



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת אחרי מות-קדושים תשס"ט • 5769 Parshas Acharei-Kedoshim

LONG-DISTANCE CALL

TALKING WITH THE ANGELS

Both Avraham Avinu and his Egyptian handmaiden Hagar encountered angels. However, there exists a distinctive and surprising difference between their respective conversations.

Hagar's communication with the celestial beings was direct. When she beholds the angels in the desert, they speak plainly to her: "And the angel of Hashem said to her: 'Return to your mistress...'" (*Bereishis* 16:9). "For she said: 'Have I *seen* (them) even here...,'" (*ibid.*, v. 13).

The nature of Avraham's encounter was different. Unquestionably, one of the most momentous spiritual occasions of Avraham Avinu's life was *akeidas* Yitzchak (the binding of Yitzchak), wherein Avraham displayed his absolute devotion to Hashem by demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice his son. So sublime was this moment that Chazal compared Avraham during that event to an officiating Kohen Gadol (High Priest) (*Bereishis Rabbah*, 55:10). Yet, when the angel informed him that he had passed the test and should desist from harming his son, there was no "up close and personal" conversation. Rather, the call came from a distance, as the verse attests: "And an angel of Hashem called to him *from the Heavens*," (*Bereishis* 22:11).

Why did Hagar merit a face-to-face conversation with the angels, whereas Avraham – precisely at such a climactic moment of devotion – had to suffice with a long-distance call?

To resolve this difficulty, let us study the topic of the Kohen Gadol – a subject of this week's *parshah* – more closely.

HOOF IN THE HEAD

One of the focal points of our *parshah* revolves around an occasion which is the paradigm of holiness itself. The Torah deals extensively with the *avodah* (service) that took place through the hands of a most exalted personage, in the most sublime spiritual place, at the most pristine moment of the year – namely, the *avodah* of the Kohen Gadol inside of the Holy of Holies, on the day of Yom Kippur.

At one point in the proceedings, the Kohen Gadol would take an oath, as recorded in the Mishnah in *Yoma* (1:5):

הַשְּׂבִיעוּהוּ... וְאָמְרוּ לוֹ: אֵיֶשֶׁי כֹהֵן גָּדוֹל... מִשְׂבִּיעֵן אֲנִי עֲלֶיךָ... שְׁלֹא תִשְׁנֶה דְבַר מִכָּל מָה שְּׂאֲמַרְנוּ לְךָ.

"(The elders) administered the following oath: 'My master, Kohen Gadol... you must swear... that you will not deviate at all from the instructions we are giving you (regarding the *avodah*).'"

The Gemara (*Yoma* 19b) explains the purpose of this "swearing-in ceremony": to preclude any potential usurpation of the *avodah* by the heretical Tzeduki (Sadducee) faction. This group of recalcitrants – while professing fealty to the Scriptures – denigrated the authority of the Oral Law and its rabbinic guardians.

One result of this situation was a discrepancy in the performance of the incense offering. A cursory reading of the pertinent verse seems to imply that the Kohen Gadol should ignite the incense *before* entering the Holy of Holies; the Tzedukim promoted this view. On the other hand, the Rabbis – employing the exegetical tools of the Oral Tradition – understood that the incense is to be lighted only *after* entering the Holy of Holies.

Due to the unfortunate infiltration of the Tzedukim into the Temple service, the Rabbis had to view every

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Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit
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Kohen Gadol with a certain level of suspicion, lest he turn out to be a closet Tzeduki. And so they required the Kohen Gadol to swear that he would not tamper with the Yom Kippur service by prematurely igniting the incense.

There was good reason to be concerned. The Gemara (*ibid.*; cf. *Yerushalmi 1:5*) relates how once, an officiating High Priest actually did switch the order of the incense (in keeping with the “tradition” of the heretics). However, he soon paid for his chutzpah. As he left the Holy of Holies, he had his own angelic encounter; an angel appeared and struck him a death blow. Hearing a commotion, his fellow Kohanim came running, only to make a startling discovery. On the forehead of the stricken Kohen Gadol was the imprint of a hoof, apparently made by the angel’s foot when he administered justice. (In *Yechezkel, 1:7*, angels are described as having “feet like calves’ hooves.”)

It is interesting to note that the offending Kohen Gadol was smitten by the angel only upon *exiting* the Holy of Holies. Why wasn’t he punished while still inside?

AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

The Maharsha (*Yoma 19b*) clarifies this point based on a teaching of the *Yerushalmi (ibid.)*. Concerning the time that the Kohen Gadol is present in the Holy of Holies, the *pasuk* states: “And no one else shall be present in the Sanctuary when he enters... the Holy of Holies,” (*Vayikra 16:17*). According to the *Yerushalmi*, this restriction is not limited to humans; even angels are barred entry while the Kohen Gadol performs his service in the inner sanctum. For this reason, the angel who was sent to smite the renegade High Priest had no choice but to wait for his exit.

Based on this revealing statement of the *Yerushalmi*, it is possible to clear up the apparent irony that characterized *akeidas* Yitzchak. As mentioned, the event itself was one of enormous spiritual proportions. At the same time, Avraham’s communication with the angels seems to have been of a lesser degree than that of Hagar: while Hagar merited a face-to-face appointment, Avraham had to suffice with a call from the Heavens.

The *Yerushalmi*’s teaching casts this episode in a totally new light. It was *precisely* because of the awesome spiritual magnitude of the *akeidah* that the angels did not speak directly to Avraham. As previously stated, Avraham was likened to the High Priest as he was preparing to offer up his son as a sacrifice to Hashem. The *Meshech Chochmah (Bereishis 21:17)* draws the conclusion that the angels, therefore, were *unable* to appear to Avraham on Mt. Moriah as he performed the *akeidah*. For all intents and purposes, Avraham Avinu – at that moment – was a Kohen Gadol performing the *avodah* on Yom Kippur. And as the *Yerushalmi* expounded, at that moment no one – not even angels – were authorized to be present. The angels, therefore, had no recourse but to call to Avraham from their abode in the Upper Spheres.

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