace of evil. This means, he argued, that education is not necessarily a path to enlightened living, if biblical teachings are disregarded. As he put it:

> It is the purpose of these annual Holocaust remembrances—as it is the purpose of the nearby Holocaust museum—not only to honor the memory of the six million Jews and three or four million other poor souls caught up in this 20th-century terror, but also, by keeping the memory of their tragedy painfully alive, to prevent its happening again. The latter can be achieved only by acknowledging, and passing on to our children, the existence of absolute, uncompromisable standards of human conduct. Mankind has traditionally derived such standards from religion; and the West has derived them from and through the Jews.

[M]any of those overseeing the most celebrated schools in America no longer see faith as essential to the pursuit of knowledge. America's spiritual crisis and its intellectual crisis, the crisis of its culture and of its academy, are intertwined.

All this reminds us of the tragedy and travesty of what is unfolding in the American academy today. In some universities, whose own seals proclaim what Judaism, and the Hebrew Bible, gave to the world, students are turning on the Jews. And the vacuum left by the departure of biblical faith from the academy has meant that inevitably an entirely new religion has formed, one with its own dogmas and doctrines, one in which the West, in which America, are seen as having an evil legacy. And according to this perverse worldview, it is the Jews who are described as oppressors, even when it is the Jews that have again been assaulted, violated, and murdered.

In uptown Manhattan today, the students of Columbia and Barnard can be seen traipsing into the magnificent Low Library on campus. On the foyer of the library is emblazoned the Columbia seal, complete with the biblical name of God, with rays of light coming out of it. Over the centuries, as those entering have stepped on the seal, the Hebrew letters of God's name have become effaced. It is a painful and perfect metaphor for the fact that many of those overseeing the most celebrated schools in America no longer see faith as essential to the pursuit of knowledge. America's spiritual crisis and its intellectual crisis, the crisis of its culture and of its academy, are intertwined.

In this difficult moment we draw inspiration from the image of coals glowing with the fire of God, taken from

the fire of the altar, a fire which, as Leviticus tells us, was constant:

> An eternal fire shall burn on the altar; it shall never be extinguished. (Leviticus 6:13)

An eternal fire indeed. This fire represents the Jews themselves. The Jew, Tolstoy is thought to have written,

> is that sacred being who has brought down from heaven the everlasting fire, and has illuminated with it the entire world. . . . He whom neither slaughter nor torture of thousands of years could destroy, he whom neither fire nor sword nor inquisition were able to wipe off from the face of the earth, . . . he who has been so long the guardian of prophecy and who transmitted it to the rest of the world—such a nation can not be destroyed.
>
> He is everlasting as eternity itself.

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May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

Additional Resources

Ze'ev Maghen on Preferential Love, "Imagine: On Love and Lennon," *Azure*, Spring 1999. Click here to read.