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Acharei Mot 5784

Be True to Yourself

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed by TurboScribe.ai and adapted by a talmid from a YUTorah shiur originally uploaded on April 27, 2022)

In Parshas Achrei Mos, we learn about the seder avodas Yom ha-Kippurim—all the korbanos brought in the Beis Ha-Mikdash on Yom Kippur. And obviously, the strangest of all those very unique and special rituals is the Sa'ir ha-Mishtale'ach—also called Sa'ir la-Azazel. And unlike all the other animals mentioned in this week's Parsha, this goat is sent into the wilderness and thrown off a cliff in the desert instead of being brought on the mizbe'ach. And the Kohen Gadol confesses all the sins of the Jewish People upon this goat. *Ve-nasa ha-sa'ir alav es kol avonosam el eretz gzeirah, ve-shilach es ha-sa'ir ba-midbar.* It carries all their sins out to the desert. Many of the meforshim wonder how this just magically works. It seems just a little too easy to put your sins on a goat and send them out to the desert.

There are a considerable number of mefarshim who discuss this. Many understand that, of course, you cannot just throw away your sins. You must do teshuva for your sins. But this goat—Sa'ir la-Azazel—symbolically encourages our teshuva process when we see it on its way to die in the desert. How does it work? The Sefer ha-Chinuch explains that we put all our sins on this goat and throw it off the cliff. As it rolls down the cliff in the desolate wilderness, it breaks into a million pieces. Basically, a terrible fate befalls this goat—it dies a horrific death. What does this represent to us? The wages of sin. Some of us are complacent and think that it's not so bad to live a lifestyle of sin—it's not the end of the world to violate the Torah. Here we see two goats. One of them gets our sins and look what happens to it. It meets a horrible fate. And likewise, whoever sins meets a horrible fate. This is a dose of "old-fashioned Mussar." And therefore, perhaps, we will do a cheshbon ha-nefesh and decide to mend our ways and not be like that goat that is laden with sin.

However, in contrast with the more fire-and-

brimstone explanation of Sefer ha-Chinuch, Rambam in the Moreh Nevuchim explains this with a more modern Mussar—a more positive spiritual and psychological explanation. Rambam says that the two goats come together. One of them we burden with our sins, send it out to the wilderness, and throw it off the cliff, while we bring the other as a korban to Hashem. And what does the sending away of our sins, never to be heard from again, represent? That we can actually free ourselves from our bad habits and problematic patterns of behavior. Lest someone think: Once I get into a lifestyle of sin—being subject to all kinds of bad influences—I can't really do anything about this and cleanse myself. I am stuck with them these sins forever—until the day I die. No! That is not true. Just like the Kohen Gadol sends all the sins with the Sa'ir ha-Mishtale'ach to the desert, never to return, likewise, if we do a proper teshuva, we could also rid ourselves of all our sins, once and for all. For the Rambam, it's an inspiring message: We can work hard and succeed.

The Rav had a beautiful insight into this, brought down in Rav Avishai David's sefer Darosh Darash Yosef. He quotes a Midrash that has a very sharp insight. When the pasuk says *ve-nasa ha-sa'ir alav*, what is this sa'ir? Of course, it means goat. But specifically, this word also describes Eisav, the *ish sa'ir*. And as a matter of fact, when Ya'akov wanted to dress up as Eisav, he put a skin of a sa'ir on his own skin to look hairy like Eisav. So Sa'ir is Eisav. But more specifically, it's the aspect of Eisav that Ya'akov wore. *Es kol avonosam* can be read as two words—*avonos tam*. And Ya'akov is known as *ish tam, yoshev ohalim*. So the Midrash darshens the words *ve-nasa ha-sa'ir alav* to mean Eisav carrying *es kol avonosam*—all the aveiros of Ya'akov. And that's what the Sa'ir la-Azazel accomplishes. It takes all the aveiros of Ya'akov and transfers them all to Eisav.

There are many levels of understanding this Midrash. But according to the Rav, just because Ya'akov is ish tam and we dislike Eisav, we can't just put all our sins on him. It doesn't work like that. You can't just put all your sins on your enemies so they are stuck with them. Rather, says the Rav, this teaches us a deeper psychological insight. Why does the Jew sin? He answers that inherently, every Jew has a Yiddishe Neshama. Inside, we really want to do the right thing, come close to Hashem, and serve Him. We really want to grow spiritually. But what actually happens? There are influences that act upon us. Those influences are called the influences of Eisav. Eisav represents the evil philosophies and forces that permeate human culture. The Eisav of society influences us to do the wrong thing. We don't really want to do aveiros. We only want to do mitzvos. And the negative influences come from the outside—from Eisav—just like those hairy goatskins tied to Ya'akov's hands and neck, which turned Ya'akov into an Eisav-looking character. While the temimus of Ya'akov, Ish Tam, lays firmly within us. And we learn from here that we can change, banish our aveiros, and become 100 percent tzadikim. So long as we believe in one thing: that goodness is our fundamental nature, and

the aveiros that we do are not. And this exceedingly deep psychological insight, I believe, dovetails with the Rambam in the Moreh Nevuchim. How can someone really get rid of all their aveiros if they believe that they define him—if they see their aveiros and think: “That’s who I am?” But if I recognize that it’s my kedusha, my mitzvos, my she’ifos, my desires to grow in ruchnius, that really define me—while my aveiros are just the result of external influence that negatively impacts me, then I can say: Let me be my real self and free myself from these external influences.

And I think that this is a key to teshuva. *Ve-nasa ha-sa'ir alav es kol avonosam—kol avonos tam*. The key to growth is believing that what defines us is goodness, kedusha, and avodas Hashem. And those external influences to which we mistakenly gave in and the wrong turns we made along the way do not define us. And if we really internalize this message, we can realize the deepest meaning of Sa'ir ha-Mishtale'ach and send away and throw off that which is only an external part of us—never to be heard from again. And that way, we can remain with the other half—kulo la-Hashem—purely ruchnius, a life of kedusha and growth in Torah and mitzvos.

Get a Life

Rabbi Joshua Hoffman zt"l

Before presenting a list of forbidden sexual relations, God commands Moshe to tell the people, “Like the practice of the land of Egypt in which you dwelled do not do : and do not perform the practice of the land of Canaan to which I bring you, and do not follow their statutes. Carry out My judgments and observe My decrees to follow them... You shall observe my decrees and My judgments, which a man shall carry out and live by them - I am God” (Vayikra 18:3-5). Rabbi Don Yitzchak Abarbanel, in his commentary to Acharei Mos, asks why there is a need to refer to the practices of Egypt and Canaan as a prelude to the prohibitions of arayos, of forbidden sexual relations? He also asks why there is such a marked redundancy in these verses, seemingly repeating the same cautions twice. He answers that the Torah speaks of two specific kinds of prohibitions - those of idolatry, as practiced in Egypt and as detailed in the previous section of the Torah, and those of forbidden sexual unions, as practiced in Canaan and detailed in the verses to follow. The Torah then tells us that by being careful to observe the Torah’s prohibitions in both of these areas, we will

merit life in the world to come. The verse, which tells us to carry out these commands and “live by them,” must be referring to eternal life, explains the Abarbanel, because the inhabitants of Egypt and Canaan lived in this world, even though they carried out their evil practices.

