

## Leadership in a Leaderless World

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Yose ben Yose, a fifth-century poet, begins one of his *piyyutim* for Yom Kippur with the words “*Ein lanu Kohen Gadol l’chaper lanu*”—“We have no *Kohen Gadol*—no High Priest—to atone for us.” “*V’eich yitkaper lanu al shig’goteinu*” “How will we be expiated for our misdeeds?” The *piyyut* continues with Yose ben Yose lamenting all of the other losses that accompanied the loss of the position of the *Kohen Gadol*, who served as the religious leader of the Jewish people when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, and who was charged on Yom Kippur with atoning for the entire Jewish people. Without the *Kohen Gadol*, the poet reminds us, there are no sacrifices, no incense, no lighting of the Menorah in the Temple and, most of all, no Temple.

It is hard for us moderns to sympathize with Yose ben Yose’s lament. We have never experienced the existence of a Temple and, presumably, none—or very few of us—yearn for a return to the sacrificial system. But let’s try—just for the moment—to understand what Yose ben Yose and others found so compelling about the ancient atonement ritual of the *Kohen Gadol*.

When the Temple stood in Jerusalem, Yom Kippur was the only time during the year when the *Kohen Gadol*—the High Priest—would enter the *kodesh hakodashim*—the Holy of Holies. There, he would beg atonement first for himself, then for his family, and finally, for the people as a whole. Before entering, he would undergo a seven-day cleansing process and would don special white garments for the occasion. Once inside, he would make sacrifices on behalf of the people and would confess his own sins, those of his household and of the other *kohanim* and then those of the Jewish people. Then, the *Kohen Gadol* would take two goats and designate one for God and one for Azazel—an term of unclear meaning. He would sacrifice the goat designated for God and would, symbolically, place all of the sins of the Jewish people on the goat designated for Azazel. This goat, he would send into the wilderness, allowing it to carry off with it all of the sins of the people.

There are many powerful elements to this ritual. There is a sense of all of the sanctity of the universe converging, as, on the holiest day of the year, the holiest member of the Jewish community dons the holiest garments, enters the holiest part of the Temple and utters the holiest name of God, reserved only for this moment. There is also a sense of danger: according to tradition, if the *Kohen Gadol* proved unworthy of his duties, he would die inside the *Kodesh haKodashim*. For that reason, his attendants, who were not permitted to go inside this holy place, would tie a rope around his leg so that they could pull his body out if he died inside.

But perhaps what is most powerful about this ritual is the assurance that the people have been forgiven for their sins. Without such a powerful, symbolic ritual, it is easy to end Yom Kippur feeling unresolved. Even after praying and begging God for forgiveness, we might be left with a nagging sense of guilt—a sense that, perhaps, not all has been forgiven. How much easier must it have been to rely on the *Kohen Gadol* to secure atonement on one’s behalf.

The existence of the *Kohen Gadol* offers the assurance that we have been forgiven; at the same time, the placement of religious power in the hands of one central individual also poses a certain danger. In the first century before and after the common era, there was much fighting among the Jewish people over the question of the legitimacy of the priestly line then in control of the Temple. You may remember, for example, that the Essenes—or the Dead Sea sect—left the mainstream Jewish community out of a belief that false *kohanim* had defiled the Temple.

Investing one person with all religious authority is bound to lead to arguments about who is worthy of carrying this mantle.

In an effort to establish their own authority, the rabbis of the Talmud, living several centuries after the destruction of the Temple, subtly undermined the power of the *Kohen Gadol*. The Talmud contains stories, for example, of the rabbis weighing in about who should become the next *Kohen Gadol*, and about how to punish a priestly family that is lax in its duties. These stories are surprising in that the rabbis, as a category of religious leaders, did not exist until after the destruction of the Temple; it would therefore not have been possible for the *Kohen Gadol* to consult the rabbis about anything!

This rabbinic anachronism represents both an attempt to assert their own authority and, I would argue, a statement about the inherent danger of investing a single person with full religious authority for an entire community. In his time, the *Kohen Gadol* acted as an intercessor, communicating to God the people's prayers and begging God to forgive the people for their transgressions. Without a *Kohen Gadol*, the people must be their own advocates, offering their own prayers to God and, themselves, asking for forgiveness.

In his classic work *Varieties of the Religious Experience*, William James quotes a 15<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish monk who writes, "I know that when I die, I will go to heaven because I have never done anything of my own free will but only followed the instructions of my superiors. If I have ever sinned, the sin is not mine but theirs."

This attitude represents the opposite of how the rabbis would have us live our lives. When the Rambam (Moses Maimonides), a twelfth century philosopher and legal scholar, composed the section on the laws of *teshuvah* in his legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*, he devoted an entire chapter to the question of free will. There, he argues that the belief in free will is a fundamental principle of Judaism. One who rejects the idea that human beings have free will, he argues, will never take responsibility for one's deeds, and therefore can never do *teshuvah*. Human beings are not expected to be perfect; we are, however, expected to take responsibility for our own actions. A claim of powerlessness never excuses inaction.

