“And it was on the eighth day, Moshe called to Aharon and his sons, and the elders of Israel” (Vayikra 9:1). Aharon and his sons just completed the seven days of milu'im, the period after their anointing that they spent within the Ohel Mo'eid, the tent of meeting, as part of their being consecrated as kohanim.

This day is described as both part of, and subsequent to, the milu'im period. Rashi, on the opening of this week’s parashah, remarks about the word “shemini” that the Torah, by calling the day the eighth, is including it within the milu'im period. However, it clearly was different in kind from the others. The obligation to remain within the Ohel Mo'eid did not apply “because in seven days your hands will be filled.”

Seven, not eight. They are reassured that if they “remain within the door of the Ohel Mo'eid day and night, 7 days, and guard in Hashem’s guard, they will not die”. This promise stands in stark contrast to the eighth day, when Nadav and Avihu do die, within the mishkan, while serving Hashem – albeit improperly.

In a number of places, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch comments on the meanings of the numbers six, seven and eight in Jewish symbology. In his translation of Rav Hirsch’s commentary on the chumash, Dr. Isaac Levy provides this summary:

“The origin of this meaning is to be found in the work of the Creation. The visible material world created in six days received with the seventh day a day of remembrance of, and bond with its invisible L-rd and Creator, and thereby its completed summation. Similarly the symbolism of the number seven in the Menora, in the Temple, in the Mussaf offerings, in the sprinklings of the blood on Yom Kippur, in the Festivals of Pesach and Succoth, in Sabbath, Schmima, Tumma etc. etc. The symbolism of the number eight: starting afresh on a higher level, an octave higher. The eighth day for Mila, Schmini Atzereth and Israel as the eighth of G-d’s Creations. With the creation of Israel G-d laid the groundwork for a fresh, higher mankind and a fresh higher world, for that shamayim chadashim [new heavens] and the aretz chadashah [new earth] for which Israel and its mission is to be the beginning and instrument.”

For Rav Hirsch, the week gives meaning to the numbers six and seven. The Maharal, though, finds that the week itself is based on a more primary idea. He attributes the symbolism of six and seven, and therefore implicitly that of eight, to the structure of space:

“When you look closely you will find that the physical has six opposing sides, which are: top and bottom, right and left, front and back. All these six sides are related to the physical, because each side has extent, and limits physical objects. But, it also has in it a seventh, and this is the middle, which has no exposure on any side. Because it is not related to any side it is like the non-physical, which has no extension [takes up no volume of space].”

This difference is typical of their approaches to explaining ritual. To Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, symbols are a means of communication by

1 Vayikra 8:33
2 Ibid. v. 35
3 Yishayahu 65:17
4 Bamidbar 16:41
5 Gevaros Hashem, Ch. 46
which Hashem relays basic truths to man in a manner that uses experience to make a deeper impression than can speech. The symbolic system is a matter of convention between the parties of the communication. The Maharal sees them as expressions of ontologies, reflections of actual existences in how Hashem created the universe and man.

Still, to the Maharal too, six represents the physical world, and seven is the spiritual inherent in the physical world.

The highest drive Rav Hirsch calls the drive to be beyond human, to go beyond the seven days of creation and into the eighth day of the bris. The idea that eight represents “an octave higher” can be seen in the form of the letter ches. Its shape as described in the gemara and as found in Ashkenazi script is that of two zayin’s connected by a bridge. Zayin is seven in gematria. Ches is eight. Ches shows the bridge between one seven, one complete world, and the next.

There is a debate as to what exactly Nadav and Avihu did to merit death. Rashi quotes tanna’im: Rabbi Eliezer said it was that they ruled halachically without seeking their rebbe’s opinion; Rabbi Yishmael said they served in the temple while drunk. The Ramban and Ibn Ezra say the sin was that they brought their own fire to burn the ketores, whereas on that day a miraculous fire was to be used.

The source of their error was too much sanctity, not too little. It was one of overestimating the step to be taken between the world of the seven days of milu’im and the eighth.

All three could be understood as an overestimation of themselves. They thought that they could know what was appropriate without requiring Moshe Rabbeinu’s wisdom and prophecy. Alternatively, they thought that they had grown beyond having negative influences, that only the joy of mitzvos was left within them for wine to release. The fire of the first ketores was to be G-d’s, from this higher existence. But they, thinking that they were there already, thought that their own fire would suffice.

Moshe Rabbeinu said to Aharon, “Aharon my brother, I knew that the temple would be sanctified through those who are close to Hashem, and I thought that it would be through either myself or you. Now I see that they were greater than you or I are.” The source of their error was too much sanctity, not too little. It was one of overestimating the step to be taken between the world of the seven days of milu’im and the eighth. The Jewish people’s mission is to build that world; we are not yet within it.