Although Abarbanel’s explanation of the words “and live by them” is based on the authoritative Targum Onkeles, as well as on a sound logical argument, it does not explain why caution in specifically these two areas of prohibitions will merit one life in the world to come. There is, however, another explanation of the words “and live by them,” which can help us explain why these two areas are so unique. The Sefas Emes cites his grandfather, Rabbi Yitzchok Meir of Gur, the first Gerrer Rebbe, as saying that the word ‘vechay’ - ‘and live’ - should be interpreted in the sense of enthusiasm. A person, he explains, should bring enthusiasm into his life through observing the mitzvos of the Torah. Working with this explanation, I believe that the areas of idolatry and sexual morality were specifically emphasized by the Torah, because one could ostensibly argue that the opposite holds true, as I will demonstrate.

The rabbis tell us that in relating the exodus from Egypt on the seder night, we should begin by speaking of the earlier, degraded state of the Jews, and end with their elevated state. Rav Avrohom Yitzchok HaKohein Kook explains that we need to do this in order to show that it was the degraded state that actually generated the elevated state. This explanation is understandable in regard to Shmuel's opinion, that the degraded state refers to the fact that the nation was in enslavement to Pharaoh in Egypt. Their experience of slavery inculcated within the people a notion of what it means to be submissive to a master. After they were redeemed, they channeled this sense of submissiveness towards their service of God. However, according to Rav, who says that the degraded state of the people was that their ancestors worshipped idols, it is very difficult to understand how the earlier degraded state generated the elevated state that came after redemption. Rav Kook explains that one characteristic of idolatry is the enthusiastic attitude its adherents have towards their idolatrous practices. This is understandable, since the idols the person worships are really extensions of forces within himself, and so he feels very close to these projected forces. It is, however, more difficult to have that kind of enthusiasm in our service to God. Although in reality He is close to all those who call Him, as we say each day, still, He is also transcendent and, thus, seemingly, removed from our experiences. The fact that our ancestors themselves

worshipped idols, then, helped inculcate an element of enthusiasm that could then be transferred over to our worship of God, once we were redeemed. Thus, by relating the words "and live by them" in connection to refraining from idolatrous practices, the Torah is, perhaps, hinting to us that the enthusiasm idolaters display in serving their idols should be used in our service of God.

The words "and live by them" would seem to have special relevance to forbidden sexual relations, as well. The mishnah in Makkos tells us, in regard to these forbidden liaisons, that a person has a special attraction to them, and that it is very hard to abstain from them. The rabbis, in fact, tell us that when the people, in the wilderness, were "crying among their families" (Bamidbar 11:10), what they were really doing was crying over the Torah's sexual prohibitions that Moshe had informed them of. One does not need to be too steeped in popular culture to know that freedom in sexual matters is perceived by many to give particular meaning to life. The Torah is therefore telling us that, contrary to what some may think, that restricting the range of one's choices in sexual matters diminishes quality of life, in actuality it enhances it. Thus, in both areas, spirituality and sexuality, the Torah is telling us that enthusiasm is important, but it must be channeled properly. When this is done, following the guidelines of the Torah, our lives will be imbued with profound meaning and richness.

Enlivened Living

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

In a time of heightened antisemitism with calls for death, violence, and disobedience on college campuses, it is important to highlight that the Torah connects and promotes following its laws and values with a commitment to life. Knowing how influenced human beings are by their surrounding cultures, toward the end of Parshat Acharei Mot, God exhorts the Israelites not to imitate the practices they observed in Egypt, nor mimic the influences of Canaan when they were to enter the land. Success will only be achieved by obeying the laws and rules of God: "These are the commands you shall do and live by them (ve-chai bahem)" (Lev. 18:5). By analyzing the various interpretations of this verse, we glean several essential insights into what it means to "live by them."

Understanding the verse from a broad, sociological perspective, Nahmanides proposes that Jewish law provides "life" to society. The social rules delineated in

the Torah offer a framework for a just and flourishing state. Instead of focusing on society, Rashi stresses the individual. Basing himself on a midrash, Rashi assumes "live by them" can't be referring to life in this world. As is evident empirically, all people eventually die, even those who follow Jewish law. Therefore, the message is that by following these laws in this world, an individual is granted eternal life in the World to Come.

In contrast to Rashi's metaphysical emphasis on the next world, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, based on the Talmud, demonstrates how this verse highlights the virtue Judaism places on this worldly-living. The Talmud generates an operative legal principle from the verse: "You shall live by them' - and not die by them" (Yoma 85b). In dire situations, all laws of the Torah (with the exception of three), can and should be violated in order to preserve human life.

In *Halakhic Man*, Rabbi Soloveitchik marks this principle as an essential one to Jewish ethics. The laws of the Torah can never “oppose the laws of life and reality, for were they to clash with this world and were they to negate the value of concrete, physiological-biological existence, then they would contain not mercy, lovingkindness, and peace but vengeance and wrath.” It is precisely because of the emphasis on living that, “Temporal life becomes transformed into eternal life; it becomes sanctified and elevated with eternal holiness.” The Torah, reflecting God’s kindness and beneficence, would not endorse rules that contravene the value of human life.

The Torah promotes life, not just socially, as suggested by Nahmanides, eternally, according to Rashi, or biologically, in the view of Rabbi Soloveitchik, but in a psychological sense as well. Commenting on the verse “And man became a living soul (nefesh chaya)” (Gen. 2:7), Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv) writes that the word “living” does not just connote alive as opposed to dead, but indicates “lively, in contrast to depressed (atzuv).” “A Jew, born to serve God,” he writes, “is chai only if he fulfills this mission of his life.” One can be biologically alive but languishing internally. Professor

Nehama Leibowitz applies Netziv’s insight to our verse. It is precisely through the performance of mitzvot and the fulfillment of one’s divine purpose that one feels invigorated.

While the Torah provides a framework for prosperity, an individual also has the responsibility to imbue vitality and passion into his or her observance. Rabbi Pinhas Halevi Horowitz reads the verse not as an assurance of life but as a directive to perform the commandments with life! Our souls should teem with dynamic desire while serving God. Our bodies should radiate a vivacious vigor and verve. In positive psychological research, the character strength of zest is one of the few traits that is consistently correlated with well-being and happiness. It is precisely through exuding exuberant energy in the performance of commandments that we demonstrate our passion for life and feel enlivened.

This is perhaps one effective method of counter-protest to the hatred with which we are confronted. Cherish life, embody Torah laws and values, and enthusiastically live a spiritual life worthy of the biological gift of life granted to us by God.

The Powerful Double Prohibition of ‘You Shall Not Do’

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

This week’s parsha is Parshas Achrei Mos. The parsha begins with a detailed description of the Yom Kippur Avodah (Vayikra 16), and ends with a long list of prohibitions in the realm of arayos - forbidden relationships, and the holiness of Eretz Yisrael (Vayikra 18).

The section on forbidden physical relationships begins by prohibiting us to go in the ways of the nations of the world. “And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: I am Hashem your G-d, כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבְּתֶם בָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּכְמַעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבְּתֶם שָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּבְחַקְתֵּיהֶם לֹא תִלְכוּ, - *after the acts of the land of Egypt, wherein you dwelled, you shall not do, and like the actions of the land of Canaan, that I am bringing you to, you shall not do; and in their ways you shall not go*” (Vayikra 18:1-3).

