

ALSO BY ARTHUR GREEN

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Spiritual
Teachings
from
around

the Maggid's Table

Volume
1

Genesis • Exodus • Leviticus

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with Ebn Leader, Ariel Evan Mayse
and Or N. Rose

For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds

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- OR: That's a sin that is a public act by definition; you therefore have to atone for it publicly as well. The interplay between the public and private realms is very interesting in these teachings. The two shorter texts both push toward inwardness and privacy, so typical of Hasidic readings. But the *No'am Elimelekh* here understands that public sins demand public restitution.
- EL: Hasidism itself is worth looking at through the lens of public and private devotion. Even though the teachings are so much about inwardness and one's very personal relationship to God, Hasidism turned into a very public movement, filled with loud and visible displays of piety.
- AM: That may be because of the importance lent to community; things have to be visible to be shared in community.
- OR: Let's not forget that the *tsaddik* is central to this text. To atone publicly means doing so in the *tsaddik's* presence; a place where evil cannot dwell.
- EL: Yes, but why can't evil dwell there? Because the *tsaddik*, by his very presence, demands absolute honesty of you. You can't hide anything in his presence. The *tsaddik* by force of example demands that you be your best and fullest self.
- AM: Who does that in our world? Sometimes it's a close friend, or a circle of close friendship, in whose presence you can be nothing but completely honest. That element is there in Hasidism as well.
- OR: But let's not dismiss the *tsaddik* model too quickly. There can be experiences in the presence of a great soul, even in very public settings, that have a deep and transforming effect on those who are present.
- EL: I agree. We are too quick to debunk such figures in our age. Even if we have seen that in private they are less than perfect beings, we still can allow ourselves to be moved and changed by the power of their public presence. Many of us know moments like that. We know also that we can and must help create such moments for others, even though we ourselves are far less than perfect.



אהרני מרת

Aharey Mot

ME'OR 'EYNAYIM

Y-H-W-H said to Moses, following the death of Aaron's two sons when they approached Y-H-W-H and died. Y-H-W-H said to Moses: "Speak to your brother Aaron, and let him not come at all times into the holy, inside the curtain, facing the atonement-cover that is before the ark, and let him not die. With this shall Aaron enter the holy..."

(LEV. 16:1-3)

... Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu, in their intense devotion and righteousness, attained fulfillment, giving themselves over to death. They became so wondrously attached to God that their souls just remained there, cleaving to the divine light, a channel of energy rising upward. Their souls departed into the One! This is the meaning of **when they approached Y-H-W-H and died**. They drew so near, with so much attachment and longing, that their souls became hidden, cleaving to that which is above.

But really the person who serves in this way and is joined to God in this mysterious way is able to draw forth divine blessing, bringing it down from above while remaining alive. "You who cleave to Y-H-W-H your God are fully alive this day" (Deut. 4:4)! Your attachment to Y-H-W-H has made you more alive! That is God's will as the Giver of life.

But in them there was some sin that prevented this. Some of our sages said they were intoxicated; others said they taught a law in the presence

of Moses their teacher (b. 'Eruvin 63a; *Va-Yikra Rabbah* 12:5). Because of this, the downward flow of blessing in the form of returning light was blocked and their souls remained attached there, flowing upward and not returning.

That is why Aaron is now warned not to **come at all times into the holy**. It means to say that all the devotion of the *tsaddik* should be of this sort, handing over their souls as a flow of energy from below. One cannot do this **at all times**. He should indeed come into the holy **with this**, the devotion shown by his sons. But **let him not die**: he should rather add to the life-flow of blessing and holiness pouring forth upon him.



Intense devotion and attachment to God are meant to enhance the gift of life, not to negate it. The *tsaddik's* real priestly work is to bring God's presence and blessing into this world. Only purity of intention and deed allows one to become such a channel.

NO'AM ELIMELEKH

With this shall Aaron enter the sanctuary: with a bull of the herd as a sin-offering and a ram as a rising-offering. He shall wear a holy tunic of linen and linen pants upon his flesh; he shall gird himself with a linen sash and don a linen turban. These are holy garments; he should wash his body with water and put them on.