I am reminded of the story about the man who complained to God, "God—the world you created is a mess. There is so much violence and suffering—why don't you send someone to fix it?" God replies, "I did—I sent you."

The danger of the position of the *Kohen Gadol* is that the Jewish people, like the monk whom James cites, will become so reliant on their leadership that they will fail to question the

actions or instructions of the *Kohen Gadol*, even when the person holding this position may, as the rabbis assert, sometimes be ill-fit for his duties.

There is, in this world, no such thing as an innocent bystander: modern history has taught us that. And we know, also from contemporary history, that “just following orders” can never excuse immoral behavior. Wresting religious authority out of the hands of a single individual and placing morality in the hands of the entire community sends this message—that the whole community is responsible for its actions; we cannot abdicate responsibility simply by relying on a religious or political authority to make decisions on our behalf.

It is for this reason that, when we utter the *vidu'i*—the confession—we do so in the plural. None of us, I would assume, are guilty of all of the sins listed in the *vidu'i*. However, by living in a world that allows these sins to occur, we are—by association—complicit in these crimes. As the '60s slogan goes, “If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.” Unless we actively fight against corruption, oppression, violence, and other crimes, we bear some responsibility for the persistence of these acts. It is not enough simply to blame our leaders for failing to wipe out these crimes; just as we cannot rely on the *Kohen Gadol* to pray for us or to atone for us, we cannot depend on our political or religious leadership to solve the world's problems on our behalf.

Even Yose ben Yose, while lamenting the absence of a *Kohen Gadol* appears to recognize that communal action has now replaced reliance on an intercessor. After each stanza in which he describes one more function of the *Kohen Gadol* that is now lost forever, he inserts the chorus “*Chatanu tzurenu, s'lach lanu yotzreinu*” “We have sinned, God; forgive us, creator” With this refrain, the poet indicates that even as we remember the power of the religious ritual in the Temple, we also now need to take responsibility for our own fate. Even as he laments the loss of the religious intercessor, Yose ben Yose demonstrates his ability to act as his own agent in the process of atonement. In writing and uttering his own prayer, he effectively says: It is not enough to cry out that “We have no *Kohen Gadol* and therefore no means of atonement.” Rather, he suggests, we must say, “We have no *Kohen Gadol* and therefore, each of us must take responsibility for our own actions.” Without a *Kohen Gadol*, each of us, like Yose ben Yose, must find our own way to take responsibility for our actions or inactions, to confess and to atone.

The Avodah service, which will constitute part of tomorrow's Musaf service, also suggests that communal action is superior to reliance on a religious functionary. As you may remember, the Avodah service consists of a long *piyyut* that tells the story of the *Kohen Gadol's* Yom Kippur ritual. Jewish communities in different places and historical moments have used various *piyyutim* for the Avodah service. What virtually all of these *piyyutim* have in common, however, is an ending in which the *Kohen Gadol* emerges from the *Kodesh hakodashim*—the Holy of Holies—and utters a prayer. Yosef Tabory, a contemporary Israeli scholar, notes that the placement of this prayer at the end of the poem stands in contrast to the Talmudic account, which suggests that the *Kohen Gadol* offers his prayer as part of the ritual itself. In placing the prayer at the end of the story, the *payyotanim* (liturgical poets) make the theological statement that prayer, now, has supplanted sacrifice as the primary mode of religious practice. Prayer, of course, is an avenue open to all of us, whereas sacrifice requires

reliance on designated religious authorities. While early Judaism might have charged a few leaders with religious responsibility for the whole community, the Judaism practiced since the destruction of the Temple—that is, since the first century of the common era—holds the entire community—every single one of us—fully responsible for our own actions and at least partially responsible for the actions of the community as a whole.

Contemporary history, unfortunately, offers us too many examples of what happens when people surrender all authority to their political or religious leadership. Imagine how different the world might have been if a majority of ordinary Germans had protested Nazi actions; if more Jews had spoken out about the religious rhetoric that led, in part, to the assassination of Yitzchak Rabin; if more ordinary nineteenth century Americans had opposed the institution of slavery; if more of us had listened—and demanded that the government listen—to reports that the New Orleans levees could not weather a serious hurricane; if we worked to ensure that people in poor countries lived in stable homes, rather than wait and weep when whole communities are wiped out by a tsunami or an earthquake.

What if all of us were like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who died for his efforts to save Jews and to overthrow Nazism? Like Mukhtaran Mai, the Pakistani woman who recently risked her life and her family's reputation to fight against gang rape in her country? Like Judith Miller, who was willing to go to jail to protect a constitutional right? Like the whistleblowers at Enron or other companies, who risk their livelihoods in order to fight corruption?

Even in a representative democracy, it is not enough simply to vote, and then to wash our hands of responsibility for the government's actions. Nor does not having voted for a particular official absolve us of responsibility for what this person does while in office. Our responsibility to direct the actions of our country does not end in the ballot box, but rather obligates us to continue working to ensure that our elected leaders follow the right course of action.

S'lach lanu avinu ki chatanu—forgive us God, for we have sinned by relying on others when we, ourselves, had the power to act.

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