Rashi wonders, what is learned from the words: וּבְחַקְתֵּיהֶם לֹא תִלְכוּ, “and in their ways you shall not go”? Once the verse tells us not to emulate the behavior of the Egyptians, and not to follow the actions of the Canaanites, what other prohibition is added with the final words of the verse? Rashi (Vayikra 18:3) answers:

אֵלֶּא אֵלֶּוּ נִימוּסוֹת שְׁלֵהוֹן — דְּבָרִים הַחֲקוּקִין לָהֶם — כְּגוֹן טַרְטִיאוֹת וְאַצְטִיאוֹת - *These are their traditions, matters that are engraved for them so strongly, it is as if they were laws, such as (attendance to) their theaters and stadiums (days set aside for attendance at their theaters and stadiums; places where people would gather for entertainment and bullrings, respectively - Chumash with Rashi elucidated, Sapirstein Edition, Artscroll, p.215, note 3).*

Not only are we forbidden from emulating their behaviors, following in their ways, and making ourselves like the nations of the world; but we are forbidden from adopting their practices which are so firmly entrenched in their cultures and societies, that these customs become like law for them.

Another question on this verse is that the phrase לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ, you shall not do, appears twice. The first time after warning us not to emulate the ways of the Egyptians amongst whom we dwelled, and the second time after warning us not to become like the Canaanites, in the land to where we are going.

Would it not have been more concise for the Torah to

state the warning of 'you shall not do,' only once in the verse. The pasuk might simply have said: 'Like the ways of the Egyptians, amongst whom you dwelled, and like the ways of the Canaanites, in the land where I am bringing you, you shall not do.' In this structure 'you shall not do,' applies to both foreign nations.

What do we learn from the fact that the Torah stated the warning twice, one time in regard to each of these foreign nations?

Rabbi Shalom Rosner answers this question with a beautiful insight of the Kli Yakar. "The Kli Yakar explains that indeed there are two separate transgressions here, one against acting like the Egyptians, and the other against acting like the Canaanites. The Sages tell us that eighty percent of the people of Israel died during Makkas Choshech - the Plague of Darkness - because they did not want to leave Egypt, even after all the tortures of slavery they had been through in that land! They liked where they were and preferred to remain in exile, among people who threw their babies into the Nile River, rather than journey through the desert to an unknown, and foreign, land.

"This is the first prohibition. *כַּמְעֵשָׂה אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר* *לֹא תַעֲשֶׂוּ* - We are cautioned against feeling comfortable in a foreign land. We must not be complacent in exile, and we must be careful not to act like we belong in Egypt. We are to always remember that we are geirim (strangers) in exile, not toshavim (permanent residents) (cf. Bereishis 23:4)

"However, the second half of the verse is the flip side of the proverbial coin. In regard to the Canaanites, the prohibition of 'thou shall not do,' is somewhat different. Hashem promised us, His nation, that the land of Israel is the greatest land. Yehoshua and Calev, two great leaders and tzaddikim, told us that it is the greatest land. It

was beloved by the Avot, and Moshe Rabbeinu longed for it greatly... and yet, despite all these promises and reassurances, and a great vision of the fulfillment of Jewish destiny in Eretz Yisrael, the people rejected the land.

"Hence, *וְכַמְעֵשָׂה אֶרֶץ-כְּנַעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְבִיא אֵתְכֶם שָׁמָּה, לֹא תַעֲשֶׂוּ* means: do not reject Eretz Yisrael.

"The two 'you shall not do' of this verse teach us: 1. *לֹא תַעֲשֶׂוּ* - do not get too comfortable in exile, and 2. *לֹא תַעֲשֶׂוּ* - never reject or despise the land.

"... What tremendous gratitude we owe to HKB" H for allowing us to return to Eretz Yisrael in our day and age. We need to keep the lessons of the Kli Yakar in mind. On the one hand, we must be careful not to become overly comfortable in exile, and we must also strengthen our love for the Land, and never reject her... We must embrace Eretz Yisrael, recognize all the good that Hashem has bestowed upon her, and upon us, and we must appreciate the most precious gift that we have been granted in our generation" (Shalom Rav, v.II, p.89-90).

Today, more than seven months after Simchas Torah 5784/Oct. 7, 2023, and the flames of anti-semitism that have engulfed our world, and are continuing to rage, unabated, from east to west, and north to south, we would do well to keep the lesson of the double 'thou shall not do' of this verse in mind. No matter where a Jew is in exile, he is a stranger in a strange land. We should never become too comfortable in galus, because as the past seven months have powerfully reminded us, exile is not - and never will be - our home. And we must never reject, and must always embrace with passionate love, the Promised Land of Eretz Yisrael.

May we merit to see her in her rebuilding, may we merit to see her in her peace, and may we merit to see all of her children come back to her loving embrace.

Rav Soloveitchik on Acharei Mot: The Symbolism of the Scapegoat

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from *Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters* (Ktav, 2023))

The strangest element of the Yom Kippur service, as set forth at the beginning of Parashat Acharei Mot, is the ritual of the scapegoat. Two identical goats are chosen, and lots are drawn—one is to be offered as a sacrifice, and the other one is sent "to Azazel" in the wilderness. It was led over a cliff where it, together with the sins of the Jewish people, was torn to pieces as it tumbled down.

The Talmud provides a list of mitzvot that Satan belittles

and tries to get the Jewish people to cease observing or abandon altogether. These consist of those mitzvot whose rationales are not immediately evident or belong to the plane of Kabbalah: the negative commandments about eating pork and wearing wool and linen together, and the positive ones of chalitzah (removing the shoe to reject levirate marriage) and the scapegoat. Affirming that one must observe these without knowing the divine calculations behind them, God declares: "I have decreed it

and you have no right to question it.”¹

The fact that these mitzvot belong to the set called *chukim*, whose reasoning is opaque, has not deterred great minds from trying to pierce the veil. In the case of the scapegoat, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik was determined to find meaning in this centerpiece of the holiest day of the year. Even though the actual ritual is no longer performed, we continue to recite a poetic version of the sacrificial rite in the Mussaf prayer, so its relevance must endure. The Rav unpacked the meaning of three essential aspects of the ritual.

Fate Makes All the Difference

While physically indistinguishable on the basis of size or age, the two male goats could not have had more different fates. Pure chance alone, completely out of the animal's control, decided which would be “for God” and which “for Azazel” (Leviticus 16:8). This, the Rav argued, is how the penitent can petition for forgiveness and claim that he or she is not guilty. Like the goats, one can claim that they have been compelled to sin by outside forces rather than out of their own free will.

In truth, so much of our life seems the product of chance, of actors and circumstances beyond our control. We do not choose our parents, siblings, or children. The formative culture in whose orbit we are raised is inescapable. Character traits are the clear expression of genes passed down to us. Hormonal imbalances can give rise to certain states of mind and drive us to act uncharacteristically. In this way, much of life is like a lottery, and sometimes we draw losing numbers.

The penitent therefore draws God's attention to the blurring between what is within the realm of free choice and what should be chalked up to mitigating circumstances. God alone can evaluate the degree of our culpability. In this way, the rite of the scapegoat is “a psychodramatic representation of the penitent's state of mind and his emotional need.”²

While the Rav's approach does not excuse a sinner from his transgressions, it does offer hope for understanding and forgiveness, on the one hand, and the opportunity to improve, on the other.

From Satan to God

The Torah instructs us to cast one lot “for Azazel” and then send the goat “to Azazel” in the wilderness. Who or what is Azazel? According to the Ramban, “Azazel” is what the Midrash and Kabbalah refer to as “Samael,” roughly the equivalent of Satan. “And we give Samael a bribe on the Day of Atonement” is how the Ramban phrases it. But how

does a sacrifice to Azazel not fall afoul of idol worship?

