A Direct Line

In order to make his once a year entry into the kodesh kodashim (Holy of Holies) on Yom Kippur, the kohen gadol had to pass through the heichal area. Both Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yossi agree that in the second Beis Hamikdash a single paroches (curtain) separated the heichal from the kodshei kodashim and that it was folded back a bit at its northern end to enable the kohen gadol to enter. Their point of disagreement is the route he took to reach this entrance.

Rabbi Meir contends that he walked between the golden altar and the table, which meant that his route traversed almost the center of the heichal. He did not set eyes on the heichal until he actually reached the paroches, turned right until the northern end and entered. Rabbi Yossi’s opinion is that he walked between the table and the northern wall, so that he was in a direct line with the entrance to the kodshei kodashim.

Rabbi Meir explains his position by pointing out that it would be disrespectful to the kodshei kodashim to walk along a route that affords a view of its sacred interior all along the way. Rabbi Yossi’s rejoinder is that Jews are so beloved by Hashem that this was not considered a problem.

Rabbeinu Chananel’s explanation of Rabbi Yossi’s statement is based on the difference between how the kohen gadol entered the sacred precincts of the Beis Hamikdash all year long and on Yom Kippur. All year long he was required to wear a special garment called a meil which had bells attached to its bottom hem “and its sound would be heard when he entered the sanctuary” (Shemos 28:35). This was like an envoy of the people announcing his arrival to the king and requesting permission to enter. On Yom Kippur, the kohen gadol entered the holiest of all areas without the meil, signifying that on this day he had a greater degree of privilege because of Hashem’s love for the people he represented. There was therefore no need for him to hesitate walking along a route that offered a view of that holy area.

Rashi’s approach is that Jews are so beloved by Hashem that they require no agent to bring their prayers before Him. Every Jew can pray directly to Hashem, as King Solomon put it in his prayer to Hashem at the dedication of the first Beis Hamikdash (Melachim I 8:38). Their emissary on Yom Kippur may therefore enter in such bold fashion.

The prayer of a Jew has a direct route to the kodshei kodashim from which it rises upwards to Heaven. Physical access to this sacred area is limited, however, to the emissary of all Jews — the kohen gadol on Yom Kippur. It therefore follows that he should, on that day, have the same free access and not hesitate to follow the most direct route to the kodshei kodashim.

Yoma 52a
The Missing Ark

The high point of the Yom Kippur service in the Beis Hamidkash was when the kohen gadol entered the kodesh kodashim and placed the incense in front of the holy ark. Since there was no holy ark in the second Beis Hamidkash, the incense was placed on a stone which marked its place, and was called even shesiah — the foundation stone, from which, say our Sages, the creation of the world began.

What happened to the holy ark? One opinion in the gemara is that it was taken into Babylonian captivity along with the other sacred vessels. Another is that when King Yoshiyahu anticipated the imminent exile prophesied in the Torah (Devarim 28:36), he ordered the holy ark concealed in some secret subterranean passage to prevent its being taken into captivity.

But why did those who built the second Beis Hamidkash at the end of the Babylonian Exile not make a new holy ark? If they lacked the original one, either because it was in foreign hands or because its hiding place was unknown, why didn’t they make a new one?

This question is raised by Rabbi Shmuel Strashan (Rashash). His approach in answering it is based on the Torah command “You shall place in the ark the testimony (the luchos upon which the Ten Commandments were etched)” (Shmos 25:16). This would seem to indicate that the purpose of the ark is to contain those sacred Tablets, and once they were gone there was no longer any need for an ark.

He notes, though, that some commentaries write that even though the urim ve’tumim were missing in the second Beis Hamidkash, the choshen breastplate which contained them (Shmos 28:30) was nevertheless worn by the kohen gadol to complete his full array of eight garments. If so, perhaps the ark, too, should have been made in order to complete the array of sacred vessels, even if it could not fulfill its primary purpose of housing the Tablets?

The same instruction of placing the Tablets in the ark, he explains, is repeated five passages later, and Rashi grapples with the need for this reiteration. It may be, Rashash suggests, that the reiteration is to stress that with no Tablets there is no need for the ark.

Yoma 53b