

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Acharei Mot
May 7, 2016

פרשת אחרי מות
כ"ט בניסן תשע"ו

Torah Reading: *Vayikra* (Leviticus) 16:1-18:30

In this *parasha*, God instructs Moshe regarding the procedures for the Day of Atonement; sexual prohibitions are then listed.

In one of those strange vicissitudes of the Jewish calendar, the *parasha* we read immediately following Pesach addresses the Temple service on Yom Kippur. Our minds are still wrapped around the fun we had at the *seder* celebrating with family and friends and once again acclimating ourselves to *chametz* (leavened products prohibited on Pesach). And here, during the normal course of the Torah Readings, Yom Kippur intrudes upon our thoughts.

On Yom Kippur, the *Cohen Gadol* (High Priest) offered special sacrifices; he confessed on the head of the scapegoat chosen by lottery and sent that goat into the desert; for the only time during the year, he entered the *Kodesh Kodashim* (The Holy of Holies), to approach God as closely as possible to ask for forgiveness for himself and for the Jewish people. Nowadays, on Yom Kippur, we immerse ourselves in prayer, beseeching God for forgiveness and begging Hashem for a good year for ourselves, our loved ones, and the world in general.

Reading about the Yom Kippur service in the *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple) immediately following Pesach is actually a spiritually helpful happenstance. First, Pesach celebrates a triumphant time in Jewish history. God redeemed us from slavery, saved us at the *Yam Suf* (the Reed Sea), and vanquished the Egyptians. The Jewish

people could easily become overly exultant: pumping up our chests like a peacock who has just defeated his rival. But the Torah reading comes to remind us that we should, during our exultation, hearken back to the humility achieved on Yom Kippur, when we realize that the course of this world is a partnership between humans and God; that from one minute to the next tragedy can strike; and that, in the course of our Passover victory, parents and spouses, siblings and children lost their lives.

Further, Pesach is a communal celebration. It marks, after all, the true beginnings of the Jewish people as a nation. We invite others to share in our *seder*; we even have a ritual invitation at the beginning of the *seder*: כל דכפין ייתי ויכול, כל דצריך – ייתי ויפסח – *Kol difchin yaytay v'yaychol, kol ditzrich yaytay v'yifsach* – “All who are hungry, come and eat; all who are in need, come and celebrate Pesach [with us].” Yom Kippur, by contrast, especially in this era, focuses very much on the individual. We sit in synagogue and commune with God, each in our own way, once again trying to relate to and become closer to the Divine. The time of the year around *Tishrei* and Yom Kippur focuses on our “other existence” as individuals; this *Nissan* time of year focuses on us as members of the Jewish community. The juxtaposition of the reading of the Yom Kippur service to Pesach is a reminder that being a Jew means being individual and communal; communal and individual.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Name something Jewish you do as an individual. Name something Jewish you do as a member of the Jewish community. How are they the same? How are they different?
- Think back to the last Yom Kippur. How did it feel different from what we experienced during Pesach? To what do you attribute the difference?
- Which set of holidays do you enjoy celebrating more: the *Tishrei* holidays [Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Simchat Torah] or the *Nissan* holiday [Pesach]? Why?