

Parashat Acharei Mot/Kedoshim

The idea that a price must be paid in order to effect atonement for sin or to release a captive is one that is found throughout the Scriptures. In Judaism this is called *kofer-nefesh*, a term which was applied to the poll tax of a half-shekel that was to be paid by every male above twenty years old on the occasion of a census. This is described for us in Shemot 30:11-16: "ADONAI said to Moshe, When you take a census of the people of Isra'el and register them, each, upon registration, is to pay a ransom for his life to ADONAI, to avoid any breakout of plague among them during the time of the census. Everyone subject to the census is to pay as an offering to ADONAI half a shekel- by the standard of the sanctuary shekel. Everyone over twenty years of age who is subject to the census is to give this offering to ADONAI— the rich is not to give more or the poor less than the half shekel when giving ADONAI's offering to atone for your lives. You are to take the atonement money from the people of Isra'el and use it for the service in the tent of meeting, so that it will be a reminder of the people of Isra'el before ADONAI to atone for your lives." The idea behind the half-shekel tax was that the lives of the particular Israelites concerned were indebted to Hashem on account of some unspecified sin and only payment of the appointed ransom money could release them from a deadly fate. Various explanations are given by the rabbis as to what this sin was. In his commentary on Exodus, Benno Jacob (a Liberal rabbi and Biblical scholar), observes that: "The expression, "to pay the Lord ransom (*kofer nefesh*) for himself," appears in the Torah two more times. In Exodus 21:30 it denotes the expiation money paid by a person who caused the death of another, yet nevertheless his own life is not taken [the reference is to a person whose ox killed someone after the ox was declared dangerous, and therefore the person is responsible for the death of his fellow]. In Numbers 35:31-32 it appears in conjunction with someone who commits premeditated murder and from whom one may not take expiation money. A soldier [that is, those men over 20 years being counted in a census who were of age to go into battle] is in a certain sense a murderer, or at least a killer who sheds blood. Therefore he is essentially doomed to die, and if he remains alive he must pay ransom for his life, since before God every human life has value and requires expiation."

The concept of *kofer nefesh* also underlies the events of Bmidbar 25:1-11. As we read, "Isra'el stayed at Sheetim, and there the people began whoring with the women of Mo'av. These women invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, where the people ate and bowed down to their gods. With Isra'el thus joined to Ba'al-P'or, the anger of ADONAI blazed up against Isra'el. ADONAI said to Moshe, "Take all the chiefs of the people, and hang them facing the sun before ADONAI, so that the raging fury of ADONAI will turn away from Isra'el." Moshe said to the judges of Isra'el, "Each of you is to put to death those in his tribe who have joined themselves to Ba'al-P'or." Just then, in the sight of Moshe and the whole community of Isra'el, as they were weeping at the entrance to the tent of meeting, a man from Isra'el came by, bringing to his family a woman from Midyan. When Pinchas the son of El'azar, the son of Aharon the cohen, saw it, he got up from the middle of the crowd, took a spear in his hand, and pursued the man from Isra'el right into the inner part of the tent, where he thrust his spear through both of them— the man from Isra'el and the woman through her stomach.

Parashat Acharei Mot/Kedoshim

Thus was the plague among the people of Isra'el stopped; nevertheless, 24,000 died in the plague. ADONAI said to Moshe, "Pinchas the son of El'azar, the son of Aharon the cohen, has deflected my anger from the people of Isra'el by being as zealous as I am, so that I didn't destroy them in my own zeal."

