

Emor—to say, quietly, as in a whisper
Leviticus 21:1-24:23
May 21, 2016
Temple Sinai, Pittsburgh

Niggun

Part I: Ritual purity—separate path of the high priest

And Yah said unto Moses: Speak unto the priests the sons of Aaron, and say unto them: There shall none defile himself for the dead among his people...
(Leviticus 21:1)

This one line is the departure point for this afternoon's contemplation.

Emor—"I will say to them", in a whisper. Moses should whisper this to the high priest.

"Say quietly, just as all the actions of the priests are done quietly."
Zohar, Vol 8, p. 58

The silent intention of the priest is vital.
Zohar, Vol 8, p. 58, footnote 10

The high priest holds the transcendent function, to join heaven and earth, through ritual.

The mystics in our tradition talk about protecting the highest priests from exposure to anything that might give rise to sadness or anger. We are told that the high priest should not have any cause of anger toward God. They need to be protected from their own anger over harsh judgment in the world, in order to protect their purity.

It is not that the dead will defile the priest; it is that the priest will be defiled by their experience of loss and absence in the world. They will be defiled by their own anger and sadness.
Izbitzer, p. 230

"At a time when man is awake, then the head is in control of all the limbs.
Baal Shem Tov wrote: "where a man's mind is, there the man is in his entirety."

"...and the high priest's special function is to rectify the actions of Israel, so nothing would become irrecoverably lost in exile."
Izbitzer p. 231-2

For this, there must be purity.

And what do we mean by purity?

No distraction of anger, or sadness, or doubt toward God.

The Izbitzer writes that the priest must guard against the 5 kinds of angry complaints that “a man can carry in his heart against the stern attributes of the Holy One...”

The laws governing the priesthood, protects the priest from exposure to his own possible anger:

--The anger in his heart over the death and absence found in the world

--The anger against physical defects that would render a priest unfit to serve in the temple. So therefore, the priest should have no defects.

-The anger that may arise because something kept him from eating of the sacrifices.

-The anger the priest might have over the blemishes of the sacrifices themselves. So the sacrifices must have no blemishes.

-And there is a stipulation that the thanksgiving offering must be eaten on the day it was given. From what is this protecting the priest? With the command to eat the thanksgiving offering that day, there is no thought to the past or the future. The priest must always stand in prayer and the fear of God on this present day.

If it were otherwise, this could give “way to a cry of anguish in the [heart] ..., asking why the blessed God cannot simply be a constant refuge of strength.” Why can’t we do everything with complete confidence that the blessed God will help us tomorrow? God conducts the world above the level of a man’s intellect. We cannot understand. We get angry.

Izbitzer pp. 241-2

In order to protect the purity of the high priest, the high priest must not leave the sanctuary. The priest “must be in a state of perfection...”

Zohar p. 65

“The high supreme priest should display a beautiful face, a radiant face, more joyous than all. He should not display sadness or anger, but rather corresponding entirely to the pattern above.”

Zohar p. 66

The high priest should be protected from knowledge of good and evil, to cling only to the Tree of Life, ...be like the primordial Adam.

Rav Kook writes that the high priest must protect himself from even the illusion of death by not being exposed to death.

Rav Kook, p. 207-8

He writes:

“Why are *kohanim* not allowed to come in contact with a dead body? Why does the Torah refer to the dead person as a ‘dead soul’? After all, it is the body that dies, not the soul!”

He tells a parable to introduce the notion of the illusion of death. It is about twin boys in the warmth of the womb.

There are “twin brothers, fetuses in their mother’s womb, enjoying a carefree life. Their world is dark and warm and protected. One brother believes in life beyond the womb, an afterlife, and a future reality very different from their own current, miniature universe.

The second brother is a skeptic. All he knew was the familiar world of the womb. Anything beyond what he can feel and sense is only an illusion. The skeptic kept trying to tell his brother to be realistic, but to no avail...

The months passed, and the fatal moment arrived. Labor began. The fetuses became aware of the tremendous contractions shifting their little world.” *First one brother, and then the next, had to give way to the contractions. They both came out screaming.*

Rav Kook wrote:

“Death is a false illusion; defilement is due to its deceptive nature. What people call ‘death’ is in fact the intensification of life. Because man wallows in pettiness, he pictures this increase of life in a pained, black fashion, which he calls ‘death.’

The [priests] in their holiness are able to rise above this falsehood. Yet, falsehood and deception rule over the world. In order to overcome the illusion of death, the [priests] must limit their exposure to death. They need to protect themselves from those images that impress the soul with deceiving messages.

The word ‘soul’ in the verse does not refer to soul of the dead person. It refers to the soul of the [priest]...for the sake of the priest’s soul, he must distance and protect himself for death and its illusions.”

