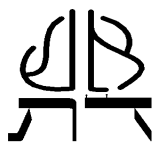


# Toras



# Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

### Shabbat Shalom

**T**he first day of the month of Nisan is a great occasion of joy within Biblical history: it is the day when the Almighty declared His first commandment to Israel, "this renewal of the moon shall be to you the festival of the New Moon; it is to be to you the first month of the months of the year" (Exodus 12:2). Indeed, the midrash records that these Divine words were heard throughout Egypt, because they foretold that a most significant event was about to take place on this first of the yearly months, the Israelite nation was about to be born as it leaves Egypt amidst great wonders and miracles, a stupendous change was about to transform the political and social character of the greatest power in the world, the Egyptian slave society (hodesh, hidush, month, change, novelty).

Therefore, the whole of the month of Nisan is considered to be a holiday, so that "we are not to fall on our faces (by reciting the penitential prayer tahanun) for the entire month of Nisan..., and we are not even to fast (during this month) for a *yahrzeit*" (death anniversary of a departed parent— Shulhan Arukh Orah Haim 429 and Ramo-Rav Moshe Isserles' gloss). The apparent reason for this festive quality of the month is the fact that Nisan is the month of our redemption. And this is especially true for Rosh Hodesh Nisan, the first day of the month of Nisan, when G-d's word was heard throughout Egypt and the optimistic command of sanctifying the monthly renewal of the moon was given to Israel; indeed, this is probably the reason why the author of the Passover haggadah even suggests that the seder ought have taken place on Rosh Hodesh Nisan, were it not for the requirement of matzah and maror on the evening of the 15th of Nisan.

And yet, the same Rav Moshe Isserles who forbids fasting on a *yahrzeit* during the month of Nisan and who generally forbids a bride and groom from fasting on their wedding day if they are married on any Rosh Hodesh (first of the month) throughout the year— since a bride and groom are forgiven all of their prior sins on their wedding day, they are by custom enjoined to make the day before their wedding a mini Yom Kippur fast up until the marriage ceremony—does specifically enjoin the bride and groom to fast on Rosh Hodesh Nisan! (Shulhan Arukh, Orah Haim 572, Ramo, Rav Moshe Isserles). And the Mishnah Brurah (Rav

Yisrael Meir Kagan, known as the Hafetz Haim) agrees, although other authorities consider it "a great wonder" (Aruk Hashulhan, peleh gadol). How can we explain the tradition allowing a bride and groom to fast on Rosh Hodesh Nisan?

In this week's Torah portion, we read of a horrific tragedy which occurred specifically on Rosh Hodesh Nisan, on the very eighth day which culminated the dedication of the Sanctuary: Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aaron the High Priest, were consumed by a Divine fire during the high point of the religious ceremony.

Why was a day of such religious sensitivity and significance transformed into such tragedy and terror? And why express the agony of what was supposed to have been a day of ecstasy in the fast of a bride and groom on that day?

According to our most classical commentary Rashi, Nadav and Avihu were righteous individuals, even more righteous than Moses and Aaron. "Said Moses to Aaron, 'My brother, I knew that the Sanctuary would be sanctified by those closest to the Divine, but I supposed that it would be by me or by you. Now I know that they (your two sons) are greater than we are'" (Rashi ad loc).

Why does the sanctification of the House of G-d require such two sacrifices— the best and brightest? The sacred text doesn't explain itself, it merely ordains and decrees. The Divine Presence is a flame of fire— and fire purifies, purges, but it also consumes. All the way back at the dawn of our faith, at the very beginning of G-d's first covenant with Abraham, "a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and behold a great black terror descended upon him— blood, fire and a pillar of smoke" (Genesis 15:12). The Prophet Ezekiel cries out, "And I see that you (Israel) are rooted in your blood, and I say to you 'By your blood shall you live, by your blood shall you live'"— and we recite these words at every circumcision ceremony. We here in Israel see the blood, fire and pillar of smoke at every homicide-suicide attack of terror. Apparently it is as Hillel understood it: the matzah of freedom must be joined to the maror (bitters) of sacrifice. So it has been ordained.

The Sanctuary of G-d is the nuptial home in which the Almighty and His beloved bride Israel are to dwell together. Every bride and groom are a reflection of G-d the groom and Israel the bride—and every marriage has moments of tragedy as well as joy, of fasting as well as feasting a Jewish marriage is the

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ultimate expression of Jewish faith in a glorious future despite the rootedness in blood, of Jewish belief "that there will be heard in the streets of Judea and the great places of Jerusalem the sound of joy and happiness, the sound of bride and groom" despite the exile and persecution.

