



Two Wounds

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Yom Kippur, depending on who tells its story, is animated by one of two central wounds.

The first, in the story Sefer Shemot tells, is the wound of the *heit ha-egel* (sin of the golden calf), the Jewish people's foundational sin against God:

מדרש תנחומא תרומה ח

ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם (שמות כה, כח). אימתי נאמרה למשה הפרשה הזו של משכן, ביום הכפורים עצמו... אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: יבא זהב שבמשכן ויכפר על זהב שנעשה בו את העגל, שכתוב בו: ויתפרקו כל העם את נזמי הזהב וגו' (שמות לב, ג). ולכן מתכפרין בזהב, וזאת התרומה אשר תקחו מאתם זהב. אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: כי אעלה ארכה לך וממכותיך ארפאך (ירמיה ל, יז).

Midrash Tanhuma, Terumah 8

“Make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them” (Shemot 25:8). On which day did He relate to Moshe the portion relating to the Temple? It was on Yom Kippur.... The Holy Blessed One declared: Let gold be placed within the sanctuary to atone for the gold with which the golden calf was fashioned, as it is said: “And all the people broke off the golden rings” (32:3). Thus they atoned with gold; “And this is the offering which you shall take of them: gold” (25:2). The Holy Blessed One said: “For I will restore health unto you, and I will



heal you of your wounds” (Yirmiyahu 30:17).

In this telling, Yom Kippur is the day that Moshe receives the command to build the *mishkan* (tabernacle), which is meant to allow the Jewish people a pathway to atone for the *heit ha-egel*: the gold of the *mishkan* can atone for the gold of the calf. While the tone of the *midrash* is optimistic, focusing on the pathway to repair, this vision of Yom Kippur contains the *egel* at its core. The day of Yom Kippur is inextricably bound up with our rejection of God.

While the *midrash* ends with a verse from Yirmiyahu which discusses God healing the Jewish people’s wounds, using it as a prooftext for the idea that God will allow the Jewish people to atone for our sin, it is God’s wound that lurks in the unspoken background. Ongoing atonement in interpersonal relationships is necessitated by ongoing hurt. In establishing Yom Kippur as a day eternally dedicated to atoning for the *egel*, God also intimates that His wound, the wound created by the *egel*, will never really entirely heal.

But in Sefer Vayikra, the focus shifts. It is no longer God’s wound, inflicted by the Jewish people, that colors Yom Kippur. Instead, the animating wound is the death of Aharon’s sons, killed by God:

ויקרא טז:א-ב

¹וַיִּדְבֹּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי ה' וַיֹּמְתוּ: ²וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר אֶל אֶהֱרֹן אַחִיר וְאֵל יִבְא בְּכָל עֵת אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִבֵּית לְפָרֶכֶת אֶל פְּנֵי הַכַּפֹּרֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל הָאֹרֶן וְלֹא יָמוּת כִּי בַעֲנֹן אֶרְאֶה עַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת:

Vayikra 16:1-2

¹God spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon who died when they drew too close to the presence of God. ²God said to Moshe: Tell your brother Aharon that he is



not to come at all times into the shrine (*kodesh*) behind the curtain, in front of the cover that is upon the ark, lest he die; for I appear in the cloud over the cover.

Aḥarei Mot opens with a warning, framed with a reference to the catastrophic death of Aharon's sons at the *mishkan*'s inauguration. Aharon is only to approach the *kodesh* at certain times, with certain rituals, lest he meet a similar fate to his sons. There, God—Who caused his sons' deaths—will appear to Aharon.

Rabbinically, the “certain time” at which Aharon is to enter the *kodesh* and encounter God is understood as Yom Kippur.¹ This is a Yom Kippur with a different tragic wound in the background than the one we encounter in Shemot. Rather than a day centered around the sin of the *egel*, it is a day colored by the loss of Aharon's sons. In this reading, Yom Kippur is a day that recalls death and grief, a day on which we approach God, holding the reality of inexplicable loss.²

What might happen to our perception of Yom Kippur, though, if we were to weave together its two strands? What might happen if we read Shemot and Vayikra, the *egel* and the deaths of Aharon's sons, as two parts of a whole?

The Or ha-Ḥayyim,³ in his commentary on Vayikra, attempts to tie together the *egel* and with Aharon's loss:

אור החיים ויקרא טז:

לא הוכשר אהרן להיות ראוי לבא אל בית חצר המלך פנימה אלא באמצעות מזבח כפרה של הבנים בניו

¹ See Sifra Aḥarei Mot, parashah 1.

² On this theme, see R. Akiva Mattenson's essay (in Hebrew), “‘With This Aharon Should Come’: Echoes of Mourning on Yom Kippur,” published in *Lifnai ve-Lifnim / The Innermost Sanctum*, Hadar's High Holiday Reader in 5784, available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/aaron-should-come-hebrew>.

³ R. Ḥayyim ibn Attar, 18th c. North Africa and Eretz Yisrael.



ונמחה רושם חטא העגל... ובזה יתישב הכתוב על נכון. וידבר ה', ומודיע הכתוב כי הדיבור הנאמר בענין בזאת יבא אהרן אל הקודש לא נכשר אהרן למעלה זו אלא אחרי מות שני בני אהרן ונמחה חטאו.

Or ha-Hayyim on Vayikra 16:1

Aharon had not yet been qualified to enter the inner sanctum of the King had it not been for the death of his two sons serving as atonement for his share in *heit ha-egel*... This is the proper understanding of our verse in the matter of “And God said, with this Aharon will come to the *kodesh*”—Aharon only became qualified for this level through the death of his two sons once his sin had been erased.

The Or ha-Hayyim weaves together the *egel* and Aharon’s sons’ deaths by suggesting that those deaths somehow atone for Aharon’s sin. It is only once he has experienced their deaths that his sin is fully atoned for and he is worthy to enter the *kodesh* and stand before God.

For most of us, the idea that Nadav and Avihu’s deaths could somehow atone for their father’s sin is painful and inconceivable. But the Or ha-Hayyim’s intuition that there is something about their deaths that matters when Aharon enters the *kodesh* on Yom Kippur, in a way that is tied to the *egel*, remains valuable. Perhaps Aharon’s loss matters when he enters the *kodesh* on Yom Kippur because that loss, in some way, gives him something deep and painful that he has in common with God—something that allows him to enter the *kodesh* and stand before God in this shared space of pain.

The intertwined, interwoven Yom Kippur that the Or ha-Hayyim guides us towards is a day of mirrored images. Aharon and God stand together, in the inner sanctum of the *mishkan*, brought together by the pain they share. Aharon—the instigator of the golden calf, the cause of God’s greatest wound—and God—Whose fire killed Nadav and Avihu, the cause of Aharon’s.

In this room, away from the crowds, Aharon and God's relationship shifts. Here, in this moment, they are more than Deity and High Priest: they are wounders and wounded. They are two who have suffered at each other's hands. They are two who know, all too intimately, just how dangerous and full of pain the Torah's project to bring together humanity and the Divine can be.

We do not know what, if anything, God and Aharon say as they stare at each other through the cloud of incense. But in that moment, we can imagine a silent agreement. Forgiveness is too flimsy a word for it: maybe because all has already been forgiven. Maybe because some things are too much to forgive.

Instead, there is determination: determination that they will continue in this dance, God and priest, for another year. Determination not to walk away.

And, underneath it all, belief—or even more faintly, hope—that through this coming together again and again, one day, they might begin to heal.

