

Kohen vs. King: Two Models of Leadership

Parashat Shemini, Leviticus, Chapters 9-11 | March 24, 2022

This week, we discuss the philosopher Isaiah Berlin—who gave us an important essay about excellence in political leadership, one which sheds fascinating light on an ancient ritual in Leviticus.

We first turn to an offering, or *korban*, described in Leviticus 4 as the “*chatat*.” While “sin offering” is the usual rendering of this word in English, Professor Jacob Milgrom has, I believe convincingly, made the case that the true translation is “purification offering.” Various actions and events in ancient Israel require purification: sin sometimes happens to be one of them. A *chatat* is offered after certain forms of accidental sin. As Milgrom argues, what is being reinforced here is the Israelite connection to the Sanctuary. When we sin, the Temple or Tabernacle is itself affected and needs to be purified. Thus, just as we saw how the blood of the Paschal Lamb was applied to Israelite doorways, here, the blood of the *chatat* is applied to various parts of the Temple or Tabernacle in purificatory rituals.

Milgrom offers an interesting literary allusion to the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. There, a man by the name of Dorian is given youth for all eternity, and the evil acts he commits cannot be seen as impacting his visage. But nevertheless, a portrait of him grows ever uglier by the day. Similarly, an Israelite who sins may seem physically unaffected, but the impact of his misdeeds is soaked up by the Sanctuary itself until purification is applied there.

Interestingly, the sins of different figures impact the Sanctuary in different ways. Let us see how this is so. Leviticus 4:27:

And if any one of the people sin through error, in doing any of the things which the Lord commanded not to be done, and be guilty.

Here, a *chatat* is brought and the blood of the offering

is applied to the horns adorning the altar in the outer courtyard of the Tabernacle. Leviticus 4:30:

And the priest shall take of the blood thereof with his finger, and put it out in the horns of the altar of the burnt offering...

When, however, the High Priest himself sins, what is required is purification not of the altar and the outer courtyard, but of the inner sanctuary:

And the priest shall dip his finger in the blood, and sprinkle the blood seven times before the Lord, in front of the curtain of the Holy. (Leviticus 4:6)

This means that the priest stands before and purifies the area of the curtain that hangs before the Ark. The sin of the High Priest, it would seem, even more profoundly impacts the sacred sphere. Purification of the inner sanctum is also required when,

The whole congregation of Israel should err... (Leviticus 4:13)

As the Talmud explains, this refers to a mistake in legal interpretation by the Sanhedrin, the supreme Torah court in Israel, whose decision bring about sin on behalf of the people. Thus, the High Priest and the Sanhedrin have greater power than the individual to pollute the Temple.

What about a king? Beginning in verse 22, Leviticus addresses the sin of the *nasi*, the political leader. And here, while the animal offered is unique, the purification is equivalent to that of any other individual. The blood is applied not within the sacred anctuary, but on the outer altar, as with any other individual Israelite.

The point appears to be that cultic leaders such as the

High Priest, and religious leaders, like the Sanhedrin, are bound up with the Sanctuary in a unique way. That priests are profoundly linked to the Holy, that both their sins and souls are connected to it, can be seen from the tragic tale of the Tabernacle's inauguration. As Leviticus further describes in chapters eight, nine, and ten, Moses prepares his brother and his nephews, Aaron and his sons, to serve as priests in the Tabernacle. As their inauguration occurs, the glory of God occupies the Temple. Fire from the Almighty issues forth, and then tragedy takes place:

And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his fire pan, and put fire therein, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. (Leviticus 10:1)

Two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, engage in what is seemingly some sort of unallowed incense, which is considered a breach, and the act results in their death. Incense provides for a mystical moment within the Holy. And while the action of these priests was a violation, it is clear that what drove them was closeness to the Divine rather than total rebellion against Him. And this is the clear message behind God's own description of their deaths:

Then Moses said unto Aaron, This is what the Lord spoke, saying through them that are close to me, I will be sanctified... (Leviticus 10:3)

The priests, God says, are those nearest to Me. And so the priests, and especially the High Priest, are linked to the inner sanctum, and a sin of the anointed priest impacts the inner sanctum, and the purification must therefore take place within the Holy itself.

The same can be said for sins of the Sanhedrin, which according to Jewish tradition would sit within the Temple inspired by the Divine presence to interpret Jewish law. A king, less linked to the Sanctuary, performs his purification act in the outer courtyard, because he is not linked to the inner sanctum in the same way. His life is bound to the polity, to the larger world.

But to this, Leviticus seems to add another striking point: the leader's engagement with the world at large makes his sin more likely, and that this is the price paid for political leadership, though this does not make political leadership any less vital.