(LEV. 16:3-4)

These verses begin to discuss the rung of an accomplished *tsaddik*. Aaron refers to a great *tsaddik*, one who [wants to] **enter the sanctuary**—the highest realm of holiness.

A **bull** refers to *dinim*, limitations or boundaries, while **of the herd** [*ben bakar*] alludes to outpouring love as in [the symbol of] morning (*boker*). This is the power of boundaries within love; you should cultivate fear of God (*din*) that derives from love.

As a **sin-offering** means that you should always reflect upon your actions, search for sin and never think that you have accomplished all that is required of you. You should humble yourself in great submission.

However, a **ram as a rising-offering** refers to intercessory prayer that rises to the heights. Regarding prayer you should be strong as a ram and not abstain from praying for any need. Never say, "Who am I to pray for such matters?" Pray for all things, great and small.

He shall wear a holy tunic of linen means you sanctify your body with such great holiness that it becomes a garment of light (*or*—light/skin) This [the process of becoming a *tsaddik*] is all about creating garments for yourself.

And linen pants upon his flesh, for the pants atone for sexual sins (b. Zevahim 88b). They should always be upon his flesh "to cover the physical nakedness" (Ex. 28:42): overcome your corporeal desires so that they do not rise up in your heart at all.

He shall gird himself with a linen sash—Gird yourself like a hero! You can always do more!

And don a linen turban, which atones for arrogance (b. Zevahim 88b). You must shatter the power of arrogance and sanctify yourself to the extent that you can incorporate aspects of pride into the holy work and make pride itself a holy covering for your head.

These are holy garments—everything. Make all things part of your holy work and they will all be holy garments.



Training instructions for the aspiring *tsaddik*. At the core of all is the divine presence. All of your spiritual work, including both humility and assertiveness, overcoming your tendencies and embracing them together create a vessel/garment through which God can be accessed and made manifest in the world.

TOREY ZAHAV (FROM TSAV)

No person shall be in the Tent of Meeting when he comes in to atone for the holy, until he goes out. He shall make atonement for himself and his household....

(LEV. 16:17)

... In the book *Duties of the Hearts* (Bahya ibn Paqquda; eleventh century) we are told that a person should regularly practice lone meditation, separate from other people. You should reach the state that even when surrounded

by a thousand people, you are able to maintain your attachment to God. Nothing should divide you or separate you from that attachment (*Sha'ar Heshbon ha-Nefesh* 3).

Thus I interpret our verse.... We know that before praying you should be stripped of your corporeal self. Your thought should cleave to the exaltedness of God, as though you were standing in the upper worlds among angels, rather than surrounded by people. When you forget that you are among people, you are able to pray with great intensity, without any false motives. This is **No person shall be in the Tent of Meeting**. That refers to the synagogue or house of study, the place where people gather to pray. **No person shall be there in your thought**; you should be so stripped of physical selfhood that you forget you are standing among people. As you **come in to atone for the holy**: the time of prayer, which takes the place of atoning sacrifices. **Until he goes out**: from the beginning to the end of prayer. **He shall make atonement for himself and his household**: prayer of this sort is surely pure.

Thus I also interpreted the sages' saying "In a place where there is no man, try to be a man" (m. Avot 2:5). When you stand in that place of *teshuvah*, strive to be more than an ordinary man; enter the upper realms, where there is no other person. Before you perform a *mitsvah*, set your mind to be attached above, as though there were no person present....



Prayer is an intensely private and intimate act, even when undertaken in public. Preserving this island of inward intensity in the public setting is a delicate task. Indeed, training in lone meditation is a valuable tool in acquiring it. The Hasidic style of worship emerges from an attempt to foster this inner "space."

YOSHER DIVREY EMET (#10)

You shall not reveal the nakedness of your sister,
your father's daughter, whether born at home or
born outside.

(LEV. 18:9)

This verse is referring to shaming or disgracing Torah, who is called **your sister**, as in the verse "Say to wisdom: You are my sister" (Prov. 7:4). **Your**

father's daughter: this refers to the blessed Holy One. **Born at home** means the hidden Torah; **born outside** refers to revealed teachings. Of both we are told not to **reveal their nakedness**, not to shame them by studying them not for their own sake. [We must study only] for the sake of God's name, in love.

