

PARASHAT SH'MINI



אחריות ומשמעותה Taking Responsibility

■ The Divine Attribute of “Great Compassion”

We read in Parashat Sh'mini that Moshe was displeased with Aharon's sons Elazar and Itamar for having burnt the meat of the sin-offering instead of eating it in sanctity:

... ואתה נתן לכם לשאת את עון העֵדָה לְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיהֶם לְפָנַי ה'.

...it has been given to you to bear the community's sin and atone for them before G-d. (Vayikra 10,17)

How exactly is the community's sin borne? Who bears it, and to what end?

We will seek, in this article, to understand the roots of atonement, purity, and the Thirteen Divine Attributes of mercy. One of these attributes, which we recite often in our prayers, is that of *rav chessed*, “*great compassion*.” The Gemara explains it as follows:

The school of Beit Hillel says: “This means that G-d tilts the Divine verdict towards compassion.” (Rosh HaShanah 17a)

The implication is that there is a type of “scale of merits and sins” on which the weights of both sides start out equal. G-d then tilts the side of the merits, i.e., He gives them more consideration and causes that side to prevail. However, there are two different ways of tilting a scale: Either by

adding weight to one side, or removing from the other. Two Amoraic Sages disputed this issue, as the Talmud there continues:

R. Elazar says that G-d *conquers* the sin... R. Yosi bar Chanina says that G-d *raises up* the sin.

Rashi explains: According to R. Elazar, Hashem *presses down* on the side of the *merits*, giving them extra weight and strength, and causing them to prevail. R. Yosi bar Chanina, on the other hand, says that Hashem *raises up* the side of the *sins*, thus leaving them “out-weighed” by the merits.

How exactly are we to understand this allegory of a heavenly “scale of weights” and these two different approaches? The Talmud explains that the two Sages differ in their explanations of the following words of the Prophet Micha:

מי אֵל כְּמוֹךָ גֹּשֵׂא עוֹן...
 יָשׁוּב וְרַחֲמֵנוּ יִכְבֹּשׁ עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ וְתִשְׁלֶךְ בְּמַצְלוֹת יָם כָּל חַטָּאתָם.
*Who is a G-d like You, raising up sin...
 He will return and have compassion on us, will
 put down our sins, and will throw into the depths of
 the sea all their iniquities.* (Micha 7,18-19)

R. Elazar understands the words *put down our sins* to mean that Hashem gives the merits extra strength. R. Yosi, however, emphasizes the beginning of the verse, which speaks of *raising up sin*: Hashem lifts away our sins, and the merits triumph. Both approaches require explanation.

Let us begin with “*raising up sin*.” The Torah says about one who neglected to bring the Pesach offering: “*The man will bear/raise his sin*” (Bamidbar 9,13). This does not mean that the man will literally carry his sin – but rather that he will bear the *responsibility* for it; he will pay its price. That is, whoever is directly responsible for a sin is the one who suffers its consequences, while one who is indirectly responsible will pay only in accordance with the extent of his responsibility. A child, for instance, is not yet ready or able to accept any responsibility for his actions, and is therefore understandably exempt from mitzvot and punishment.

Accordingly, when the Prophet Micha says that Hashem “carries our sin,” it means that He is prepared to share in the responsibility for it. How precisely can G-d share the blame for man’s misdeeds?

The Prophet Elijah, Eliyahu HaNavi, alludes to an answer in his famous prayer on Mount Carmel. The worshipers of Baal stood opposite him, praying that their false god would set fire to the offering they wished to

dedicate to him. When they finally gave up, Eliyahu placed his own sacrifice on the altar and beseeched G-d to send down a Heavenly fire to consume it. G-d did so, proving to the skeptics that Hashem is true and that idol worship is worthless.

How did Eliyahu phrase his prayer for a miracle?

עֲנֵנִי ה' עֲנֵנִי וַיִּדְעוּ הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי אַתָּה ה' הָאֱלֹהִים
וְאַתָּה הִסַּבְתָּ אֶת לְבָבְךָ אַחֲרֵינִי.