The Rav laid the emphasis on the fact that it is God's will that we do so: “it was not intended that the scapegoat offering be sacrificed by us to Satan, God forbid, but that when making it, our intention is nothing else but to carry out our Creator's will as He commanded us.”³ The Torah never instructs us to bring Satan a sacrifice per se. Both sacrifices are sanctified for God and God alone. It is God who tells us what to do with both of them.

Still, why does God direct a sacrifice to the realm of Satan, and why is it integral to the effecting of atonement?

Go and see the feelings of sorrow, of disappointment, of frustration and of distress that man endures... for the sake of petty human cupidity, financial covetousness and the craving for honors. [...]

*This terrible feeling of alienation and loneliness usually overcomes man due to an excessive pursuit of futile vanities.*⁴

The Rav writes that in our transgressive pursuits we endure a great deal of self-inflicted suffering. It is the bitter fruit of our sinful intent and iniquitous action. On Yom Kippur, God accepts these painful emotions as though they were suffered out of devotion to God: “It is seen as offering to the Almighty and not, as it was in truth, an offering to Satan.”⁵ Through this ritual, then, “the Almighty revealed the great mystery of the quality of mercy which is operative on the Day of Atonement.”⁶

To summarize: “The scapegoat symbolizes man who suffers because of his own failures. If he feels remorse and has second thoughts of repentance because of them, these failures are then regarded as a sacrifice offered up to God.”⁷

An Uncontrollable Descent

The underlying principle behind *teshuvah* (repentance) is that the human being has been granted free will. In his laws on repentance, the Rambam formulated this notion beautifully: “Free will is granted to every man. If he wishes to incline himself to the path of good and be righteous the choice is his; and if he wishes to incline himself to the path of evil and be wicked the choice is his.”⁸

Inanimate things are by definition passive objects, acted upon by outside forces and obeying precise physical laws. Roll a ball off a table and witness the laws of motion and gravity in action. Free will, however, allows man to be a subject, an actor. Sin occurs, said the Rav, when man becomes an object.

The simplest verbs which denote the dichotomy between a subject and an object are those of ascent and descent, respectively. Ascent involves an act of overcoming the force of gravity, while descent involves succumbing to this force. If

a person loses his dynamic, subjective existence and cannot counteract various forces which tend to pull him downward, he is acting as a simple object.⁹

The Rav suggested that this is the symbol of the scapegoat. The Mishnah describes graphically the scapegoat ritual: “He pushed it backward and it rolled down. It was dismembered before reaching halfway down the mountain.”¹⁰ This is an accurate description of what sin can do to a person: “Even before his total descent he is broken apart, an abject victim of gravity.”¹¹

Exploring the Rav’s Insight

Yaakov offered a blessing to his grandchildren, and to all his future descendants, before leaving the world: “may they be as numerous as fish (וַיְדַבֵּר לְרֵב)” (Genesis 48:16). The most common understanding is that the Jewish people should proliferate prodigiously. A different reading could be “may they be as great as fish,” for healthy fish swim against the tide. Rav Kook expressed the idea that the fish lives in its

own world under the sea, uninfluenced by the events and atmosphere outside of its sphere.¹² This blessing was most appropriate for the descendants of Yosef because he himself exemplified the trait of resolutely retaining his faith and making his own way in a foreign, debased society. Instead of being objects of fate, let us be agents of our own destiny.

1. Yoma 67b.
2. Besdin, Reflections of the Rav, 46–47.
3. Soloveitchik, On Repentance, 294–295.
4. Ibid., 298–299.
5. Ibid., 299.
6. Ibid., 298.
7. Ibid., 300–301.
8. Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah, 5:1.
9. Soloveitchik, Before Hashem, 31–32.
10. Mishnah, Yoma, 6:6.
11. Soloveitchik, Before Hashem, 32.
12. Ein Ayah, Berachot, 9:62. See further Parashat Vayechi, “The Scaly Armor of Fish.”

The Essence of Kedusha

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Parshas Acharei-Mos begins with the prohibition **וְאֵל יִבּוֹא בְכָל עַת אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ** – forbidding anyone, even the kohen gadol, from entering the kodesh ha’kodashim (the inner chamber of the Beis Ha’mikdash). This is allowed only on Yom Kippur, for the purpose of performing the special avoda (service) which the Torah proceeds to outline for us in the ensuing pesukim. The kohen gadol would offer ketores inside the kodesh kodashim to create a cloud of smoke, and thereafter would sprinkle the blood of the special Yom Kippur sacrifices there in this chamber.

Interestingly enough, at the very end of the Yom Kippur service, the kohen gadol would enter the kodesh kodashim one final time – to remove the spoon and the shovel that contained the incense. The kohen gadol would have to immerse in a mikveh and change into his special Yom Kippur garments one last time just for the purpose of retrieving the **כַּף וּמַחְתָּה**, the utensils with which he had offered the ketores inside the kodesh ha’kodashim.

Rav Yechezkel Abramsky raises the question of why this purpose necessitated – or even justified – the kohen gadol’s entry into this chamber. We understand that the Torah made an exception for the Yom Kippur avoda, allowing the kohen gadol to enter the kodesh ha’kodashim in order to sprinkle the blood of the special atonement sacrifices

offered on this day. But why was the kohen gadol allowed into the kodesh ha’kodashim in order to “clean up,” to remove the **כַּף וּמַחְתָּה**? Couldn’t he just have left it there until Yom Kippur of the following year, when he would go back into the kodesh ha’kodashim for the avoda?

Rav Abramsky answers this question by offering a fascinating insight into the meaning and essence of kedusha. He explains that empty utensils could not be left in the kodesh ha’kodashim, the most sacred spot on earth, because emptiness is the antithesis of kedusha. In Rav Abramsky’s words, **בְּמִקּוֹם קְדוֹשׁ אֵין מְקוֹם לְכָלִים רְקִים** – “There is no place for empty utensils in a sacred site.” Kedusha is all about recognizing that life has meaning and purpose, that the world is filled with significance. Emptiness implies worthlessness, the absence of value and meaning. Kedusha means just the opposite – that there is a purpose to everything in life, that everything in our world has significance if we utilize it the right way. The essence of kedusha is the commitment to fill our lives with meaning, by filling our time with meaningful pursuits. Kedusha requires us not to leave any vacuum in our lives, to infuse every day and everything we do with significance and purpose. Therefore, Rav Abramsky explains, the **כַּף וּמַחְתָּה** could not be left inside the kodesh ha’kodashim – because emptiness has no place in the lives of kedusha that we are expected to live.

of the many other immoral practices condemned by the Bible.

How far did our people stray in their reprehensible practices? Probably much further than we can ever imagine. And yet, somehow, our people always found their way back, or at least a minority of Jews found their way back.

Only about 60 years after the death of the wicked king Menashe, his grandson, the righteous king Josiah, inspired the people to return and repent, cleansing the land of Judea of idol worship, and renovating the holy Temple. Despite

Being a Jew in Exile and in Israel

Rabbi Johnny Solomon

Parshat Acharei Mot instructs the Jewish nation, ‘you shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor shall you do as they do in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you’ (Vayikra 18:3).

Based on this verse, Rabbi Berachya, in a teaching quoted in Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 23:7, invokes the words of Shir HaShirim 2:2 of *keshoshana bein hachochim*, ‘like a lily among the thorns’, to explain that it is as if God said to Moshe:

“Go and say to the Jewish people that when they were in Egypt they were like a lily among the thorns (*keshoshana bein hachochim*), and now, as they prepare to enter the land of Canaan, they should also be like a lily among the thorns (*keshoshana bein hachochim*) and they shouldn’t do as they did in Egypt or as they do in Canaan.”

