

Rabbi Dr. Meir Y. Soloveichik

## The Avodah at O'Hare

*Yerushalayim*; Yom Kippur; 2500 years ago. There is no *Kol Nidrei*, no kittels, no congregational sermons. No *chazanim*, no *machzorim*, not even *U-Netaneh Tokef*. All of Israel's eyes are on one man; he is called *Kohen Gadol* (the High Priest). Jews assemble in awe and anticipation as the *Avodah* (the sacrificial service) begins. It is the ultimate reality show, with extraordinary stakes. If the sacrifices are performed properly, with appropriate intent, *Kelal Yisrael* will be forgiven. If he proves unworthy, he himself could be struck down and the *Avodah* invalidated. The climax of the *Avodah* is the *Kohen Gadol's* entry into the *sanctum sanctorum*, into the Holy of Holies. Cradling the cup of blood from the sin-offering, the High Priest completes the sacrifice by sprinkling that blood between the twin poles of the Ark of the Covenant. As he sprinkles, he counts, and all those assembled hear his voice emerging from that sacred site: *achat*, one sprinkle; *achat ve-achat*, a second one; *achat u-shtayim*.

Chicago; any old Tuesday morning, around fifteen years ago. R. Aaron Soloveichik, my grandfather, rises at the crack of dawn and prepares for his weekly flight to New York, where he teaches Torah at Yeshiva University. It is not an unusual commute, with the following critical caveat: the rabbi is eighty years old and a stroke victim. He can only walk slowly, haltingly, with cane, with one hand shaking behind his back. Every step is painful; every effort excruciating, and accompanied by an agonizing oy! He heads to O'Hare airport, where he is greeted behind the ticket counter by Diana, a non-Jew who has developed a love and respect for this elderly rabbi, and even gave the rabbi's wife her home number in order to assist with travel arrangements. The affection is mutual; he calls her "the real princess Diana." He gets his boarding pass, and is wheeled by an attendant towards the gate. Of course he has to be frisked first by security, as he is clearly a potential security threat. Once, in fact, the airport security examined him, and allowed him through, only to call him back so the guard could check under his big black hat, no doubt for the grenades which he could be secreting under there. But he is only packing a *Tehillim*, which he reads on the plane. He arrives in Newark and takes a cab to Washington Heights, to Yeshiva University. Now he has reached the last and most difficult leg of his journey, one more obstacle that has to be confronted before he could reach the *shi'ur* that mattered so much to him. Yeshiva's main building is a hundred years old, and not handicapped accessible, and he has to climb up a staircase. And so he begins to do so, his teeth gritting in pain; and as he pulls himself up each step, he tends to count to himself how many he has climbed; and he utilizes the *machzor* as his method of counting, muttering to himself the *Kohen's* mantra: *achat*, one step; *achat ve-achat*, another step; *achat u-shtayim*, another. I remember vividly him counting this way whenever he took the stairs, but it was my father who noted to me that perhaps this was symbolic of something larger; that for my *zeidie* every day was a day when we had to bring a *korban* to *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* by sacrificing of our time and energy for Torah. In other words, for him, every act was an *Avodah* in miniature, every step up those stairs a small sacrifice for God.

And this explanation, I believe, makes a lot of sense in light of something that I had heard from my grandfather myself. My grandfather knew a man who was always complaining about his mother. What a nudge, the man used to say. My mother always wants me to come visit her, to call her. I don't have time for that, I'm busy, I work hard. Then this mother took terribly ill, and this man quit his job and devoted himself full time to caring for his mother. In considering this case, my grandfather commented that there are certain things for which, when push comes to shove, we are all prepared to make grand sacrifices. But oddly, we are all too reluctant to make smaller, more frequent sacrifices for the same thing which so obviously means so much to us. According to a remarkable, and bizarre, story in the Talmud, the Sages were once asked by the Greek philosophers "*mah ya'aseh adam ve-yichyeh*" – "what should a man do, that he should live"? The rabbis replied: "*Yamut et atzmo*" – "he should kill himself." My grandfather interpreted the *gemara* as follows: What ought a man do, that he should live? How should he organize his life? *Yamut et atzmo*. Let him ponder what he is willing to die for, and then let him *live* every day for that. Who among us would not give our lives for our kids? Who would not willingly make such a sacrifice? But shouldn't we then feel obligated to sacrifice a bit from a busy schedule in order to spend time with them, every day? And what about our faith? If forced to choose, would we not like to believe that we would martyr ourselves for Judaism? But if Judaism is so important to us, if such an extraordinary sacrifice is possible, why are we so often reluctant to make small sacrifices for our Torah and *mitzvot* during every day of our lives? And so we encounter a rabbi struggling to