*Answer me, O G-d, answer, and the people
shall know that you are G-d the Lord, and*

You have turned their heart backwards. (Kings I 18,37)

“It was You, G-d, “ Eliyahu pleads, “Who created the force of evil in the world, which leads people to sin. Therefore, please bear some of the indirect responsibility for Israel’s sins, thus relieving them of some of it.”

The Prophet Micha affirms this approach, in the name of G-d Himself:

... אֶסְפֶּה הַצִּלְעָה וְהַנִּדְחָה אֶקְבְּצָה וְאֶשֶׂר הַרְעֵתִי.

*I will gather the lame, the driven-out, and those to whom
I have done bad.* (Micha 4,6)

Hashem admits: “I created that which causes Israel to sin, and I must therefore make amends, gathering the injured and sick remnants of the flock of Israel from around the world” (based on Tr. B'rachot, 31b-32a). We now understand R. Yosi ben R. Chanina’s position, that G-d “carries our sins” and bears partial responsibility for them.

Let us proceed to R. Elazar’s approach, based on the the words “*He will put down our sins*” in Micha’s prophecy praising G-d for conquering or covering our sins. How so?

Let us look at Moshe Rabbeinu’s prayer for Israel after the grievous Sin of the Golden Calf. In Parashat Ekev we read:

זְכוֹר לַעֲבֹדֶיךָ לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב,

אַל תִּפְּן אֶל קְשֵׁי הָעָם הַזֶּה וְאֶל רְשָׁעוֹ וְאֶל חַטָּאתוֹ.

*Remember for Your servants Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov,
pay no heed to the stubbornness of this nation,
nor to its wickedness or its iniquity.* (D'varim 9,27)

How can Moshe ask Hashem to ignore evil deeds that were actually perpetrated? We must explain that Moshe is asking G-d to concentrate on

the great deeds of our forefathers, thus magnifying these acts and dwarfing their descendants' sins. That is, by concentrating on merits and good deeds, sins are covered and hidden.

Similarly, the wicked Bil'am was forced to bless Israel by citing G-d's special relationship with them, in which He focuses on their good deeds and overlooks their sins: "*G-d does not look at wrongdoing in Jacob, and sees no vice in Israel*" (Bamidbar 23,21). This is how R. Elazar explains the concept of "conquering or covering" Israel's sins.

We thus see that there are two ways in which Hashem "tilts" the scales with compassion in Israel's favor: One is by declaring that He shares indirect responsibility for the sins, and the other is by concentrating on the good deeds and thus overlooking the wrongdoing. Both of these methods of Divine forgiveness are described by King David in his Psalms:

רְצִיתָ ה' אֶרְצָהּ שְׁבֵתָ שְׁבִית יַעֲקֹב.
נִשְׂאתָ עֵינַי עֲמִידָה כְּסִיתָ כָּל חַטָּאתָם סֵלָה.

You have graced Your Land... You have carried the sin of Your Nation, You have covered all their sins. (Tehillim 85,2-3)

Hashem either "carries" Israel's sins, or "covers" them - or both.

■ Atonement and Purity

This foundation that we have laid will guide us in understanding the following famous verse, prominent in our Yom Kippur prayers:

כִּי בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטָהֳרָתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' תִּטְהָרוּ.

*For on this day Hashem will atone for you,
to purify you from all your sins,
before G-d you will be purified.* (Vayikra 16,30)

Let us note two phrases: *will atone for you*, and *to purify you*. The first, *kaparah*, is related to the word כַּפּוּרָת, the *kaporet* covering the Holy Ark – implying "covering" the sin. The second is טַהָרָה, *taharah*, meaning "purity" and referring to a total "erasure" of the sin.

The concept of atonement, *kaparah*, is simply a short-term cover-up of a sin, not its total erasure. It stems from G-d's compassion: He temporarily overlooks our sins, giving us a short reprieve so that we might repent. Only then, if and when we do long-term *teshuvah*, will we achieve purity and our misdeeds will be totally erased. The atonement we seek to achieve via our

Holy Temple sacrifices is merely a “cover-up” of our sins and protection from punishment – up until we feel true regret, guaranteeing that we do not repeat them.

