

The Death of Aaron's Sons, and the Priestly Service on Yom Kippur

By Rav Yair Kahn

"God spoke to Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons, when they came close before God and died. And God said to Moshe: Speak to Aharon, your brother, that he should not come at any time to the Kodesh that is inside the parokhet [partition], before the covering which is upon the Ark, so that he will not die, for I shall appear upon the covering in a cloud. [But] thus shall Aharon come to the Kodesh: with a bull for a sin offering, and a ram as a burnt offering..." ([Vayikra 16:1-3](#))

By means of this introduction, the Torah draws a substantive connection between the commandment concerning the priestly service on Yom Kippur and the death of Aharon's sons. This connection is certainly meant to convey a certain message, and in this shiur we shall examine several of its aspects, with the aim of reaching a deeper understanding of the significance of Yom Kippur and its service.

A. "That he should not come at any time to the Kodesh"

On the simplest level, the Torah mentions the death of Aharon's sons in its introduction to the Yom Kippur service because this entire command came about as a reaction to the death of Nadav and Avihu when they came close before God, to "offer before God a strange fire, which He had not commanded." Aharon, then, is warned not to enter the Kodesh at any time, except within a cloud of incense, as part of the Yom Kippur service. But if the whole section regarding the Yom Kippur service is indeed a response to, and a means of rectification for, the sin of Aharon's sons, we must ask why this parasha is not recorded

immediately after their death (10:2). A number of different issues are discussed in between the death of Nadav and Avihu and the Yom Kippur service: laws of kashrut, ritual impurity associated with childbirth, and the impurity arising from 'tzara'at' (leprosy infections) and from 'zivut' (bodily discharges). Why are these matters inserted here, forming what appears to be a separation between the death of Aharon's sons and the parasha of Acharei Mot, which was transmitted in its wake?

Let us begin by examining the parasha that immediately follows the story of the death of Nadav and Avihu: the list of forbidden foods. In order to understand the nature of this parasha, we must contrast it with the parallel section in Sefer Devarim (chapter 14). The latter consists of a virtually word-for-word repetition of the animals specified in Parashat Shemini. It includes the signs of kosher animals and kosher fish, and even repeats the detailed list of kosher birds. But then we find a discrepancy between the two parashiot. Whereas the section in Sefer Devarim ends at this point, after enumerating the various kosher and non-kosher animals, the parallel section in Vayikra continues with the laws concerning the impurity of carcasses and of people who partake of their meat, and the prohibition against eating *sheratzim* (creeping creatures):

"From these shall you be impure; anyone who touches their carcass shall be impure until the evening, and whoever carries any part of their carcass shall wash his clothes and be impure until the evening: [the carcass of] any beast with a parted hoof but which is not cloven-hoofed and does not chew the cud – these are impure for you; anyone who touches them shall be impure... Do not make yourself abominable with any creeping thing that creeps, nor shall you make yourself impure with them, such that you will be defiled by them."

([Vayikra 11:24-43](#))

Thus, the comparison between these two parashiot reveals that the section devoted to forbidden foods in Sefer Vayikra is fundamentally a section dealing with the concept of impurity, and is therefore related to the other parashiot that address this subject. Hence, we are left with only one subject wedged between the death of Aharon's sons and the Yom Kippur service – the subject of ritual impurity - and we must therefore understand the relationship between the parashiot discussing ritual impurity and the death of Nadav and Avihu.

