

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**S**peak to the children of Israel saying, 'these are the creatures which you may eat from all of the animals upon the earth: any animal that has split hoofs with clefts through the hoofs and that chews its cud-such you may eat'" (Leviticus 11:2,3)

The two main subjects dealt with in this week's Torah portion of Shemini seem to be totally far removed one from the other: we first read of the tragic death of the two sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, on the eighth day of the consecration of the Sanctuary and we then read all of the details of the laws of kashrut, with detailed lists of animals, fowl and fish which are forbidden. It seems to me however that there is a powerful connection between these two issues as well as a crucial message especially in this age of post-modernism.

Let us begin with kashrut. The Bible itself concludes its food prohibitions by declaring the following rationale: "Because I am the Lord your G-d and you shall sanctify yourselves and you shall be holy because I am holy..." (Leviticus 11: 44) Most of our commentaries define holiness as the ability to separate oneself from one's physical instincts and drives, an inner discipline which enables the individual to be above the physical and to come closer to the spiritual.

However, the roots of kashrut express an even deeper idea and ideal. The very introduction to the Five Books of Moses is the story of the Garden of Eden and the very first sin of Adam and Eve. The transgression of the first two human beings was a kashrut transgression. The Almighty commanded Adam, "From every tree of the garden you are free to eat, but as for the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you must not eat of it." (Genesis 2: 16,17) Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit and were banished from the Garden of Eden. But what made the fruit forbidden? After all, the Bible itself testifies that the fruit was "good for food" which probably meant low in calories and devoid of cholesterol, "a delight to the eyes" which suggests a beautiful color and an appealing texture, and "desirable as a source for wisdom" (Genesis 3: 6) which testifies that it activated the brain cells. So if the fruit was so desirable, why was it prohibited?

Strangely enough, it is the serpent who explains the reason : "Because G-d knows that on the day that

you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like G-d, knowing what is good and what is evil" (Genesis 3:5) The serpent, symbolizing the force of evil within the world, is expressing the fundamental struggle which takes place within the breast of every individual: who decides what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong? Is it the subjective individual or is it a more objective outside system or Being whom we call G-d? What G-d is setting down at the very dawn of creation is the fundamental axiom of a religious lifestyle: the final arbiter in the realm of good and evil must be the Divine Will rather than the individual desire. The forbidden fruit is evil because G-d calls it evil. The ultimate source of morality must be a system which is higher than any single individual.

Many years ago I was told by a woman congregant-whose husband had been considered a pillar of their congregation and whose children were all studying in day schools-that her husband had established a second residence with another woman several miles away with whom he had even fathered a child. When I confronted the husband, he didn't even blink an eyelash. He confirmed the facts of the case, but insisted that he was acting out of the highest standards of morality. The only way he could continue his marriage to his wife-who he insisted could not live if she was a divorcee-was if he was simultaneously receiving satisfaction from this other woman, and that he had rescued this "second wife" from committing suicide. Not only did he not consider his act of adultery a transgression; he truly believed that he had rescued two women's lives by having this extramarital relationship.

Sigmund Freund, in his Civilization and its Discontents, maintains that when it comes to rationalization and self justification, every human being is a genius. We can always find perfectly cogent reason for justifying in ourselves acts that we would readily condemn in others. It is for this reason that the subjective individual can never be the ultimate arbiter as to what is proper and what is improper. Hence, our Bible gives the Divine imprimatur to what is right and what is wrong. Kashrut-although many of these laws are guided by ethical sensitivity and the basic moral ambiguity involved in eating the flesh of creatures who were once alive-is basically the paradigm for our deference to G-d in the realm of morality. Hence, despite the fact that post-modernism questions any absolute position, our Ten Commandments are not

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merely options and "Thou shalt not murder" teaches that there is no possible justification for taking the life of an innocent human being!