Rav Kook, p. 208

At the time of the Temple, in order for the high priest to hold the transcendent function, he must maintain ritual purity, not come in full contact with the variability of life, and death. To be able to perform this function, he must be set apart. For he alone is tasked to bridge heaven and earth for the community of Israel, to rectify the actions of Israel, so nothing would become irrecoverably lost in exile.

The Lord says to Moses: “Whisper to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: None shall defile himself for any [dead] person among his kin.” (Leviticus 21:1)

Niggun

Silence

Part II: Two facets of awe

We are taught that the beginning of wisdom is awe.

There are two facets of awe to consider--

--The one that leads to peace, as it puts all earthly concerns into perspective.

This is the largest perspective

--And, the realization that we are not in control of much. This is our individual perspective. And it is frightening.

Every service, every period of prayer, we review the Exodus from Egypt. Why?

To remember awe, to awaken awe.

This is the story we remember:

That last night of plagues is filled with screams and blood.

There is the blood of the lamb, slaughtered to paint the lintel and the thresholds of our door.

There are the screams of the slaughter of the Egyptian first born.

There is the blood and cries of our own circumcision.

We are becoming a people, fleeing for our lives, taking only what we can carry in our arms.

We are escaping, fleeing to an alien domain.

In this liminal state, we depend on manna from heaven.

It is seven weeks before we are prepared to receive Torah.

Then in the receiving of Torah, and there is another kind of terror. The Holy King comes to couple with the assembly of Israel, to give us His commandments.

Total completion. Thunder and lightning. Shaking and trembling, we pull away.

Here is awe.

Fear of God is greater upon those who are closest.

And we are taught: "wholeness" comes to those who fear the Lord.

"The holy Zohar teaches that wholeness comes to those who fear the Lord, as ... "There is no lack for those who fear Him' (Ps. 34:10). Since they lack for nothing, they may be called whole or 'at peace' (shalom)...Shalom is God's own name.

"Here we see the great difference between 'awe before God's [great might and mystery] and any ordinary human fear. This awe is a fear that takes us beyond our ordinary selves, allowing us to leave behind all other fears, all attachments to the vanities of this world, even our attachment to our own individual selves. It is the fear of the angels, those who stand eternally in the chorus of God's praise, knowing without interruption that it is for this alone that they were created."

Sefat Emet p. 196

Awe brings us to the peace of the largest view of our place in the universe. Our smallness is reassuring. What are these small plans we make?

Awe brings us to fear for our individual being. We can make no plans that can't be crushed.

And we are taught that awe is balanced by God's love. The love that is personal to us, and the love that is vibrant in the universe.

From the Song of Songs: 'His left hand is beneath my head, while His right hand embraces me' (Song of Songs 2:6). The left hand of God, in judgment and might, seems to insist on awe, to demand a distance between God and the soul. But even as that left hand of God pushes me away, I know that God also embraces me to draw me near. This is part of the mystery of faith."

Art Green, p. 148

Awe contains both the great distance we feel to the Divine Mystery, our smallness in relationship to the great dance of the cosmos, as well as our sense of personal responsibility and our receptivity to being profoundly loved. Both.

It is our job to remember mystery and awe, while we so love mercy. Rightly so. But we must be careful not pray to an attribute of God but remain directed only to Essence which "no mind can comprehend."

The Izbitzer writes:

"... In prayer, we are forbidden from ascribing any attributes of man's limited understanding to the blessed God. This is because the function of prayer is to allow the blessed God to enlighten the eyes of man to a place that he otherwise could not have reached. Attributes of behavior are something that man has the power to comprehend. [But we are instructed] 'to call directly to Him, and not call to His attributes.' When a man prays and mentions one of the attributes of God, it might seem that he is praying, God forbid, that the attribute save him, where the attribute only contains that which the blessed God measured into it...Prayer is only to be directed to His very essence, may it be blessed, which 'no mind can comprehend'"

Izbitzer, pp. 234-5

The beginning of wisdom is awe.

**Niggun
Silence**

Part III: Living in the world—continual refinement, integrating variability and death

In our creation story, God created Adam—cleaving, never changing—attached to the Tree of Life.

The Zohar explains:

“The woman saw that the tree was good for eating and attractive to the eyes and the tree was desirable to look at, and she took of its fruit and ate (Genesis 3:6).’ Come and see, for people do not know or consider or contemplate: When the blessed Holy One created Adam, investing him with supernal glory, [Yah] asked him to cleave to Him, so that [Adam] would be unique and single-hearted, in a place of single cleaving, never changing or reversing—in that bond of faith, to which all is bound, as it is written: ‘and the Tree of Life in the midst of the Garden’ (ibid 2:9).