A solution to our question is hinted at in the story of "peretz Usa" ("the breach of Uza"), which the Sages selected as the haftara to Parashat Shemini. At first glance, the tragedy of Uza's death, recorded in this haftara, appears to have resulted from a very specific, isolated error. As we read in Sefer Shemuel II (chapter 6), the cattle leading the wagon carrying the Aron stumbled, and Uza made the mistake of putting out his hand to support the Aron to prevent it from falling. But if this were the whole story, there would be no need for David to implement any procedural changes when attempting a second time to bring the Aron, this time from the house of Oved Edom, other than warning the bearers of the Ark not to touch it. But, as the narrative in Sefer Shemuel reveals, there are indeed significant disparities between the two attempts. When the Aron is taken up the first time, from the house of Avinadav, we are told: "They bore it from the house of Avinadav, which was in Giv'a, with the Ark of God, and Achyo went before the Ark. And David and all of Israel played before God on all types of [instruments made of] cypress wood, and on lyres and on lutes and timbrels and on rattles and cymbals" (Shemuel II 6:4-5). These verses describe an atmosphere of festivity and celebration – bordering on frivolity, as expressed in the word "played" ("mesahakim" – in Hebrew, this word is not usually used in relation to musical instruments; it parallels rather the other meaning of the English word – lightheartedness). But three months later, when the Ark is taken up from the house of Oved Edom, we are told: "David went and took up the Ark of God from the house of Oved Edom, to the city of David, with joy. And when those bearing the ark of God took six steps, he offered an ox and a fatling" (ibid. 12-13).

Admittedly, the text again mentions joy, but the atmosphere is unquestionably more cautious and serious. After every six paces an ox and a fatling are offered. David and all of Israel are not "playing before God," but rather bringing up the Ark "with shouting and with the sound of the shofar."

We may conclude, then, that David understood that God's punishment against Uza did not result from a one-time, isolated failure – the fact that Uza made the mistake of putting forth his hand towards the Aron. David understood that there had been a broader problem with the spirit in which they had tried to move the Ark. Carried away with the festive feeling of "playing before God," they had lost sight of the command, "...the service of the Sanctuary is upon them, they shall bear it on their shoulders" ([Bamidbar 7:9](#)). Indeed, in the parallel account in Divrei Hayamim I, we discover several details omitted from the narrative in Sefer Shemuel:

"David called Tzadok and Evyatar, the kohanim, and the leviim, and Uriel, Asaya and Yoel, Shemaya and Eliel and Aminadav. And he said to them: You are the heads of the households of the leviim; sanctify yourselves and your brethren that you may bring up the Ark of the Lord God of Israel to the place which I have prepared for it. For it was because you did not do this the first time that God burst forth among us, for we did not seek Him in proper fashion." (Divrei Hayamim I 15)

Before the tragedy of Uza, there was an eruption of spiritual emotion. Following a period of separation, after the Ark was taken from them, it once again became possible to come close to God and to take shelter in the Divine Presence. They presumptuously imagined that for man, created in the image of God, concerning whom we declare "You have made him [only] a little less than God" ([Tehillim 8:6](#)), the road to the Shekhina's revelation would not be a long one. Swept away by unbridled intoxication of religious feeling, they believed that a person who is full of love of God could cleave to the Shekhina, as it were. They did not understand, in that state of mind, that "The Lord

your God is a consuming fire" ([Devarim 4:24](#)), and the distance between the Creator and mortal man is infinite. Moshe himself, who spoke with God "face to face, as a man speaks to his fellow," was told, "No man can see Me and live" ([Shemot 33:20](#)). This explains the teaching of Rabba:

"For what reason was David punished? Because he called words of Torah 'songs' (zemirot), as it is written: 'Your statutes are songs for me in my dwelling.' The Holy One said to him: 'Words of Torah, concerning which it is written, 'If you close your eyes from it, it is gone' - you call them 'songs'? I shall therefore cause you to stumble regarding a matter which is known even to young children, as it is written, 'To the children of Kehat He did not give [wagons], for the service of the Sanctuary [is upon them, they shall bear it on their shoulders]' – and he [David] brought in on a wagon." ([Sotah 35a](#))

The episode of Uza taught David that God is to be served with fear and awe; the joy experienced before Him must be accompanied by trembling, as it is written, "and David feared God on that day" ([Shemuel II 6:9](#)).