Religious commitment demands humility of the individual who is required to bend his knee before a higher Divine power, both in terms of our ethical and ritual lives as well as in terms of our acceptance of tragedy which often seems absurd and illogical. Aaron the High Priest stood at the zenith of success with the consecration of the Sanctuary in the desert; his two sons seemingly performed an unsolicited religious act which expressed their profound appreciation of the Divine "And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them"-inexplicably and even absurdly (Leviticus 10: 3,4 and Rashi ad loc). The Bible records Aaron's response in two words: "And Aaron was silent". Apparently we learn from Moses that when one individual acts unjustly towards another, we must speak out and act. But when a tragedy occurs which is not of human making-and when a Divine law insists upon human discipline-we must submit to the ultimate will of a G-d whom our Bible guarantees is "A G-d of compassion and loving kindness" even though it may be beyond our subjective understanding. © 2005 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Much of this week's Parsha deals with the animal kingdom, from a description and list of which are kosher and which are not, to the 8 "creeping" animals that cause ritual impurity with much smaller amounts of carcass than others. Recently, issues related to zoology and traditional Jewish thought have been a topic of conversation, including an article in the science section of a "mainstream" newspaper.

While this is not an appropriate forum for a full discussion of the possible tension between Torah and

science, and I am not qualified to address it, there is one area that I would like to take a closer look at.

One of the activities Biblically prohibited on Shabbos is taking (ending) the life of a living being. The Gemora (Shabbos 107b) seems to say that the reason the Chachamim allowed killing a louse on Shabbos is because they do not have "parents," and therefore are not considered a "living being." Although "spontaneous generation" was universally accepted until just a few hundred years ago, it has since been scientifically disproved. Much has been written about this discrepancy (and not all of it banned), but I believe we can understand it better by deconstructing the Talmudic discussion and seeing where this specific tension (if any) lies.

The Mishna (107a) states that wounding any of the 8 "creeping" animals mentioned in our Parsha (Vayikra 11:29-30) constitutes a Biblical violation of Shabbos, while wounding other "creeping or crawling" creatures does not. The commentators explain that causing a loss of blood is like causing a partial death; therefore if the thick hide of these 8 animals prevents blood from coming out (the "wound") it is as if the blood did come out, as it will never return to its original source. The blood of those creatures without thick hides, however, will either return to its origins or come out of the creature's body completely, and therefore a mere "wound" does not qualify as a partial loss of life.

The Gemora (107b) deduces that if only a "wound" is not problematic, then ending the actual life of these creatures would be considered a Biblical violation. Since not every "creature" is considered a "living being" in this respect, the Gemora asks which Tanna (sage from the Mishnaic period) is of the opinion that even "creeping or crawling" things are "alive" enough to prohibit killing them on Shabbos. R' Yirmiya says that it is Rebbe Eliezer, who states that killing even a louse is prohibited. R' Yosef then attacks this position, arguing that the Chachamim (who disagree with R"E) say that it is only a louse that falls under this category, as it does not have any "parents." Killing other creatures, however, would be considered taking a life, and therefore prohibited.

The Ran gives the following explanation of this piece of Gemora: "The first thought was that the Chachamim who disagree with R"E do not consider as a Biblical violation (the killing of) any [creature] that has no veins or bones, as since it does not stay alive for 12 months it is as if it is dead." This, he continues, is how the Yerushalmi (1:3) understands their opinion too. "And along comes R' Yosef, who disagrees," saying that even a creature without a skeletal structure is considered "alive;" as only creatures without biological parents (such as lice) are not. Therefore, our Mishna, which implies that even "creeping or crawling" creatures cannot be killed on Shabbos, is consistent with the position of the Chachamim as well.

Incorporating this idea, the Gemora now reads as follows: R' Yirmiya says that our Mishna cannot be the Chachamim, as they say that it is not considered "ending a life" if the creature would not live for at least a year. (R"E choice of a louse is due to its size, that even taking such a tiny life is prohibited.) R' Yosef is not comfortable limiting our Mishna to the minority opinion, preferring the parameters of what is considered a life that allow our Mishna to be universal. (See Shabbos 146a, where the Gemora demands a reason why R' Oshiya felt he was forced to explain the Mishna in a way consistent only with the minority opinion.) Did R' Yosef have an ancient tradition that lice have no parents, or was it that he knew that the whole world (at that time) believed in "spontaneous generation," and therefore insisted that there's no reason to relegate our Mishna to being only R"E?