And so Aaron is silent, "Va yidom Aharon", when faced with the tragedy of his sons' demise. He realizes that there are Divine decrees which must be accepted rather than understood, just as the Klauzenberger Rebbe, who lost a wife and thirteen children in the holocaust, would always interpret the words of Ezekiel, "bedamayikh hayii—by your silence do you live" (dam can mean blood, but also silence) -- because had the Jews lashed out at G-d in anger, they could never have rebuilt their lost Jewish world in America and Israel.

In a Munich Synagogue a few months ago, I witnessed another kind of silence. There were about one-hundred people in shul—but only the Cantor and I were praying. Everyone else was talking—but not the hushed tones in which neighbors generally speak during the Prayer Service but in loud conversations, even occasionally walking from place to place as they spoke, seemingly totally unaware of the praying and Torah reading going on at "center stage." My host explained it very well: "These Jews are all holocaust survivors or children of holocaust survivors. They're angry at G-d—so they can't, or won't speak to Him. But neither can they live without Him. So they come to shul, they don't speak to Him, but they speak to each other..."

What should bride and groom—symbolic of the eternal relationship between G-d and Israel pray to G-d about when they fast on their wedding day, even on that day of agony and ecstasy, Rosh Hodesh Nisan, which portends the ultimate Nuptial Home in which there will be no blood or tears. I believe that bride and groom,

representatives of Yisrael Sabba, Israel—G-d eternal, ought recite Psalm 83:

"Lord, You do not be silent, Do not keep quiet and do not still Your voice, O G-d. Because Your enemies are shouting and your foes are lifting their heads. They are saying 'Let us destroy them from being a nation, let the name Israel never again be remembered. Let them know, G-d, that Your Name alone is the highest over all the earth.'" © 2004 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

### **RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## **Taking a Closer Look**

There are numerous approaches brought by our sages and the traditional commentaries as to what Nadav and Avihu did, and what sin or sins they committed, to warrant instantaneous death- on the day that the Mishkan (portable Temple) was consecrated. And while some of these approaches are mutually exclusive (unless you subscribe to the theory that multiple planes of reality can exist simultaneously), because the sources of these approaches are impeccable, the concept of "ailu ve'ailu divrei Elokim chaim" (that they are all divine concepts), applies. In other words, the lessons that we can learn from how our sages (and the traditional commentators) understood Nadav and Avihu's actions (and mistakes) are all valid and worthwhile.

The Sifra (Shemini, Mechilta d'Miluim 32 and Acharai Mos 1:1) says that their sin was not showing enough respect to their father (by not asking his advice), not asking Moshe for advice, and not consulting each other before taking any action. In other midrashim (i.e. Vayikra Rabbah 20:6, and Midrash Tanchuma, Acharai Mos 6), Bar Kapara quotes R' Yirmiyah ben Elazar as saying that Aharon's sons died because of four things: for going into the Holy of Holies, for bringing an offering that they were not commanded to, for using a fire that did not come from the Altar, and because they did not consult each other first.

We can certainly understand why not giving Aharon (their father) or Moshe Rabbeinu enough respect is problematic. If for no other reason, had they asked either of them before doing what they did, they could have avoided their tragic mistake. But why does the Sifra include not consulting each other as (part of) their sin? R' Yirmiyah ben Elazar doesn't even mention not consulting Aharon and Moshe, only not consulting each other! If they each came to the same conclusion (as evidenced by their doing the same exact thing and receiving the same exact punishment), why should they have consulted each other first? What difference would it have made?

The midrash (Beraishis Rabbah 80:9) similarly takes Shimon and Levi to task for not consulting their father (Ya'akov) and for not consulting each other before wiping out Shechem (Beraishis 34:25-29).

Although they both took part in the massacre, they were reacting to what had happened to their sister, Dena. Ya'akov even cursed their anger (49:6), and blamed it for their reaction in Shechem (see Rashi on 49:6). So while they both had the same reaction, it was more of an over-reaction that might have been averted had they given it (more) forethought- including talking about it with each other before attacking. It was their impetuosity that caused the problem, and consulting each other first might have prevented their overreaction.