The commentators present many different explanations concerning the sin of Aharon's sons. But when it comes to the root of the sin, most share a similar fundamental concept: religious presumptuousness. According to the view of Rebbi, God issued the warning, "Also the kohanim who come to approach God shall sanctify themselves, lest God break forth among them" ([Shemot 19:22](#)) specifically to prevent the ascent of Nadav and Avihu to Mount Sinai. The Sages, in [Vayikra Rabba \(20:10\)](#), describe Nadav and Avihu as arrogantly teaching halakha in front of their teacher. They were princes, who already at a very young age were ranked among the elders of Israel who merited to ascend and see, as it were, the God of Israel. According to the Targum Yerushalmi, it is with reference to them that the Torah tells, "They beheld God, and they ate and drank" ([Shemot 24:11](#)) – in other words, as Rashi explains, "They

gazed at Him with a coarse heart, while eating and drinking." The religious experience, in their view, was taken for granted. Out of thirst for God they burst forth before Him, without any Divine command. The Netziv beautifully explains that the "foreign fire" refers to the fire of love for God: "They entered [the Kodesh] out of a fiery enthusiasm of love of God. The Torah says that although the love of God is precious in God's eyes, it should not be expressed in this way, which He had not commanded." Therefore, it is said concerning them, "I shall be sanctified among those close to Me" – because they yearned to enjoy the splendor of the Divine Presence. They fulfilled what we are told in [Sefer Tehillim \(55:15\)](#) – "... we walked to God's house with excitement." But they were punished because they lost sight of the warning of [Kohelet \(4:7\)](#), "Guard your feet when you go to the house of God."

The laws governing the manner in which one is to approach the Mikdash serve as an expression of the distance between man and his Creator. Using purely physical powers, one cannot behold God and serve Him. In order to serve in the Mikdash, a Divine command is necessary to facilitate that which is otherwise impossible. One who wishes to approach the Mikdash must fulfill a list of conditions, for license to enter God's house is granted only through compliance with the laws of the Torah. According to Chazal, Nadav and Avihu – as princes – scorned these conditions (whether we adopt the view that they entered in a state of intoxication, or the view that they entered without the priestly garments), and for this they were punished.

In light of the above, we can now reexamine the sequence of the parashiot in Sefer Vayikra. The Sefer opens with a discussion of the sacrifices, and of a person's ability to offer them before God. Following the discussion of the sacrifices, the Torah describes the seven days of inauguration, the aim of which was to reach the eighth day – "For on this day God will appear to you" (9:4). Thus, from the beginning of the Sefer up until the revelation of the Shekhina on the eighth day, the Torah addresses only one aspect of religious experience – the possibility of coming close to God. Suddenly, at the moment of climax, when fire emerges

from before God and consumes whatever is upon the altar before the eyes of the nation, there is a disruption: Aharon's sons enter the Kodesh with no Divine command, and they are immediately consumed. In the blink of an eye, everything changes. After all, there are laws governing the service in the Mikdash; not everyone is able to serve. The Divine revelation to man is no longer taken for granted.

In this context, the parashiot relating to the various types of ritual impurity come to emphasize the other aspect of religious experience, and to teach us about the infinite abyss that separates between human reality and Divine reality. Impurity is an inseparable part of ultimate human reality. It accompanies his birth, as well as his death; it is bound up with his eating and his marital relations. Mortal man, mired in impurity, cannot come to God without the laws of purification that God Himself commands. Without fulfillment of the purifying Divine command, mortals – dwelling in their material homes – cannot approach the King. "You shall separate Bnei Yisrael from their impurity, that they shall not die in their impurity, when they defile My dwelling that is among them" ([Vayikra 15:31](#)).

