

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093 718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263  
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

## Parashat Ahare Mot Part I Leviticus 16: The Opening Verses

### 1. Verse 1

The first verse of *Parashat Ahare Mot* states that Hashem spoke to Moshe “after the death of Aharon’s two sons, who, in approaching too closely before Hashem, died” (Lev. 16:1). In the next verse, Hashem instructs Moshe to inform Aharon that he is prohibited from entering the Holy of Holies at [just] any time and without appropriate preparations. The reference to Nadab and Abihu’s deaths just before this command may shed light on their transgression, as Ibn Ezra points out (that they entered the Holy of Holies with their incense). But exactly what purpose does this reference serve in the present context?

Rashi and Ibn Ezra understood it to mean that G-d implied to Moshe to use that tragedy as a motivational element when instructing Aharon regarding entering the Holy of Holies. Moshe is to thereby stress to Aharon that violation may result in death, as was the case with his sons. This explanation is not convincing. First, the Nadab and Abihu reference is not in the message itself but in its narrative introduction, serving as a chronological note. In addition, it is conceptually difficult to interpret G-d’s instructions as containing such an indelicacy. Aharon can never forget the tragedy that befell his sons, so merely informing him of the potential consequence of death would automatically include the motivational force of his sons’ deaths without being distasteful.

The Ramban interpreted the reference to mean that Hashem gave this legislation earlier, at the first opportunity after the tragic event, prior to the Chapters 11-15 legislation. It was placed in its present location because that is where it actually belonged in the unfolding of the Mishkan program and where it would have been transmitted had the unanticipated

tragedy not occurred, after the chapters dealing with bodily impurities. The deaths had made it appropriate to specially warn Aharon as soon as possible regarding approaching the Holy of Holies.

This interpretation is also problematic. As a chronological reference, only the words “After the death of Aharon’s two sons” would be needed – why mention the reason they died? The verse appears to be transmitting more than chronological information. In addition, following the Nadab and Abihu episode there is a cautionary passage recorded in chapter 10 – the prohibition for priests to indulge in intoxicating beverages before cultic service – apparently placed there because of its connection to their transgression. And, indeed, that passage is addressed directly to Aharon. Our passage is addressed to Moshe, instructing him to inform Aharon. The differing modes of communication seem to indicate that the two messages were not transmitted at the same time.

Perhaps the reference indicates that the law that follows was established because of that occurrence. “That he may not enter at [just] any time to the Holy of Holies” seems to imply that previously he was permitted to enter whenever he felt the need to do so, acting upon his personal responsibility and his own judgment as to preparedness. He is now being provided regulations concerning preparedness prompted by what occurred. Perhaps Nadab and Abihu did not die merely because they entered the inner sanctum but because they entered improperly, possibly intoxicated.

The clause “at [just] any time” seems to imply that Aharon remained permitted to enter the Holy of Holies “sometimes,” of course with the appropriate preparations, not only on Yom Kippur. Actually, Yom

Kippur is not mentioned in our context until verse 29. Leviticus Rabbah (21:7) does indeed posit that Aharon was permitted to enter when he felt the need to do so, presumably in a situation of national urgency, provided it was with the proper preparations. It also posits that Moshe was permitted to enter – and as a non-priest he did not perform the preparations Aharon did – because entering for prophecy was different. One may wonder whether later prophets were permitted to enter the Holy of Holies when in search of prophetic inspiration.

## 2. Verse 2

The prohibition to enter the Holy of Holies “at [just] any time” is followed by the explanation: כִּי בְעֵנָן אֲרָאָהּ עַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת (v. 2). How is this clause to be translated? Many classical commentators interpret it to mean that a cloud of G-d’s glory resided upon the *kaporet* (the covering of the ark) in the Holy of Holies, similar to the cloud that hovered above the Tabernacle. אֲרָאָהּ is understood as “I appear,” using the future tense for the ongoing present. Aharon is not to enter at just any time because the Divine Presence is described as abiding in the cloud upon the *kaporet*. Presumably, the cloud is in a more concentrated form than it is in its public appearance above the Tabernacle.

