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בס"ד

Parashat Aharei Mot Part I Leviticus 16 – The Opening Verses

1. Verse 1

The first verse of *Parashat Aharei Mot* states that Hashem spoke to Moses “after the death of Aaron’s two sons, who, in approaching closely before Hashem, died” (Lev. 16:1). In the next verse, Hashem instructs Moses to inform Aaron that he is prohibited from entering the Holy of Holies at [just] any time and without appropriate preparations. As Ibn Ezra points out, the reference to Nadab and Abihu’s deaths just before the command may shed light on their transgression (that they entered the inner sanctum with their incense “at [just] any time and without appropriate preparations”). But exactly what purpose does this reference serve in the present context?

Rashi and Ibn Ezra understood the juxtaposition to mean that G-d implied to Moses to use that tragedy as a motivational factor when instructing Aaron regarding entering the inner sanctum. Moses is to thereby stress to Aaron that violation may result in death, as was the case with his sons. This explanation is not convincing. First, the Nadab and Abihu reference is not in the message itself but in its narrative introduction, serving as a chronological note. In addition, it is conceptually difficult to interpret G-d’s instructions as containing such an indelicacy. Aaron can never forget the tragedy that befell his sons, so merely informing him of the potential consequence of death (which is mentioned in v. 2) would automatically include the motivational force of his sons’ deaths without having to be explicit about it.

The Ramban interpreted the reference to mean that Hashem gave this legislation earlier, at the first opportunity after the tragic event, prior to the legislation of chapters 11–15. It was placed in its present location because that is where it actually

belonged in the unfolding of the Tabernacle program and where it would have been transmitted had the unanticipated tragedy not occurred, after the chapters dealing with bodily impurities. The deaths had made it appropriate to specially warn Aaron as soon as possible regarding approaching the Holy of Holies.

This interpretation is also problematic. As a chronological reference, only the words “after the death of Aaron’s two sons” would be needed – why mention the reason they died? The verse appears to be transmitting more than chronological information. In addition, following the Nadab and Abihu episode there is a cautionary passage recorded in chapter 10, apparently placed there because of its connection to their transgression: the prohibition for priests to indulge in intoxicating beverages before cultic service. And that passage is addressed directly to Aaron. Our passage is addressed to Moses, instructing him to inform Aaron. The differing modes of communication seem to indicate that the two messages were not transmitted at the same time.

Perhaps the reference indicates that the law that follows was established because of that occurrence. “That he may not enter at [just] any time” to the most holy area seems to imply that previously he was permitted to enter whenever he felt the need to do so, acting upon his own judgment as to appropriate preparedness. He is now being provided regulations concerning preparedness prompted by what occurred. It is very likely that Nadab and Abihu did not die merely because they entered the inner sanctum but because they entered improperly, possibly intoxicated.

The clause “at [just] any time” seems to imply that Aaron remained permitted to enter the inner sanctum “sometimes” – of course with the appropriate preparations – not only on Yom Kippur, the occasion

on which the high priest is required to enter to perform the service of the day. Actually, Yom Kippur is not mentioned in our context until verse 29. Leviticus Rabbah (21:7) does indeed posit that Aaron was permitted to enter when he felt the need to do so, presumably in a situation of national urgency, provided it was with the proper preparations. It also posits that Moses was permitted to enter – and as a non-priest he did not perform the preparations Aaron did – because entering for prophecy was different. One may wonder whether later prophets were permitted to enter the Holy of Holies when seeking prophetic inspiration.

2. Verse 2

The prohibition to enter the inner sanctum at [just] any time is followed by *כִּי בְעֵינַי אֶרְאֶה עַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת* (v. 2). There is a major difference of opinion as to the translation of this latter clause, a declaration of G-d. Many classical commentators interpret it to mean that a cloud of G-d's glory resided upon the *kaporet* (the ark covering) in the inner sanctum and G-d's presence is manifest in it. *אֶרְאֶה* is understood as “I appear,” using the future tense for the ongoing present. Aaron is not to enter at just any time because the divine presence is visible there. Perhaps this cloud is in a more concentrated form than the cloud that hovers above the Tabernacle, which was viewed by the public.

