

OVERVIEW

Annually, on the tenth of Tishri, the Jewish people observe the Day of Atonement and forgiveness, Yom Kippur. At the start of our weekly portion the sacred text presents a detailed description of the ceremonial rites that bestow a special character on this day. At the center is the sacrifice of the two rams of atonement. One is offered on the altar, the other is brought to a rocky place in the desert where it is killed. At the conclusion of the ceremonies the high priest causes incense to rise up in the interior of the Holy of Holies while the people, assembled in the forecourt of the temple, prostrate themselves before G-d. This day is a Sabbath day forever dedicated to the timeless bond between G-d and His people.

COMMENTARY

The two rams on Yom Kippur

The ceremonial offering of the two rams - suspended since the destruction of the temple - formed the highlight of the most sacred day of our Jewish year. According to tradition, these two animals, had to be exactly alike in age, color and value. They are brought together before the priest who affixes to each the golden shield bearing the engraved word that sends them either to the altar or to the desert. Could one conceive of a more eloquent symbolic act? The entire day of Yom Kippur is a call to the Jew to total inner renewal - as if forgiveness were to be achieved through his own spiritual resources

rather than through the grace of G-d. Every man has the potential to guide his steps on the path of good or on the path of evil. No trace here of the "original sin" which christianity finds itself unable to renounce. Man's unfettered freedom encompasses his nobility as well as his squalor. In the sight of the sanctuary we reveal ourselves with all the elements of this freedom that makes our voices so sublime and yet so arduous. Yom Kippur teaches us to be firm and decisive, never to vacillate or compromise. There are only two rams before the priest, not three. The choice is clear: rejection of the path to the sanctuary leads to the loneliness of the desert and the void of nothingness.

The prohibited marriages

The Torah's social legislation is introduced with the command: "Be fruitful and multiply yourselves". This elevates marriage from the purely physical to the rank of a true national institution. G-d obligates us to participate as moral beings in the grand structure of humankind. Jewish marriage - which seems "natural" and self-understood - must be viewed in the context of the great goals that G-d has set for us. The miracle of procreation matches accurately the act of creation. The Inner resemblance between these two creations resulted in laws that alone could provide the perfect framework for this second, human act of creation. Thus incest is the capital violation of the law of the individual species. For a woman to be her brother's wife and mother of his children blurs the boundaries of procreation to such a degree that only

one ingredient remains: the female. By minimizing the role played by passion and lust the Torah Law wishes to inspire man to build his marital relationship on a nobler and more solid foundation than provided by mere physical attraction. All conditions must come to play to ensure the dignity of the Jewish marriage.

Instead of general rules, our text cites specific cases relating to the bond between husband and wife. Let us not forget that the Sinaitic legislation constituted a profound break with the pre-Sinaitic epoch. Nowhere else is the special character of the Jewish people more discernible. The great civilizations of antiquity had no laws to regulate marital relations which they considered a natural function and thus in no need of keeping within bounds. The Torah law precipitated a true revolution in that man was to learn to subordinate his desires and longings, his entire existence, to the dictates of the law. These disciplinary measures and laws are not stumbling blocks but stepping stones leading to a progressive spiritualization of a physical act. Foremost among the strict sexual prohibitions is the act of incest. Ancient Egypt, Persia, even certain parts of the Roman empire until medieval times not only tolerated incest but glorified it. The Jewish concept of family purity categorically rejects any compromise in this most sensitive of sexual areas.

The Torah prohibits any sexual liaison falling in the category of incest which are enumerated in great detail by the Talmud. The fact that European civilization adopted the precepts of this

Jewish law need not give special reason for satisfaction. It only demonstrates the dramatic impact of a legislation that fundamentally changed the sexual mores of the contemporary society.

Judaism does not grant absolute as practiced by the church. Its laws apply to all regardless of personal status. Thus the church that prohibits divorce permits exceptions in special circumstances. Such a procedure is unknown in Judaism. It is interesting to note that in certain cases the church applied the prohibition of incest in the area of psychological complications, such as forbidding a marriage between a godfather and his godchild.

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