Ketroet: Embracing the Sinner  
Rabbi Adam Friedmann

Moshe said to Aaron, “Take the fire pan, and put on it fire from the altar. Add incense and take it quickly to the community and atone for them. For wrath has gone forth from G-d: the plague has begun!” Aaron took it, as Moshe had ordered, and ran to the midst of the congregation, where the plague had begun among the people. He put on the incense and atoned for the people; he stood between the dead and the living until the plague was checked. (Bamidbar 17:11-13, JPS translation with emendations)

Moshe’s response to the plague is unexpected. We do not find that the Torah prescribes the incense offering (ketroet) as a remedy for Divine punishment. How did Moshe know to do this?

The Talmud teaches that when Moshe ascended to receive the Torah, the angels insisted that such a precious gift not be given to such a lowly being as man. Moshe was afraid to respond, but G-d reassured him, “Hold on to My throne, and answer them.” Moshe, emboldened, began to challenge the angels: The Torah is filled with commandments that relate to the gritty details of human life. These things have no meaning to the angels, and, therefore, the Torah has no relevance to them. The angels were appeased, and, “as a reward for having been called ‘Man’ by the angels,” they all gave him a parting gift. The last was the angel of death, who shared that the ketroet undermines his power. (Shabbat 88b-89a)

Grasping G-d’s throne gave Moshe recourse to answer the angels. Why? The image of man is engraved on that throne. (Yechezkel 1:26) A midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 68:12) identifies the man depicted on the throne as our ancestor Yaakov – the one whom the angels, having ascended to find his likeness inscribed upon the celestial throne, ridiculed when they descended and discovered him asleep, a mere body of flesh. The Yaakov who through his faith was transformed into Yisrael, and because of this became the image of humanity. On the surface, a human being appears to be selfish and deeply fallible. But man’s outward weaknesses mask his great potential. He can transcend a narrow vision of reality, discovering G-d and morality. It is transformed man that G-d waits for, and takes glory in. Moshe answered the angels with this claim. The Torah belongs with man not despite his weaknesses, but because of them. Humanity can and will transform itself, and leading the charge will be the children of the man whose image adorns G-d’s throne. But what does the ketroet have to do with all this?

One of the ketroet’s three central ingredients, chelbanah, had a repugnant odor. The ketroet, offered out of public view, symbolizes the intimate contact between G-d and His people. Its smoke is a tangible reminder of G-d’s presence, which rests on all the people at once, or on none of them at all. G-d wants every single Jew, even those whose scent is not pleasing. He knows the potential of each one as another facet in the greater image of Yisrael. The ketroet thus echoes Moshe’s argument to the angels. Man deserves special treatment because of who he can become. The effect is to silence the accusations of the angel of death.

Our Sages derived a corollary lesson from the composition of the ketroet. If G-d’s presence rests only in the merit of the whole people, then only a unified people can seek His presence. (Keritut 6b, as read by Rabbeinu Bechaye on Shemot 30:34) Therefore, any attempt at repentance which does not also include the sinners among us, is useless.

These days, we are forced to be increasingly alone. It seems like the least likely time to become one people. But this is a misconception. Unity begins in the heart of each individual. In the willingness to recognize the “sinner” as family. In cultivating a desire to be with him despite what he has done or become. And, ultimately, in seeing the greatness in him.

Today Aharon the Kohen is not here to atone for us via the ketroet. We must do the work ourselves. Each individual, offering his private ketroet. We all know Jews whom we think are sinners. It is time we stop letting that get in the way of loving them.

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After years of study in Jerusalem’s prominent Yeshivat Porat Yosef, Rabbi Zabihi was ordained at a young age. He went on to serve on the beit din of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

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Torah and Translation

Keeping a Piece of the Afikoman After the Seder

Rabbi Pinhas Zabihi, Ateret Paz I Vol. 2 Yoreh Deah, He’arot 2 #9

Translated by Ezer Diena

And it would be possible to add and say, according to what the Gaon, the pious Rabbi Eliyahu HaCohen wrote in Sefer Midrash Talpiyot, where he brought (Entry Aleph, Afikoman) in the name of the Sefer HaTishbi, this idea of the segulah to leave over [a piece of] the afikoman. There he wrote, in these words: “He should take some of the afikoman to carry with him (or to put in another place), and it is a segulah to be saved from thieves, and to drive away the ketipot from him.” And it seems that from the fact that he chose the language of “he should take some” of the afikoman, etc., that this language implies that he should take [only] a very small piece...

And now, according to these words of the Minchat Chinuch [omitted here for space-ED], who understands within the Rambam’s view that the prohibition against leaving over the korban pesach only applies when one leaves over an olive’s-bulk, if so, we could say that in our case as well, as seen from the words of the rabbis cited earlier, that the custom of leaving over some of the afikoman matzah was [only] a small amount, if so, this would obviously be less than an olive’s-bulk, and since this is the case, we are not concerned for it in regard to [the prohibition of] leaving over [from the afikoman]. As explained, even for the korban pesach itself, the leaving over which the Torah prohibited was only an olive’s-bulk according to Rambam...

But one should also consider further, for what will we say according to the rest of the authorities, the Seraphim who stand above, who brought this custom to leave over matzah from the afikoman, and did not mention anything about leaving over a small portion? And the simple understanding of their words shows that one may leave over even more than an olive’s-bulk, and not specifically a small amount! Even from the words of the Tishbi and Kitzur HaShlah [brought earlier], one can ponder if they truly specifically stated that one should leave over “a small amount”, and their intention was less than an olive’s-bulk, due to that concern, as perhaps it was not [stated in] an exact manner.

[Although according to] our own interpretation, according to our path, it seems that the answer that we brought above is correct, with the help of Heaven, in truth, even though according to the opinion that the afikoman is a remembrance of the korban pesach, and that [the Rabbis] placed all of the rules of the korban pesach on it... Nevertheless, we can say that this is only in regards to those rules that are related to its actual consumption, such as to eat it before midnight, and not to eat it in two groups. But for external [rules] that are related to the body of the korban pesach, like this aspect of leaving over, they did not give it the force of the korban pesach...