

Parshas Acharei-Kedoshim

This week we read, once again, two parshiyot, Acharei and Kedoshim. Part of this week's reading is read on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, a day when we enact and live the ideal of being holy. The direct connection is that the parsha includes the service of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur, specifically the service of taking a goat, one of which is sent off a cliff (Azazel, from the words Az-goat and Azel-went). The goat chosen to be dropped off the cliff is selected by lottery, i.e., by chance, and that one is tossed off the cliff as an atonement for the sins of the Jews, cast into the wilderness. Interestingly, a lottery is used to decide which goat will be chosen. The reason may be that Hashem is the chooser here of which goat to use. Meaning the outcome of a true lottery (goral) is that it is only by divine design of the outcome. The second reason is to ensure fairness. If there is a true raffle, it is difficult to argue about the outcome, as everyone was an equally viable winner.

Another idea concerns free choice. It is difficult to observe in our lives whether we have free choice, since we often choose based on heuristics or other reasons (e.g., to avoid guilt, to make you happy, because you like something, etc.). In observable reality, there may not be a scenario where there is "free choice"; rather, there are informed choices.

Furthermore, people argue that there is no free choice if Hashem is all-knowing, which means that you don't have free choice, because Hashem knows. This disturbs people, and the idea that a divinely controlled world has humans with free choice. Then there is a lottery with two equally likely outcomes (as if in a free-choice scenario), and the fact that one is chosen over the other is by divine design. This means that the element of Hashem knowing all outcomes isn't specific to control; rather, whatever the outcome, whether it's a lottery, it is by divine design. Ultimately, this is to show that Hashem controls and is involved in every outcome, because every outcome, like a lottery, is equally plausible, even if it is defined by informed choice (like guilt or the like), and Hashem empowers that outcome. This is important to Yom Kippur and our service as Jews, because the fact that we choose to, and on faith, continue to practice our faith, follow the rules, and learn Torah, is because we are choosing to do this, and these acts further the revelation of Godliness on this earth, and get us closer to the ultimate revelation of Mashiach. These rules make us Kadosh as they separate us from the equally plausible action of not following the Torah. The observable outcome of a lottery is such that we don't necessarily pray for the outcome of a lottery to be a reliable method of getting sustenance. For example, although one can buy a lottery ticket, it is an unreliable source of income for survival, and one should still

pursue traditional ways of earning a living. Because the observable outcome of a lottery is a direct divine intervention, i.e. a miracle, we don't pray for the natural order of the world to be altered, and expect it to happen, not that it can't, but if the outcome doesn't arise as the Gemara in Berachos 55 states, a person will become sour. But the lottery can be a metaphor for something else. There is an expression people use about when good things happen to them, that they "won the lottery". This expression can serve as a lens for viewing your own existence. If you stop and think about all the amazing things that are going on for you in your life, i.e. your own version of winning the lottery, then that win was by direct divine intervention, much like the goat that gets thrown off the cliff is chosen by lottery, i.e. direct divine intervention. This idea can be renewed for us on Yom Kippur, when we atone for our sins and reestablish a connection with Hashem that may have been dulled throughout the year. This week's Parsha, mid-year, is a reminder to reconnect with Hashem and ensure that instead of the context of the day of atonement, we clean our lenses, and look at the lotteries we are individually winning, and note that it is a gift from Hashem, and in that way we reconnect with Hashem, and boost our efforts to continue on the righteous path, and bring us one more moment closer to the revelation of Mashiach.

Good Shabbos.