

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

When the wicked Tornsufus questioned how we could consider circumcision as improving upon G-d's creation of man, Rabbi Akiva responded by comparing sheaves of wheat and loaves of bread, thereby demonstrating that G-d gives us the opportunity to take the raw materials that He provides and make something better out of them. This raises an issue regarding the blessing we make before eating this man-improved food, thanking G-d "who brings bread from the ground." If man plowed the field, planted and cultivated the seeds, harvested the wheat, ground it, mixed it with water (and possibly other ingredients), kneaded it, shaped it and baked it, how are we making a blessing that makes it seem as if G-d caused loaves of bread to just sprout from the ground?

Other blessings are more straightforward. For example, we thank G-d for "creating the fruit of the tree" before eating the very fruit He caused to grow. But bread is, as Rabbi Akiva aptly showed, a man-made item, even if man did take G-d's raw materials to make it. Why do we thank G-d for "bringing bread (i.e. the finished product) out of the ground?"

Numerous commentators refer to the Talmud's statement (Shabbos 30b) that in the future the ground will produce actual loaves of bread, explaining that when we thank G-d for bringing loaves of bread from the ground, we are alluding to this future utopian world when we won't have to work, i.e. won't have to turn sheaves of wheat into bread. However, the Talmud also says (Berachos 38a) that when making this blessing we must use the past tense ("who brought bread out") rather than (just) the future tense ("who will bring bread out"), as we are primarily thanking G-d for the food that we are about to eat (see Rashi), not the food that will someday be available.

Some commentators point out that the word "bread" often refers to all food, not just bread itself. Rabbi Yonah Ibn Genach (in his dictionary) brings the

verse that says that G-d "gives bread to all flesh" (Tehillim 136:25). Since "all flesh" includes the animal kingdom (and they do not have bakeries), "bread" must mean "food" and not literally bread. The Radak uses this approach to explain the verse in Tehillim (104:14) that is remarkably similar to our blessing, that G-d "brings bread out from the ground," which he understands to refer to food in general. Rabbeinu Bachya (Shulchan shel Arba I), before explaining that the blessing's future connotation of "brings out" refers to the above-mentioned future utopia, applies this less specific definition directly to our blessing, "for the bread does not come out of the ground, only the grain from which bread is made."

By now, you are probably wondering what this has to do with our Parsha. Well, our Parsha contains the mitzvah of bringing the "Omer" offering (Vayikra 33:9-15), and a closer look at this offering may give us further insight into the meaning of the blessing.

The B'er Yosef points out that although every offering of grain uses the same measurement (one tenth of an eifah) the term "omer" is used exclusively by this offering of the first barley harvested from the new crop - so much so that the offering itself is referred to as the "Omer Offering." Even the offering of the new wheat (a more distinguished grain) doesn't use this term. Where else do we find the term "omer?" By the Mun (manna) that the Children of Israel ate during their 40 years in the desert (Shemos 17:11-36), where each person collected an "omer" for each member of his household. And it is here that we are told that an omer is a tenth of an eifah. There must be a link between the Mun and the Omer offering if this term is primarily shared by them.

Another fascinating connection that the B'er Yosef makes between these two is their timing. "And the Children of Israel camped at Gilgul, and they did the Passover offering on the 14th of the month at night, in the Plains of Jericho. And they ate from the old produce of the land on the day after the Passover [offering]-matzohs and roasted wheat. And the Mun was finished on that next day when they [still] ate from the old produce of the land, and the Children of Israel had no more Mun, and they ate from the new produce of the Land of Canaan that year (i.e. from then on)." We see from these verses (Yehoshua 5:10-12, see Kiddushin 38a) that the Mun lasted through the first day of Passover, the 15th of Nissan, and the "new" crop became permissible to eat from the 16th of Nissan. And

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on the occasion of his engagement to
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guess which offering allows the new crops to be eaten—that's right, the Omer! The Omer was brought on the first day that there was no longer any Mun, a sort of "hemshech" (continuation) of the heavenly "bread" that had been eaten every day in the desert.

