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ATONEMENT AND MORAL SPIRITUAL REBIRTH

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Reading and reflecting upon the Torah portion Acharei Mot—meaning, literally, “after the death of” the sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu—it occurred to us that its lessons are not *sui generis*. They apply not only to the circumstances of those two who lost their lives for the sin of bringing “strange fire” (אש זרה) from their own hearth into the Sanctuary, but to all of us at all times.

The tradition understands the deaths of Nadav and Avihu as the result of ignoring, even flaunting, the laws of the Sanctuary. Their deaths were, in effect, a rejection of introducing personal desires and longings into the institutional religious life of the nation. The smoking incense or *ketoret* (קטר) that they brought into the Sanctuary had the effect of contravening the symbolic purpose of the incense, which was to encourage the complete sublimation of the self to God’s law, to give oneself up completely to the Torah. In a time when the instrumentality of the Temple Sanctuary, with its meaning laden furnishings and utensils and rituals, was the moral spiritual engine powering Jewish life, distancing oneself from its requirements would inevitably lead to moral spiritual death. And this is no small matter, since we take it as a virtual certainty that moral spiritual death precedes physical death, both individually and communally.

But what does that have to do with us today?

Is there one of us who doesn’t make decisions and take actions every day that distance us from the requirements of the engine powering modern Jewish moral spiritual life?

Of course, that engine is now even as it was then: the Torah residing in the *aron* (ark—ארון)—in ancient times at the center of the Holy of Holies

(קדש הקדשים), today at the center of our synagogue sanctuary. It is less a matter of ignoring the particular demands Torah makes on us, and more a matter of our wholesale rejection of its authority. In effect, the understanding that Torah can give us, which reflects the Creator’s design in the workings of Creation, we trade for our highly vaunted autonomy to determine meaning and purpose for ourselves. But in either event the effect is the same: We choose to decide and act on the basis of what feels good *personally in the moment*, on the basis of what satisfies our senses, in contrast to the vision and path of Torah that has as its purpose the moral spiritual uplifting of our *whole people throughout history*.

What’s the effect on us individually and communally?

In small, imperceptible increments we become alienated from the Source of our highest calling, from our potential moral spiritual greatness.

What are the conspicuous symptoms of that estrangement?

Our day-to-day lives become mostly a repetitive grind, devoid of uplifting inspiration and rarely capable of inspiring others. Instead of investing our time, energy, resources, and spirit in fostering and uplifting and beautifying life, we become preoccupied with activities that distract us from the despair and depression that accompany numbing encounters with violent death. This is hardly surprising at a moment in history when the images and sounds of death-dealing violence are commonplace, and myriad mass media exist to exploit the unlimited profit potential of promoting our continuous exposure to violence and death.

And our estrangement from the vision and path of Torah is revealed in the greater or lesser extent to which we have traded the benefits and burdens of a shared commitment to family and community life for a privatized commitment to the materialistic satisfaction of our senses in a forlorn hope of filling our moral spiritual emptiness. We have traded love and loyalty, family integrity and neighborly responsibility, to feed in their place an insatiable appetite for the distractions of physique, position, prestige, possessions, and power.

Atonement is needed by all symptom-carriers of moral spiritual disease, which undoubtedly includes those of us who largely ignore the demanding requirements of our own physical, mental, and emotional health; those of us who largely ignore the demanding requirements of intimate loving relationships with family and friends; and those of us who largely ignore the demanding requirements of mutuality and reciprocity in community—in short, those of us who consume the sustaining energies of life without replenishing them.

What are we to do if in fact we recognize such estrangement and trade-offs in our own lives? How are we to reverse our own incremental spiritual and physical demise?

In Acharei Mot we read that Aharon, the High Priest (כֹּהֵן גָּדוֹל), is to bring an offering “*v’chipeir ba’ado uva’ad beito*” (וּכְפַר בְּעֵדוֹ וּבְעֵד בֵּיתוֹ), “. . . and effect atonement for himself and for his household.” (Leviticus 16:6)

But what exactly is this “atonement” that has the effect of ending our estrangement from the will of God, and how is it to be achieved practically—not once and for all, or even once a year, but over and over again, week in and week out, year in and year out? What offering are we to bring, and where are we to bring it in the absence of the Temple in Jerusalem?

The essence of atonement is our spiritual *and* moral rebirth. The two are inseparable, because our *spiritual* relationship with God is realized in our *moral* response to God’s will. In Jewish life it’s meaningless to talk of relationship with God without observing the *mitzvot* (commandments)—since responding to God’s will is our *raison d’être*.

Atonement entails the rebirth of a part of oneself that has suffered moral spiritual decline or death. If that language—moral spiritual death and rebirth—seems extravagant or exaggerated, it may be useful to consider again the effects of distancing ourselves from the vision and path of Torah, the devastating effects on our family, community, and national life. The purpose of atonement, *kapara* (כַּפָּרָה) in Hebrew, is to forestall those natural effects of our moral spiritual mistakes and misdeeds.

The meaning of the word *kapara*, from the root כ-פ-ר, is to *cover* or *protect*. In the context of moral spiritual mistakes and misdeeds, it refers to covering or protecting us from the consequences of ignoring or openly rejecting the vision and path of Torah. The classic case was the incident of the golden calf, which required the atonement of the whole people. In effect, then, atonement works to cover over or bury the wrongdoing of the past, abrogating ordinary cause and effect between wrongdoing and its consequences.

We’re familiar with atonement from our experiences of High Holy Days, the once-a-year cycle that, for many of us, not uncommonly falls far short of its mission. So we come back to the demands of atonement in our day-to-day lives. Because for us as practicing Jews, the expectation that we can achieve atonement—moral spiritual rebirth and ongoing relationship with our Source—without living a Jewish life day-to-day, has proven itself to be a dangerous self-deception.

Atonement, the interruption of our wrongdoing from its natural poisonous consequences, demands self-knowledge and self-judgment, which are attainable through consistent study and prayer. But if we’re too busy with the demands of diverting ourselves from the disappointment and pain of our moral spiritual disease, then we have mostly foreclosed the possibility of acquiring self-knowledge that comes from contrasting our individual and communal life with the vision given to us in the Torah, which we acquire and internalize through regular study. Likewise, if we’re too busy with our diversions to engage daily in *hitpaleil* (הִתְפַּלֵּל), the act of congregational Jewish praying, then we mostly foreclose the possibility of self-judgment needed to get ourselves back on the path of life-sustaining moral spirituality. It is the protective effects of self-knowledge and self-judgment, covering over our past misdeeds and missteps, which is the miraculous gift of God that enables our moral spiritual rebirth.

Again, this is not a once-a-year event, but a continuous process. The extraordinary power and potential of *kapara* requires that we live a Jewish life of study and prayer throughout the year. It’s objective, which one may find shocking, is to inculcate in ourselves the habit of *continuous confession*, repeated acknowledgement—the natural outcome of our day-to-day study and prayer—that we must reverse the ordinary direction of our lives: Instead of constantly increasing the distance between us and God’s plan for us, through atonement we can choose to internalize the conditions that enable us to strive upwards to God in every waking moment.

Withal, we want to remember that on our personal atonement rests not only our individual moral spiritual rebirth, but also the social rebirth of our family, our community, and our people.

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