Whether Nadav and Avihu's motivation for bringing their misguided offering was to replicate the miraculous fire that had descended from G-d onto the Altar, or because they thought that even on that day fire must be from a human source, not just a heavenly source, or because they thought that the incense offering had to be brought before the other offerings were burned on the Altar, the fact that they both felt that it should be done was not enough. As the Aitz Yosef (on Vayikra Rabbah) puts it, "for had they consulted with each other they would have realized that their actions were evil and bitter, because salvation comes from increased advice." They reacted too quickly when they wanted to do something, even if it came from a strong desire to do the right thing. Instead, they should have discussed it not only with Moshe and/or Aharon, but with each other.

Some may (at first glance) think there is a fine line between being zealous (a very positive trait) and being impetuous. Upon taking a closer look, however, it is easy to distinguish between acting quickly after a fully thought out decision (including the appropriate consultations) has been made and reacting before taking a step (or two) back- to fully consider the situation and the possible options. Even when more than one person has the same reaction, it is imperative that it be fully discussed- among themselves and with others- before taking any action.

This is one of the myriad of lessons to be learned from the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. © 2004 Rabbi D. Kramer

#### **MACHON ZOMET**

## **Shabbat B'Shabbato**

*by Rabbi Amnon Bazak*

**A**fter the death of Aharon's two sons, the Torah quotes Moshe's command to Aharon and his remaining sons not to observe the rituals of mourning and not to leave the area of the Tent of Meeting (Vayikra 10:6-7), and to continue the dedication service of the eighth day (10:12-20). However, these two commands are separated by a passage that is not related to the dedication but are general commands for the Kohanim. "And G-d spoke to Aharon... Do not drink wine or liquor, you or your sons, when you come to the Tent of Meeting... In order to distinguish between the holy and the profane... And to teach Bnei Yisrael all of

the laws that G-d commanded to them." [10:8-11]. Many commentators saw a connection between the two subjects in this passage, explaining that the prohibition of drinking wine stems from the role of the Kohanim as teachers, since somebody who is intoxicated is not permitted to teach. But we are still left with a question: Why is this brought up at this point?

Rashi quotes the opinion of Rabbi Yishmael, that the sin of Aharon's sons was that they were intoxicated when they entered the Tabernacle. However, he also gives other explanations, perhaps because this interpretation is difficult to accept. After all, the description of the event in the Torah implies that the problem was that they offered "a strange flame" on the Altar, and there is no mention of them being intoxicated (see the Ramban). One explanation, given by Chizkuni, is that the prohibition of drinking wine is part of the command not to mourn. This is based on the existence of an ancient custom to give mourners wine and liquor (see Mishlei 31:6 -- "Give liquor to a lost person and wine to one whose soul is bitter"). However, this is not simple, since the prohibition of mourning was given by Moshe, while the command about wine was given directly by G-d to Aharon. This would imply that the two subjects are not related.

Perhaps the command against drinking wine can be understood differently. We learn from the death of Aharon's sons not only about their sin but also about the greatness of Aharon and his other sons in coping with this terrible tragedy. After Nadav and Avihu die, Moshe says to Aharon, "This is what G-d said: I will be sanctified through those closest to me, and I will be honored in front of the entire nation" [Vayikra 10:3].

According to the Rashbam, this means that the Almighty will be sanctified and glorified in the eyes of the nation by the fact that Aharon and his sons continue to perform the holy rituals. "It is an honor for the Shechina, that one sees his sons dead but ignores his mourning and performs the service of his creator." Thus, it may be that the prohibition of drinking wine, which stems from the role of the Kohanim in educating Bnei Yisrael, includes a reward for Aharon and his sons for the impressive way they coped with the tragic events. The fact that they have the strength to continue observing the mitzvot even at the most difficult times shows that they are worthy of teaching halacha to Bnei Yisrael. And that is the reason that this command was specifically given to Aharon. There is only one other place in the Torah that Aharon is given a direct command. After the affair of Korach and his followers, Aharon was also given a special task for the Kohanim. "And G-d said to Aharon, you and your sons and your father's family will carry the burden of the Temple's sin..." [Bamidbar 18:1].

In three separate affairs—the sin of the Golden Calf, the sins of Nadav and Avihu, and the sin of Korach—the greatness of the sons of Levi could be seen in their ability to cope with tragedy while

maintaining their great faith in G-d. For this reason, they were rewarded with central roles in the spiritual leadership of Bnei Yisrael.