**Rashi:** For I always appear there in my pillar of cloud and since the revelation of My Divine presence is there he should be careful not to come there frequently.

**Rashbam:** I always appear upon the *kaporet* through a pillar of cloud, as stated, “and I will speak with you from above the *kaporet* between the cherubim” (Ex. 25:22), so that if the *kohen* peers [at it] he will die. Therefore, G-d commanded that when the *kohen* enters on Yom Kippur he should perform the incense service to darken the chamber (v. 13).

**Ibn Ezra** citing others: Because I dwell in the cloud upon the *kaporet*, similar to [Solomon’s declaration], “Hashem has chosen to dwell in the thick cloud” (1 Kings 8:12).

The Talmudic Sages, however, followed by Ibn Ezra expressing his personal view, understood the cloud of this phrase to refer to the incense cloud Aharon was instructed to raise when entering the Holy of Holies

(anticipating verse 13). They take the statement as prescribing the necessary procedure before the Divine presence becomes manifest to Aharon. The passage thus describes not the “why” he should not enter at just any time, but “how” he should enter when he does.

A famous Pharisee-Sadducee dispute concerned this verse. Neither group interpreted it as stating that a cloud of glory was present in the Holy of Holies. The Sadducees cited it as proof that the high priest is to enter the Holy of Holies with an incense cloud that he had already created in the outer chamber. The Pharisees responded that the meaning of this verse is qualified by verse 13 that instructs the high priest to place the incense on the coals “in Hashem’s presence,” which they take to mean in the Holy of Holies. He thus enters before raising the incense cloud. Verse 2, which implies that the high priest should not enter without a cloud, is to be explained in a different manner. “*Ma`ale `ashan*” – a smoke-raising element – was placed on the coals just prior to entering the Holy of Holies, so that the high priest entered with a smoke cloud already rising from the coals (BT *Yoma* 53a).

That the Pharisees did not rebut the Sadducees by proffering the “cloud of glory” interpretation for verse 2 indicates that they did not consider that interpretation to be the actual meaning of Scripture. Rashi, after interpreting the verse according to what he considered *peshat* as quoted above, cited the incense-cloud explanation as a midrash, but he did not mention the smoke-cloud. Rashbam also considers the incense cloud raised in the Holy of Holies as adequate to be a screen. On this point Ibn Ezra is apparently of the same opinion. This possibly is the *peshat* of verse 2 without resorting to the “cloud of glory” or smoke-cloud explanations.

## 3. Further Analysis of Verse 2

We will further examine this issue, citing and commenting upon the views of two modern scholars, one on each side of the controversy.

Baruch Levine (JPS Lev. Commentary, p. 101) considers the cloud of glory interpretation preferable. In his view, the key clause – כִּי בְעֵנָן אֲרָאָהּ עַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת –

appears to provide the *reason* for the preceding statement in the verse restricting Aharon's entry; it explains why he must be careful that he not die. By stating, "for I appear in the cloud," Hashem is identifying His presence as the cause for restricted entry, not merely announcing that He chooses to appear when the incense-cloud is raised, as it would mean according to the opposing view. Further, the purpose of the incense cloud of verse 13 is to protect the high priest when coming into G-d's immediate presence whereas in verse two the cloud appears to shield G-d, so to speak.

However, it is not self-evident that our verse is stating the reason for restricted entry to the most holy chamber; an explicit reason for such a regulation may not be required. It is well understood from the Mishkan structure and its function that Hashem's presence is represented to be focused in the Holy of Holies, in the area above the *kaporet*, where He "meets" Moshe to speak to him (Ex. 25:22; 30:6; Num. 7:89). It is taken for granted that one who approaches that area must take great care not to misstep. It is especially unnecessary here to state why entry is restricted following the Nadab and Abihu reference in the introductory verse. It is adequate to explain the proper procedures by which to proceed when approaching the most holy area.