teach Torah until the day he died; if he was prepared to give his life for the Torah, then he was certainly prepared to live for it, and sacrifice every day to continue teaching Torah. If R. Akiva, murdered and mutilated by the Romans for his loyalty to Judaism, joyously greeted the opportunity to fulfill the awesome *mitzvah* that is martyrdom, then ought not this rabbi, who, while suffering tremendously, is not forced to sacrifice in similar proportions, ought he not at least joyously number and proclaim his own sacrifices with an *achat, achat ve-achat!!*

Chicago; October 2001. Soldier Field. Home of the Chicago Bears. A yarmulke-doffing Chicagoan took his seat at a football game. The man next to him notices the skullcap, and asked the Jew if he had a rabbi. Of course, the Jew said. Well, said the non-kippah-wearing man, my wife and I aren't Jewish, but we have a rabbi too: Rabbi Aaron Soloveichik. "Oh," the Jew said casually, "you mean the Rabbi Aaron Soloveichik who just passed away?" The man blanched, and dropped his Coke on the floor. He took out his cell phone, dialed, and said, "Honey, the rabbi has died." The woman on the phone began to cry. Of course this man was the husband of Diana of O'Hare airport, the real princess Diana, who was crying because she would never see her rabbi again. It is true, as a cousin of mine pointed out to me, that God providentially arranged for this wonderful woman's husband to sit next to this member of Chicago's Jewish community, in order that she would be informed of Rabbi Soloveichik's passing, and to allow her to mourn him and honor his memory. But even more interesting is her genuine admiration for this rabbi, and her profound grief now that he was gone. Why did she care so much in the first place? Diana never observed the Torah he taught, never understood the Talmud he analyzed. What moved her was the notion of a man for whom his faith meant so much that he was willing to make this trip week after week, an eighty-year-old stroke victim who spent each day making sacrifices for what he believed was important.

*Yerushalayim*; Yom Kippur, 1900 years ago. The Temple lies in ruins. It had for generations been the sole medium by which the Jewish people renewed their relationship with God. Without the *Ketoret*, without the exculpation of Azazel, without the *achat, achat ve-achat*, atonement appeared impossible. And then R. Akiva introduces the following extraordinary idea: *Ashrekha Yisrael*, fortunate are you O Israel, before whom are you purified, *Lifnei Avikhem She-Ba-Shamayim*, before your Father in Heaven. In the absence of the ability of the High Priest to stand before God, God will stand before each and every one of us. Instead of a *Kohen Gadol*, each of us atones for ourselves; and instead of one ritual sacrifice, it is we who must resolve to make sacrifices throughout our daily lives, sacrifices of our time for things that matter, that are worth dying for, and certainly worth living for.

We are, all of us, on Yom Kippur, akin to the *Kohen Gadol* in the *Kodesh Ha-Kodashim*; we gather together as an *Am Mamlechet Kohanim*, a nation of kingly priests. And it is the Almighty who watches in anxious anticipation to see if our *Avodah* will be successful, the *Ribono Shel Olam* who listens for our own announcement, *achat, achat ve-achat*, God, I am willing to sacrifice for what is important, God, I realize that there are certain things for which I would give my life, so God, please give me so many more years to live for them.