Here is how the sin of the High Priest is described:

If the anointed priest shall sin... (Leviticus 4:3)

The verse begins with the Hebrew word "*im*," "if." But when it comes to a political leader sinning, then another word is utilized:

When a leader shall sin... (Leviticus 4:22)

"When" replaces "if." When it comes to the leader of the polis, sin seems almost likely, if not inevitable. Why might this be so?

One of Isaiah Berlin's most important essays is titled "On Political Judgments," in which Berlin notes that while we tend to speak about political science as if affairs of state obey universal rules, the truth is that great leaders often decide what to do by drawing on a strength within themselves. As Berlin puts it, political judgment is a "capacity, in the first place, for synthesis rather than analysis..."

Berlin compares knowledge in leadership to the way that conductors know their orchestras, rather than to the way mathematicians know numbers. Political leadership for Berlin reveals the inner art, instinct, and individuality of those who lead. The corollary of this, however, is that error might also be assured. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in a wonderful essay, draws on Isaiah Berlin's insights in making this point:

It is possible that a High Priest, the Supreme Court or an individual may err. But in the case of a leader, it is probable or even certain. Leaders make mistakes. It is unavoidable, the occupational hazard of their role. Talking about the sin of a *Nasi*, the Torah uses the word "when," not "if."

...The reason leaders—as opposed to Judges and Priests—cannot avoid making mistakes is that there is no textbook that infallibly teaches you how to lead. Priests and Judges follow laws. For leadership there are no laws because every situation is unique. As Isaiah Berlin put it in his essay, ‘Political Judgement,’ in the realm of political action, there are few laws and what is needed instead is skill in reading a situation. Successful statesmen “grasp the unique combination of characteristics that constitute this particular situation – this and no other.”

And Rabbi Sacks further adds that the point here is that, “In politics it is easy to get it wrong, hard to get it right.”

To this we might add another point. The reason why political leadership is so difficult, and why Leviticus seems to expect errors from a king, is that for Judaism, the leader must always join ideal and real. It was Isaiah Berlin, in another even more famous essay, who divided leaders into two categories—foxes and hedgehogs—in the spirit of a Greek saying, “The fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one big thing.” Hedgehogs, as Berlin puts it, “relate everything to a single central vision,” whereas foxes respond differently to diverse situations. But as John Lewis Gaddis notes in his book *On Grand Strategy*, the essay’s thesis is incorrect, because the truth is that great statesmen are simultaneously hedgehogs and foxes. Like foxes, they innovate in the face of the uniqueness of the situation, but they also never lose sight of a central principle in their life. This combination requires incredibly difficult decisions that may prove sometimes to be entirely erroneous with the hindsight of history.

Rabbi Sacks himself writes further as follows:

There are no universal rules, there is no failsafe textbook, for leadership. Every situation is different and each age brings its own challenges. A ruler, in the best interests of their people, may sometimes have to take decisions that a

conscientious individual would shrink from doing in private life. They may have to decide to wage a war, knowing that some will die. They may have to levy taxes, knowing that this will leave some impoverished. Only after the event will the leader know whether the decision was justified, and it may depend on factors beyond their control.

The Jewish approach to leadership is thus an unusual combination of realism and idealism—realism in its acknowledgement that leaders inevitably make mistakes, idealism in its constant subordination of politics to ethics, power to responsibility, pragmatism to the demands of conscience. What matters is not that leaders never get it wrong—that is inevitable, given the nature of leadership—but that they are always exposed to prophetic critique and that they constantly study Torah to remind themselves of transcendent standards and ultimate aims. The most important thing from a Torah perspective is that a leader is sufficiently honest to admit their mistakes. Hence the significance of the sin offering.

The nature of political leadership was captured in one scene in the movie *Lincoln*, where the president refers to lessons that he learned while working as a land surveyor. It is a scene which for John Lewis Gaddis captures the true combination of hedgehog and fox. Lincoln says, and I paraphrase the quote slightly,

A compass will point you true north from where you’re standing, but it’s got no advice about the swamps and deserts and chasms that you’ll encounter along the way. If in pursuit of your destination you plunge ahead, heedless of obstacles, and achieve nothing more than to sink in a swamp, then what’s the use of knowing true north?

For both *kohen* and king, the compass for the Jewish leader is the Torah. It points true north. But each form of leadership has its unique challenges, and the descriptions of priest and king in Leviticus allow us to better appreciate what Jewish leadership is all about.

Discussion Questions:

1. If our description of the king tells us of the challenges of kingship, what might the deaths of Nadab and Abihu teach us about the temptations involved in spiritual leadership?
2. In Judaism, the roles of priest and king are strongly separated—with the descendants of Levi serving as religious leaders and the descendants of Judah serving as political leaders. Given what Rabbi Soloveichik highlights about the nature of statesmanship, why might this be?