

SICHA SUMMARY

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 28

Masei

The Context:

Seven days prior to Yom Kippur, the High Priest was sequestered in a chamber in the Beit Hamikdash where he would undergo a week of preparation for that auspicious day.

This chamber appears in two Mishnaic tractates, but is given a different name in each. Tractate Middot refers to the High Priest's room as the "Wooden Chamber," apparently because of its wooden construction. (Midos, 5:4) Being that exposed wood was forbidden in the Temple, the chamber's walls were coated with plaster.

Tractate Yoma, an exhaustive account of Yom Kippur and its sacrificial rites, refers to the chamber as "the Parhedrin Chamber." (Yoma, 2a)

Parhedrin were officers of the King who served one-year terms. Somewhere within the first one-hundred years of the Second Beit Hamikdash, the office of the High Priest was corrupted. Priests paid bribes to earn

the position. But the sanctity of the Beit Hamikdash would not tolerate these faux-leaders: rarely did a High Priest of that period live out the year. He died by divine retribution. And so, the chamber that housed the High Priest during this era of brief tenures became known as the "Parhedrin Chamber," reminiscent of those royal officers who were annually replaced. (Yoma 8b, Rashi ad loc.)

An Ancient Position

Rabbi Levi Yitzchok, the Rebbe's father, elaborates on the mystical significance of the chamber's two names and their relevance to the High Priesthood.

The Priesthood is an office of kindness. Aharon, the first High Priest, was a paragon of love and acceptance who "loved and pursued peace." Indeed, the law forbids the priest who harbors hate of another in his heart to bestow the Priestly blessing to the congregation.¹ A priest who cannot love cannot serve.

The Torah links kindness with longevity: "Length of days is in its right hand." The

¹ *Shulchan Aruch Admor Hazaken, Orech Chaim*, 128:19.

right hand is synonymous with kindness. Long life, permanence, immutability are qualities that emanate from kindness, for it is persistent and unending.

The kindness that defines the priest thus identifies him as the symbol of long life as well—as illustrated in the law of the inadvertent killer. In Biblical Israel, one who killed accidentally found asylum from vengeful relatives of the deceased in one of six designated cities of refuge. If the law found him innocent of intentional murder, he was escorted to one of these towns where he would remain until the death of the High Priest. Why was his isolation contingent on the life of the High Priest? In the words of the Midrash: “It is not proper for one who shortens the days of men to precede one who lengthens the days of men.”² The inadvertent killer is the antithesis of the High Priest. He severs, the priest prolongs.

Translated into the realm of divine service, kindness is the durable passion of the righteous whose ascent to G-d is uninterrupted and consistent.

Wooden Comforts

When the prophet searches for a metaphor for the indestructibility of the Jewish people he settles on a tree: “For like the days of a tree are the days of My people.”³ A tree’s longevity represents the sturdy reliability of kindness, and the tranquil progress of the righteous.

The chamber designated for the High Priest reflects his role. So his room is made of wood, and is fittingly called the “Wooden Chamber.”

Once the Priesthood became corrupted and the appointees no longer embodied the righteousness alluded to in the “wooden chamber,” the name became “Parhedrin,” reflecting their brief tenures.

The Question:

During the era of the righteous High Priests, why was the wood of the chamber concealed if wood was the best expression of the Priest’s righteousness? Furthermore, even in the era of the corrupt High Priests, there were exceptions, leaders who enjoyed longevity. How would the Parhedrin name be appropriate for them?

The Explanation:

The single objective of Yom Kippur is to repent, and so to earn God’s pardon.

A penitent is the master of reinvention. His approach to God has been thwarted by inner and outer obstructions. To move forward he cannot define himself by the mistakes of the past, but must reimagine himself as the ideal he wishes to become. As Maimonides puts it, the penitent is one who declares: “I am no longer the same person who did those actions.”⁴

Repentance is thus an act of holy deviance. While the righteous move in steady

² *Yalkut Shimoni*, Numbers, §788.

³ Isaiah, 65:22.

⁴ *Rambam*, *Hilchot Teshuva*, 2:4. For further elaboration on the transformative effect of repentance see, *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 34, pp. 63-65.

progress, building upon yesterday's achievements, the penitent abandons old designs and fashions a new persona. Righteousness, it was said, is longevity, the straight line of ascent. Repentance, then, is brevity, a dramatic statement of newness.

Recall the Parhedrin officers. There is no tenure, no repetition. Their office is a revolving door of constant freshness. In the name of the Parhedrin Chamber this second role of the High Priest—to lead his people in repentance—is given voice. Even if the High Priests of that era were spiritually unfit and therefore met early death in securing the position, this paradoxically reflects their desire for closeness with G-d, even at the ultimate cost. Thus, the Parhedrin chamber is not just pejorative, it alludes to the task of the High Priest to guide themselves and their people in repentance.

Throughout the days of the First Temple and the early years of the Second, the nation maintained a stable commitment to God.

The High Priest was a consummate righteous man. His room was then identified as the Wooden Chamber, for that was his preoccupation. However, because the objective of Yom Kippur is repentance, the wood of the chamber was always concealed, revealing that the focus of the High Priest was to focus on the people's return to G-d, not on their tree-like longevity.

The Parhedrin Chamber was introduced to the lexicon in the Second Temple era, when the spiritual stature of the nation declined. In those years, repentance was not the righteous individual's dissatisfaction with the body's limitations, it was the urgent need to completely remodel the people's priorities and spiritual life. The seemingly derogatory appellation of Parhedrin, alluding to the literal deaths of decadent High Priests— thus alludes to a deeper spiritual drama—the hope of constant change.