Clearly, this teaching is very meaningful – especially given the fact that we are between Pesach and Yom Ha’atzmaut. Still, an important question as posed by Rabbi Chaim Elazary (1902-1984) in his Netivei Chaim commentary on Vayikra 18:3, is why was there a need for the Torah to reference Egypt and Canaan? As he writes:

‘Surely, if the Jewish people were like a lily among the thorns while they were in exile where they acted with righteousness even while surrounded by those that were wicked, they would most certainly continue doing so when they arrived in Israel. Still, it seems that it was necessary for the Jewish people to be given a specific command about [not following the ways of the Canaanites] when they entered the land of Israel - even though they had steadfastly maintained their identity as a lily among the thorns while exiled in Egypt’.

To this, Rabbi Elazary responds by explaining that,

‘We have been taught that wherever there is an increase in opportunities for holiness, there is also an increase in

the popular appeal of the Molech cult, the Jewish people abandoned that shameful form of worship, and returned to G-d.

Let us pray, that our contemporary brothers and sisters, who seem to have drifted so far away from their Jewish roots, but not nearly as far as the ancients who practiced the evil Molech rituals, will return to their Jewish practices. May we see the Temple renewed and rebuilt in the very near future, and may we all soon merit to worship G-d in peace, tranquility and great joy.

opportunities for spiritual impurity as the Gemara (Sukkah 52a) teaches us: ‘Whoever is greater than his fellow, his evil inclination is also greater than his fellow’. The simple reason for this is that when the evil inclination (yetzer hara) fights against the good inclination (yetzer hatov) it acquires the necessary weapons to fight against its foe. Accordingly, if its foe is greater, then so too the weapons of the yetzer hara will increase.’

What this means is that rather than there being a kal vachomer (a fortiori) of, ‘if the Jewish nation were like a lily among the thorns in Egypt, then certainly they will be so in the land of Israel’, the reality is that, ‘if the Jewish nation had to strive to be a lily among the thorns in Egypt, then certainly they will have to strive to be so in the land of Israel’. This is because, as stated clearly in Vayikra 18:25-30 and as emphasized by the Ramban in his commentary to Vayikra 18:25, when living in the land of Israel more is spiritually expected of the Jewish people. At the same time, when living in the land of Israel, the threat of spiritual failure is also greater.

This then prompts Rabbi Elazary to add that,

‘In this command the Jewish people are being given a warning: Do not think that now that you are in your homeland that you can live like all other nations! The fact is that when you were in exile, you understood that if you were to behave like your neighbours that this would thereby cause you to assimilate. This is why you endeavoured to maintain your identity and essence as a nation. The problem is that when you come the land of Israel, you may then think that you can dwell like all other nations and that there is nothing to be afraid of in terms of assimilation. As a result, you will grant yourselves permission to adopt their ways and practices. In response to such a concern the Torah specifically warns us that even when we are in our own land, we must strengthen our loyalty to our

holy and pure heritage as expressed in our Torah.'

As a Jew who previously lived in the diaspora, I know what it means to be like a lily among the thorns in exile. And as a Jew who now proudly lives in Israel, every day provides me with further opportunities to discover and nurture what it means to be a lily among the thorns here in Israel.

Just as Israel differs from all other countries, so too, the

Holy Maintenance

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

Aharon is given a set of instructions. Once a year, on Yom Kippur, he was to enter the Kodesh Hakodashim, the Holy of Holies – but only after performing an extensive ritual of purification and atonement to allow for his brief audience with the Divine presence in its sacred abode.¹ Under no other circumstances may the Kohen Gadol enter the Kodesh Hakodashim (the Holy of Holies), no other person could enter along with him (Vayikra 16:17), and there was great fear that, in accordance with the words of the Torah (Vayikra 16:2), a diversion of any kind from the set ritual, known as Avodat Yom Hakippurim, could lead to the very demise of the Kohen Gadol (Cf. Rashi ad. loc.; Yoma 19b). To serve as the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur was an awesome and sacred responsibility, to be performed with the utmost care. Yet just a few months ago, while visiting Ohr Torah Stone students mobilized to IDF reserves in the south of Israel, I was reminded of another halakha regarding the Kodesh Hakodashim from an interaction with one of our brave students. He had been stationed at a location in Kibbutz Beeri which had been designated for tank repairs, a skill set he had developed during the years of his regular service. He admitted to me that he was feeling somewhat disappointed. Many of his friends and peers were fighting on the frontlines, yet he had been left back to perform work that is, despite the physical exertion and technical mastery needed, considered less important than combat. I shared with this student that, despite the Torah's seeming pronouncement that the Avodat Yom haKippurim is the only circumstance in which we allow for entry into the Holy of Holies, the Tosefta in Keilim (1:11) notes that Kohanim were permitted to enter the Kodesh Hakodashim at their leisure when performing maintenance work. No additional sacrifices or sprinklings of blood were necessary; the Kohen could simply enter the Kodesh Hakodashim. These priestly maintenance

tools for spiritual success in Israel are different to those required outside of Israel. Still, the overall lesson we learn from Vayikra 18:3 is that, both while living in exile and especially while living in Israel, we must not be spiritually careless or complacent. Instead, we must be clear and strong about what it means to be a Jew, and live in a way that is expressive of keshoshana bein hachochim.

workers of millenia ago reminded me of this student, who was similarly tasked with what seemed to him to be menial tasks lacking in the meaning and excitement designated to others. I encouraged him to see in his current task a similar fulfillment of responsibility. Sure, this particular student wasn't serving on the frontlines; but his role in ensuring that the tanks operated was no less than crucial.

In fact, throughout the past few months, the people of Israel have been witness to a wide range of crucial tasks on the home front as well: medical staff working extra shifts to keep hospitals operating, community members bringing food to the families of wounded soldiers or those in miluim, volunteering to care for children who have been evacuated to the center of the country or have been recently orphaned, and so much more. It is easy to spot the heroes on the frontlines who, like the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur, put their entire lives and wellbeing on the line in order to protect us. Yet a half-year into this ongoing war, we should remember that we all have the capacity to be heroes of a different stripe, people who can similarly enter the 'holy of holies' to perform the so-called 'menial tasks' that support and empower others. All the background and behind-the-scenes work that allows our families, communities, and state to thrive ought to be cherished and performed with pride. These, too, are priestly pathways to the Divine allowing all of us to find our presence in the Holy of Holies.

1. The Netziv in his introduction to Vayikra quotes the Gaon of Vilna that Aharon the first High Priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies any day, not just on Yom haKippurim. All future High Priests could only enter once a year. Furthermore, If Aharon wanted to enter he needed to follow the rigorous protocols required for any High Priest on Yom haKippurim, the protocols mentioned in our parsha.

Yom Kippur, the Parah Adumah and the Breaking of the Luchos

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן... בְּזֹאת יָבֹא אַהֲרֹן אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ.

Hashem spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon ... With this shall Aharon come into the Sanctuary (16:1-3)

The Yerushalmi in Maseches Yoma (1:1) records three statements regarding the passing of tzaddikim, the first of which is based in our pasuk:

1. Commenting on the Torah's juxtaposition of the mention of the death of Aharon's sons and the avodah of Yom Kippur, the Yerushalmi states that just as Yom Kippur atones, so, too, the death of tzaddikim atones.
2. In a similar vein, the juxtaposition of the Torah's account of the death of Miriam to its presentation of the laws of the Parah Adumah (Bamidbar perek 19-20) teaches that just as the ashes of Parah Adumah effect atonement for Israel, so, too, the death of tzaddikim effects atonement for Israel.
3. Finally, the Yerushalmi notes the juxtaposition of the Torah's account of the death of Aharon with it mentioning the breaking of the luchos (Devarim 9:17-20) commenting: This is to teach you that the death of tzaddikim is as difficult before Hashem as the breaking of the luchos.