Zohar, p. 203

When the primordial Adam became two—male and female, and ate from the Tree of Good and Evil, death came into the world. We became variable.

From the Zohar:

“Afterward, they strayed from the way of faith—abandoning the unified tree, highest of all trees—and came to cling to a place that changes and turns from color to color, and from good to evil and evil to good. They descended from above to below and clung below to many changes, abandoning the highest of all, who is One and never changing, as is written: ‘God made the human being upright, but they sought many schemes. (Ecclesiastes 7:29)—but they sought many schemes, surely! Then their hearts changed in the very aspect: sometimes toward good, sometimes toward evil; sometimes to Compassion, sometimes to Judgment—according to that to which they clung, surely! They sought many schemes and clung to them.”

Zohar, pp. 204

The Indwelling Presence “varies and changes, her colors for good, sometimes for evil; sometimes for Judgment, sometimes for Compassion.”

Zohar, p. 203

Living in the world requires adapting to variation and change. We are not protected from the vicissitudes of life, like those high priests who attempt to emulate the primordial Adam.

So we do our work of purification.

We have both heart and mind...Heart teaches what is beyond the intellect. Understanding and wisdom work together, in relationship.

Our cycle of holidays help us refine this work.

Writes the Izbitzer:

“On Passover they only received a temporary illumination, which was then immediately concealed, for they saw the preciousness of the light of the blessed God but were unable to be drawn after His will...for all of Israel were like maidservants under the yoke of blessed God, and were unable to fulfill their desire in His desire. Then on Shavuot, with the giving of the Torah, then the blessed God fixed...Understanding in the hearts of all men, and the will of the blessed God was understood in their very souls. This...Understanding is called ‘the moon.’ The moon teaches of the understanding of the heart, whereas the sun teaches...Wisdom that is clear to all. Wisdom [comes from]... the 613 mitzvot, so that a man may know the proper course of action by means of the [the rules] of behavior... By means of these principles he knows what is permitted and what is forbidden. The moon, however, teaches of the understanding in the heart with which a man may sanctify himself even [delineate himself from] that which is permitted to him. This means that he has a deep and instinctive feeling for where he must create his boundaries, knowing how to recognize just how far is the will of the blessed God, and any further is not the will of the blessed God. Man needs this understanding under all circumstances.

This is why it says in the Midrash, ‘The nations of the world measure the year by the sun, and Israel measures the year by the moon.’ This is because the sun is ...wisdom, which is in man’s power of comprehension, but the moon teaches of life that is above the intellect.”

Izbitzer, p. 236

Since no one can return to the state of the primordial Adam, the apple has been bit, we cannot be shielded from death and variability. We no longer have high priests who are protected from knowing death, and their own capacity for anger and sadness.

The holiness of the priest depends on the holiness of the people of Israel. We work with the spark of our own holiness, raising it up individually and collectively, knowing it is connected to The All. We can take on our bit of holiness, adding strength to the one who has been designated to perform the priestly function.

“...the holiness of the priests depends upon that of the people Israel. They, too, have to sanctify themselves. Even those who cannot become truly holy, when they take on a bit of holiness, add strength to the ones who has been designated as holy, [enabling them] to be properly sanctified.”

Sefat Emet, p. 194

Omer counting, where we are today in the calendar year, is a period of purification, to make us ready to receive Torah. Our inward attachment to Torah bears witness to the purity of our words.

“It is only in accord with one’s personal purity that one can deserve to attain Torah. That is why the days of Omer counting were given, as a period of purification to make us ready to receive Torah. While it is true that anyone may study Torah, attachment to the innermost Torah, the ‘utterances of the Lord,’ of which we say: ‘Cause our hearts to cling to your Torah.’, indeed requires purity. This [inward attachment] in itself bears witness to the purity of the person’s words, for this Torah is attained only through purity....

But this too is true: words of Torah themselves serve to purify the one who studies them.”

Sefat Emet pp. 194-5

“Purity of heart bears witness to itself.”

Sefat Emet, A.G. p. 195

Together, we examine our own capacity for anger and sadness, and work to rejoin the Tree of Knowledge to the Tree of Life.

Niggun

Silence

Text compiled by Rhonda.k.rosen@gmail.com

Resources used:

Zohar, Vol VIII, Daniel Matt translator

Living Waters, a commentary on the Torah by Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Isbitza, translated by Betsalel Philip Edwards

The Language of Truth, Torah commentary of the Sefat Emet, translated and edited by Arthur Green

Gold from the Land of Israel, from the writing of Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, by Rabbi Chanan Morrison

These are the Words, Arthur Green