There was one major difference, though, between the Mun that was eaten through the 15th of Nissan and the Omer that would be brought every year on the 16th: The Mun was obviously heaven sent; no plowing or planting was needed. It could even be eaten just as it fell from heaven - without any further preparation - if they wanted, after making a blessing thanking G-d "who brings bread from the heavens." The Omer, on the other hand, came from barley that had to be planted and harvested, and underwent a very complicated process of preparation (see Rambam, Laws of Constant and Additional Offerings 7:11) that included separating the barley, slightly roasting it, grinding it and sifting it numerous times. It's the epitome of heaven-sent "bread" versus the extreme human toil that went into the Omer offering. Yet, what was done with the Omer after all of that work? "And he (the Kohain) shall waive the offering before G-d" (Vayikra 23:11). "It was brought back and forth towards the One to whom the (4) directions belong, raised and lowered towards the One to whom the heaven and earth belong" (Menachos 62a). Despite all of the human effort that went into the preparation of the Omer, we indicate that it still comes from G-d and belongs to G-d, that until the new grain is brought as an offering to Him, we dare not eat any of it.

The B'er Yosef says that the Mun and the Omer are comparable because we are making the statement that we consider them as equals. Just as the Mun was completely from heaven, we acknowledge that the Omer is similar - as if it too is coming straight from heaven. This is why they are both referred to as "omer,"

and why the Omer was brought precisely on the first day after the Mun was finished.

Ultimately, everything comes from G-d. The ability to plow, and the land to plow. The ability to plant and cultivate, and the ability of the seed to grow into a sheath. The ability to harvest and grind and knead and bake, and the ability to earn enough to buy the finished product or the ingredients to make it. The system through which we have the opportunity and ability to buy these products - and through which these products are available. We certainly have the free will to use (or abuse) the abilities that G-d gave us, but ultimately, along every step of the way, G-d must give us the ability and wherewithal to do it. By thanking G-d for "bringing bread from the ground" we are acknowledging that He was, and is, the force behind everything. © 2005 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd I shall be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel" (Leviticus 22:32).

The biblical portion of Emor opens with a very strange commandment to the Kohanim-priests of Israel: "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Say to the Kohanim-priests children of Aaron and tell them: Do not defile yourself by contact with the dead of the nation'" (Leviticus 21:1). And the bible goes on to delineate the only dead with whom the Kohen-priest may have contact: his wife, his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother and his unmarried sister. In previous commentaries, I have explained the fundamental prohibition against Kohen-priestly involvement with death and cemeteries as a ringing declaration that Judaism-unlike all other religions from the dawn of history to present day-is not chiefly concerned with the other world but rather is concerned with this world, is not interested primarily in death and the hereafter but is rather principally engaged with life and the here-and-now. Our major religious question is not how to ease the transition from this world to the next but in rather how to improve and repair the society in which we are now living.

What does seem strange, however, is that our same Biblical portion goes on to command: "You shall not desecrate the name of my holiness; I shall be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel." (Leviticus 22:32)

Our Talmudic sages derive from this verse the necessity of sacrificing one's life-sanctifying the name of G-d (Kiddush Hashem) -- for the sake of the commandments of the Bible: under all circumstances an individual Jew must give up his life rather than transgress any of the three major prohibitions of murder, sexual immorality or adultery, and, in times of Gentile persecution of the Jews, a Jew must die rather than publicly transgress even the simplest or most

"minor" of Jewish Laws, even a Jewish custom referring to our shoe-laces (B.T. Sanhedrin 74a,b). If indeed the preservation of life in this world is deemed to be important, that our Kohen-priest may have virtually no contact with the dead-and the Talmudic Sages even insist that when the Jews are not being persecuted, it is actually forbidden for a Jew to forfeit his life in order not to desecrate the Sabbath, for better he desecrate one Sabbath and remain alive to keep many Sabbaths (B.T. ibid, Maimonides, Laws of Torah Fundamentals 5) -- then why command martyrdom in any situation at all? And the truth is that our history is tear-drenched and blood-stained by the many sacred martyrs of our faith who have given up their lives in sanctification of the Divine Name!

I believe that the answer to our question lies in the very juxtaposition of the law of priestly defilement emphasizing the importance of life to the law of martyrdom enjoining death within the very same Biblical portion. Yes, preservation of life is crucial and this world is the focus of the Jewish concern-but not life merely for the sake of breathing and not the world as it is, with all of its imperfections, after all, anyone who lives only to keep on living is doomed to failure, for no one has gotten out of this world alive. Living, and not merely existing, means devoting one's life to external ideas, ideals, and values which are more important than any individual life; one enables one's life to participate in eternity by dedicating it to the eternal values which will eventually repair the world and establish a more perfect society. Hence we must value and elevate life, improve and enable this world, but always within the perspective of those principles which will lead us to redemption, those beliefs and actions which are more important than any individual life. Yes, "live by these (My laws)," but external life can only be achieved by a dedication which includes the willingness to sanctify G-d's name with martyrdom, albeit only under very extreme circumstances.