### **I Will be Honored in Front of the Entire Nation"**

*by Rabbi Sinai, Kiryat Chinuch, Mevasseret Zion*

"And Moshe said to Aharon, this is what G-d said: I will be sanctified through those closest to me, and I will be honored in front of the entire nation. And Aharon was silent." [Vayikra 10:3].

The Almighty decided that in order for the Shechina to dwell within Bnei Yisrael it was not enough just to build a Tabernacle. It was necessary to have an example of sanctification of the holy name, to be accomplished through the death of Aharon's sons. While it is true that they died for committing a sin (the exact nature of the sin has been discussed by our sages), the punishment was a clear case of sanctifying the name of G-d. As is written by Rashi, "When the Almighty passes judgment on righteous people, it causes an increase in fear of G-d, His greatness increases, and He is praised." [Vayikra 10:3]. This leads to the presence of the Shechina within Bnei Yisrael. The punishment of righteous people demonstrates that true judgment exists and that nobody is given special treatment of any kind.

When the Almighty created the world, He at first wanted to create it based on the trait of justice, but He saw that the world could not survive in this way. He therefore gave precedence to the trait of kindness over strict judgment (see Rashi, beginning of Bereishit). However, the trait of judgment was not cancelled, rather it was joined by kindness and compassion. Our task is to constantly awaken the trait of kindness, but when we do not succeed and judgment calls for punishment, we must accept the decision. This is the true test of faith, showing whether it is deeply ingrained in our character or is only superficial.

Our generation as a whole was tragically and harshly harmed by the trait of judgment during the Holocaust. We and our descendents must pass the test of faith. If, G-d forbid, we fail this test, it will cause a great desecration of the holy name. However, passing the test will be the greatest possible example of sanctifying the name of G-d.

During this coming week, the entire nation, both in Israel and abroad, remembers the great destruction that took place during the Holocaust. It is true that the halacha does not set any specific date for self reckoning, since throughout the year we are commanded to repeatedly check our actions. However, once a date has been chosen for such a reckoning, we should certainly take advantage of it.

True self criticism must start, first of all, with everybody checking himself, to see the depth of his pure and simple faith. By performing this task, we will fulfill the Divine command in this week's Torah portion,

which is a definitive example of sanctifying the holy name: "I will be honored in front of the entire nation."

**RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## **Playing With Fire**

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. The Mishkan (tabernacle) was finally completed, and the celebration had begun. Special offerings were brought by Ahron, the High Priest, and his children, and the joy of accomplishment permeated the camp of the Jewish Nation. Then tragedy struck. Ahron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, brought an offering that the Torah characterizes as "an alien fire that Hashem had not commanded. A fire went out from before Hashem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem." (Leviticus 10:1-3)

Varying Talmudic and Medrashic opinions argue as to what exact sin they committed. Some commentaries interpret the literal verse by explaining that Ahron's children rendered a Halachic (Biblical law) decision in front of their master, Moshe. Others say that they performed their service after drinking wine. Still others argue that their true punishment was deserved at Sinai. They refused to marry claiming that their lineage was so dignified that no maiden could ever meet their standard. Another interpretation is that they began to discuss their future leadership roles that they would secure after the "two old men" (Moshe and Ahron) passed on.

In all these varying opinions a major question must be addressed. If those were their actual sins, why then did the Torah use the terminology "a strange fire that Hashem had not commanded" to describe their transgression? Obviously those words are fit to describe each interpretation that is offered. How?

The Dubno Magid would often relate the following parable: After receiving his promotion to captain, a young sergeant was given his new uniform. He was strictly warned by his appointing general. "Officer, this uniform is your badge of honor. Wear it with pride, and never remove it in public! Remember, you represent the king's elite forces, and your life is now devoted to enhance the honor of his kingdom."

Not long after his commission the young officer was chided by some seamen in a public park. "We hear you have a large tattoo across your chest reading 'I miss my Mom.'" The young officer was enraged at this humiliating claim, and disputed it vehemently. He was tempted to strip to the waist, but remembered the stern warning not to remove his coat. Suddenly one of the sailors declared, "we will contribute 500 golden pieces to the King's treasury if you don't have the tattoo—but only if you prove it now!"