Having understood this introduction, let us now turn to the Torah portion of Sh'mini.

■ The Priesthood

The Cohanim (priests) in Israel have several functions. They are best-known for serving in the Holy Temple, preparing and bringing the people's sacrifices. Much less well-known, but of paramount importance, is their task of teaching Torah to Israel. The Prophet Ezekiel emphasizes:

וְאֵת עַמִּי יוֹרוּ בֵּין קֹדֶשׁ לְחַלּוּ וּבֵין טְמֵא לְטָהוֹר יוֹדְעִם.

And they will teach My nation to differentiate between sacred and profane, and will inform them of the difference between impure and pure. (Yechezkel 44,23)

As their teachers, the Cohanim carry a great responsibility, even if indirectly, for the people's actions. If the people sin, the Cohanim must share in the blame. This is why the priests must partake of the sin-offerings that the people bring. However, there are significant restrictions: They must eat the sin-offering meat only in “sanctity and purity,” and only in the holy sanctuary, the Azarah, in the Beit HaMikdash.

The fascinating conclusion is this: It is not enough for the sinner to bring a “ransom” to atone or cover up for his sin; someone must also take responsibility for the sin. Via the encounter with the priest who eats of the sacrifice in purity, some of the responsibility is transferred to him, completing the atonement “cover-up.” The sinner must then repent and do full *teshuvah*, and only then will the sin be totally erased.

We read in Parashat Sh'mini that Moshe rebukes Aharon and his sons:

מִדּוּעַ לֹא אֲכַלְתֶּם אֶת הַחֲטָאת בַּמָּקוֹם הַקֹּדֶשׁ?

כִּי קֹדֶשׁ קֹדְשִׁים הִיא וְאֵתָהּ נָתַן לָכֶם לְשֵׂאת אֶת עוֹן הָעֵדָה

לְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיהֶם לִפְנֵי ה'.

Why did you not eat the sin-offering in a holy area?

It is holy of holies, and has been given to you to bear the community's sin and atone for them before G-d. (Vayikra 10,17)

What exactly is Moshe upset about? Based on the above, he is reminding Aharon's sons, the Cohanim, that they are those who are indirectly

responsible for the people's sins, and that they must therefore eat the sacrifice. If they do not do so, there will be no atonement for the owner.

What about those sins for which the Cohanim do not share responsibility? Who is responsible, and who will eat of the sacrifices? Consider these two examples:

- A High Priest who sinned on his own.
- The High Court that erred in a ruling, leading the nation to sin inadvertently.

In such cases, no part of the sin-offerings is eaten; instead, their blood is sprinkled towards the inner sanctuary, onto the *parochet*, the curtain separating the “Holy” area from the “Holy of Holies.” In some cases, the blood is even sprinkled into the Holy of Holies itself, opposite the Ark.

In these cases, no one eats of the meat of these sacrifices, even though they are sin-offerings; they are entirely burnt and consumed upon the altar. This signifies that Hashem Himself, as we saw above, is sharing in the responsibility for Israel's sins, for having created the motivation to sin. No mortal need eat from it – because Hashem's fire consumes it!

Moshe emphasizes this as he continues his reproach to Aharon and his sons:

הוּ לֹא הוֹבֵא אֶת דָּמָהּ אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ פְּנִימָה, אֲכֹל תֹּאכְלוּ אֹתָהּ בַּקֹּדֶשׁ ...

*For its blood was not brought into the holy sanctuary;
you shall eat it in the Holy area.* (verse 18)

Moshe asks: “Why did you not eat of the sin-offering, to help atone for the Children of Israel? After all, it is not of the type whose blood is sprinkled inwards, of which you do not eat because G-d Himself takes partial responsibility for having created man with an evil inclination. It is rather of the regular type, for which you, the Cohanim, must take responsibility and atone for Israel by eating it in the holy area.”