But then how can we justify martyrdom-even if only during periods of persecution-for the sake of a Jewish custom referring to our shoe-laces? What can there possibly be about a shoe-lace which strikes at the heart and essence of our Jewish mission? The Talmudic commentary of the Ashkenazik (France-Germany) Sages of the eleventh-twelfth centuries, when many Jews were martyred by the Crusaders, suggest that the general custom in Rome and its numerous colonies during the second century was to wear white shoelaces; the Jews, however, wore black shoelaces, as a memorial to the loss of our Holy Temple and the disappearance of the Jewish National Sovereignty in Jerusalem. When Gentiles in times of persecution attempted to force Jews to wear white shoe-laces-and thereby force the Jewish Community to cease their mourning for the loss of our national homeland- the Jew must respond with Martyrdom (B.T. Sanhedrin 74b, Tosafot ad/oc).

My revered teacher Rav Joseph B Solovetchik added one crucial point. Among the many Jewish laws, decrees and customs which have developed from Biblical times to the present, the Jews themselves do not always realize which are truly vital for our national and religious preservation; the Gentiles who are persecuting us always do, because they-wishing to destroy us-strike at the jugular. Hence whatever they insist we abandon, we must maintain even at the price of our lives!

From this perspective, it becomes easier to understand why the current claws of anti-semitism-especially throughout Europe-is expressing itself in acts of persecution specifically focused against the state of Israel and her policies. The double standard of condemning us for fighting back against terrorists without so much as censoring those responsible for the terror, the disenfranchisement of our right to a State while championing the cause of our non-democratic (as yet) enemies to a State and the de-humanization and demonization of our political leadership in the enemy press and media might only emphasize to us how crucial and vital the State of Israel is for Jewish survival today.

The memorials of Yom Hashoah and Yom Hazikaron quickly followed by Yom HaAtzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim must remind us that Israel is not merely a destination but is truly destiny; Israel is not only the means to our survival, but it is also our mission for world salvation, from whence the word of G-d, a G-d of life, love and peace-will spread to all of humanity.

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In this week's portion, the Torah proclaims the famous dictum "eye for an eye." (Leviticus 24:20) The message seems clear. If one takes out the eye of a neighbor, his punishment is that his eye is taken out.

The oral law, however, explains through logic that "eye for an eye" is monetary compensation as it may be impossible to carry out equal justice through a physical penalty. For example, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai said, if a blind person damaged the sight of another...how would he be able to give an eye for an eye? The school of Hezekiah added that it can sometimes happen that more than an eye could be taken from the perpetrator if in the process of taking an eye, the assailant dies. (Baba Kamma 84a)

The Talmud also uses a textual proof for its thesis. The Torah states "You shall not take a ransom for the life of a man who is condemned to death." (Numbers 35:31) This implies that for the life of a murderer you may take no ransom, but you may take ransom for the major organs of the human body which do not grow back. (Baba Kamma 83b)

One wonders, however, if "eye for an eye" is monetary, why doesn't the Torah spell this out clearly? Perhaps it can be suggested that the written law sets the tone, gives the direction, and presents the teaching. As the Torah is read the listener hears the words "eye for an eye" and concludes that if I remove the eye of another, the crime is so heinous it is deserving of my eye being removed. In the words of Ha-ketav Ve-ha-Kabalah "the Torah mentions here only what punishment the perpetrator of bodily injuries deserves."

The oral law, however, which is the interpretation of the Torah, tells us how these rules are actually practiced. While one who removes the eye of another may be deserving of physical punishment, in practical terms he receives a monetary penalty.

My Rebbe in Tanakh, Nechama Leibowitz, points out that in the phrase "eye for an eye" (ayin tahat ayin) the term tahat is used. While usually translated as "for" tahat actually means "instead of." In place of the eye something different is substituted - money.

This concept may explain what seems to be a difference between the written and oral law concerning capital punishment. On many occasions, for example for cursing one's parents, the Torah states "He shall die." (Exodus 21:17) Yet, the oral law cites opinions that capital punishment was hardly, if ever, carried out. (Mishna Makkot 1:10)

The Torah once again is telling us about what the perpetrator deserves. Cursing a parent and other such offenses are so horrible that they are deserving of death. However, the oral tradition, through the practical halakhic judicial process, proclaims that capital punishment hardly, if ever, actually occurs.