As can be seen from this very last sentence, Hashem considered the sin of our people at Ba'al Peor to be so serious that the lives of every single Israelite ought to have been forfeited. To say that God was angry with our people is therefore something of an understatement. That His people should act so terribly offended His holiness and the natural result ought to have been our destruction. And yet, as with the case of the half-shekel tax and the owner of the ox, Hashem graciously proposed a ransom which would both meet the demands of His holiness and release our people from a deadly fate. Moshe was accordingly ordered to take all the chiefs of the people and hang or impale them facing the sun before Hashem so that His righteous anger would turn away from Israel. That the death of Israel's leaders could pay the appointed ransom price and bring deliverance to the people might sound a little perverse to some, but as we have heard "before God every human life has value". Indeed, the lives of Israel's leaders was clearly considered of sufficient value in God's eyes to effect such an atonement. They were, after all, the creme de la creme of Israel! The manner of their deaths too would contribute toward paying the ransom price. Indeed, the Hebrew word translated as 'hung', *hokia*, properly means "to be put out of joint, to be executed slowly by exposure or by being impaled, and to be alienated". In the Septuagint this same word is translated as 'Paradeig-mat-izo' - which means to hold up to public infamy, shame or disgrace. More on this later.

There are other instances in Scripture of the deaths of individuals ransoming the lives of the community. In Shmuel Bet 21:1-14 we read, for example, of a famine which lasted three years. On enquiring with Hashem as to the cause of the famine, Melech David was told "It is because of Sha'ul and his bloodstained house, because he put to death the people of Giv'on" - in other words the famine was divine punishment on the whole of the Jewish people for sins committed by King Shaul against the Givonim, a non-Jewish group whom the Israelites had promised, at the time of the conquest, not to exterminate like the other inhabitants of the Land. Thus armed with this knowledge, David asked the Givonim what they wanted him to do. "David said to the Giv'onim, "What should I do for you? With what should I make atonement [or ransom], so that you will be able to bless ADONAI' s heritage?" The Giv'onim said to him, "Our dispute with Sha'ul can't be resolved with silver or gold; and we don't have the right to put anyone in Isra'el to death." He said, "So, what do you say that I should do for you?" They answered the king, "The man who ruined us, who schemed against us so that we would cease to exist anywhere in Isra'el's territory— have seven of his male descendants handed over to us, and we will put them to death by hanging [or impalement, because the Hebrew word here is 'hokia'] before ADONAI in Giv'ah of Sha'ul, whom ADONAI chose." The king said, "I will hand them over." David handed over the seven sons to the Givonim who impaled them [hokia] on the mountain in Gibeon "before the Lord". The passage concludes

Parashat Acharei Mot/Kedoshim

“And when all that the king had commanded was done, God responded to the plea of the land thereafter.” Thus, as at Ba'al Por in our portion, the impalement of these seven men, descendants of Shaul's royal house and therefore people of great value, served as a ransom price for the community.

This idea then that the lives of the many may be ransomed by the death of a few is thoroughly Scriptural and as such it is no surprise that it is foundational to our Messianic Jewish theology of atonement. That Messiah's death was interpreted through the lens of *kofer nefesh* is evident, for example, from Messianic Jews 6:6 which not only explains that those who fall away from the faith effectively execute Messiah all over again, but “hold him up to public contempt”. In fact the Greek word that is rendered with this latter phrase is the very same Greek word 'Para-deig-mat-izo' which we have seen the Septuagint used to translate the Hebrew word 'hokia'. By so doing the writer to the Messianic Jews directly connects Yeshua's execution with that of the leaders of Israel at Baal Peor and Shaul's descendants at Givon. In effect he invites his readers to link these events together. Thus Baal Peor and Givon serve to give meaning to Messiah's death. Ergo, if the gruesome *hokia* deaths of these people of worth served to expiate for and ransom the people, then why not that of the Messiah? We are reminded of this fact in this week's parashah - Acharei Mot - in which the procedure for offering the Yom Kippur sacrifices is prefaced with a reference to the deaths of Ahaon's sons, Nadav and Avihu. As we read, “Adonai spoke with Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons, when they tried to sacrifice before Adonai and died; Adonai said to Moshe, ‘Tell your brother Aharon not to come at just any time into the Holy Place beyond the curtain, in front of the ark-cover which is on the ark, so that he will not die; because I appear in the cloud over the ark-cover.’” The rabbis naturally ask why the Torah prefaces the Yom Kippur instructions like this and conclude that it is not only to serve as a warning against the profanity which caused Nadav and Avihu to presume to enter the Holy of Holies at a whim, but as a statement of the principle that the death of the righteous ransoms or atones. Indeed, the Yerushalmi Yoma 1:1 asks in this respect: “Why is the death of the righteous [i.e. Nadav and Avihu] mentioned in conjunction with the chapter of the Yom Kippur service? Because, just as Yom Kippur brings atonement, so the death of the righteous brings atonement.” Furthermore, so the Artscroll Vayikra commentary adds, “Meshech Chochmah [written by Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (1843–1926)] explains that Yom Kippur is an *Et Ratzon*, opportune time for atonement. In God's plan for Creation, He determined that certain times of the year should be suited for certain spiritual manifestations. Just as we find that Pesach is a time of freedom, Shavuot is a time to receive the Torah, and so on, so, too, Yom Kippur is a time that is ordained for atonement. When a great person dies, someone of the stature of a Nadav or Avihu, and his soul ascends to the world of the souls, it is a cause of rejoicing in Heaven, at the same time that it causes grief on earth. This good feeling above can bring a spirit of forgiveness and atonement to those who survive the *tzaddik*. However, and this is crucial,” it continues, “both Yom Kippur and the death of the righteous bring atonement only on one condition. Yom Kippur atones only for people who regard it as a holy day and treat it as such. Those to whom it is merely a day of refraining from food and work, but without a