In a patriotic move that the sergeant felt would surely bring pleasure to the commander-in-chief, he bared his chest, proved his point and collected the 500 gold coins. He ran to the general with the money and

expected a commendation. Unfortunately, the neophyte officer was greeted by a shower of abuse. "You fool! I just lost a fortune because of your stupidity. I bet the Navy admiral 2,500 gold pieces that not one of my soldiers would ever remove their uniforms publicly! "

Perhaps there is a common thread among all the explanations of the sins of Nadav and Avihu. In all of the opinions, they had the best of intentions but their actions lacked protocol and guidance. Actions without protocol can have disastrous results. Nadav and Avihu were considered very holy and pious. But the small degree of over-confidence led to their acting without consort. It led to their demise. Perhaps they felt that they were in a position to render judgment without Moshe, or that a little wine may have enhanced their service. Maybe they felt that marriage was beneath them. In theory they may have been correct. But they made decisions without consultation, advice, or consent. They were looked forward to their own leadership—a leadership that never materialized. They had the desire to contribute their own fire, according to their own visions, but the Torah considered it alien.

The Mishkan was given to the Jews to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. It was at the Golden Calf where the young nation rushed to judgment without true guidance. As soon as Hashem felt that the self-directed scenario was about to recur in the Mishkan, He made a powerful statement. It was as if the Mishkan had a nuclear charge. When dealing with high levels of radioactivity, one cannot forego the slightest established protocol. If you experiment with fire, especially an alien fire, unfortunately you get burnt. © 1996 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

#### RABBI AVI WEISS

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**A**mong the directions given in this week's portion is a command to Aaron the High Priest by God not to drink wine before officiating in the Tabernacle. (Leviticus 10:9)

Rashi explains the prohibition to mean that the priest "[may not drink] wine to such an extent that it has an intoxicating effect." Indeed, an opinion in the Talmud maintains that one has violated this prohibition only if an intoxicating wine of at least a re'vi't — approximately 4-6 fluid ounces has been consumed. (Keritut 13b) In such a state, Rambam adds that the priests could go astray by entertaining some improper thoughts or by becoming unclear and erring in a matter of law, thus violating the spirit of the Tabernacle rite.

In moderation, however, drinking is permissible. In fact, wine plays a crucial role in virtually every rite of passage — i.e. circumcision, marriage ceremony. And, wine is used to usher in most important days of our calendar year — i.e. Shabbat, Yom Tov, etc. Why is this so?

It can be suggested that wine is the symbol of joy. Therefore, in proper measure, it is drunk on the happiest of occasions and on the happiest of days.

Also, using wine on holy occasions teaches that while wine can intoxicate, when imbibed in moderate amounts and for lofty purposes, it can sanctify. Hence, we drink wine during kiddush and kiddushin (the marriage ceremony). Not coincidentally, both of these terms come from the word kadosh, holy. What this teaches is that everything in the world, even that which has the potential to be destructive, can be used for the good and even for the holy.

There is another explanation that is mystical in nature. Adam and Eve disobeyed God when they drank wine squeezed from grapes. Every Shabbat, and, for that matter, at other religious ceremonies, we drink wine as a way of fixing that mistake. In Eden, Adam and Eve drank wine improperly. On Shabbat we "return" to Eden, but in Eden where we celebrate and drink wine in accordance with the will of God.

Finally, wine can alter the senses; it has the capacity to change our mood and demeanor. It is, therefore, transformative in nature. Thus, wine is drunk when we go through important spiritual moments of transition, like when moving from the weekdays to Shabbat, or when experiencing a rites de passage.

Still, even as the Torah speaks openly about the holy potential of wine, it warns us of its deleterious effects. The fact that the Torah warns us about intoxication means that substance abuse, including alcoholism, is a human reality. As a religion that advocates the use of wine in moderation, we must realize that alcohol abuse is also a very real Jewish problem. We must never overlook this reality and make religious excuses for it. We have the responsibility to address it head-on while reaching out to embrace and show endless care and love for those afflicted with this terrible disease.

In this way we will show a true and real relationship with the wonderful and, at the same time, destructive nature of wine. © 2003 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

## Wein Online

**I**n the face of overwhelming tragedy, the death of his two sons, Aharon is nevertheless reprimanded by Moshe for a seeming infraction of the halacha regarding eating from a sacrifice while one is yet grief-stricken over the personal loss of near relatives. Aharon responds by defending his position as being halachically correct and proving the point to Moshe. Thereafter, Moshe, upon reflection, admits that Aharon is correct and that he fulfilled the Torah's law in this matter completely. The question that begs answering in this situation is the obvious one. At a black moment such as this one, where is there room for discussion of an

arcane halachic rule? Is this not a moment for emotion, for compassion, for sympathy, not for law and legalisms? Is it not almost cruel of Moshe to raise any sort of halachic issue whatsoever with his brother at a time of such sadness and tragedy?