The written law cannot be understood without the oral law. Together they form one unit. The Zohar claims that written law is the "harsh law" while the oral tradition is the "soft law." The two combine to form what we refer to as Torah whose ways are "ways of pleasantness." (Proverbs 3:17) © 2005 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah gives us a glimpse into the kohanim's status during Moshiach's times. The prophet Yechezkel begins by directing our attention to the specific regulations of the kohanim's garb. He then refers to their restriction from wine and shaving and mentions their prohibition from marrying certain women. This list seems to be, at first glance, a total repetition of the details of our parsha. Yet, a more careful analysis reveals to us something shocking about the elevated status of the ordinary kohain of Mashiach's times. His restrictions and regulations are similar to those of the Kohain Gadol mentioned in this week's parsha. This suggests that the ordinary kohain's spiritual status will be likened to that of the Kohain

Gadol. Evidently, the Jewish people's status will be so elevated that the ordinary kohain will assume levels of sanctity tantamount to the most sanctified person of earlier times.

The prophet Yechezkel conveys this message by drawing our focus to the priestly garb during their service. It will be exclusively linen rather than the customary complex woolen and golden material of earlier times. In addition, the kohanim will be forbidden to wear their garb outside the Bais Hamikdash thereby limiting all mundane association with the garb. Their hair length will be regulated and limited to that of the Kohain Gadol of earlier times- not too long, not too short. They will even be forbidden to marry widows thus limiting their marriage to virgins. (see comments of Radak, Abravenel and Malbim to these respective passages) All of these regulations run parallel lines with those of the earlier Kohain Gadol. In fact, some of them were previously prescribed for the Kohain Gadol during his elevated Yom Kippur service. We conclude from this that the daily Temple service of Mashiach's times will assume higher levels of devotion than ever and resemble, on some level, the Yom Kippur service of earlier generations. The earlier experience of the Kohain Gadol on the holiest of all days in the holiest of all places will eventually become part of the daily service of Mashiach's times!

In order to digest this overwhelming development let us study the inner workings of the Kohain Gadol. In this week's parsha, the Torah gives us the reason for the Kohain Gadol's elevated status. After listing all his specific regulations the Torah states "And he should not leave the Mikdash and not profane the sanctity of Hashem because the crown of Hashem is upon his head." (Vayikra 21:12) Sefer HaChinuch (in Mitzva 270) elaborates upon the concept of "the crown of Hashem". He cites the opinion of the Rambam (in Hilchos Klei Hamikdash 5:7) that the Kohain Gadol was confined to the Bais Hamikdash area throughout his entire day of service. In addition, Rambam teaches us that the Kohain Gadol was forbidden to leave the holy city of Yerushalayim during nightly hours. This produced an incredible focus on Hashem and His service yielding the supreme sanctity of the Kohain Gadol. Sefer HaChinuch profoundly states, "Although the Kohain Gadol was human he was designated to be Holy of Holies. His soul ranked amongst the angels constantly cleaving to Hashem thus detaching the Kohain Gadol from all mundane interests and concerns." (ad loc) Sefer HaChinuch understands the Kohain Gadol's elevated sanctity as a product of his total immersion in the service of Hashem. His surroundings of total sanctity together with his constant focus on Hashem and His service produced the holiest man on earth. His elevated life-style was restricted to one of total sanctity because his total interest and focus were devoted to purity and sanctity.

We can now appreciate the sanctity of the ordinary kohain of Mashiach's times and its message for us. First, a word about the general status of the Jewish people during that era. The prophet Yeshaya refers to this illustrious time in the following terms, "And the land will be filled with the knowledge of Hashem likened to the water that fills the sea." (Yeshaya 11:9) Rambam elaborates upon this and states, "And in this time there will be no jealousy or quarreling... the preoccupation of all will be 'to know Hashem'...the Jewish people will be great scholars who will understand Hashem to maximum human capacity." (Hilchos M'lochim 12:5) In essence, the entire Jewish nation will be absorbed in learning Hashem's truthful ways. Their total focus will be on Hashem's expression in every aspect of life thus revealing more and more of His unlimited goodness and knowledge. It stands to reason that if this will be the knowledge of the ordinary Jew, how much greater will be that of the kohain who is privileged to stand in the actual presence of Hashem! One cannot begin contemplating the ordinary kohain's daily experience with Hashem. His profound knowledge of Hashem together with his direct and constant association with Him will truly elevate him to the sanctity of "Holy of Holies". His awareness of Hashem's presence will therefore, in certain ways, become tantamount to that of the Kohain Gadol on the holiest day of the year. May we soon merit to witness and experience such elevated levels of sanctity, so sorely needed in our times. © 2005 Rabbi D. Siegel & TorahWeb.org

