



PARSHAS ACHAREI MOS – KEITH GOLDSTEIN

LOOKING FORWARD AND LOOKING BACK

Usually, on the Shabbos before Pesach we read parshas Tzav dealing with the various sacrifices and the build up to the dedication of the Mishkan which occurred on Rosh Chodesh Nisan. This is in keeping with the time of year in which Pesach has to fall, namely springtime. Because this year is a leap year, the parsha which we read on the Shabbos before Pesach is Achrei Mos dealing initially with the service and laws of Yom Kippur which falls in the autumn time. The parsha of the week always has relevance to the events of the week and accordingly there has to be a connection between Pesach and Yom Kippur.

There are three striking similarities between the two festivals. Firstly, the obligations of the day include sacrifices beyond the normal Mussaf sacrifices which are central to the festival, the Paschal lamb or kid in the case of Pesach and two goats in the case of Yom Kippur. Secondly, both festivals impose restrictions upon eating and drinking, in the case of Pesach limited to leavened produce and in the case of Yom Kippur an absolute prohibition. Thirdly, each festival has a strong connection to the giving of the Torah; Moshe Rabeinu brought down the second tablets on Yom Kippur and the first tablets were given on Shavuot which in the Mishnah is called "Atzeres" and our Rabbis say that it is the equivalent for Pesach of Shemini Atzeres to Succos, which is why it is so named, and that but for inclement weather conditions there would be a 49 day gap between Succos and Shemini Atzeres. Also the Kabbalists say that in the case of Pesach, the 49 day gap, reflected in the counting of the Omer, was to look forward to the giving of the Torah and to enable the people to reach the required spiritual purity for that.

Springtime, in which Pesach falls, represents, agriculturally, a period of growth and renewal at which time the farmer will be hopeful of a bumper crop and for everything to run as it should to achieve that. Autumn time reflects the end of the season when, no doubt, the farmer will look back with a critical eye on the harvest season, will rejoice over the good things and will look to learn from experience and correct for future years anything that he did wrong. I venture to suggest that the same is true spiritually. Pesach was the time of our exodus when we became a people full of hope and expectation and looking forward to the giving of the Torah. By the time of Yom Kippur we had sinned with the golden calf and required, and were given forgiveness; that is one reason why on Yom Kippur we each carry out an examination of what we have done in the past year and seek to atone for it and ultimately, as the Rambam writes, after doing teshuvah, become a different person, at least to an extent, the person we aspired to be in the first place.

However, despite the great merits and level of a person who does teshuvah, the fact of sinning has a consequence, as we see from Adam who did not regain the degree of greatness or sanctity which he had before the sin, when he was the perfect man. I would like to suggest that this fact is reflected in the differences between the similarities of Pesach and Yom Kippur mentioned above. As the commentators explain, the Paschal lamb or goat was sacrificed as a statement of our rejection of idolatry, the animals being the idolatry of Egypt at that time, which is why it had to be roasted whole so that it was identifiable. By the time of Yom Kippur, after we had served, or at least flirted with idolatry i.e. the golden calf we had, as a result, to give a bribe to the forces of evil by way of the scapegoat, the Azazel, as the commentators explain.

The symbolism of leavened produce is that of haughtiness, the yeast in the dough which makes it rise, and particularly at Pesach, when we became free and a people, it was important that our beginning be with humility and we were therefore proscribed from eating leavened produce. By the time of Yom Kippur, after we had sinned, that restriction was not enough. Sin is caused by haughtiness; as the Hasidic master, the compiler of the Maor Vashemesh interprets the opening verse of Parshas Reeh, the ego is a curse if it is utilised to break the commandments of the Torah. Although the middle path is usually the right one, as the Rambam says, when a person has gone to one extreme he needs to go to the other extreme to correct the position. Accordingly, on Yom Kippur we had to refrain from eating or drinking entirely to counterbalance the haughtiness shown when we sinned.

Had we not sinned with the golden calf and had Moshe Rabbeinu not had to smash the first tablets, we would not have forgotten what we learned, as the Rabbis say which is not true after our receiving the second tablets.

To summarise, Pesach reflects the ideal world, the way we wish it to be and Yom Kippur reflects the world we have created for ourselves by our actions and requires introspection on our part, for us to learn from our experiences and change for the better.

There is a famous argument between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshuah as to whether the world was created in Tishri, as Rabbi Eliezer says or in Nisan as Rabbi Yehoshuah says. On the face of it, it is hard to understand the view of Rabbi Eliezer as Tishri is the autumn time, which is the end of the season of growth and surely the symbolism would require the world to be created in the springtime, at the beginning of the season of growth. Perhaps we can answer by saying that, as mentioned, autumn is a time of retrospection which should lead to our betterment. The Rabbis say that Teshuvah was created before the world which indicates how fundamental it is to the world. Accordingly, as the time for review and repentance is the autumn and that underpins the world, it was appropriate for the world to be created then.

לעילוי נשמת אמי מורתי מרת שרה ראכיל בת ר' חיים ע"ה נפטרה י"ג ניסן

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