As usual, the Torah uses this all too human situation to grant us an insight into God's view, so to speak, of life and human behavior. For any sort of mental stability to be present in one's life, one must live by a set of values and rules. Without such norms and standards, one is constantly blind-sided and buffeted by the never-ending problems of life. And, one is a prisoner of one's emotions and personal conflicts. There are so many times in life that one asks one's self, "Now what am I supposed to do? How am I to react to this event?" It is because of this recurring and never-ending human question that halacha takes on such a central role in the life of a Jew. It is precisely for this reason that halacha is so all-pervasive, covering every act and situation of a Jew's existence. It is halacha that rules our lives and sets our standards of behavior under all circumstances and all human conditions.

In today's society, God and religion have to somehow conform to the human being's comfort and pleasure zone. Religion cannot be too demanding. Three days of mourning is sufficient, not seven. Restrictions on behavior and entertainment on the part of the mourner are to be discarded. Religion cannot make one feel uncomfortable or make too many demands on time or life-style. God should have no say in the way human beings should express their emotions. In a society as self-centered as ours, religion is defined by and for me alone. There is no room for communal or generational considerations. It is only me - here and now - that counts. Thus the positive psychological benefits of a halachically endorsed grieving period and process is ignored and eventually forgotten.

The Torah and Jewish tradition have carefully and minutely described the laws, attitudes and customs that should govern one who is in the process of confronting tragedy and loss. The Torah in this instance, as in all other affairs of life, is on the side of humans. It attempts to give us perspective and balance, strength and inner fortitude in order that we are better equipped to deal with the inevitable blows of life. Therefore, Moshe correctly calls Aharon to task for apparently not following the Torah's law when tragedy overwhelmed him and his family. But it is the very steadfastness of Aharon in observing the Torah's laws, as expressed in his response to Moshe's criticism, that allows him to revive himself and rise from his grief and pain and become the great High Priest of Israel, beloved by God and all of the Jewish people.

Death is always an unwelcome visitor. Nevertheless, our mortality makes its appearance at our doorstep unavoidable. Yet, there lies within the soul deep resources that enable human beings to deal with

this final act of the life cycle. The Torah, and its accompanying halachic rules and norms, lights the way through the darkness of sad events and moments of grief. "Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me," says King David. In Jewish tradition and history "You are with me" is reflected in the laws and customs that the halacha has created for those trying and searing moments. And in so doing, "You are with me" becomes the cry of our ultimate triumph over death and darkness. © 2004 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory](http://www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory).

**RABBI YIRMIYA MILEVSKY**

## National Council of Young Israel

**T**he Torah gives us two signs by which we can determine the status of aquatic creatures: "You may eat any creature that lives in the water, whether in seas or rivers, as long as it has fins and scales.: (Vayikra 11:9)

The Talmud (Chullin 66b) points out an interesting zoological fact -all fish with scales have fins as well, but fish with fins do not necessarily have scales. As a result of this rule, when we walk in to the fish market to purchase kosher fish, the only sign we have to look for are the scales. Once we spot scales on the fish we may consider it kosher, and no need for a tradition on that specific species is required.

However in light of this general rule, one cannot help but wonder why the Torah mentions fins at all, since their presence does not affect the laws of kashrus. Scales should be the only determinant.

The commentators explain that the Torah mentions both scales and fins to convey to us a very basic principle of Jewish survival. The Sages liken the Torah to water and the Jewish people to fish - just as fish cannot live outside of water, Jews as a people cannot exist without Torah. The scales and fins of fish represent two essential aspects of Jewish continuity.

The scales are comprised of a thickened layer of "skin" that is designed to ward off external dangers, such as sudden changes in temperature and water pressure. Fins enable fish to maneuver in the water and turn in different directions.

To endure the trials and tribulations of thousands of years of exile, the Jewish people have had to develop a "thick skin" to shield them from dangerous external influences. Jews have managed to survive because of their ability to resist change and to limit their interaction with the non-Jews among whom they have dwelled.

In fact many of the rabbinic decrees were established for this purpose, to guard the Jew from the

outside world, so he could continue the mission of transmitting the word of HaShem to the next generation.

The scales of kosher fish represent these social barriers that the exiled Jew has had to erect around himself.