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Sfas Emes

by Rabbi Zvi Miller

The parsha begins with an unusual turn of phrase. The language used-"Emor... ve'amarta" ("Speak... and tell") -- seems to call for special interpretation. Why does the Torah use this double mention of "amira"?

Apparently, this question also bothered Chazal. How do we know? Because the first paragraph of Medrash Rabba on the parsha addresses this very question. The methodology that Medrash Rabba uses to provide an answer is straightforward. The Amoraim there scour Tanach to find other pesukim which also use a double mention of "amar", and thus may resonate with the pasuk here.

Chazal find such an "echo" in a pasuk in Tehilim (12:7) That pasuk says: "Imeros HaShem ahmahros tehoros; kesef tzaruf, ba'alil la'aretz, mezukak shivasayim (ArtScroll: "The words of HaShem are pure words; like purified silver, clear to the world, refined sevenfold.").

The Sfas Emes notes that the pasuk in Tehilim introduces the subject of tahara (purity; i.e., "ahmahros tehoros") into the discussion. He seems to wonder what

the subject of purity is doing here. To understand what the Sfas Emes says next, some background information may be helpful.

We live with a fundamental metaphysical problem: How can we, as human beings- bassar (flesh, with all of its weaknesses) vadahm (blood = volition, with all its selfishness) -- achieve a state of purity?

To this question, the Sfas Emes replies: We can achieve purity because HaShem created the world with His ma'amoros (spoken words; note that we are back to "Emor"). And HaShem's ma'amar implants tahara in the whole world. Thus, what the Sfas Emes (and Chazal) learn from the pasuk in Tehilim is that amira brings with it the possibility of tahara. In other words, the double mention of amira at the beginning of Emor is there to remind us that HaShem formed this world with his ma'amar, and thus to draw our attention to the possibility of achieving a respectable level of purity.

The Sfas Emes develops this picture further by pointing to another sense of the word "amira"-a meaning that may not be widely known. A pasuk in Devarim (, 26:8) tells us: VeHaShem he'emircha... liheyos Lo le'ahm segula... " (ArtScroll: "And HaShem has distinguished you ... to be for Him a treasured people...") Chazal (Berachos 6a) read this pasuk as telling us: "... ve'ahni eh'eseh eschem chativa ahchas ... " (" You shall make Me a single "chativa", and I will make you a single "chativa"). Obviously, the key word here is "chativa". What does this word mean? Both here in Berachos and in Chagiga (3a), where this ma'amar also appears, Rashi translates "chativa" as "shevach"-praise. The Sfas Emes reads the word "he'emircha" as "chibur vedibuk-i.e., clinging together, held tightly. Thus, "Emor... ve'amarta" becomes "Cling to HaShem's Presence and you will achieve purity".

(Before you fall off your chair at the Sfas Emes's innovativeness, note that in his authoritative dictionary, Marcus Jastrow-who was not a chassidische rebbe-translates "chativa" as "object of love". This translation fits in neatly with the Sfas Emes's reading.)

The Sfas Emes recognizes that we may need some help at this point. Accordingly, he brings up reinforcements, with some "tosefes bi'ur". This "further explanation" actually introduces additional mind-stretching ideas. The Sfas Emes comments that what he has told us thus far in this ma'amar dovetails with "Sefiras Ha'omer". (In the Sfas Emes's milieu, people did not pronounce the letter "ayin" very differently from the way they pronounced the letter "aleph." Hence, the Sfas Emes assumes that we are all aware that he is reading "omer" as an allusion to "Emor". Because this remez is so obvious, he does not mention the connection.)

The Sfas Emes explains that, like the beginning of this week's parsha ("Emor..."), Sefiras Ha'omer is about achieving purity. Thus, in the tefila that we say after counting the Omer: "You commanded us to count

the omer in order that we may be purified..." Our redemption from Egypt showed that we can achieve freedom from all desires and all commands other than those of HaShem. The Sfas Emes tells us that "freedom" means exactly that: to be able constantly to do the will of HaShem. Our redemption from Egypt demonstrated that possibility. That demonstration, however, was limited to the special case in which miracles were in operation.