As the Ibn Ezra often put it (see Beraishis 22:4), "im kabbalah nekabeil," if it is a tradition, if it was part of the "mesorah," then we will accept it. And it is theoretically possible that R' Yirmiya (and the Yerushalmi) had the same "mesorah" but still felt that the Chachamim extended the "non-life" status to other creatures. But if they knew that lice were unique in how they were formed, and R"E used lice as his example, why would they go out of their way to extend the Chachamim's opinion past that? And why didn't the Gemora ask why R' Yirmiya was forced to limit the Mishna to the minority opinion (as it does elsewhere)? If there was no such tradition about lice, we can easily understand why they didn't trust the scientists to make such a distinction.

Additionally, the Gemora continues with Abaye asking how R' Yosef can claim that lice have no parents (bringing sources that imply that they lay eggs). If R' Yosef had such a tradition, the question should be phrased as a contradiction between sources, not as question on his premise.

It would seem, then, that this supposed source of tension is not what it is often made out to be. First of all, the assumption that the only reason killing a louse on Shabbos would not be Biblically prohibited is that it has no biological parents is patently false. Rather than this "possibility" (or "tradition") being introduced as the reason a louse is not considered alive, its purpose is to exclude creatures without a skeletal structure from being considered "not alive." And it is very possible that the intent was to minimize the extent of the dispute (always desired) and to allow the Mishna to be more than just a minority opinion.

Additionally, the Yerushalmi and R' Yirmiya (in the Bavli) disagree with the premise that what excludes a louse from being considered "alive" is its lineage. And we don't know that they (or even R' Yosef) had a tradition that a louse has no parents.

Admittedly, this approach is only "local," and does not attempt to address any other area where some think that Torah and science are not in sync. Nor does it

attempt to reconcile any halachic implications (which are a completely separate issue anyway). However, as far as this particular "flashpoint" is concerned, it seems that the supposed controversy is a bit eggs-agerated.

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In some circles, it is assumed that the laws of kashruth, the dietary laws, are related to health. By abstaining for example, from the consumption of swine, one is protected from trichinosis. A cursory glimpse of our portion indicates otherwise. The Torah states that the reason for kashruth is kedusha. In the words of the Torah, "You shall be kedoshim for I am kadosh." (Leviticus 11:45)

In fact, every time the Torah discusses the dietary laws, it gives as its underlying reason-kedusha. (See, for example, Deuteronomy 14:21) An analysis of this term can give us a deeper understanding of the dietary laws.

On one level, kedusha means "separation." Thus, when someone contributes something to the Holy Temple, the Beit Hamikdash, it is called "hekdesh" for it can be used for no other purpose other than the Temple. From this perspective, kashruth forces the Jews to identify him or herself as the Torah insists that the everyday activity of eating has the stamp of Jewishness.

Another approach to kedusha comes to mind through considering what many deem as the three major Jewish rituals - the Sabbath, the laws of family purity and the dietary laws. It is not a coincidence that these rituals correspond to the three major physical drives of the human being-the desire to be powerful, the desire to engage in sexual relations and the desire to eat.

In each case, the Torah does not insist that we abstain from these fundamental human drives. Rather, it channels the fulfillment of these desires in a way that gives them more meaning and purpose. The Torah understands the human quest to be powerful, but asks that on the Sabbath we abstain from all work, allowing for time to evaluate the purpose of this quest and to recognize that our creative powers come from God. In a similar fashion, the Torah sees the sexual encounter in a positive light. Indeed, sexual pleasure, onah, is a cornerstone of the marital encounter. Here again, however, the Torah asks that we commit ourselves to the laws of family purity as a way of ensuring that the physical act does not become the sole expression of a couple's love. Finally, the Torah wants people to enjoy food. Through such laws as humane slaughter of animals, the laws of kashruth lift the eating process to a higher plain.