Here we come to the parasha describing the Yom Kippur service, in which the Torah warns Aharon not to come to the Kodesh at any time, except within a cloud of incense as part of the Yom Kippur service. Concerning the significance of the incense, attention should be paid to the fascinating insight of Seforno at the end of Parashat Tetzaveh ([Shemot 30:1](#)), where he explains why the command to build an incense altar is not mentioned together with the other vessels of the Mishkan:

"This altar is not mentioned together with the rest of the vessels, in Parashat Teruma, for its intention was not to allow God to dwell among us, as was the idea behind the rest of the vessels, as God says – 'And I shall dwell in their midst; in accordance with all that I show you, the form of the Mishkan and the form of all its vessels...'
Nor was its intention to bring down a vision of God's glory into the house – as was the intention of the

sacrifices – as He says, 'I shall meet there with Bnei Yisrael,' and as Moshe testifies, when he says: 'This is the matter that God commanded you to do, that the glory of God may appear before you.' [Rather,] the point of this altar was to give honor to the blessed God after He came to accept with favor the service of His people in the sacrifices offered morning and evening, to 'welcome' Him, as it were, with an offering of incense, in the spirit of 'Give honor to God's name; bring an offering and come before Him!'"

According to our approach, we must define the point of building the Mishkan and its vessels as bringing about a revelation of the Shekhina to Am Yisrael. But the golden altar, upon which the incense is offered, symbolizes the abyss that separates the Shekhina from Am Yisrael. Only after the command to build the Mishkan and its vessels do we find the command concerning the golden altar, as though to declare, "It is God's glory to hide a matter" ([Mishlei 25:2](#)). It is only by means of the screen of smoke created by the burning incense that God appears above the covering of the Ark.

Thus, there are two aspects to religious experience. On one hand, there is the thirsting of the soul for the living God. But on the other hand, there is the awareness that "no man shall see Me and live." Only after we have absorbed the message of the parashiot concerning impurity, only after we have internalized the mistake of Aharon's sons, only once we have understood the two aspects of religious experience, is it possible to return to the instructions concerning the entry into the Kodesh, behind the parokhet: "By this shall Aharon come to the Kodesh..." Once it has become clear that one cannot come into the Kodesh whenever one chooses, the Torah can then inform us that God will nevertheless appear above the covering – but only by means of the cloud of incense.

B. "For on this day God will appear before you"

But it seems that there is yet another connection between the death of Aharon's sons and the Yom Kippur service. Yom Kippur is the day when God delivered to Moshe the second set of Tablets, when Bnei Yisrael achieved atonement for the sin of the golden calf. But this, it appears, was not the end of the process of atonement for the sin. Immediately after Yom Kippur, Bnei Yisrael are commanded to construct the Mishkan. The Torah ([Shemot 35:20-29](#)) describes the enthusiasm that greeted the campaign for donations towards the building project – to the extent that they brought even more materials than were needed (36:5-7). Apparently, this enthusiasm arose not only from the thirst for the Divine Presence, but also from feelings of guilt for having fashioned the golden calf. Bnei Yisrael had previously removed their gold earrings in order to fashion the calf; in contributing towards the Mishkan they were given an opportunity to offer their jewelry for the sake of the Mishkan and its vessels. Therefore, the very engagement in the Mishkan was part of the process of the nation's teshuva for the sin of the golden calf, as Chazal explain:

"When they made the calf, God told Moshe: 'Now leave Me alone....' He said to Him: 'Test them, [to see] whether they will make the Mishkan.' What is written with regard to that failure? 'Remove the gold rings.' And what did they bring? Rings. And when they made the Mishkan, they made the same contribution. And that which is written, 'All who were generous of spirit brought nose-rings and earrings, rings and bracelets' – they sinned by means of earrings, and by earrings He was appeased. The Divine spirit moved Hoshea to declare, 'Instead of them being told, 'You are not My nation,' they will be told, 'You are the children of the living God.' Moshe said to God, 'You wrote: 'If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and he slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for that ox.' Behold, they have brought to

God nose-rings and earrings, rings and bracelets." (Midrash Rabba, Shemot 48:5)