Furthermore, if the verse was interested in highlighting the fact that G-d's presence is concentrated in that area, the critical element that should have been articulated is the representation of His "dwelling" in that area. That He is "seen" there is not as meaningful as a reference to His dwelling there. A word such as "*eshkon*" would be called for, consistent with other passages. "Am seen" has its own connotation and is not elsewhere used in the sense of "dwell." Sforno anticipated an aspect of this question. He explains that as the area above the *kaporet* is the earthly source from which prophecy emanates, אֲרָאָה עַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת refers to Hashem appearing to the prophets when they receive prophecy, through the generations, not His being there in a state of able to "be seen."

There appears to be another difficulty with the "cloud of glory" interpretation. In the other descriptions of Hashem's cloud (עָנָן) in conjunction with the Tabernacle, it does not mention the cloud as being

"in" the sanctuary. At the end of Exodus, the text carefully differentiates between the cloud that covered the Tent of Meeting and His glory that filled the Tabernacle (וַיִּכְבֹּד ה' מְלֵא אֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן, Ex. 40:34). The next verse there asserts that Moshe was not able to enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud resided upon it and, again, that Hashem's glory filled the Tabernacle, וַיִּכְבֹּד ה' מְלֵא אֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן. On the day of dedication, it speaks about His glory (Lev. 9:6, 23). The cloud and His כְּבוֹד do not appear to be synonymous; thus, we cannot interpret with any confidence the cloud of our verse 2 as the manifestation of Hashem's glory inside the Tabernacle.

Jacob Milgrom (AB Lev. Commentary, p. 1015) considers the incense-cloud interpretation preferable for two reasons. First, the cloud of glory in its other manifestations – primarily hovering above the Tabernacle – was visible to the people on a regular basis, indeed, it was specifically intended for being viewed. It is thus clear that those that saw it did not die. On the sanctuary dedication day the people even witnessed Hashem's glory in the sanctuary and nothing happened to them (Lev. 9:23-24). Since there is no statement differentiating the supposed cloud of glory in the Holy of Holies from the other cloud manifestations, why should G-d now state that a threat of death is attached to the cloud? Second, immediately following the verse 2 citation of the cloud is a listing of items and procedures the high priest requires in fulfilling his preparatory rites so an incense cloud screen should be understood as first on the list.

Neither proof is compelling. His first point assumes that "lest he die" upon viewing the imputed cloud of the Divine presence means that one would automatically die. However, it may mean that if one enters casually, lacking proper preparation, he would possibly be disrespectful in some way, an act that would incur the death penalty since it would be directly in the presence of Hashem's glory. More important, if verse 2 refers to a cloud of glory that abided in the Holy of Holies representing the Divine presence, this might be different from the cloud above the Tabernacle and all other manifestations of Divine glory. The latter are signs of His presence and a signal to the nation; they do not represent His specific dwelling in His place. Hence, the fact that viewing the

cloud above the Tabernacle does not bring death may not be a relevant consideration for defining the nature of the cloud inside the Holy of Holies.

Regarding Milgrom's second point, it may be countered with the following argument. Verse 3 begins with, "With the following shall Aharon come forth to the Holy," an introduction to the items and procedures needed for the preparatory rites. Since the verse 2 cloud comes beforehand it appears not to be part of that list of preparations and thus not referring to the incense-cloud. However, in Milgrom's defense, it may be that the incense-cloud is a preparation but is mentioned before the official inventory of required items begins and separate from it because it is more than just another condition. It is a highlight of the

ritual service that brings about the goal of G-d manifesting His presence.

One wonders if any support may be adduced from the similarity of the verse 2 formulation with that of verse 13. Verse 2 states that Aharon should not enter at just any time beyond the curtain to the presence of "the *kaporet* that is upon the Ark that he not die." Verse 13 relates that the incense-cloud should cover "the *kaporet* that is upon the Testimony (a synonym of the Ark) that he not die." Does the fact that the latter expresses the idea that the incense-cloud protects against the threat of death with basically the same phraseology as employed in the earlier statement shed any light on this matter? This subject requires further work.

©2008 Sephardic Institute