However, a Jew cannot isolate himself completely from the society in which he lives. In order to survive, he must adapt certain elements of his lifestyle to the customs of society. From speaking the vernacular, to understanding and following the law of the land, all this is required by the Jew during his time in exile.

The fins of kosher fish represent this ability of the Jew to adapt himself. As the fins guide the fish to change direction and adapt to his new environment and challenge, so to the Jew must learn to do so in exile.

This is the reason Yaakov used the metaphor of fish when he blessed the sons of Yosef:

"May He bless the lads, and let them carry my name, along with the names of my fathers, Avraham and Yitzchak. May they increase in the land like fish. (Bereishis 48:16)

Unlike their cousins, Yosef's sons were born and bred in exile. They grew up among non-Jews and were exposed to the degenerate values of an extremely depraved and corrupt society. They, more than any of Yaakov's other grandsons, needed the blessing of fins and scales.

#### RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

## RavFrاند

*Transcribed by David Twersky*

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**A**fter the deaths of the two sons of Aaron, Moshe told Aaron: "Of this did HaShem speak saying 'I will be sanctified through those who are close to Me and I will be honored before the entire people.'" Aaron's reaction was silence. [Vayikra 10:3]

Rashi quotes the source [based on Zevachim 115b] for Moshe's assertion that G-d would be sanctified through those who were closest to him. The pasuk [verse] says, "I shall meet with the Children of Israel, and it shall be sanctified through My honor (v'nikdash b'kvodi)" [Shmos 29:43]. According to the homiletic interpretation of the pasuk, the word b'kvodi is not read as it is vowelized - "b'kvodi - through My honor". Rather, it is read as if it were vowelized b'kvoday (through those who honor Me).

The Gemara there elaborates. Moshe consoled Aaron by saying "I knew that this Mishkan [Tabernacle] was going to be sanctified through the death of someone close to G-d. I thought that it would be either you or me. I now see that they (Nadav and Avihu) were greater than either of us".

At first blush this seems very strange. Who said "I thought it would be either you or me, because we are the holiest ones here"? That is Moshe Rabbeinu

talking—the most humble of all men. How could the most humble person in the whole world say about himself, that he (or his brother) were the holiest persons in the entire congregation?

Rav Leib Chassman points out that if we think this statement is a contradiction to Moshe's humility, we are making a terrible mistake as to the definition of humility. If someone denies who he is, that is not modesty - that is foolishness!

A person who denies his own identity and talents is not humble. He is deceiving himself. An 'anav' [humble person] can know precisely who he is.

There is a famous story which illustrates this point. Rav Chatzkel Abramsky, zt"l, once needed to testify in a case in which the Beis Din of London was sued by a shochet [ritual slaughterer] who had been fired. As the head of the Beis Din, Rav Abramsky had no choice, but to testify in secular court. His attorney asked him to state his name and his position. The attorney then asked, "Is it true that you are the greatest living halachic authority on the European continent?" Rav Abramsky said, "Yes. That is true."

At that point the judge interjected and said, "Rabbi Abramsky, is that not rather haughty on your part? I thought that your laws and ethics teach you to be humble." Without any hesitation, Rav Abramsky responded, "I know we are taught to be humble. But I am under oath."

The point of this story is that Rav Chatzkel Abramsky was aware that he was the greatest living halachic authority on the European continent. Recognition of his true status was not haughtiness.

Rav Moshe Feinstein did not consider himself "an ignoramus". He knew that he was the posek [halachic authority] of his generation. Nevertheless, he was an extremely humble person.

What then is the key to humility? The key to humility is to remember that whatever a person has and is, is a gift from Heaven. "It is not my strength and the power of my hand that has wrought me this great wealth" It is not my brains. It is not my talents. It is not innate. It is all a blessing from G-d." A person remains humble by realizing and remembering that all of his achievements in this world are only through the good graces of G-d, and that he can lose them at any minute, G-d forbid.

There is a famous Mishneh at the end of Maseches Sotah that states that when Rebbi (Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, the editor of the Mishneh) died, humility ceased. Rav Yosef in the Gemara questions this Mishneh and says that it could not possibly be accurate "For I am here". This comment of Rav Yosef begs for clarification.

I once heard a beautiful homiletic interpretation of this Talmudic passage. Rav Yosef was not saying, "I am humble. Therefore there are humble people around." He was saying something else. We learn elsewhere that Rav Yosef became blind. When he

became blind, he forgot all his learning. This great Amora, Rav Yosef, whose opinion is found on so many folio of Shas, who learned so much, who taught so much—this same Rav Yosef forgot it all after his illness.