Proceeding ever upward, after Pesach we go to the more relevant, everyday case-the experience that "Sefiras Ha'omer" brings to mind. (The Sfas Emes is reading the word "sefira" as "cutting away extraneous material". Cutting away the clutter enables us to clarify what is truly essential. This alternate meaning of the Hebrew root SPR in the sense of cutting away continues in modern Hebrew, e.g., with "sappar"-a barber. Further, the Sfas Emes is reading the word "omer" in its Biblical sense of a middah, a measure (Shemos, 16:36).

From middah as a measure, he moves on to see middos as character traits. Thus, Sefiras Ha'omer is a process in which we cut away from our middos-our behavioral qualities-everything that is extraneous to our Avodas HaShem. By discarding everything that is not conducive to doing HaShem's will, we can achieve purity even in a world in which miracles are not apparent.

The Sfas Emes concludes with some words about Shabbos and the weekdays. Shabbos is total commitment (hisbatlus) to HaShem. By contrast, the weekdays are there to enable us to extend the chiyus of Shabbos to the mundane, material world. The Sfas Emes explains that is why the weekdays are called "yemei ha'avoda". Not only are those days "work days". They can also be days of unique Avodas HaShem.

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MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

This week's Torah portion ends with the event of the blasphemer, who was sentenced to death after first being held in prison (Vayikra 24:10-23). This raises several questions. First, the text implies that the main sin involved was blasphemy of the holy name of G-d, but if so why does the Torah mention the laws of one who strikes an animal or a human being as part of the words by the Almighty to Moshe? In addition, a more general question, what is the lesson to be learned from this story, and why does it appear at this point?

Evidently, the main emphasis in this story is the subject of national identity. This affair did not begin with an argument between two normal people of Bnei Yisrael, since one of them was "the son of an Israelite woman who was also the son of an Egyptian man" [24:10]. It may well be that the dispute began with

financial matters and then moved on to the more serious matter of physical fighting. This would explain why the laws of damages and physical harm to another person appear in the passage. However, suddenly something unexpected happened: in the heat of the argument, the son of the Egyptian became so angry that he cursed the man from Yisrael using the name of G-d. Just how serious a matter this is can be seen from the fact that this phenomenon occurs only one other time in the Tanach, during the dispute between David and Goliath-"And the Pelishti said to David, Am I a dog that you come at me with sticks? So the Pelishti cursed David using the name of G-d." [I Shmuel 17:43]. Why did the blasphemer in Vayikra act the way he did?

It may be that the curse was related to the man's problematic background, as the son of an Egyptian. Note that the Torah does not give the names of the two antagonists. The only name mentioned in the whole passage is that of the blasphemer's mother-Shelomit Bat Divri. Thus, the important figure of this story is the woman, who gave birth to the child of an Egyptian. This son might well have constantly felt that he was an outsider with respect to the nation, which was responsible for the fact that his father's nation was punished so severely. And in a moment of anger his frustration led to his serious outburst.

It may also be that the complex background of the blasphemer was the reason that Bnei Yisrael hesitated, not knowing what to do, and put him in prison. Since his national status was not clear (see the Ramban, 24:10), they were not sure that he should be punished in the same way as a normal person from Bnei Yisrael. And therefore the Almighty emphasizes in His reply to Moshe that the punishment of death for a blasphemer should be applied to anybody within the camp of Yisrael: "Somebody who blasphemes the name of G-d shall die, he shall be stoned by the entire community- whether a stranger or a citizen, if he blasphemes he shall be responsible [24:15]... There will be one law for you, the same one for a stranger or a native, I am your G-d." [24:22].

It is now clear why this story appears here in the Torah. This Torah portion sums up the demand of sanctity in several chapters of Vayikra (19-23), including the holiness of Bnei Yisrael, the sanctity of the Kohanim, and the sanctity of the holidays. In order to briefly illustrate the intrinsic holy character of Bnei Yisrael, the Torah presents us with the sad story of a man who was not an integral part of this sanctity, and with the high price that he had to pay because of the way his mother damaged the holiness of the nation. From this point of view, the story of the blasphemer is a tragedy related to the phenomenon of assimilation and mixed marriages.

