

Why The Awe This Time?

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The Mishkan is complete. Aharon is anointed as Kohen Gadol and he begins his duties with a series of Korbanot. When he completes the preparation of the Korbanot we are told:

"וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֶת הַעֹלָה וְאֶת הַחֲלָבִים וַיֵּרָא כֹּל הָעָם וַיִּרְדּוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל פְּנֵיהֶם" [ויקרא פרק ט:כד]

A fire emanated from before HaShem and consumed the burnt offering and the fats on the altar. All the people saw, they praised [HaShem] and they fell on their faces.

The experience was awesome and Am Yisrael were overwhelmed. A heavenly fire consumed the Korban, Am Yisrael witness it and fall on their faces in awe. It was a very powerful moment.

The problem with this episode is why now? What makes this particular miracle so special that Am Yisrael fall on their faces in awe? Am Yisrael are accustomed to seeing miracles. They witnessed the splitting of the Red Sea. Their travels in the Midbar have been guided by a pillar of cloud at day and a pillar of fire at night. They are blessed with daily miraculous food in the form of Manna. What made this heavenly fire unique? In what way was this miracle different? Why did Am Yisrael fall on their faces now but not before?

Shem Mishmuel offers a simple yet very powerful answer. There is a critical difference between this heavenly fire and other miracles. The heavenly fire appears here as a result of the actions of Aharon. The other miracles occurred through Moshe.

A miracle performed through Aharon is particularly significant. Aharon was involved in the Golden Calf; Moshe was not tainted by that sin. When Am Yisrael witnessed previous miracles, they might have concluded that those miracles were performed in Moshe's merit, but not theirs. They might have thought that they had no intrinsic greatness; they could have attributed other miracles to their proximity to Moshe.

Then something happened to shatter that illusion. A heavenly fire consumed a Korban offered by Aharon. Am Yisrael realized that their close relationship with HaShem was not dependent on Moshe. Aharon was involved in the Golden Calf and yet he merited a miracle performed through him.

Am Yisrael saw that HaShem has a relationship even with those who have sinned. They appreciated that miracles were not dependent on Moshe. They understood that they too

were capable of closeness with HaShem. It is with that confidence building realization that they fell on their faces with awe.

Am Yisrael understood then, as we must understand now, that HaShem does not give up on us. We must ensure that we do not give up on Him.

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