I heard from the mouth of that holy man Dov Baer [of Mezritch], on the Sabbath I spent there during his lifetime, his reply to a question someone asked about a passage in the Midrash. That text compared a student of Torah to a pearl-encrusted clapper inside a golden bell (*Va-Yikra Rabbah* 27:1). He said that this refers to those who study Torah truly for her own sake, in order to be attached to God. Their thoughts are only of God. When Scripture says, "May this book of teaching never depart from your mouth; contemplate it day and night" (Josh. 1:8), the text really meant to "contemplate *Him* day and night"; your thoughts should be of God. The divine presence is concentrated right there in the spirit-breath of Torah as it comes forth from a person's pure mouth. If you can purify both your mouth and heart, you may become a throne for God. So attachment to God is the innermost part [of this act of study]; the teachings one learns are the external form in which this devotion is garbed. That is a proper understanding. This is not true if your desire and love are for anything other than God—if you are still attached to temporal matters or seek even some bit of self-glorification. Then your innermost thought is of that glory, and your learning surrounds that thought. Woe to the disgracing of Torah, making her into a garment for your own foolish thoughts that she has to cover up!

That is why the Midrash compared the student of Torah to a golden bell. The bell is the external section, while the clapper is within it and makes the sound. "Woven gold is her garment," but "the full glory of the king's daughter lies within" (Ps. 45:14). That glory consists of awe before God and the indwelling presence of *shekhinah*, within the heart of every Jew. The "woven gold" is the letters of Torah, in which she is dressed. But the pearl-studded clapper (*'anvil*) is our attachment to God, which is possible only where there is true humility (*'anavah*)....



There is a bilingual play on words hidden in the end of this teaching. R. Meshulam Feibush is suggesting that the unusual noun *'anvil*, used for "clapper," means that the true sage needs to be an *'anav*!, a humble little guy.... The complete homiletical transposition of a verse like this

one, dealing with incest prohibition, to an entirely different realm is quite frequently found in the Hasidic sources.

Aharey Mot Round Two

- EL: Isn't it interesting to see Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu presented as essentially positive models! That's what the *Me'or'Eynayim* is doing.
- OR: He doesn't even note what their sin is. Usually they are viewed primarily as sinners.
- EL: He's not interested in their sin! His goal is total purification of the self, and they look like people who were attempting that.
- OR: That's the ideal of *devekut*. Approach the fire as closely as you can; be willing to give up your life for that intensity of devotion. But, at the same time, try to come back.
- EL: Of course. This is Hasidism; the goal is always to come back, bring some holiness down to this world, so it can be lifted up.
- AG: Think of this as the Yom Kippur experience, because it is the Torah reading for that day. That is Yom Kippur—going all the way, losing the self in the intensity of cleansing prayer—but then coming back, returning to the world, getting to work building your *sukkah* once the day is over.
- OR: The *Torey Zahav* also wants us to be able to achieve that *devekut* right in the midst of a sea of people. I find that very moving as a description of religious community.
- EL: That's what *tefillah be-tsibbur*, communal prayer (don't call it "public" prayer!), is supposed to provide: a group and setting that support you in your intense and essentially private inward journey. But how rare it is to find a *tsibbur* like that in which to pray! I long for that kind of community.
- OR: But isn't there something missing in that? What about dialogue with others in the community? What about mutual caring for one another?
- AG: Yes, of course those are part of it. They are what make the support for one's inner life possible.
- EL: Maybe we worry too much about togetherness. We pay too much attention to one another's needs, we're too careful never to offend.

Leave it behind! Remember what religious community is really there to do.

- AG: But is the horizontal there just for the sake of the vertical? Aren't *mitsvot beyn adam le-havero*, between person and person, a value unto themselves, not just a stepping-stone to *devekut*?
- AM: This conversation is hard for us moderns. In the post-Freudian age we are always too busy watching ourselves. We stand too much on the sidelines, being observers. The challenge to us is to walk through the gate, to enter with our whole selves. That's why Nadav and Avihu look so attractive.