Rashi: For I always appear there in My pillar of cloud and since the revelation of My divine presence is there he should be careful not to come there frequently.

Rashbam: For I always appear through a pillar of cloud [that is] upon the *kaporet*, as stated, “and I will speak with you from above the *kaporet* between the two cherubim” (Exod. 25:22), so that if the priest looks he will die. Therefore, G-d commanded that when the priest enters on Yom Kippur he should first perform the incense service to darken the chamber with a smoke cloud and then do the blood service (v. 13).

Ibn Ezra citing others: Because I dwell in the cloud upon the *kaporet*, similar to [Solomon's declaration], “Hashem has chosen to dwell in the thick cloud” (1 Kings 8:12).

The talmudic sages, however, followed by Ibn Ezra expressing his personal view, understood the cloud of this clause to refer to the incense cloud Aaron was instructed to raise when entering the Holy of Holies (anticipating verse 13). There is no permanent cloud of glory upon the *kaporet*, but G-d's glory does reside there and the high priest should not have an unobstructed view of it. The Torah thus prescribes a necessary procedure to be performed before the high priest begins his service in the Holy of Holies so that the divine presence does not become openly manifest to him. According to this verse 2 does not describe “why” he should not enter at just any time, but “how” he should enter when he does.

A famous Pharisee-Sadducee dispute concerned this clause. Neither group interpreted it as stating that a cloud of glory was present in the inner sanctum. The Sadducees cited it as proof that the high priest is to enter the inner sanctum with an incense cloud that he had already created in the outer chamber. The Pharisees (generally followed by the sages) understood the verse to be qualified by verse 13 that instructs the high priest to place the incense on the coals “before Hashem,” which they take to mean when in the inner sanctum. He thus enters before raising the incense cloud. Verse 2, which they agree implies that G-d should not be manifest upon the *kaporet* except with a screen of a cloud, is to be explained by positing the addition of another item and another step. The high priest placed *ma'ale 'ashan* (a “smoke raising” element) on the coals of the firepan while he was still in the outer chamber just before entering the Holy of Holies, so he entered with a smoke cloud already rising from the coals and then added the incense (*b. Yoma* 53a).

The Pharisees did not rebut the Sadducees by proffering the cloud of glory interpretation for verse 2 because they obviously did not consider that interpretation to be the actual meaning of Scripture. Rashi, after interpreting the verse according to what he considered peshat (as quoted above), cited the incense cloud explanation as a midrash, but he did not mention the smoke cloud. Rashbam also considers the incense cloud raised in the inner sanctum as adequate to be a screen for G-d's appearance. On this point Ibn Ezra is apparently of the same opinion.

3. Further Analysis of Verse 2

We will further examine this issue, citing and commenting upon the views of two modern scholars, one on each side of the controversy.

Baruch Levine (JPS Lev. Commentary, p. 101) considers the cloud of glory interpretation preferable. In his view, the key clause – *כִּי בָּעֲנַן אֶרְאֶה עַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת* – appears to provide the *reason* for the preceding statement in the verse restricting Aaron's entry; it explains why he must be careful that he not die. By stating, "for I appear in the cloud," Hashem is identifying His presence as the cause for restricted entry, not merely announcing that He chooses to appear when the incense cloud is raised, as it would mean according to the opposing view. Further, the purpose of the incense cloud of verse 13 is to protect the high priest when coming into G-d's immediate presence whereas in verse two the cloud appears to shield G-d, so to speak.

However, it is not self-evident that our verse is stating the *reason* for restricted entry to the most holy chamber; an explicit reason for such a regulation may not be required. It is well understood from the Tabernacle structure, its furnishings and its function that Hashem's presence is represented to be focused in the inner sanctum, in the area above the ark covering, where He "meets" Moses to speak to him (Exod. 25:22; 30:6; Num. 7:89). Surely it is taken for granted that one who approaches that area must take great care not to misstep. It is especially unnecessary here to state why entry is restricted following the Nadab and Abihu reference in the introductory verse. It is adequate to explain the proper procedures by which to approach the most holy area.