"Like the Days When You Left Egypt, I will Show You Miracles" by Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun, Head of "Shiluv", Yeshivat Hakibbutz Hadati

The Exodus from Egypt is the model of "redemption," including the last and final redemption, which will not be followed by any oppression (Tanchuma Shoftim). This is repeated by the prophets (Yeshayahu 31) and also by the sages: "Just as I overturned Egypt, so will I overturn the other nations" [Shemot Rabba 18].

Many great changes are taking place, at the same time that the historic process of gathering in the exiles occurs. This process has never happened before in history, and indeed it could never have happened, for no other nation was spread out to the four corners of the earth and still survived. The world wars, and the changes in science, technology, and society that have all taken place at the same time, have had tremendous effects. The exiled people have been returning to our land for the last 150 years, before our very eyes, ever since the arrival of the students of the GRA. The establishment of the State of Israel and the wars that we have fought are part of this great and awesome process. And all of this is not hidden but openly revealed, it is not a natural process but rather consists of miracle after miracle, one on top of the other.

Should we feel that tragedies and disasters, commands and withdrawals, put the entire process of the ingathering of the exiles in doubt? Definitely not! Imagine if the moment the decree was made that the generation of the desert would not enter Eretz Yisrael some people would have come to the conclusion that this proved that the Exodus from Egypt had been in vain. The truth is that these people existed, and their names were Datan and Aviram (Bamidbar 16). After the Jews reached the land, not only was it not completely conquered by Yehoshua (see Chapter 13) but the land that they did capture was often brought under the rule of evil foreigners from the nearby area:

Chushan Rishatayim, Eglon (the King of Moav), and the nations of Amon, Midyan, and the Pelishtim. Did it occur to anybody to claim that the Exodus was no longer valid, and that G-d had abandoned Bnei Yisrael, G-d forbid?

The truth is that this did occur to some people, and this is what led them to worship idols, out of despair. But this stopped when the angel of G-d revealed himself to Gidon Ben Yoash and said to him, "G-d is with you, strong warrior!" [Shoftim 6:12]. Gidon cried out in his heart, "Is G-d with us at all? Why has all this happened to us? Where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, G-d took us out of Egypt? But now G-d has abandoned us and handed us over to the hand of Midyan!" [6:13]. And G-d's reply was, "Go with this strength of yours and rescue Yisrael from the hand of Midyan, have I not sent you? [6:14]."

In what way was Gidon different from Datan and Aviram? They denied the existence of G-d, while Gideon cried out to G-d from a true feeling of pain. A cry of this type stems from the depths of faith if it contains

within it the willingness to do a true and proper reckoning of the soul.

RABBI ARON TENDLER

Rabbi's Notebook

Kedusha is the designation of purpose and therefore value. Purpose and therefore value are functions of our belief in G-d. To the extent that we believe in the singular and absolute significance of G-d is the extent to which all our actions will be motivated and directed by the desire to attach ourselves to the significance of G-d and the degree to which all our actions will have purpose and value.

Kedusha is more than the understanding of true purpose and value. Kedusha is the imposition of purpose and value over all actions and attitudes. It presumes the discipline to do the will of G-d at all times regardless of emotional or intellectual questions and reservations. This week's Parsha challenges us to accept Hashem's significance and extend purpose and value to all aspects of life.

1. The regular Kohain may not engage in the Mitzvah of burying the dead unless it is one of his seven closest relatives (parent, child, sibling, spouse). The exception is the unattended body where the Mitzvah of attending to the burial takes precedence over even the protected sanctity of the Kohain Gadol (High Priest). (This assumes that there is no one else to bury the body.)

Why would the burial of an unattended, dead, stranger take precedent over the sanctity of the Kohain whereas his closest non-relative would not?

2. A Kohain may not marry a divorcee, a convert, or any woman with the legal classification of a "Zonah." The divorcee, convert, or Zonah could be the most wonderful woman in the world. The Kohain could be convinced that she is his "bashoret," his soul mate; yet, they are forbidden to marry. Why?

3. The Kohain Gadol is restricted in all the ways that the regular Kohain is restricted. Additionally, he cannot attend the funerals of his seven closest relatives and cannot marry a widow. Why?

4. A Kohain who is born with a deformity or becomes so because of time or circumstance may not participate in the Temple service. To do so is called a desecration. The "blemished" Kohain could be the greatest and most pious of all the Kohanim; yet, he would be prohibited from attending to the Mizbeach (alter).