The eighth day of the Mishkan's inauguration – the conclusion of the consecration process – is therefore also a day of atonement for the sin of the golden calf. Am Yisrael had toiled for months to build the Mishkan, with the aim of once again meriting a Divine revelation reminiscent of that at Sinai. And indeed, following seven days of inauguration, on the eighth day, God promises, "On this day God will appear to you" ([Vayikra 9:4](#)). With great anticipation, Bnei Yisrael approach and stand around the Mishkan, awaiting word of their expiation. The tension mounts continuously, until the fire emerges from before God: "And God's glory appeared to all the nation, and a fire emerged from before God and consumed [that which was] upon the altar – the burnt offering and the fats" ([Vayikra 9:23-24](#)).

The eighth day therefore marks the end of a lengthy process that began with Moshe's bringing the second Tablets of Testimony that he received at Sinai, and concludes with the Shekhina's descent onto the Mishkan – a process reflecting a profound religious drama within the collective spirit of Bnei Yisrael. But this drama plays itself out with special intensity within the recesses of one person's soul – Aharon. Aharon played a central role in the sin of the golden calf, and there can be no doubt that a powerful sense of guilt lurked within him. Here, Aharon is called upon to sanctify himself and serve during the days of inauguration, to atone for the sin of the calf. Aharon, who took part in the transgression, who "exposed them, so that they were an object of derision to those who oppose them" ([Shemot 32:25](#)), is the one chosen to serve as Kohen Gadol, in order that God's glory can once again appear before Am Yisrael.

Chazal sense Aharon's psychological tension, and explain the verse, "Moshe said to Aharon: Approach the altar, and offer your sin offering and your burnt offering" ([Vayikra 9:7](#)) as an expression of a lack of religious confidence, as a result of his part in the creation of the golden calf:

"To what may this be compared? To a mortal king who got married; his wife was shy in his presence, so her sister came to her and said: 'For what reason did you agree to this? In order to serve the king! Be confident, and come to serve the king!' Thus Moshe told Aharon: 'Aharon, my brother, for what reason were you selected to be the Kohen Gadol? Only so that you may serve before the Holy One, blessed be He. Be confident and come to perform your service!'" (Sifra, Parashat Shemini, Mekhilta de-Milu'im).

Moreover, the Sages explain:

"Some say that Aharon perceived the altar as having the form of an ox, and he was afraid of it. Moshe said to him, 'My brother: that of which you are fearful – be confident and approach it!' For this reason it is written, 'Approach the altar'."

The Ramban offers a psychological insight into this Midrash:

"The reason for this is that because Aharon was sanctified to God, and his soul held no sin except for the matter of the golden calf, that sin was fixed in his mind, in the manner of what is written – 'and my sin is before me always.' It seemed to him that the form of the golden calf was there, obstructing his atonement. Therefore, Moshe told him, 'Be confident' – do not be of such lowly spirit, for God is already favorably disposed towards your actions." (Ramban, [Vayikra 9:7](#))

However, we find that even after Aharon finishes offering all the sacrifices and blesses the nation, the Shekhina does not

immediately descend to the nation. The Shekhina appears only when Moshe joins him:

"Aharon lifted his hands to the nation and blessed them. And he descended from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings, and Moshe and Aharon came to the Ohel Mo'ed, and they came out and blessed the nation, and God's glory appeared to all the nation." ([Vayikra 9:22-23](#))

Chazal point out that Aharon felt that the Shekhina was not appearing because of his role in the sin of the golden calf:

"And Moshe and Aharon came to the Ohel Mo'ed' – when Aharon saw that all the sacrifices had already been offered, and all the actions had already been performed, but the Shekhina was not descending to Israel, Aharon stood and was troubled. He said, 'I know that God is angry with me; it is because of me that the Shekhina has not come down to Israel. This is what my brother Moshe did to me – I went forth and I was embarrassed, for the Shekhina did not descend to Israel!' Moshe immediately entered with him, and they asked for Divine mercy, and the Shekhina descended to Israel. Therefore it is written, 'Moshe and Aharon came to the Ohel Mo'ed'." (Sifra, Parashat Shemini, Mekhilta de-Milu'im)