Parashat Acharei Mot/Kedoshim

spiritual dimension, do not find atonement on Yom Kippur. Similarly, those who do not honour the righteous in life are not benefitted by their ascent to Heaven in death." All of this provides important context for what the Messianic Writings say about the efficacy of Yeshua's death and ascent to Heaven. For Yeshua is not only portrayed by the writer to the Messianic Jews as exercising the ministry of the High Priest of Israel, in other words he is much greater than Nadav and Avihu, but he is portrayed as ascending into Heaven as a fulfilment of the Yom Kippur sacrifices. Moreover, unlike Nadav and Avihu, and even Aharon, all of whom who sinned, Yeshua is presented to us as being spotless and without blemish - a man who through the several decades of his life never failed to do the right thing. Therefore if the deaths of Nadav and Avihu are said to have temporarily atoned for and ransomed our people, then how much more does the death of the pure, sinless Messiah atone and ransom us? As the writer says, "But when the Messiah appeared as cohen gadol of the good things that are happening already, then, through the greater and more perfect Tent which is not man-made (that is, it is not of this created world), he entered the Holiest Place once and for all. And he entered not by means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of his own blood, thus setting people free forever. For if sprinkling ceremonially unclean persons with the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer restores their outward purity; then how much more the blood of the Messiah, who, through the eternal Spirit, offered himself to God as a sacrifice without blemish, will purify our conscience from works that lead to death, so that we can serve the living God.... For the Messiah has entered a Holiest Place which is not man-made and merely a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, in order to appear now in the very presence of God. Further, he did not enter heaven to offer himself over and over again, like the cohen hagadol who enters the Holiest Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer death many times - from the founding of the universe on. But as it is, he has appeared once at the end of the ages in order to do away with sin through the sacrifice of himself. Just as human beings have to die once, but after this comes judgement, so also the Messiah, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear for a second time, not to deal with sin, but to deliver those who are eagerly waiting for him."

This last sentence is of great importance. As we have heard, Meshech Chochmah states that the death of the righteous atones, but is only effective in the lives of those who esteem the Tzaddik while they were alive. The logic behind this statement is clearly that if one refuses to acknowledge the holiness of a Tzaddik in his life, why should they think that his righteousness will atone for them after their death? This is the same logic that the Messianic Writings applies with regard to Yeshua, in that Yeshua's death is said also only to atone for those who recognise him as a Tzaddik, nay as THE Tzaddik, while they are alive. It is these who will naturally be eagerly awaiting him on his return. It's just like Pesach. As the Haggadah makes clear, you've only kept Pesach properly when you have fully bought into the Yetzias Mitzrayim by faith. We have to consider that we too came out of Egypt for "in each generation, each person is obligated to see himself or herself [lirot et atzmo] as though he or she personally came forth from Egypt." Indeed, Hashem commands us in every generation to