What is the meaning behind these three statements regarding the passing of tzaddikim, the first two of which seem essentially the same?

Time of Divine Favor

The Meshech Chochmah explains that each of these statements reflects a distinct element that may pertain to the passing of a tzaddik.

The first element can be found in Yom Kippur. The special quality of Yom Kippur is that it is an עת רצון, a time of Divine favor, during which Hashem is particularly well disposed toward granting the Jewish People atonement. So too, when a tzaddik passes away, Hashem rejoices over the return of a pure soul having completed its mission on earth. As such, it is also an עת רצון when atonement can be more easily fulfilled, just as on Yom Kippur.

There is a proviso, however. Yom Kippur only effects atonement for a person who approaches the day with due reverence, not someone who relates to it flippantly.¹ Likewise, the passing of a tzaddik only signifies an עת רצון for someone who reveres the tzaddik, while one who has no such reverence cannot partake of the עת רצון that exists

upon his passing.

Reflection and Introspection

A second quality that accompanies the passing of a tzaddik is in the area of reflection and spiritual stock-taking.

The procedure of sprinkling the Parah Adumah ashes is administered to someone who has come into close contact with a dead body. This encounter engenders within a person a consciousness of his mortality, which should lead him to take stock of the way he is leading his life. Likewise, when a tzaddik passes away, it is time for all to reflect on their own lives, for even someone as righteous as the departed was unable to escape death.² Additionally, the tzaddik may have exerted protective merit on those around him while he was alive, as well as praying for their wellbeing. In the absence of this merit, people will be roused to attain more merits by virtue of their own actions.³

Removing a Source of Indictment

A third element of atonement within the passing of a tzaddik relates not so much to what happens when he passes away, but to what would have happened had he remained in this world.

There are times when a person's status and that of his actions is assessed relative to others in his environs. Thus, we find, for example, Noach is referred to as a "perfect tzaddik in his generations," (Bereishis 6:9) which Chazal (Sanhedrin 108a) explain to mean relative to the wicked people in his time, while had he lived in Avraham's generation he would not have been considered a tzaddik. Conversely, we find that the woman of the household where Eliyahu enjoyed hospitality complained to him "You have come here to recall my wrongdoing!" (Melachim I, 17:18) Meaning, that before Eliyahu came she was considered righteous, but now, in his elevated presence, she was considered relatively lacking in merit.⁴

Therefore, if there is a tzaddik whose conduct – and exhortations – are ignored by those around him, his presence serves to indict their actions. Since Hashem wishes to see His people exonerated, He removes the tzaddik from their midst, so that the only people to whom they can be compared are the nations of the world, relative to whom they can now be assessed as tzaddikim. In this regard, the Meshech Chochmah cites the comment of the Sifrei (Devarim sec. 349) on the pasuk in Devarim

(33:8) “You contended with him at Mei Merivah” – You arranged a pretext for him. Since Aharon’s level was so far above that of the new generation that had been born in the wilderness, his presence was an indictment of them and hence, Hashem “conspired” to arrange trying circumstances at Mei Merivah such as would justify him leaving the world.

This concept finds a parallel in Moshe breaking the luchos. Chazal (Shemos Rabbah 43:1) explain that the luchos represented the sealing of our relationship with Hashem which is compared to that of husband and wife. Having made the Golden Calf, the worship of which is tantamount to “adultery” in our marriage with Hashem, that relationship would serve only to condemn us all the more. Hence, Moshe chose to break the luchos, thereby removing that aspect of the relationship and sparing us that

further level of condemnation. Thus, the Yerushalmi states that the passing of a tzaddik is like the breaking of the luchos, as in this respect, it achieves the same goal.

1. See Shavuos 13a.
2. In the words of the Gemara (Moed Katan 25b): “If a flame has taken hold [even] of the cedar trees, what, then can the shrubs growing from the wall do?”
3. See Sanhedrin 37a where it recounts that there was a group of wayward individuals for whose wellbeing R’ Zeira would pray. When he passed away, they said “Who, now, will pray for us?,” and they were moved to do teshuvah.
4. Yalkut Shimoni to Melachim ibid. In this vein, the Gemara (Yoma 35b) states that “Hillel indicts the poor,” i.e. his efforts to learn Torah in spite of his poverty serve as a criticism for others who cite their poverty as the reason for their neglect of Torah study.
5. The beginning of that pasuk (תומיק ואוריך לאיש חסידך) refers to Aharon.]

Haftarat Acharei Mot: Will God Ever Reject Us? Purpose and Inscrutability: Two Aspects of Israel’s Election

Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank (From *From Within the Tent: The Haftarah, Essays on the Weekly Haftarah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, YU Press, 2011)

Why were we chosen? Can God ever reject us entirely? Is God’s love unconditional? These vexing questions form the central theme of the book of Amos. First, however, let’s start with our parashah. In Vayikra chapter 18 God warns the Jewish people: “And let the land not vomit you out for having defiled it, as it vomited out the nation that preceded you” (28). The implication is clear – just as God is going to eject the current inhabitants of Kena’an for their abominations so He will eject you if you follow in their ways. This prompts the obvious question: are we any different than those inhabitants? God has utterly vanquished the Amorites – could we suffer the same fate?

The book of Amos, from where our haftarah is culled, begins with this very dilemma. The prophet opens with God’s charge: “Three transgressions of Damascus I can forgive, but not a fourth” (1:3). The same is said of the Philistines, of Tyre, of Edom, and of Moav. In each case the matching refrain is utilized. God predicts the destruction of these nations due to their sinfulness. Remarkably, the identical statement is then said about Yehudah: “Three transgressions of Yehudah I can forgive, but not a fourth” (2:4). No obvious distinction between Yehudah and the other nations is offered.

Likewise, “Three transgressions of Yisrael I can forgive, but not a fourth” (2:6). Here, however, the prophet

elaborates. After listing the sins, as he did in the previous cases, he adds: “And I destroyed the Amorites from before them ... And I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and I led you in the desert for forty years, to inherit the land of the Amorites” (2:9–10). According to Radak, this is a reference to the pesukim quoted earlier from our parashah. God bemoans the irreverent actions of the Jewish nation: I warned you not to follow in the ways of the Amorites, lest you suffer their fate, but instead you mimicked their evil ways.

Chapter 3 continues the theme of chosenness, but with a twist. Thus far, the Jewish people have been equated with the rest of the world – now the prophet offers a shocking statement about children of Israel: “Only you did I know from among all the families of the earth; therefore, I will visit upon you all your iniquities.” In this verse, God finally distinguishes us from all the rest of the world. However, this distinction carries with it a heavy burden – we, more than any other nation, are punished for our sins. The commentaries offer several possibilities as to how to understand this verse. According to all of them, here we finally see explicit acknowledgment of Jewish distinction. Nevertheless, we are left confused about the nature of this distinction and muddled about how to reconcile the first two chapters with the third. The answer to the sefer’s primary question – can we ever be utterly obliterated? –

remains elusive.

The mystery only intensifies as we continue reading: “The virgin of Israel has fallen and shall not continue to rise; she is spread out on her soil, there is none to raise her up” (5:2). The verse implies finality – it’s all over. However, this reading is challenged by subsequent verses. The confusion continues in chapter 7. The verses depict God going back and forth about whether to vanquish His people. In chapter 8, Amos prophesies: “The end has come to My people Israel” (v. 2). We are left wondering – the end of what?