No wonder the word kadosh surrounds each of these rituals. Shabbat is referred to as Shabbat kodesh. The very word that begins the marital relationship is

kiddushin. And the way we eat is likened to the service of the Holy Temple (Beit Hamikdash).

Thus, the word kadosh is a term that embraces human physicality, but asks that the physical act be elevated and, in fact, sanctified. Observance of Jewish ritual is not solely an act that connects us to God. It is a means through which human life can be ennobled; it is nothing less than a pathway to an ethical and kadosh existence. © 2005 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

RABBI NOACH WITTY

Tayvas Noach

This week we focus on the ever-versatile Vav. The sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet can be the carrier of vowel sounds such as the cholam malai and the shoorook. It can also be, as its name implies, a conjunctive, meaning "and." (The word vav means "a hook," and is used in that sense in the narration of the construction of the mishkan, to wit: "vavei ha'amudim.")

It can also serve as a device that reverses the tense of the verb that follows it. When this happens, the vav is usually pronounced with a patach (though a kamatz will sometimes be used if the vowel sound immediately following is, for instance, a cholam, e.g. vamar, "and I said.')

Probably the earliest appearance of the vav in such a capacity is in the third verse of Chumash: "vayomer," translated as "and He said." The verb without the vav is "yomar," meaning "and he will say," in the future tense. The vav reverses the future to the past tense.

The Vav can also reverse the tense of the verb from past tense to future tense. A well-known example is the verse from Parshas Eikev contained in Birchat Hamazon: "Ve-achalTA," meaning "and you will eat." The past tense is "aCHAlti," (you ate); by adding the vav and moving the stress to the last syllable, the word becomes future tense. (I am uncertain whether the vav ha-heepukh, the reversing vav," should be translated at all, as it may be merely the grammatical device by which the tense of the verb is reversed. Most translations translate the vav ha-heepukh.)

In this week's parsha, the vav, in addition to the more common vav ha-heepukh, plays the conjunctive roles in somewhat unexpected places. In Vayikra 9:6, we find the word "ve-yai-ra." The vav there is simply conjunctive. The verb itself is intended to be in the future tense and thus is pronounced with a sheva, meaning "and will appear," referring to the "honor of HaShem." Moshe is simply informing Aharon, his sons and the elders that if they follow the procedure of sacrifices as commanded, HaShem will make His presence known. To pronounce the vav with a patach would incorrectly render the verb into the past tense.

In the next verse, verse 7, the word "va'asai" ("and make/perform") appears twice, both times with a

patach. However, despite the patach, the word remains in the command form (which is a truncated form of future tense in which "ya'aseh" becomes "'asai.'): the patach under the vav before "'asai" is not there to change the tense. Rather, the vav carries a patach because the vowel under the 'ayin is a chataf patach (a patach with a sheva immediately next to it). This is significant for the following reason. A chataf operates as a sheva. Hebrew does not allow two consecutive sheva-im at the beginning of a word. Consequently, what would have been the sheva under the vav turns into a patach.

In verse 10:18, the word "ve-achalti" appears. The question is: Is the vav a vav ha-heepukh or merely a conjunctive vav? Should the word be translated "and I will eat" or "and I ate"? We now understand the point of Rashi's brief comment on the words "ve-achalti chtat": "if I ate would it be acceptable, etc." Rashi is explaining the odd and somewhat compressed phrasing of the phrase by adding the word "and if" in order to separate the vav from the verb, allowing the verb to stand alone as a past tense. Rashi thus clarifies that the verb is in the past tense and that the vav is conjunctive.

