Bs”D

Parshas Shemini

*The Kli Yakar’s radical explanation sheds light on the perplexing debate between Moshe and Aaron.*

Why Aaron Burned the Sin Offering

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

The Torah relates an event that happened on the final day of the dedication of the Sanctuary in which Moshe and his brother Aaron argued about the proper way to deal with a legal issue.

After the death of Aaron’s older two sons upon their offering an improper sacrifice of incense, Moshe instructs Aaron and his two surviving sons to eat the remnants of the meal offering (Mincha) and the peace offering (Shlomim). Ordinarily, a Cohen on his first day of mourning for the death of a close relative is not supposed to eat of the sacrifices. However, on this day, an exception was made. Since this was the joyous day of the revelation of G-d’s presence in the Sanctuary, the ordinary laws of mourning did not apply, and the sacrifices were to be eaten. Moshe explained to Aaron and his sons that they were not to observe the laws of mourning such as tearing their clothes. All of Israel would cry over the tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu, but the sacred nature of the day would continue as usual.

At some point, Moshe realized that the goat of the sin-offering (Chatas) had been burned. He was angry at Aaron’s sons. He said that the offering should have been eaten as Moshe had commanded.

Aaron defended his sons (and his own) actions: When such a tragedy befell me on this day, would G-d approve if I ate of the sin-offering? Surely not.

Moshe considered Aaron’s argument and accepted his reasoning. The argument was over, and as Rashi puts it, Moshe was not ashamed to say that he had been wrong.

But why was Moshe indeed wrong? Aaron and his sons were not supposed to mourn. They were told to eat the meal and peace offerings and apparently did so. What justification was there for not eating the sin-offering? It’s really very difficult to explain Aaron’s response and no less difficult to explain Moshe’s acquiescence to Aaron’s argument.

The Talmud resorts to a radical answer to this question. Rashi and most commentators follow the Talmud’s explanation.

There was no reason not to eat of the sin-offering brought on that day for the atonement of the Jewish people. In fact, they did eat their portion of that sacrifice. The argument of Moshe and Aaron took place over a *different* sin-offering, the sin-offering of the New Moon which coincided with that day (Rosh Chodesh Nissan).

Moshe reasoned that since mourning was suspended on that day, they should have partaken not only of the inaugural sacrifices brought especially for the occasion of the Sanctuary’s dedication, but of all incidental sacrifices that happened to be offered independently on that day. In other words, since it happened to be Rosh Chodesh (the New Moon), additional sacrifices (Musaf) of burnt offerings (olah) and a sin offering had been brought as well. Thus, they should have partaken of that sin offering as required.

Aaron’s reasoning was that the laws of mourning had been suspended only for the unique dedicatory sacrifices of that day (olah, peace, and sin offerings). But the rules of mourning *did* apply to other ordinary sacrifices, in this case the sin offering of the New Moon. Surely, G-d would not approve of men who partook of that sacrifice on the day their sons and brothers had died.

Moshe accepted this argument. He had assumed that all of the sacrifices should be treated equally. The distinction between different types of sacrifices that Aaron made was sound, and Moshe went along with it.

Now, the main difficulty of this explanation is that nowhere does the Torah indicate that the sin offering under discussion was an entirely different offering than the sin offering of the inaugural day. Nevertheless, this interpretation deals very well with the question of why Aaron did not eat the sacrifice he had seemingly been commanded to eat.

There are some commentaries that stick with the plain meaning of the text that the sin offering under discussion was, in fact, the offering of this special day. These commentaries include Targum Yonasan, Akeidas Yitzchak, Abarbanel and Kli Yakar. The understanding of the debate of Moshe and Aaron and its resolution, however, remain perplexing.

I’ll give you the Kli Yakar’s explanation of this issue:

Although Aaron was supposed to eat of the sacrifices brought that day, he reasoned that the sin offering that had been brought on behalf of the Jewish people was an exception, and he should not eat of it. This offering was an atonement for the Jewish people for the sin of the golden calf. A Cohen is normally supposed to eat part of the sin offering brought by a Jew. But that made sense only if the Cohen himself was not guilty of the sin. In the case where he was not guilty of the sin, his eating of the sacrifice was part of the atonement. But if he was guilty of that very sin, he could not eat of the sacrifice.

Aaron blamed himself for the sin of the golden calf. True, he had made the calf in order to stall for time, and he had put off the celebration of the calf for the next day, hoping that by then Moshe would arrive. But nevertheless, he had facilitated the sin and so was also guilty for it. Therefore, he could not possibly eat of the atonement sacrifice. It was atoning for the Jewish people, and he was part of that people and required that atonement equally.

When Aaron brought up the death of his sons as his reason for not partaking of the sacrifice, he was proving to Moshe that he, too, needed the atonement of the sin offering for the sin of the golden calf. Why was the holy day of the dedication of the sanctuary marred by the death of Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu? Even though they sinned, surely their punishment did not have to be immediately on that very day. It must be that on this day G-d wanted to complete the final atonement for the golden calf both for all of Israel and for Aaron personally. The death of Aaron’s sons marked the painful atonement for Aaron’s sin. Thus Aaron argued, he could not eat of the atonement sacrifice. Moshe listened to Aaron and accepted his explanation.

The Kli Yakar’s commentary emphasizes not only Aaron’s acceptance of responsibility for his share in the golden calf, but also his unwillingness to distance himself from the rest of the Jewish people. He was part of the Jewish people; his responsibility was not just to himself as an individual, but to himself as part of the people. He sinned with them and so had to be atoned for with them.