Ultimately, after Moshe joined Aharon, the Shekhina descended upon Israel. But immediately thereafter, Nadav and Avihu were consumed by fire. According to one view in the Midrash, Aharon's sons died as punishment for their father's role in the debacle of the golden calf:

"At first, a decree was pronounced against him, as it is written, 'and God was exceedingly

angry at Aharon, [and decided] to destroy him' – Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin said in the name of Rabbi Levi: The term 'destruction' (hashmada) is never used except to mean the annihilation of one's children, as it is written, 'I shall destroy his fruit above and his roots below.' Because Moshe prayed for him, he was spared from half the decree: two died and two remained. This is as it is written, 'Take Aharon and his sons with him...' ([Vayikra Rabba, 10:5](#))

Even if we do not adopt this Midrash, we cannot ignore the possibility that Aharon blamed himself for the death of his sons. Indeed, the phrase, "Aharon was silent" (10:3) is interpreted not only as an expression of mourning, but also as a justification and acceptance of God's judgment and punishment, as part of Aharon's teshuva for the sin of the golden calf. Admittedly, the Torah does not elaborate at any length on Aharon's teshuva, or how he overcame his part in the golden calf, in order to be worthy once again of serving God as the Kohen Gadol. But in these two words – "va-yidom Aharon" – the Torah offers us a glimpse into the drama that was playing out in his soul. These two words testify, like two reliable witnesses, to one of the most inspirational examples of teshuva.

Thus, on the eighth day, Aharon's struggle with his sin reached new heights and new depths. However, we find that it was only after the eighth day that Aharon was permitted to enter the Kodesh ha-Kodashim. The sacrifices of the eighth day, despite their similarity to the sacrifices of Yom Kippur, were offered outside, in the Mishkan's courtyard. Only after the death of his two sons is Aharon told, "With this shall Aharon come to the Kodesh: with an ox as a sin offering...."

In order to enter the Kodesh ha-Kodashim, Aharon must first offer the sacrifices that atone for the sin of the golden calf. The order of the Yom Kippur service includes two central sacrifices, whose blood is sprinkled inside the 'heikhal': an ox brought as

the Kohen Gadol's sin offering, and the goat that serves as the nation's sin offering. It would seem that at their root, these sacrifices are meant to atone for the sin of the golden calf. The nation's sin offering is entirely burnt; the only other sacrificial goat that is burnt in its entirety is the sin offering brought when the nation transgresses with regard to idolatry ([Bamidbar 15:22-26](#)). In contrast to the goat, which comes as a public sin offering, the Kohen Gadol's ox is the sin offering of an individual. And the only other individual sacrifice that is entirely burnt is the sin offering brought by the Kohen Gadol when he commits an inadvertent violation ([Vayikra 4:3-12](#)). Regarding the process of sacrificing and sprinkling the blood, too, we find a great deal of similarity between the sin offerings of Yom Kippur, on one hand, and the nation's sin offering for idolatry and the ox brought by the Kohen Gadol, on the other. It would seem, therefore, that these sacrifices are offered in order to atone for the sin of worshipping the golden calf. In order to enter the Kodesh ha-Kodashim on behalf of the nation of Israel, Aharon must bring atonement for his own part in the calf, as well as for the sin of the nation. For this reason, he is commanded to offer a goat as a sin offering for the nation's inadvertent violation of idolatry, and, to atone for his own part in the sin, he brings an ox as the Kohen Gadol's sin offering.

C. "It shall be for you an eternal statute, in the seventh month, on the tenth of the month"

Yom Kippur, then, is a day of atonement for the sin of the golden calf – not only because the second set of Tablets were given on this day, but also because Yom Kippur was chosen as the day on which Aharon – or whoever would succeed him as Kohen Gadol – must offer an ox and goat as a sin offering, and to sprinkle their blood in the 'heikhal', like the Kohen Gadol's sin offering, and the goat offered to atone for the sin of idolatry. It is with these that the Kohen Gadol approaches the Kodesh ha-Kodashim.