Ibn Ezra agrees and points out that the stress of the verb, as indeed indicated by the placement of the trop under the "chaf" of "ve-achalti," is on the penultimate syllable, requiring that the word be read: "ve-aCHAlti." (Ibn Ezra notes that in Mishlei (30:9) there is a future tense verb that is atypically stressed on the second last syllable as if it were a past tense verb. In nine words, we are privileged to a display of both the scope and precision of Ibn Ezra's knowledge and his intellectual honesty!) © 2005 Rabbi Noach Witty

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A .

Summarized by Howard Gever

Para aduma (the red heifer) is the paradigm of incomprehensible mitzvot. An examination of Chazal's approach to this mitzva can teach much about their understanding of ta'amei ha-mitzvot, the enterprise of offering reasons for the commandments.

The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 19:5) relates:

"Rabbi Yehoshu'a of Sikhnin said in the name of Rabbi Levi: There are four things that the yetzer hara (evil impulse) ridicules, and which the Torah calls 'chukka': the mitzvot of a brother's wife, of kilayim (mixed species), of the se'ir ha-mishtaleiach (scapegoat), and of the para aduma.

"A brother's wife, as is written, 'Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother's wife' (Vayikra 18:16), yet when a woman is widowed without children, 'Her brother-in-law shall marry her' (Devarim 25:5)! And

regarding a brother's wife, the Torah employs the term 'chukkotai' (Vayikra 20:22).

"Kilayim, as it is written, 'Thou shalt not wear wool and linen together' (Devarim 22:11), yet a linen garment with woolen tzitzit is permitted! And here, too, the Torah uses the term 'chukkotai' (Vayikra 19:19).

"Se'ir ha-mishtaleiach, as it is written, 'And he who sends the goat to Azazel shall wash his clothing' (Vayikra 16:26), yet the scapegoat itself atones for others! And this mitzva is also designated 'chukat' (Vayikra 16:34).

"Para aduma, based upon the mishna (Para 4:4), 'All who are involved in the para from beginning to end have their garments become impure,' while the para itself renders garments pure! Here, too, the Torah applies the word 'chukat' (Bamidbar 19:1)."

This midrash describes the internally inconsistent duality of these four chukkim. A brother's wife and kilayim simultaneously contain elements of both issur and heter (prohibition and permission), while the se'ir ha-mishtaleiach and para aduma are characterized by the coexistence of purity and impurity.

Such inherent "contradictions," which vex the yetzer ha-ra, can be contrasted with ones which trouble the heathen in another midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 19:8):

"A certain heathen asked Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, 'These rituals [of the para aduma] that you perform appear like witchcraft. You take a cow, burn it, pound it, and take its ashes. If one of you becomes impure from a dead body, you sprinkle upon him two or three drops, and say to him, 'You are pure!'"

"R. Yochanan answered him, 'Have you ever... seen a person possessed by the demon of madness?'"

"Said the heathen, 'Yes.'

"What do you do for him?'"

"We bring roots, and make them smoke under him, and sprinkle water upon the demon to exorcise it."

"Said R. Yochanan, 'Let your ears hear what you utter with your mouth! The spirit of impurity is exactly like this demon... Water of purification is sprinkled upon the person made impure by contact with a corpse, and the spirit flees.'

"When the heathen had left, R. Yochanan's disciples asked him, 'Our master! Him you dismissed with a flimsy excuse (Heb. 'kaneh'), but what explanation do you offer us?'"

"He said to them, 'By your lives! It is not the corpse that makes one impure, nor the water that makes one pure. Rather, the Holy One, Blessed be He, declared, 'A chukka I have enacted, a decree I have issued; you may not violate my decree,' as it is written, 'This is the chukka of the Torah' (Bamidbar 19:2)."

Here the question is motivated not by intrinsic inconsistencies in the nature of the mitzva, but rather by the perception of para aduma as contrary to the rational, cause-and-effect nature of the world. The heathen fails to grasp the true nature of mitzvot, and instead tries to assimilate ta'amei ha-mitzvot into his

mechanistic understanding of the universe. For him, any mitzva is performed only for an appreciable benefit, a purpose. By drawing a parallel to the "demon of madness," R. Yochanan answers the heathen within his own schema, emphasizing the goal-directed aspects of the mitzva.

