

Affirming Holiness in the Face of Tragedy

Achrei Mot Kedoshim

In our Parsha, Aaron is invited back into God's presence, into the Holy of Holies, specifically after the tragic loss of his two sons. Aaron's instructions to enter the Holy of Holies includes a vague requirement: Aaron must enter "with this" (ba'zot). Though a simple reading of the text (Leviticus 16:3, source #1) makes it clear that "this" refers to the sin offering and the burnt offering described at the end of that very verse, the rabbis chose to make a connection between the "this" appearing here and several other occurrences of the word "this" appearing elsewhere in the Tanach (see Midrash appearing in source #2). After studying the Midrash, I invite you to delve into its deeper meaning: What caused our rabbis to draw a connection between Aaron's entering the Holy of Holies, after his sons' deaths, and these manifold occurrences of the word "this"?

Leviticus 16:1-3

1. And the Lord spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, when they drew near before the Lord, and they died.
2. And the Lord said to Moses: Speak to your brother Aaron, that he should not come at all times into the Holy within the dividing curtain, in front of the cover that is upon the ark, so that he should not die, for I appear over the ark cover in a cloud.
3. With this shall Aaron enter the Holy: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.

ויקרא פרשת אחרי מות פרק טז

(א) וַיְדַבֵּר יְקֹוֹק אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אֹהֶרֶן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי־יְקֹוֹק וַיָּמָתוּ:
(ב) וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹוֹק אֶל־מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן אַחִיךָ וְאַל־יבֹא בְּכָל־עֵת אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִבֵּית לַפָּרֹכֶת אֶל־פָּנָיו הַכַּפֹּרֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל־הָאָרֶן וְלֹא יָמוּת כִּי בְעֵנָן אֲרָאָה עַל־הַכַּפֹּרֶת:
(ג) בְּזֹאת יִבֹּא אֹהֶרֶן אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּפָרֹךְ בֶּן־בָּקָר לַחֲטָאת וְאֵיל לְעֹלָה:

Midrash Leviticus Rabbah, Acharei Mot 21:6

R. Yudan explained the verse as describing the state of the High Priest as he enters the Holy of Holies: he must do so while holding on to bundles and bundles of Mitzvot.

With the merit of Torah: "And this [ve'zot] is the teaching which Moses set before the children of Israel" (Deut. 4:44)

With the merit of the covenant: "As for Me, this [zot] is My covenant with them," says the Lord." (Isaiah 59:21).

With the merit of Shabbat: "Fortunate is the man who will do this [zot] and the person who will hold fast to it, he who keeps the Sabbath from profaning it and guards his hand from doing any evil." (Isaiah 56:2)

With the merit of Jerusalem: "So said the Lord God: This [zot] is Jerusalem; in the midst of the nations I have placed it, and around it are lands." (Ezekiel 5:5)

With the merit of the tribes: "All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this [ve'zot] is what their father spoke to them and blessed them; each man, according to his blessing, he blessed them." (Genesis 49:28)

ויקרא רבה (וילנא) פרשת אחרי מות פרשה כא

ו ר' יודן פתר קריא בכהן גדול בכניסתו לבית קדשי הקדשים חבילות חבילות של מצות יש בידו:

בזכות התורה (דברים ז) וזאת התורה

בזכות חילה (ישעיה נט) זאת בריתי

בזכות שבת (שם) ישעיהו/ (נו) אשרי אנוש יעשה זאת

<p>With the merit of Judah: "May this [ve'zot] [also be] for Judah." And he [Moses] said, "O Lord, hearken to Judah's voice and bring him to his people; may his hands do battle for him, and may You be a help against his adversaries." (Deuteronomy 33:7)</p>	<p>בזכות ירושלים (יחזקאל ה) זאת ירושלים</p>
<p>With the merit of Israel: "This [ve'zot], your stature, is like a palm tree..." (Song of Songs 7:8)</p>	<p>בזכות שבטים (בראשית מט) וזאת אשר דבר להם אביהם</p>
<p>With the merit of the Trumah offerings: "And this [ve'zot] is the offering that you shall take from them: gold, silver, and copper;" (Exodus 25:3)</p>	<p>בזכות יהודה (דברים לג) וזאת ליהודה</p>
<p>With the merit of the tithes: "Bring the whole of the tithes into the treasury so that there may be nourishment in My House, and test Me now therewith [ba'zot], says the Lord of Hosts..." (Malachi 3:10)</p>	<p>בזכות ישראל (שיר/שיר השירים/ז) זאת קומתך</p>
<p>With the merit of the sacrifices: "With this [ba'zot] shall Aaron enter the Holy" (Leviticus 16:3)</p>	<p>בזכות תרומה (שמות כה) וזאת התרומה בזכות המעשרות (מלאכי ג) ובחנוני נא בזאת בזכות קרבנות בזאת יבא אהרן.</p>

According to the Midrash, Aaron was commanded to enter the Holy of Holies, while holding on to either Torah (ultimate meaning), the covenant (historical connection), Shabbat, Jerusalem (land), tribes (family), Judah (the mantle of leadership), Israel (peoplehood), Trumah (connection to Temple/synagogue), tithes (charity to the needy), sacrifices (general commitment to give). Each of these is replete with meaning.

Aaron, who must have lost his sense of connection while encountering and struggling with personal tragedy, was invited to reconnect by being offered multiple entry points. If you're not connecting to God...then connect to Torah...If you're not connecting to Torah...then connect to Jewish history...If you're not connecting through Jewish history...then connect through Shabbat...or a sense of belonging to a land, a family, or a people...or connect through giving to your community, or to those in need...or by making any form of sacrifice.

According to the rabbis, Aaron's invitation to enter with "this" [ba'zot], is an open-ended invitation to find his own way back in, after feeling spiritually distant from God in the face of tragedy.

<p>Psalm 27:3</p> <p>3. If a camp encamps against me, my heart shall not fear; if a war should rise up against me, <u>in this I trust.</u></p>	<p>תהלים פרק כז</p> <p>ג) אִם־תִּחַנֶּה עָלַי מַחֲנֶה לֹא־יִירָא לִבִּי אִם־תִּקּוּם עָלַי מִלְחָמָה בְּזֹאת אֲנִי בֹטָח:</p>
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During this time of crisis, in what do you place your trust?
 What is the "this" that allows you to feel connected despite everything that is currently challenging in your life?