

Torah Thoughts Aharei Mot-Kedoshim

5778:

There are two major topics in parshat Aharei Mot: The offerings on the altar associated with expiating sin, and a list of prohibited sexual relations. At first glance these two subjects seem only slightly related: the purging of sin, through sacrifice or through the avoidance of certain sexual acts. Yet each of these passages is read on Yom Kippur, the first in the morning and the second in the afternoon, and there is a common word that at the beginning of each section that may suggests a deeper affinity between them.

Describing the priests entering the *mishkan* to make the sacrifices, the Torah recalls the deaths of Aaron's two sons when they 'drew too close' to the presence of God. The Hebrew word used is '*korvatam*,' 'their drawing close' or 'their encroaching.' The text makes it clear that the rituals that are about to be described are quite serious, that performing them requires 'approaching' them with proper intent. The same Hebrew word introduces the prohibited sexual relations at the end of the parshah: "None of you shall come near (*tikr'vu*) anyone of his own flesh to uncover nakedness..." Here too the seriousness of the prohibitions is emphasized by including the word for 'approaching' or 'drawing near.' Instead of simply stating 'Don't uncover nakedness...' the Torah seems to add the word 'come near' to make a more explicit connection to the earlier section about sacrifice. Why?

I have often said that sex and death are the two primary concerns of the Torah. Nearly every narrative episode, as well as many of its legal sections, invokes one or both of those themes. We should not be surprised by that; most art does the same thing, whether in literature, film or dance. These are central human concerns, and we wouldn't be fully human if we were not interested in them. So when the Torah describes the animal sacrifices, which is to say the slaughtering that will purge our sins, or sexual relationships, it is touching on primal experiences that should be approached with a sense of awe and of seriousness. These are things that are undertaken only with great care for their meaning and their effect on us. When our ancestors approached God's presence with the taking of an animal's life, they were to do so with a great appreciation for what that meant, just as people should approach sex with a great appreciation for what it can mean. The Torah teaches us that sin, sex and death are the nexus at which we should sanctify our relationships with each other and God by heightening our awareness of how we approach them.