All this brings us to the climax of the sefer, the end of chapter 9, our haftarah (9:7–15). The section begins with one of the most jarring phrases in all of Tanakh: “הֲלוֹא כְּבָנֵי הַכּוּשִׁיִּים אַתֶּם לִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל” God proclaims that we are like “the children of the Cushites to [Him].” Whatever this means, it does not seem complimentary. The implication is that there is nothing special about us. But, we rejoin, that can’t be – for, did He not take us out of Egypt? The end of the verse addresses this claim, but cryptically: “Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and Aram from Kir?” Once again, we are startled – are we truly no different from the Philistines and Arameans? Is our rescue from Egypt comparable to God’s favors to other oppressed nations? And can we suffer their fate? The prophet continues, “Behold the eyes of the Lord God are on the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from upon the face of the earth.”

When it seems that all is lost, however, there is a sudden shift: “But I will not destroy the house of Jacob, says the Lord.” We will never be utterly decimated. True, things will not be easy; God “will scatter the house of Israel among all the nations.” We will be shaken in a sieve, but there is hope, because in the end “בְּיוֹם הַהוּא, אָקִים אֶת־סֶבֶת דָּוִד הַנִּפְלֹתָ;” – “On that day, I will raise up the fallen Tabernacle of David, and I will close up their breaches, and I will raise up its ruins, and build it up as in the days of yore.” With these comforting thoughts the book closes.

When we examine it as a whole unit, Sefer Amos leaves us confused. It is clear that we are different, but it is not clear why and how. Are we like the Cushites, or not? Is the Exodus from Egypt comparable to Philistines departure from Caphtor, or does it differ? Evidently, we will be saved, but how do we understand the prophet’s prediction of utter destruction?

To better understand these quandaries, we need to broadly examine the nature of a central tenet of Judaism:

Bechirat Yisrael – God’s choosing of Israel. The question of why the Jews were chosen to be God’s people is addressed not only by Amos; it is raised frequently in the Written and Oral Law. This question proves especially troublesome because of the mixed messages that different sources suggest. In this essay, we will explore passages in Tanakh and rabbinic literature to attempt to unravel the mystery of our chosenness.

When we survey the various depictions of chosenness, a binary and somewhat contradictory message is conveyed. On the one hand, Israel and its founder Avraham show moral perfection and devotion to God, and God selects us because of our outstanding behavior. At the same time, however, the reason for the choice remains mysterious – our selection transcends our righteousness. In this essay, we attempt to understand the implications of this complex and seemingly contradictory relationship; after all, unraveling bechirah is to analyze the mortar that initially fused us and to probe the glue that currently binds us.

Let us begin with the pivotal moment in Bechirat Yisrael – God’s selection of Avraham. Maharal notes a striking distinction between the Torah’s introductions of Avraham and Noach: when the Bible introduces Noach, his righteousness is immediately proclaimed, with the text describing why Noach alone, among all the people of the world, was picked. In the case of Avraham, shockingly, God speaks to Avraham, commanding him to leave on his fateful mission, without informing us of the merits by which Avraham deserved such distinction. Maharal attributes this discrepancy to the disparate nature of Avraham’s and Noach’s respective missions. Noach was chosen to be a survivor, while Avraham was chosen to found an eternal nation. Since Avraham’s chosenness extends beyond just himself, asserts Maharal, the reason for his selection must go beyond personal greatness. To be sure, the Bible articulates the unsurpassed rectitude of Avraham, but only after God promises, “I will make of thee a great nation” (Bereishit 12:2). Thus, the verses in Nechemiah, “Thou art the Lord, the God, who chose Avram, and brought him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gave him the name of Avraham, and found his heart faithful before Thee,” imply that God first chose Avraham, and only later discovered his loyalty. This does not minimize Avraham’s early accomplishments, but rather underscores that his chosenness, and therefore the chosenness of his progeny, was not simply a function of his moral superiority, as was the case when God designated Noach. Presumably, the Torah omits the reason for God’s choosing Abraham to

indicate that we cannot, or should not, understand the reason for God's selection. While the text does not state that God's choice was random, void of consideration of worth or value, it nonetheless implies that the reason for Avraham's initial election, and ultimately the election of all of Israel, is inaccessible.

Despite the Biblical reticence in articulating the rationale for Avraham's selection, rabbinic literature satiates the glaring void by revealing the Divine cause. Midrashim graphically describe the details of Avraham's early life, depicting his independent discovery of the Almighty, and articulating his youthful piety. Thus, according to tradition, Avraham was already the greatest person in history before God began to converse with him. Maimonides eloquently expresses this perspective:

Owing to the passage of time, the honored and fear-inducing Name was forgotten by all of nature.... Things continued in this manner until Abraham the Patriarch, supporter of the world, was born. Once Abraham was weaned, he, as a child, began contemplating and thinking day and night, and wondered how a sphere could follow a fixed path without being directed. If so, who directed it? Surely it would be impossible for it to rotate on its own! Abraham did not have a mentor, but was immersed amongst the stupid idolaters of Ur Casdim, where everyone, including his mother and father, served idols, as did he. In his heart, however, he continued to contemplate, until he realized the way of truth and understood the ways of righteousness from nature, and knew that there is a God who directs the spheres, created the world, and besides whom there is none other....

The identical pattern repeats itself in Devarim, where the Torah transmits the rationales that God did not consider when choosing Israel without really telling us why He did select us:

For thou art a holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be His own treasure, out of all peoples that are upon the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people – for ye were the fewest of all peoples – but because the Lord loved you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore unto your fathers, hath the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Devarim 7:6–8).

However, when explaining this very verse that highlights the mysteriousness of God's selection of Israel, Talmudic literature finds purpose in His choice:

It is written, it was not because you were greater than any people that the Lord set His love upon you and chose you. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel, I love you because even when I bestow greatness upon you, you humble yourselves before me. I bestowed greatness upon Abraham, yet he said to Me, I am but dust and ashes; Upon Moses and Aaron, yet they said: And we are nothing; upon David, yet he said: But I am a worm and no man. But with the heathens it is not so. I bestowed greatness upon Nimrod, and he said: Come, let us build us a city; upon Pharaoh, and he said: Who is the Lord? Upon Sennacherib, and he said: Who are they among all the gods of the countries? Upon Nebuchadnezzar, and he said: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; upon Hiram king of Tyre, and he said: I sit in the seat of God, in the heart of the seas.

These contradictions, between the Biblical text and the interpretation tradition has granted it, point to a duality within Bechirat Yisrael. Rabbinic literature stresses one element of our chosenness – namely, that God selected us because of our outstanding behavior, while the Bible stresses that our selection transcends our righteousness.

When we speak of bechirah, however, we refer not just to the choosing of Avraham – after all, Avraham sired many nations – but we also refer to God's choosing of the nation of Israel. The aforementioned Deuteronomic verses highlight both elements of selection by referring both to God's love of Israel and the covenant with the forefathers when discussing the reason for chosenness. Likewise, in explaining the verse, "For you are a holy people to the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen thee to be His own treasure out of all peoples that are upon the face of the earth," Rashi stresses both junctions of selection: "[The phrase] 'For you are a holy people,' refers your inherent holiness, which is a legacy from fathers, and in addition, 'God has chosen you'" (Devarim 14:2).