In the continuation of the midrash, the disciples of R. Yochanan demand a better answer, unwilling to accept the apologetics offered to the idolater. The use of the expression "kaneh" suggests not only that the answer to the heathen was superficial, but also that the disciples realize that not every mitzva lends itself to a purposive explanation. "Kaneh" means not just "reed" but also "trachea;" the laws of shechita require that, when slaughtering an animal, one must ensure that the trachea be severed more than halfway. No purely goal-oriented account of ta'amei ha-mitzvot can explain why a 49% penetration is invalid while a 51% section is kosher. Unlike the heathen, the disciples are not constrained to understand each individual mitzva as yielding a perceptible benefit, and they press their teacher for a deeper explanation.

R. Yochanan assures his students that, indeed, ta'amei ha-mitzvot are not to be construed purposively. Rather, the only reason to perform mitzvot is that God decreed that we do so. As Vayikra Rabba 13:3 (on Parashat Shemini) states, "Rav said, 'The mitzvot were given to Israel only in order that mankind might be improved by them.'" This midrash (like the Rambam's approach in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, but unlike that of the Kabbalists) reflects the opinion that the procedural details of specific mitzvot are not always subject to rational explanation. Not every component of every mitzva can be reduced to a goal-directed reason or assigned a purpose. The idea behind mitzvot is the performance of God's will, for the eventual betterment of mankind, and individual mitzvot do not necessarily hold up to a compositional analysis.

Finally, there is a danger in resorting to potential benefits of mitzvot when explaining mitzvot to others. Although adherence to the laws of family purity may be believed to protect against cervical cancer, and avoidance of pork products may reduce risk of trichinosis, these are not the reasons for these mitzvot. Such rationales are dependent upon current opinions, and the possibility of contradictory empirical observations in the future threatens to invalidate such accounts. Mitzvot should never be presented as principally yielding direct benefit, as such conceptions are transitory, while mitzvot and ta'amei ha-mitzvot are eternal.

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

After the tragic event of the death of Aharon's sons, Moshe discovered that the Chatat sacrifice which

the Kohanim were supposed to eat had been burned. Moshe was angry with the Kohanim: "And Moshe was angry with Elazar and Itamar, the remaining sons of Aharon, saying: Why did you not eat the Chatat in the holy place?... It was given to you to obtain forgiveness for the sin of the community, to atone for them before G-d! Behold, its blood was not brought into the holy site, you should eat it at the holy site, as I commanded!" [Vayikra 10:16-18]. And Aharon replied, "Today, they offered their Chatat and Olah sacrifices before G-d, and look at what happened to me. Can I eat a Chatat today, will this be pleasing to G-d?" [10:19]. What is the meaning of this disagreement?

Evidently, after Aharon's sons died, Moshe came to the conclusion that it was very important to follow the exact details of the mitzvot. While in the descriptions of the actions by Aharon and his sons before the sin, it was emphasized several times that everything was done "as G-d commanded" [9:7,10] or "as Moshe commanded" [9:21], we are told that the sin of Nadav and Avihu was that they brought a strange flame which "he did not command them" [10:1]. Moshe therefore wanted to make absolutely sure that the exact commandment would be observed. He told Aharon and his sons to continue their divine service and not to show any mourning, in order to avoid additional troubles. "And Moshe said to Aharon and to Elazar and Itamar his sons, do not leave your heads unkempt and do not rend your garments, so that you will not die, and He will be angry with the entire community." [10:6]. Afterwards, he also warned them how important it was to eat the parts of the sacrifices that were meant for the Kohanim. "And Moshe said to Aharon and to Elazar and Itamar, his remaining sons, take the Mincha which remains from the Divine sacrifices and eat it as matzot near the Altar... For it is your portion and the portion of your sons from the sacrifices of G-d, since that is what I was commanded. And you shall eat the breast that was lifted up and the contribution of a thigh in a ritually clean place... And this will be for you and your sons with you as an eternal rule, as G-d has commanded." [10:12-15]. And this explains why Moshe was angry when he discovered that one detail of the command had not been fulfilled. "Why did you not eat the Chatat?... eat it at the holy site, as I commanded!"