Rav Yosef is saying is the following: Do not say that there cannot be humble people around anymore—because I am around. As long as I am around, people can look at me and see what can happen to a person. Let them see that a person can be an Amora, know all of the Mishnayos, have hundreds of students and yet forget it all. If people bear that in mind, then there can still be humble people. For the key to humility is realizing that everything is a gift that can be lost at any time.

### In The Way A Person Wishes To Go, That Is How G-d Will Lead Him

There is an interesting Medrash on the pasuk "Wine and strong beverage do not drink" [Vayikra 10:9]. The Medrash cites an incident involving an alcoholic. His addiction was so bad that he would sell everything he owned to support his habit. He ultimately even sold his own furniture and household utensils in order to buy wine. When his children saw what was happening, they decided that they had to do something dramatic to demonstrate to their father the destructiveness of his behavior.

When he was totally drunk, they tied him up and carried him out to the cemetery and left him there. They figured that he would sleep off his drunken stupor there, and upon waking in the morning, would see where he was, and become shocked by the fact that he found himself in a graveyard. Hopefully, he would thereby get the message that alcohol was killing him and would stop drinking.

The Medrash says that while he slept, a caravan containing barrels of wine passed by. Suddenly pirates approached to descend upon the caravan. The caravan had to speed away at a fast speed. In their haste, they allowed a barrel of wine to bounce off a wagon. It rolled into the cemetery and landed right near the head of the sleeping drunk father.

When their father awoke the next morning, he saw the barrel of wine next to his head and started drinking all over again until he was stone drunk once more. The children arrived at the cemetery the next morning and saw the situation. Frustrated, they said, "Even here, G-d does not allow you to break your habit. Since He gives it to you, we do not know what to do to counteract the Will of G-d." In other words "This is fate. G-d wants you to be a drunkard and there is nothing we can do about it."

What is the point of this Medrash? What is it trying to tell us with this story?

Rav Eliyahu Dessler writes that the lesson of the Medrash is that G-d helps a person do whatever he wants to do. In the way a person desires to go, that his how he is directed from above. If one wishes to become

a righteous person, G-d will help him to become a righteous person. If one wishes to be an evil person, He will find ways to let you be an evil person. If one wishes to be a drunkard, G-d will provide him with a barrel of wine right next to his head.

But one might ask - don't we all want to be righteous people? Who does not want to be a Tzadik? Don't we all want to be Torah scholars? And yet we see that G-d does not make it so easy for us! So, Rav Dessler asks, what is the difference between the drunkard and us? G-d provided the barrel of wine to the drunkard, but we are not so easily provided with what we need to become righteous and scholarly. We sometimes find it so difficult to sit down and learn. We find it so difficult to daven (pray) with proper intent. We find that so many things that we want to do are so difficult for us to achieve!

The difference, Rav Dessler said, is that the drunkard was willing to sell his furniture, willing to sell every last thing he had for another drink. When the will is that strong, it indicates that the person REALLY wants something. When someone REALLY wants something, G-d makes it easy for him to acquire it. Unfortunately, many times, our desire to do the right thing—to learn, to pray, whatever it may be—is not as strong as the will for the alcoholic to have their next drink. © 2003 Rabbi Y. Frand and torah.org

### RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

## What is Freedom

The main story of this week's Parsha, Shemini, is about the death of Aaron's two sons after they tried to bring an offering they were not supposed to bring. The Torah attests to the fact that Aaron was quiet about his sons' deaths, and didn't complain or question G-d (10:3). Rashi explains that his reward was that G-d spoke to him directly. Why was that his reward, and why do we need to know what Aaron's reward was?

As the Lekach Tov explains, Rashi is telling us more than just about the reward Aaron received. It's been well documented that G-d doesn't speak to anyone that's sad. What that tells us is that not only was Aaron quiet, but that he wasn't even sad about his sons dying, and never doubted G-d's decision to take them away. It is a spiritual level we should all strive for. If we only think of our physical lives, then in a sense we're dying with every second that brings us closer to it. But as Ramban explains, if we understand that there's more to life than our time on earth, we'll realize that this world is only the beginning and that death is not the end. With that in mind, we will understand that there's less to be sad about, and we can live our lives embracing that physical "goal line". The Parsha (and Aaron) is teaching us that when we embrace death, we can enjoy living! © 2003 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.