Yom Kippur

5778

One of the challenges of Yom Kippur is making sense of the mahzor itself. This is a pretty big book to go through in the next 24 hours. Even all the many contemporary editions of the machzor, no matter how much commentary there might be included, cannot do justice to the depth and allusive nature of the liturgy. One of the more interesting Facebook posts I came across two days ago was asking the question what books you will bring to services to read during the service? As if the machzor was not big enough already! We even read a whole book as part of the liturgy! Think the Book of Jonah we will read tomorrow. It may be a short book but it is still a short novel we read that has hundreds of commentaries and books on it.

So what I want to focus on tonight is two texts, one directly from the liturgy and one from Chapter 5 of the Mishnah Yoma which is used in the description of the sacrificial service of the Kohen Gadol, High Priest. One is a description we will read tomorrow about the priest, the Kohen Gadol entering the Holy of Holies and one from the end of Neilah, perhaps to remind you not to worry, we have faith we will get to the end and finish the book!

The Mishnah in Yoma records the following description of the High Priest in the Holy of Holies:

When the Kohen Gadol reaches the Ark, he places the coal pan between the two staves. He piles the incense atop the coals, and the whole chamber in its entirety would fill with smoke. He then exits and comes out the way that he entered. He does not turn around but leaves the Holy of Holies walking while facing the Ark. And he recites a brief prayer in the outer chamber, in the Sanctuary. And he would not extend his prayer there so as not to alarm the Jewish people, who would otherwise conclude that something happened and that he died in the Holy of Holies.

Two things emerge from this description.

While in the Holy of Holies, at this greatest point of human intimacy with God, the High Priest fills it with the ketoret, the smoke from the incense. The ketoret was not only used this once on Yom Kippur but every day with the sacrifices. Maimonides writes in the Guide for the Perplexed that since the Ohel Mo'ed (tent of meeting) was a place where they cut up the parts of the sacrifices and washed their innards, God therefore commanded that they burn incense there in order to remove and substitute that smell. The good smell would be so powerful in that place that it would also perfume the clothes of the Kohanim. Others suggest a less practical but perhaps more spiritually nourishing answer that the smell of the Ketoret was the most pleasant smell known to people. A good smell has a very powerful effect on people and can draw their hearts in a particular direction. The burning of the Ketoret in the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and Bait HaMikdash (Holy Temple) thus brought great pleasure and joy to the Jews who were there and thereby magnified the honor and awe of these holy places in their perception. There are other approaches as well. But it is striking on Yom

Kippur that when the Kohen reaches the Ark in the Holy of Holies, at that point of the deepest physical/spiritual encounter, he lights the ketoret and the result is smoke and the inability to see or perhaps to "understand that he really does not understand". The ultimate religious experience is not clarity but mystery. Adding to the mystery is that there was no Ark in the Holy of Holies during the Second Temple. It had been lost after the destruction of the First Temple. But nonetheless the Mishnah describes it as if it were there, reminding us perhaps that reality is sometimes real but that our most profound experiences sometimes require an act of will or imagination.

And secondly after the Kohen leaves, he is to offer a prayer, but notice he is not to extend it lest the people anxiously waiting his appearance worry that he has not made it out alive. It is the people who need the Kohen and whatever of his spiritual experience from which he has to come down, he cannot dilly dally. The people are waiting and he is responsible to them! After the deepest experience of mystery comes the call of responsibility. One could suggest that this is the tikkun, the repairing of the sin of the Golden Calf. Moses was on the mountain, he had not come down, and some of the people thought he was dead. Each Yom Kippur we make sure the Kohen Gadol in this case, does not make that mistake again. He cannot tarry. But if this is correct, then it is clear his responsibility is both in his service and his leaving, it is not about him but the needs of the people. At the height of inwardness, he must turn outward.

And secondly, think how after a long day, Neilah will conclude with Shema Yisrael and some other lines being recited. Why Shema Yisrael?

This is a powerful line and extraordinarily challenging. If we really have done Yom Kippur properly, the Matteh Moshe, Rabbi Moses ben Abraham Premsla (16th century) suggests we have to be willing to give up our lives for Kiddush Hashem, sanctification of God's name. Se we end Yom Kippur prepared to die with the words on our lips that we associate with martyrdom and death. This is pretty powerful, and perhaps be initially off-putting. But if we read about the Akedah on Rosh Hashanah that Abraham was to give back his son to God when God demanded, although only his willingness was desired and not Isaac's actual death, and we read about Hannah returning her son for whom she prayed and he would grow up to become the prophet Samuel, then maybe if we took these ten days really seriously we would understand that our ultimate commitment is our willingness to give up our lives, to return them to God for a higher ideal. We in a sense express and internalize the passions and commitment of Abraham and Hannah.

Maybe, and I think there is some value in this consciousness, but there is a certain danger in the fascination with martyrdom. And so here I must remind you that living a life of Kiddush Hashem, sanctification of God's name, need not be so dramatic or tragic. Listen to Maimonides discussion of another aspect of Kiddush Hashem:

There are other deeds which are also included in [the category of] the desecration of [God's] name *the opposite of sanctification of God's name, if performed by a person of great Torah stature who is renowned for his piety - i.e., deeds which, although they are not transgressions, [will cause] people to speak disparagingly of him. This also constitutes the desecration of [God's] name.

For example, a person who purchases [merchandise] and does not pay for it immediately, although he possesses the money, and thus, the sellers demand payment and he pushes them off; a person who jests immoderately; or who eats and drinks near or among the common people; or whose conduct with other people is not gentle and he does not receive them with a favorable countenance, but rather contests with them and vents his anger; and the like. Everything depends on the stature of the sage. [The extent to which] he must be careful with himself and go beyond the measure of the law [depends on the level of his Torah stature.]

[The converse is] also [true]. When a sage is stringent with himself, speaks pleasantly with others, his social conduct is [attractive] to others, he receives them pleasantly, he is humbled by them and does not humble them in return, he honors them - even though they disrespect him - he does business faithfully, and does not frequently accept the hospitality of the common people or sit with them, and at all times is seen only studying Torah, wrapped in tzitzit, crowned with tefillin, and carrying out all his deeds beyond the measure of the law - provided he does not separate too far [from normal living] and thus become forlorn – to the extent that all praise him, love him, and find his deeds attractive - such a person sanctifies [God's] name. The verse [Isaiah 49:3]: "And He said to me: `Israel, you are My servant, in whom I will be glorified'" refers to him.

While Maimonides is talking about a Sage here, I think you can apply this to all of us. The sanctification of God need not be martyrdom but the everyday, how we encounter the other in all seemingly mundane ways and visibly religious ways. When I have taught this text to Naval recruits up at the Great Lakes Naval Base, I formulate this as what are your responsibilities when you wear the uniform? Will you honor and behave in a way that gives expression to the ideals of service?

So the liturgy is long, but I think it has much to teach. In the end the dramatic story of the Kohen Gadol in the Holy of Holies is not only descriptive but prescriptive of a type of personality who has to worry about what might happen if he shows up late. To say Shema at the end of Neilah is not only to express faith but to be called to action, deed and decency. And if there is one thing needed now is to act with deed and decency.

For a discussion of Mishnah Yoma see Rabbi Yakkov Nagen, The Soul of the Mishnah