“Seven days preceding Yom Kippur, we separate the Kohen Gadol from his family, and sequester him in the Parhedrin Chamber” (Yoma 2).

The Lishkat Parhedrin becomes the home of the Kohen Gadol for the week preceding his service on Yom Kippur. It is in this chamber that he will prepare himself intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually to represent the Jewish people on Yom Kippur. One can only imagine the mixed emotions of apprehension and anticipation as the reality of his awesome responsibility set in throughout the Aseret Yemei Teshuva.

The Gemara relates an interesting halachic anomaly regarding this chamber relative to the other rooms of the Beit HaMikdash:

“מֵסֵורָה כָּל הַלְּשָׁכוֹת שֶׁהָיוּ בְּמִקְדָּשׁ לֹא הָיוּ לָהֶן מְזוּזָה, חָוץ מִלִּשְׁכַּת פַּרְהֶדְרִין, שֶׁהָיָה בָּהֶם בֵּית דִּירָה לְכֹהֵן גָּדוֹל. אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוּדָה: וַהֲלֹא כַּמָּה לְשָׁכוֹת הָיוּ בְּמִקְדָּשׁ שֶׁהָיָה לָהֶן בֵּית דִּירָה, וְלֹא הָיָה לָהֶן מְזוּזָה. אֶלָּא לִשְׁכַּת פַּרְהֶדְרִין גְּזֵירָה הָיְתָה. מַאי טַעְמָא דְּרַבִּי يְהוּדָה... שֶׁלֹּא יֹאמְרוּ: כֹּהֵן גָּדוֹל חָבוּשׁ בְּבֵית הָאֲסוּרִין.” (Yoma 10a–10b)

What is the nature of Rabbi Yehuda’s concern? Why would anyone assume the Kohen Gadol is incarcerated, and how does placing a mezuzah on the door mitigate this concern?

The answer to this question reveals how the entire Yom Kippur experience truly strikes at the heart of our fundamental challenge in perpetuating our Torah values to the next generation. To the outsider, uninitiated and unfamiliar with the Kohen Gadol’s preparatory journey, the sequestering of this great leader indeed appears as a form of incarceration. Cut off from his family and friends, he is constrained and forced to function exclusively within the narrow parameters of the Parhedrin chamber.

However, in reality, this environment provides the Kohen Gadol with the foundation to encounter the most profound moment of Divine connection imaginable. One who is intimately familiar with the inner workings of the Temple world can appreciate the solemnity and sanctity of the experience. Chazal were deeply concerned that people not characterize a religious experience of meaning and purpose as a confining suppression of opportunity and freedom. Therefore, they mandated a mezuzah to be placed upon the door of this chamber, proclaiming to all the eternal message of ahavat Hashem, love of G-d, as the defining character of the religious experience.

We find ourselves raising and teaching a generation that increasingly views the lifestyle of Torah and mitzvot as a “beit ha’asurim” – a restrictive environment comprised mostly of expectations and demands that undermine our natural ambition for individuality and freedom. It is our responsibility to affix mezuzot on the doorways of our religious experience and inspire our children to recognize the deep meaning and purpose that Torah and mitzvot provide to our lives.

The month of Tishrei is a unique opportunity in this regard. One can view these weeks as a “beit ha’asurim,” with an endless set of expectations and demands. Alternatively, one can view the month as one of opportunity. The chance to project the “veahavta et Hashem Elokecha” dimension to our religious life. To recognize how the Yamim Nora’im, and chagim which follow, are an eternal gift that provide our lives with reflection, transformation, and celebration.

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