Interestingly, when we examine the chosenness of Israel as a nation, we find the exact opposite pattern than the one we discovered in the choosing of Avraham. At the giving of the Torah, the text of the Bible informs us that Israel chose God and His Torah voluntarily, even eagerly, proclaiming "Na'aseh ve-nishma" – "We shall perform and [then] we shall hear." This time, it is the Bible that identifies Israel's greatness, while rabbinic tradition paints the picture oppositely, highlighting the apparent irrationality in God's choice of Israel by depicting God as having to coerce Israel into accepting the Torah.

Of course, Chazal also send the reverse message, with

the very same page in Avodah Zarah depicting God as offering the Torah to various nations, all of whom rejected the gift based on their objections to particular commandments, with only Israel accepting the Torah without qualification. Clearly these two images merge to portray the duality of bechirah, one which highlights Israel's choosing of the Almighty, and one which points to God's choosing of Israel; one which demonstrates Israel's greatness, and one which reveals its failings.

Thus, in every depiction of chosenness, the binary nature of Israel's choice is conveyed. On the one hand, Israel and its founder Avraham show moral perfection and devotion to God, while on the other hand, the reason for the choice remains mysterious. In each instance, the Mikra and Midrash combine to highlight this dichotomy.

The metaphors used to describe God's relationship with Israel also express this duality. Sometimes, Israel is referred to as the son of God, which implies a relationship not based on merit; a parent need not justify his or her love for his or her child – it is natural, and, to a certain degree, irrational. Moreover, because a progenitor's love does not stem from his or her son's righteousness, but from his essence, the relationship can never be broken. Other times, the Torah depicts Israel as the spouse of God. The spousal relationship differs from a familial bond in that it is initially formed because of the qualities one spouse finds in the other. Because the union is volitional, it can be broken if one partner fails to live up to expectations.

These mixed metaphors are not a contradiction; we are both the son of God and His spouse; we were chosen without reason and because of our greatness. Thus, by calling us Divine progeny, the Torah relates the inscrutability in God's choice, while the allegory of the spouse points to our righteousness as the reason for our election.

The spouse-son duality in our relationship with God thus resolves a thorny quandary within Tanakh. At certain points, the Torah indicates that God's relationship with Israel can never be broken; nothing Israel does could rupture the eternal bond with the Creator. This is certainly the prevailing expression both in Tanakh and rabbinic literature. Thus, God initially joins Avraham in an "eternal covenant" (Bereishit 17:7), God promises redemption after the harsh retribution of Vayikra (26:44), and Shmuel can reassure the nation that the Lord will never abandon them (Shmuel Aleph 12:22). Even Amos, who, as we saw earlier, seems to compare Israel to other nations, concludes, "Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are upon

the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from off the face of the earth; except I will never utterly destroy the house of Jacob" (Amos 9:8). Psalm 89 likewise highlights the permanence of the father-son relationship.

At other times, however, the Torah seems to imply that the kinship is disposable. The appearance of God's threatening to abandon Israel is most vividly depicted in the chastisement in Devarim in chapter 28, especially in verses 45 and 61. Even more startlingly, Yeshayahu declares, "He hath broken the covenant" (33:8). Likewise, Yirmiyahu records in Melakhim Bet 17:20 that "God has rejected the entire offspring of Israel;" they should therefore, "Cut off thy hair, and cast it away, and take up a lamentation on the high hills; for the Lord hath rejected and forsaken the generation of His wrath" (Yirmiyahu 7:29).

When we consider the dual spouse-son nature of our relationship with God, however, the contradiction dissipates. Though God could theoretically terminate the spousal element of our relationship, as it is based on merit, the ancestral component of our affiliation can never disintegrate. Thus, when God exiles Israel, and appears to abandon them, the prophets repeatedly stress the parental relationship, with God assuring Israel, "As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you" (Yeshayahu 66:13).

With this we can understand the various contradictions highlighted earlier that mark the book of Amos. Are we like Cushites or are we not? Well, in a sense we are, because like the Cushites our relationship with the Almighty depends upon our behavior; however, in a different sense we are not like them, as we are His children. The contradictions in Amos about our utter destruction can likewise be resolved.

It is important to stress, however, that we are not contending that the spousal relationship with the Almighty has actually been broken, only that by definition a spousal relationship can theoretically be severed. Moreover, because of the eternal parent-child component of our relationship, in a sense, even our spousal relationship is eternal – after all, in reality, we cannot simultaneously be both attached and unattached to God. Poignantly, our parent-child bond maintains even our spousal relationship, which might otherwise be terminated. This dichotomy is brilliantly captured by Rashi in his introduction to Shir Ha-Shirim. According to Rashi, the Jewish people in exile are like an אשה צרורה אלמנות חיות, a bound widow who is still attached to her deceased husband – an internal contradiction, one with no halakhic analog. What

maintains her relationship with her husband? Based on the above, we can suggest it is the parent-child bond. Moreover, it is this precisely this component that will facilitate our amorous reunion with God described in the second chapter of Hoshea.

This dichotomy manifests itself in Halakhah as well. On the one hand, the Talmud rules, “Even if a proselyte returns to his original faith, his ability to marry [a Jew] remains effective” (Yevamot 47b). In other words, once someone becomes a full-fledged Jew, he cannot lose his Jewishness, even by defecting to a different religion. Elsewhere, the Talmud echoes this sentiment, coining the phrase, “Yisrael af al pi she-chata Yisrael hu” – “a Jew, even if he sins, remains a Jew” (Sanhedrin 44a). On the other hand, many laws in Halakhah treat certain sinners like gentiles. For example, the apostate’s ritual slaughter is invalid, like that of a non-Jew; according to most opinions, one may collect interest from an apostate, since it is as if he lost his Jewishness; and the Torah Scroll he writes is even burned! Many authorities even use the expression, “mumar ke-akum le-kol davar” – “an apostate is like a gentile [lit. an idolater] regarding all matters.”

Following our thesis, however, these seemingly contradictory sources are reconciled. Normative law follows the majority opinion that while an apostate is treated like a gentile with regard to most laws, when it comes to marriage, as well as conversion, he remains Jewish. In our terms, the parent/child element of our relationship with God demands that the sinner cannot utterly shed his status as Jew, yet the spousal nature of our relationship with the Almighty allows the apostate to lose his entitlements and stature. This bifurcated relationship leads to a complex, but predictable, pattern. We may brand the sinner a renegade, but he is still part of the family. Even when he loses his privileges and respect, even if we curse him and estrange him, he remains a Jew. Thus, the apostate remains ancestrally Jewish, since this element of chosenness, which reflects Divine inscrutability, is a function of our being Divine progeny. Like a child, we can rebel, but we cannot divorce. But since we are also His spouse, since we were chosen because of our achievements, when we flout our covenant we risk separation, both on an individual and national level.

Faithful friend, Merciful father

Pull me your servant towards you.

In this first line of his poem, “Yedid Nefesh,” R.

Elazar ben Moshe Azikri awakens us to our complex and

seemingly contradictory relationship with the Almighty – he says we are at once His friend, His child, and His servant. In this essay, we have sought to understand this bond; after all, unraveling bechirah is to analyze the mortar that initially fused us and to probe the glue that currently binds us. Our attempts to comprehend, however, are stymied because this relationship, by definition, resembles no other. The two partners are not only unequal, they share nothing in common. He is infinite; we are mortal. He is omnipotent; we are puny. He knows everything of our essence, yet we know nothing of His. So how are we to analyze our bond? Just as we are commanded to attempt to know the Unknowable, we must try to understand the incomprehensible, even as we realize that ultimately the truth eludes us.