6 Commentaries on 10:2

7 Rashi ad loc, quoting Chazal

The second berachah of Shemoneh Esrei is that of Gevuroos (Might). However, the berachah does not close with a mention of Hashem’s Gevuroah, but with “Mechayeih hameisim”, calling Hashem “the Giver-of-life of the Dead”. The berachah actually mentions the theme of resurrection repeatedly, “You are the Mechayeih meisim”, “You are mechayeih meisim in great mercy”, “He keeps His trust to those who sleep in the dust”, “the King who causes death and causes life.” Nor does the body of the berachah contain those things that we would normally associate with might; such as a mention of the flood, or perhaps the destruction of Sodom and Amorah, or the plagues and drowning the Egyptians, or even of the notion that “one can not see Me and live.”

To understand this focus, perhaps we should look at both what is gevuroah, and second, what is the purpose of techiyas hameisim.

To understand gevuroah, I would like to revisit what we saw about the concept of gevuroah expressed in the opening berachah, Birkas Avos. The Vilna Gaon understands the berachah by casting Moshe’s praise of Hashem, “haKel haGadol haGibor vehaNorah” as its backbone. The rest of Birkas Avos are iterations and elaborations of these ideas. Looking in particular at the middle two, we have “haGadol”, the Great, referring to Hashem as suffusing creation. This idea is elaborated upon with “gomeil chasadim tovim” (supports through good acts of kindness). HaGadol is chessed. And, as per the normal thesis-antithesis structure, chessed is followed by gevuroah.

This understanding of the berachah unsurprisingly associates “Hashem E-lokeinu” in its opening with the verse iteration of these two themes. As Rashi tells us in the beginning of Bereishis, “Hashem” is a name that connotes Mercy, “E-lokim”, with justice. It also associates gevuroah with the phrase...
after “gomeil chasadim tovim”, “veKonei hakol”, which the Gr’a renders “Who repairs everything”. In the final iteration through the themes, the pair is rendered “Ozeir uMosha”, “Helper and Savior”.

Chessed vs. Gevurah is giving vs. restraint. However, chessed emerges first. “Olam chessed yibaneh” – the world is built on chessed. What greater act of giving is there than the giving of existence itself? As Rav Shimon Shkop writes, the world exists so that Hashem could have recipients to whom He could give. How and why then does gevurah emerge? Because with restraint, Hashem can give us a greater gift, the opportunity to be givers ourselves, to be in His Image.  

But gevurah goes beyond that. With the ability for man to make his own choices and create and give on his own, comes the ability to make mistakes. This is the role of justice, to correct those errors. It is also why we need a Konei, a Repairer, and why we need a Mosha, someone who saves us after being mired in such errors, not only an Ozeir, a Helper.

These notions of Konei and Mosha run throughout Birkas Gevuros. Aside from Mechayeih meisim, we also praise Hashem as “the One Who causes the winds to blow and the rains to fall”, allowing winter to revive the crops, as “the One Who supports the fallen, Who heals the sick, Who releases the imprisoned”, and “Who causes redemption to sprout”. Were the world run with chessed alone, Hashem would simply prevent downfalls and sickness; there would never have a need for salvation.

The connection between this idea and reviving the dead is quite blatant – Hashem allows us our frailties and then, when appropriate, saves us from them. But by looking at the purposes suggested for the resurrection, we can get some idea of the true subtleties of the berachah. Four rishonim present conflicting views of its purpose, and therefore I would like to suggest that they would imply different meanings about the thrust of the berachah.

According to the Ramban, life after the revival is permanent, and is in fact what we call “Olam haBa”, the world to come, the ultimate reward. (Which is not the same as gan eden and gehennom.) The berachah then is not only about Hashem’s Gevurah, but also how that Gevurah allows man to eventually live up to his promise.

The Rambam understands techiyas hameisim as the beginning of a second, temporary life, from which one again dies. The ultimate reward, Olam haBa, is only possible without the limitations of physical existence, and is therefore identical to gan eden – the splendor of the afterlife. Why then is there a resurrection? So that man can be judged. This would focus on Hashem’s Gevurah as the source of Justice.

Rav Saadia Gaon teaches that techiyas hameisim is the means by which the righteous who worked toward the messianic era are rewarded by being able to experience it. It’s a revival well before the day of ultimate judgment, when the souls of the righteous are taken to a non-physical Olam haBa, a revival into the messianic period. The Ikkarim, Rav Yosef Albo has a similar but slightly different position. In his view, techiyas hameisim, follows the day of judgment, and leads to a qualitatively different kind of life, even though it concludes with a more mundane second death. The post-techiyah life is one without illness or downfall. It is one in which service of Hashem is taken to the next level, where the only challenges of such service are those internal to the person himself. (Perhaps because those resurrected are only those who mastered the challenges of our current kind of existence.)

According to Rav Saadia and the Ikkarim, the berachah is about Gevurah’s transitory nature. Because of Hashem’s Gevurah, history can progress, provide challenge and develop humanity until the day when man reaches the level where the synthesis of chessed and gevurah can be perceived, and life not lived as a tension between the two.

Because of Hashem’s Gevurah, history can progress, provide challenge and develop humanity until the day when man reaches the level where the synthesis of chessed and gevurah can be perceived, and life not lived as a tension between the two.

1 Introduction to Sha’arei Yosher

2 Sha’ar HaGemul
3 Peirush HaMishnayos, Sanhedrin, introduction to ch. Cheilek
4 Emanos VeDei’os 7:9

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