Parashat Acharei Mot/Kedoshim

“remember when you came out of Egypt”. Thus Moshe impressed on the generation that had been born in the Wilderness and who had never personally lived in Egypt, that they too had come out of the abode of slavery (Dev 8:14). It was by the power of their faith that the experiential gap could be bridged and the corporate memory of Hashem’s deliverance could be secured in a new generation. But, he warned, those who did not observe the Pesach so as to remember and enter into the exodus experience would not only not benefit but they would be ‘karet’ - cut off. The Messianic Writings approaches the sacrifice of Yeshua with the same mindset. Just as with Pesach so too with Yeshua’s sacrifice, it is necessary to ‘buy into’ the idea and experience. Thus the Messianic Writings promise atonement for those who acknowledge Yeshua as THE Tzaddik and believe that his death atones for the sins of the unrighteous. Moreover, with regard to the Seder Rabbi Chaim Joseph David Azulai (1724-1806) states that “It is not enough to think about this [the Exodus] and to rejoice internally. Rather, one needs to ‘show’ this excitement physically so that everyone sitting in one’s house will recognize and know it.” Rabbi Azulai thus takes the idea of connecting by faith in the Pesach one step further. That faith, he implies, to be really real and thus effective, will exhibit itself in a real way that can be seen by others. So too the Messianic Writings adjure us not only to believe in the efficacy of Yeshua’s death but to take actions that will demonstrate to others that this is so. Only such faith, it is claimed, is a saving faith. Rav Shaul therefore states in Romans 10:4-10, “For the goal at which the Torah aims is the Messiah, who offers righteousness to everyone who trusts. For Moshe writes about the righteousness grounded in the Torah that the person who does these things will attain life through them. Moreover, the righteousness grounded in trusting says: “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend to heaven?’” — that is, to bring the Messiah down — or, “Who will descend into Sh’ol?” — that is, to bring the Messiah up from the dead. What, then, does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart.” — that is, the word about trust which we proclaim, namely, that if you acknowledge publicly with your mouth that Yeshua is Lord and trust in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be delivered. For with the heart one goes on trusting and thus continues toward righteousness, while with the mouth one keeps on making public acknowledgement and thus continues toward deliverance.” Moreover, Yaakov adds that, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no actions to prove it? Is such “faith” able to save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food, and someone says to him, “Shalom! Keep warm and eat hearty!” without giving him what he needs, what good does it do? Thus, faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions, is dead. But someone will say that you have faith and I have actions. Show me this faith of yours without the actions, and I will show you my faith by my actions! You believe that “God is one”? Good for you! The demons believe it too — the thought makes them shudder with fear! But, foolish fellow, do you want to be shown that such “faith” apart from actions is barren? Wasn’t Avraham avinu declared righteous because of actions when he offered up his son Yitz’chak on the altar? You see that his faith worked with his actions; by the actions the faith was made complete; and the passage of the Tanakh was fulfilled which says, “Avraham had faith in God, and it was credited to his account as

righteousness." He was even called God's friend. You see that a person is declared righteous because of actions and not because of faith alone."

To sum up. If the death of the righteous atones as the Torah tells us it does, then Yeshua as the sinless High Priest atones in greater magnitude than any before or after him. In fact, as the shaliach Kefa has written: "You should be aware that the ransom paid to free you from the worthless way of life which your fathers passed on to you did not consist of anything perishable like silver or gold; on the contrary, it was the costly bloody sacrificial death of the Messiah, as of a lamb without defect or spot. God knew him before the founding of the universe, but revealed him in the acharit-hayamim for your sakes. Through him you trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory; so that your trust and hope are in God." (1Pe 1:18-21). That saving trust, if it is real, will be exhibited in the life of the believer. One must not only buy into the Tzaddik's righteousness while one is alive in order to benefit, one must also make that faith known in both words and deeds. Professions of faith in Yeshua must therefore be matched by acts of kindness and compassion. For "The religious observance that God the Father considers pure and faultless is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being contaminated by the world."