Concerning the connection between the Kohen Gadol's entry on Yom Kippur and the sin of the calf, we learn in Masekhet Rosh

ha-Shana: "For what reason does the Kohen Gadol not enter the Kodesh ha-Kodashim in his golden garments, to perform the service? Because a prosecutor cannot become an advocate" (26a). This Gemara teaches that Aharon's role in the sin of the golden calf forms the background to the Kohen Gadol's entry into the Kodesh ha-Kodashim. The Kohen Gadol enters the holiest place wearing only the simple priestly garments made of linen, showing that he is completely clean of this sin.

In light of the above, Yom Kippur is found at both ends of the process of atonement for the sin of the golden calf, with the eighth day of the inauguration placed in between. Obviously, Yom Kippur is the day when the second Tablets were given to Israel. On this day, in the first year following the Exodus from Egypt, Israel were granted the opportunity to atone for the golden calf by means of building the Mishkan. On the eighth day, at the conclusion of this process of construction and preparation, the Shekhina once again descended to the nation. But from Aharon's point of view, the eighth day was a day for grappling with his part in the sin. This grappling reached its climax with the death of his two sons, and his silent reaction: "Aharon was silent." This reaction – an expression of the depth of his teshuva, and his acceptance of Divine justice – led to his ability to atone for the sin of the calf, for himself and for his household and for all of the congregation of Israel, and to the license to enter the Kodesh ha-Kodashim. This entry takes place every year on Yom Kippur, when Bnei Yisrael seek atonement for all their sins before God.

D. "The place where penitents stand..."

It thus emerges that Nadav and Avihu, who were not part of the sin of the golden calf, died when they tried to approach God. Aharon's sons believed that they deserved to behold God. In their arrogance, they entered the Kodesh without consulting with their teacher. They failed to understand that a mortal man – even the most righteous and the most holy – does not have the right to demand to behold God. The license to enter the holiest of places is awarded specifically to Aharon, who did play a role

in the sin of the golden calf, and who lived with a sense of failure and missed opportunity. His sin gave him no rest. He felt, in a most profound way, that he had no right to behold God's countenance. He knew that his calling to enter the holiest place, the most intimate meeting with God, was granted not by right, but rather by God's mercy and compassion, after he himself had sinned and then performed teshuva.

Chazal teach: "The place where penitents stand – even the completely righteous cannot stand there" ([Berakhot 34b](#)). The completely righteous, who have never tasted sin, do not recognize the weaknesses and limitations of human reality; therefore, they cannot occupy that special place before God that is reserved for the penitent. The latter has experienced, firsthand, the impurity that surrounds human reality; he knows that his calling to stand before God comes only as a result of Divine mercy and compassion.

The Kodesh ha-Kodashim is open not to Nadav and Avihu, but rather to Aharon (or the Kohen Gadol who will succeed him), dressed only in the simple, linen priestly garments so as not to recall the golden calf. Even today, in the absence of our Temple, we do not come before God by virtue of our righteousness, but rather by virtue of His immense compassion. With a profound sense of regret we declare, "Like the destitute and downtrodden we knock on Your door." We give stark expression to the limitations of human existence: "After all, the valiant ones are all like nothing before You, and people of fame – as though they had never existed, and the wise – as though they knew nothing, and the understanding – as though they had no discernment. For most of their actions are worthless, and the days of their lives are vanity before You, and man has no advantage over the animals, for all is vanity." In complete submission we pray and entreat the Holy One Himself, as it were, to cleanse us, as the mikveh purifies the impure, and that the promise be fulfilled: "For on that day He shall give you atonement, to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be purified BEFORE GOD" ([Vayikra 16:30](#)).

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Visit our website: <http://vbm-torah.org>