This helps us understand yet another puzzling Torah concept: The commandment to send one of two goats to its death in Azazel on Yom Kippur.

וְנָשָׂא הַשְּׂעִיר עָלָיו אֶת כָּל עֲוֹנֹתֵם אֶל אֲרֶץ גְּזֵרָה...

The goat shall carry upon it all their sins to a barren land. (16,22)

How can one little goat can bear on its back all the sins of the Nation of Israel? Furthermore, given that we now know that we do not mean “carrying sins,” but rather bearing the *responsibility* for them, how can a mindless goat be responsible for our misdeeds?

The answer is as follows: This mitzvah act of shifting the sin from man to animal symbolizes that it is the animalistic force of evil in the world that is actually indirectly responsible for man's sins. For it is that which gives man the urge to sin, as we read in the account of the serpent's seduction of Eve; it is the *mesit u'mediach*, the inciter and instigator.

On the other hand, it was G-d Himself Who created and activated this animalistic force, though He had a good reason: It was in order to enable true Free Will, as is described in the dialogue between G-d and the Satan in the beginning of the Book of Job.

This is precisely the reason that we sacrifice two goats on Yom Kippur: one for G-d, and one for Azazel. On Yom Kippur, when the sins of Israel are "covered up" – G-d overlooks them – the indirect responsibility for them is shifted and attributed to the very presence of instigative evil in the world. This is symbolized by the goat for Azazel. It is why we fast on Yom Kippur and keep away from all our physical lusts that bring us to sin – an allusion to the fact that without these lusts, we would not sin.

But above this, there is a second aspect to the Evil Inclination: Hashem Himself shares in the responsibility for having created this force. This is symbolized by the second goat – the one that is sacrificed to G-d not by being driven off a cliff, but inside the Beit HaMikdash. The blood of this second goat is sprinkled towards the *parochet* and the area of the Holy, and also inside the Holy of Holies itself, before the Holy Ark. This sacrifice is not eaten at all; no human being shares in the responsibility for these sins. Rather, as we have seen, Hashem takes partial responsibility for it. The Torah tells us regarding this sacrifice:

וְכַפֵּר עַל הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִטְּמֵאוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִפְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכֹל חַטָּאתָם...

*It will atone at the holy area for the impurities
of Israel and all their sins...* (Vayikra 16,16)

"*Atonement at the holy area*" means that Hashem is requesting that Israel should "atone" for Him, as it were, simply for having created evil in the world. The reason He did so was, as stated above, a good one: His desire to run the world with Free Choice for mortals, which meant that sin and evil would follow right behind as an integral part of Creation. Free Choice without the possibility of sin in the world is inconceivable.

All sin, then, can be traced back to G-d's will to grant us Free Choice. G-d's desire to run the world with Free Will comes at the price of all the sins that were and will ever be committed.

This view of sin stems from G-d's compassion for His nation of Israel, as we repeat many times in our prayers and especially on Yom Kippur:

ה' ה', אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן, אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם... נִשָּׂא עוֹן... וְנִקָּה לֹא יִנְקָה...
*G-d, G-d, merciful and compassionate Lord, long-suffering
 and of great kindness ... Who bears sin... yet does not
 completely cleanse [sinners of their guilt]... (Sh'mot 34,6-7)*

Note the conclusion of this list of the 13 Divine Attributes of Mercy: *He will not cleanse*. It means that G-d's attribute of compassion is not that He erases or purifies the sin right away, but rather waits patiently for the sinner to truly regret his actions and resolve not to do them again. Only then will G-d wipe them off the slate.

This explains why, when we recite the list of Divine Attributes in our prayers, we end in the middle of a phrase. We say וְנִקָּה, *He will cleanse*, and leave out the words וְלֹא יִנְקָה, *He will not cleanse*. This implies our confidence that we *will* be cleansed of our sins, because we take upon ourselves to repent and do complete *teshuvah*, truly wiping our slate clean of sin. As the Sages teach in the Talmud:

“Hashem cleanses those who repent, and not those who do not repent.” (Shavuot 39a)