Furthermore, it has been argued, if the verse was interested in highlighting the fact that G-d's presence is concentrated in that area, the critical element that should have been articulated is the representation of His "dwelling" in that area, and that is not done. That He is "seen" there is not as meaningful as a reference to His dwelling there. A word such as *eshkon* ("I dwell") would be called for, consistent with other passages. "Am seen" has its own connotation and is not elsewhere used in the sense of "dwell." Sforno anticipated an aspect of this question. He explains that as the area above the *kaporet* is the earthly source

from which prophecy emanates (Exod. 25:22; Num. 7:89), the clause "I appear above the *kaporet*," refers to Hashem appearing to the prophets when they receive prophecy, through the generations, not His being there in a state of able to "be seen."

But there appears to be another difficulty with the cloud of glory interpretation. In the other descriptions of G-d's cloud (*עֲנַן*) mentioned in conjunction with the Tabernacle, it does not refer to the cloud as being "in" the sanctuary. At the end of Exodus, the text carefully differentiates between the cloud that covered the Tent of Meeting and His glory that filled the Tabernacle (*וַיִּכְבֹּד ה' מְלֵא אֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן*) [Exod. 40:34]. The next verse there asserts that Moses was not able to enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud resided upon it and, again, that Hashem's glory filled the Tabernacle, *וַיִּכְבֹּד ה' מְלֵא אֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן*. On the day of dedication, it speaks about His glory (Lev. 9:6, 23). The cloud and His glory (*כְּבוֹד*) do not appear to be synonymous; thus, we cannot interpret with any confidence the cloud of verse 2 as the manifestation of Hashem's glory inside the Tabernacle.

Jacob Milgrom (AB Lev. Commentary, p. 1015) considers the incense cloud interpretation preferable for two reasons. First, the cloud of glory in its other manifestations – primarily hovering above the Tabernacle – was visible to the people on a regular basis, indeed, its purpose was that it should be seen. It is thus clear that those that saw it did not die. On the sanctuary dedication day the people even witnessed Hashem's glory in the sanctuary and nothing happened to them (Lev. 9:23-24). Since there is no statement differentiating the supposed cloud of glory in the Holy of Holies from the other cloud manifestations, why should G-d now state that a threat of death is attached to the cloud? Second, immediately following the verse 2 citation of the cloud is a listing of items and procedures the high priest requires in fulfilling his preparatory rites so an incense cloud screen could very well be understood as first on the list.

Neither proof is compelling. His first point assumes that according to the cloud of glory interpretation, the phrase "that he not die" of verse 2 means that upon viewing the imputed cloud of the divine presence one would automatically die. However, the verse seems to read differently. It is saying that one should not enter

at just any time, casually, lacking proper preparation, because he might be disrespectful in some way, an act that would be of the utmost seriousness and incur the death penalty since it would be directly in the presence of G-d's glory. More important, if verse 2 refers to a cloud of glory that abided in the inner sanctum representing the divine presence, this would be different from the cloud above the Tabernacle and all other manifestations of divine glory. The latter are signs and indications of His proximate presence and a signal to the nation; they do not represent His specific dwelling in His place. Hence, the fact that viewing the cloud above the Tabernacle does not bring death may not be a relevant consideration for defining the nature of the cloud inside the most holy chamber.

Milgrom's second point, that raising a cloud begins the list of preparations, also appears problematic. Verse 3 begins with, "With the following shall Aaron come forth to the holy." This is the introduction to the items and procedures needed for the preparatory rites. Since the verse 2 cloud comes beforehand as part of a previous statement, it appears not to be part of that list

of preparations and thus not to refer to the incense cloud. However, in Milgrom's defense, it may be that the incense cloud is a preparation but is mentioned before the official inventory of required items begins and separate from it because it is more than just another condition. It is a highlight of the ritual service that brings about the goal of G-d manifesting His presence.

One wonders if any support may be adduced from the similarity of the verse 2 formulation with that of verse 13. Verse 2 states that Aaron should not enter at just any time beyond the curtain to the presence of "the *kaporet* that is upon the ark that he not die." Verse 13 relates that the incense cloud should cover "the *kaporet* that is upon the testimony (a synonym for the ark) that he not die." Does not the fact that the latter expresses the idea that the incense cloud protects against the threat of death with basically the same phraseology as employed in the earlier statement shed light on this matter?

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