

TORAH SPARKS

SONS AND GOATS

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Dvar Parashah

"After the death of the two sons of Aharon," and the midrash in [Vayikra Rabbah](#) opens and brings [Ecclesiastes](#), brings a memento mori, reminding us that everyone dies: לְכָל מִקְרָה אֶסֶד, "There is one fate for everyone." It doesn't matter if they were good or bad, righteous or wicked. The acts of their lives cannot and will not prevent their deaths. It pairs Noah the righteous with Pharaoh the wicked, David whose son built the Temple with Nebuchadnezzar who destroyed the Temple. And all of them met the same fate. Whatever distinction we thought mattered, death does not see it. The midrash ends with Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, burnt to death. We read:

מִקְרָה אֶחָד, אֵלוּ בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן, דְּכָתִיב בְּהוֹן בְּשָׁלוֹם וּבִמְיֻשׁוֹר. לְרַשָּׁע, זֶה עֵדֶת קִרְחַ, דְּכָתִיב בְּהוֹן סוּרוֹ נָא. אֵלוּ נִכְנְסוּ לְהִקְרִיב בְּמַחְלֶקֶת וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׂרוּפִין וְאֵלוּ נִכְנְסוּ לְהִקְרִיב שְׁלֵא בְּמַחְלֶקֶת וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׂרוּפִין.

One fate: these are the sons of Aaron, of whom it is written [in [Malachi](#),] *in peace and in equity.*

For the wicked: this is the congregation of Korach, of whom it is written [in [Numbers](#),] *turn aside, now.* These (the congregation of Korach) entered to offer sacrifices in dispute and came out burned. And these (sons of Aaron) entered to offer sacrifices not in dispute and came out burned.

The sons of Aaron and the congregation of Korach. The highest praise Malachi can find for a priest is spoken of the sons of Aaron: בְּשָׁלוֹם וּבִמְיֻשׁוֹר הָלַךְ אִתִּי, "in peace and in equity he walked with me." The sharpest warning God can deliver about the congregation of Korach is סוּרוֹ נָא מעל אֶהְיֶה הָאֲנָשִׁים הַרְשָׁעִים הָאֵלֶּה, "turn aside, now, from the tents of these wicked men." And yet. These entered in peace. Those entered in rebellion. All of them came out as ash. One fate for everyone.

The fire does not distinguish. The altar is indifferent to the interior condition of the one who approaches it. Whatever the priest carried in his heart as he walked toward the sanctuary, love, arrogance, yearning, contempt, the fire reads none of it. The fire reads proximity. You came near, and you burned.

This is the nightmare pressing up against the Yom Kippur ritual. Aaron has just lost his sons. The parashah opens אַחֲרֵי מוֹת, *after the death*, and proceeds immediately to instructions for approach. How does one approach when the approach has already killed? How does one draw near when nearness has proven lethal? The midrash's answer, in its terrible symmetry, is that no interior posture secures the one who enters. Nadav and Avihu went in pure and came out burned, and Korach's two hundred and fifty went in rebellious and came out burned, and the fire wrote the same verdict on both.

And then the parashah gives us the two goats.

They are identical. The [mishnah](#) insists on it: matched in appearance, in height, in value, purchased together if possible. The tradition works hard to make them indistinguishable, because the theological work of the ritual requires that nothing about them, whether visible, hidden, or chosen, differentiate one from the other. And then the lot is *cast*: גוֹרֵל אֶחָד לַיהוָה וְגוֹרֵל אֶחָד לְעִזָּאזֵל. "One lot for God, and one lot for Azazel." One goat enters the קֹדֶשׁ קְדוֹשִׁים, holy of holies, its blood carried into the innermost place, and the other becomes the bearer of the people's sins, driven out toward the wilderness and what waits there.

Two identical bodies. Two incommensurable destinies. The thing the midrash laments, the fact that there is no real difference between the one who enters in peace and the one who enters in rebellion, is what the ritual now takes up as its operating premise. The goats are the sons of Aaron and the congregation of Korach stripped of their histories. Interchangeable. Alike. Waiting together at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

In the midrash, the sons of Aaron and the congregation of Korach were already distinguished before they entered. Those verdicts made no difference to the fire. The interior truth of a person, the reality of their actions, failed to translate into a difference in fate. Same entry, same flame, same ash.

In the Yom Kippur ritual, the distinction runs the other way. Nothing about the goats is settled when they arrive. They are, by design, one goat doubled. And then something is done to them. A lot is drawn. A name is pronounced. And the distinction is made. One becomes destined for the holy of holies, one becomes the bearer-away of sin. The goats do not come to the ritual with their destinies in hand. The ritual hands them their destinies.

In this lies the difference between the גוֹרֵל of the Tanakh and the מִקְרָה of the midrash. The ritual uses "lot," which will come to mean "fate." The midrash reads מִקְרָה, "chance," the thing that happens, the same accident falling on righteous and wicked, erasing the moral differences that were supposed to mean something. Both words reach toward the same cluster: the thing that befalls us, the thing we do not choose. But in the midrash, מִקְרָה is what empties the moral world of its distinctions. In the ritual, גוֹרֵל is the instrument through which distinction enters at all. The same structural fact, read in opposite directions. Chance as leveler. Lot as distinguisher.

And the hand that draws the lot is Aaron's. Aaron, who has not spoken since the fire. When Nadav and Avihu were consumed, the Torah recorded his response in two [words](#): וַיִּדַם אַהֲרֹן, "and Aaron was silent." Moses spoke. God spoke through Moses. Aaron received. The father of the dead priests was the one figure in the scene who did not get to say anything, who did not need to say anything, who could not say anything.

And now the parashah opens אַחֲרֵי מוֹת, *after the death*, and the first thing Aaron is asked to do with his hands after the silence is this: וַנִּתֵּן אֶתְּנֵן עַל שְׁנֵי הַקְּטָעִים גְּדִלוֹת: "and Aaron shall place on the two goats lots." Action, giving, doing. Not speaking.

Aaron is a priest silenced by the fire that took his sons. He cannot speak for them, cannot speak against God, cannot articulate a verdict on what happened. He cannot say "my sons were בְּשָׁלוֹם וּבִמְיֻשׁוֹר," cannot defend them. And the ritual, rather than forcing him to break the silence, gives him an instrument that distinguishes without speech. The lot is drawn. The distinction is made. Aaron does not have to say a word. And the distinction holds.

And then, of course, both goats die. The goat whose blood is carried into the Holy of Holies dies on the altar. The goat led out toward Azazel dies in the wilderness. The distinction the lot draws does not save either of them from the ending the midrash grieves. מִקְרָה אֶחָד still holds. The fire still waits. Everybody dies.

But for this one day, in this one ritual, between the drawing of the lot and the dying of the goats, there is a difference. One is holy of holies. One bears away. The גוֹרֵל does not cancel the מִקְרָה. It carves a shape inside it. The goats will both die. While they live, they are not the same. And Aaron, who cannot speak the difference, places it on their heads with his hand.