Is G-d so petty and insensitive that He cares more about appearances than substance and character?

5. The Kohanim are an exclusive group with both rights and restrictions. They are gifted with eating Terumah (tithes) and certain parts of the Korbanos (offerings). At the same time they are restricted to a much more rarefied environment of purity than the

regular Jew-Yisroel. If the Kohanim wish to partake of their rights they must first adhere to their restrictions.

The same is true for the daughter of a Kohain. She too is gifted and restricted when it comes to Terumah and Korbanos; however, she must marry a Kohain to retain those rights. If she should marry a non-Kohain she forfeits all her ancestral rights in favor of her husband's non-Kohain status.

Why? Regardless of whom she marries she is of the same genetic makeup as her male siblings. Why should she lose the right of partaking from her father's table?

6. Blemished animals are forbidden on the Mizbeach. If the blemish / deformity is severe enough that the animal is classified as "Treif" (not kosher) it makes sense that it is unfit for the Mizbeach. At the very least an offering must be Kosher. However, a split lip, eye infection, or skin condition does not render an animal treif, yet, it does render it unfit for the Mizbeach.

If G-d made it and we can eat it (meaning, it is only treif to offer on the alter but is permitted to be eaten) why shouldn't it be fit for the Mizbeach?

7. A first-born sheep or goat must be offered as a Korban. Similar to the concept of Bris Milah (circumcision), the newborn calf stays with its mother until it is eight days old after which it is offered as a Korban. The Torah then states that a mother cow / ox and her calf cannot be slaughtered on the same day.

What is with the mixed messages? On the one hand the eight-day-old calf is "torn away" from its mother after they have had a chance to bond with each other and is offered as a Korban. On the other hand, the Torah forbids the slaughtering of a mother animal and her offspring on the same day! Is it a question of sensitivity or a concern for compassion?

Furthermore, the Torah concludes these laws of Kedusha and sanctification by stating, (22:31-33) "...observe My Mitzvos... do not desecrate My Holy Name... I am G-d Who sanctifies you... Who took you out of Egypt..." Why does the Torah make this statement at this specific juncture?

Death, marriage, disabilities, class distinctions, privileges, and mandated sensitivities, are life events and attitudes that define the values of a society. They challenge us to revisit the cherished ideals of individuality, democracy, and equality from the perspective of responsibility that is either divinely or socially mandated.

On the one hand it acknowledges the reality of differences. Whether naturally or divinely imposed (not that there is much difference) differences dictate consequences. Our expectations for the naturally gifted student whose grasp of information and application are seemingly effortless are far greater than the student who struggles with basic logical constructs. The gifted student may receive more attention and encouragement than the non-gifted student and will earn greater consequences for both successes and failures. On the

one hand there is the greater potential for reward; on the other hand there is the greater possibility of failure and disappointment.

Is it fair? Is it moral? Is it right that some are born with more and some with less?

The Torah tells us that fairness or rightness have nothing to do with the reality of differences. The only absolute fairness and equality that exist in the realm of differences is the responsibility to accept that which is and attempt to realize the purpose and value intended by G-d. Whether Kohain or Yisroel, whether Kohain or Kohain Gadol, whether divorced or widowed, born Jewish or immersed Jewish, seemingly sensitive or grossly insensitive, the challenge of accepting G-d at face value is across the board.

The blemished Kohain is no less valuable than the unblemished Kohain so long as they assign significance by G-d's intent rather than their own. The Kohain's daughter who may no longer partake of her father's Terumah because she married a non-Kohain is no less valuable in the context of nation and G-d than her male siblings who minister to the people and must conduct their lives in purity. G-d delights in dirty diapers, laundry, and homework no differently than He does in the sweet incense of the Ketores. Both are equally essential because He commanded them. Both are equally important because He determines importance. Both are equally valuable because He established their significance.

Compassion is a natural characteristic of our people. However, compassion is only trustworthy when expressed within the framework of G-d's Mitzvos. Not every expression of compassion is beneficial to the recipient and not every act of compassion accomplishes what we intend. How can we know when to be compassionate and when to withhold compassion? The only absolute scale is to do what G-d commands.

(22:31) The verse states, "You shall observe my Mitzvos and perform them..." Rashi quotes the Medresh that explains, "Observe" means to study and "perform" means to do. If we study G-d's Mitzvos and then do what we understand to be His will, the verse concludes, "I am G-d." That is the meaning of Kedusha and that is the only way for us to be a holy people.

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