However, Aharon replied calmly that there are unusual situations when it is appropriate to deviate from the standard requirements. Should Aharon really eat the food whose purpose is atonement on the very day that his two sons were lost to him? "How could I eat the Chatat which is significant for future generations on this day, when our joy had been diminished, something which can be compared to a bride who commits adultery while still under the Chuppah?" [Rashbam]. It is true that to divert from the original rule is usually a sin, sometimes even worthy of a punishment of death. However, every case must be examined in detail. An act that was performed out of foreign motives should

not affect other actions which correspond to a deep understanding of what G-d really desires.

Moshe's greatness can be seen from the fact that he understood the message. A strict demand for total obedience of all the details of an action, without any regard for changing circumstances, is not always the best way to perform G-d's work. "And Moshe heard, and he was satisfied" [10:20].

G-d's Approval of Our Actions

by Rabbi Avraham Hershkop, Rabbi of Negohot, and Institute of Settlement Rabbis, Chevron

On the eighth day of its dedication, all of the eyes of Bnei Yisrael were turned towards the Tabernacle, to see if a flame would descend from heaven or not, to understand whether their hard labor and their repentance before G-d would be accepted, or if all of their labors were in vain.

Moshe and Aharon had already done what G-d had commanded them to do. A large pile of the organs of sacrifices could be seen on the Altar, and no flame had yet appeared. Aharon feared that perhaps the Shechina did not appear in anger over his part in making the Golden Calf. And Bnei Yisrael feared that perhaps G-d had not forgiven them for the sin, and all their labors had been in vain. Then Moshe and Aharon entered the Tent of Meeting, and when they came out they blessed the nation. Immediately, a flame appeared and devoured the sacrifices.

Rashi reveals to us the text of the blessing that Moshe and Aharon gave to the nation: "Let the pleasantness of our G-d be upon us, and let the product of our hands be established for us, let the product of our hands be established for us." [Tehillim 90:17]. This verse, at the end of Chapter 90 of Tehillim (which starts with the words "A prayer by Moshe"), serves as an introduction to the following chapter. "He sits in the hidden depths of the heights, he will rest in the shadow of G-d." [91:1]. The sages call this chapter "Song of Misfortune," and it has a special power to inhibit the prosecutors and the accusers and keep them far away. This poem was sung not only at the time of dedication of the Tabernacle but also whenever the holy areas of the Temple or Jerusalem were expanded. It was sung for every large stone that was added to the construction when Bnei Yisrael returned to their land at the end of the exile in Babylon, in the days of Ezra and Nechemia.

What is the significance of this "Song of Misfortune"? It seems that every time actions are taken to expand the sanctity in the world and to increase an area where G-d is revealed, forces arise which interfere with the process. These evil forces are called pests and misfortunes. Their actions can be felt most strongly at a time of change, when the light in the world has begun to increase, specifically when the world has risen above its old lower level but has not yet fully reached its new level.

In such a situation, it is important to take refuge in protection provided by the Almighty. It is necessary to understand that everything we do stems from His power and will return us to Him. We must then pray that we will meet with His approval, and that our actions will be appropriate. This prayer is especially important for our generation, when the light is increasing but at the same time the forces of shadow which are trying to swallow the light are also gaining strength. With the strength of our faith and our prayers, let us hope that G-d will give us the privilege of being under His protection, so that we will be able to complete the process of revealing His Shechina in our land.

RABBI ARON TENDLER

Rabbi's Notebook

The Talmud in tractate Avodah Zara (2b) discusses the manner of G-d's justice at the end of time. It describes a conversation He will have with the other nations of the world at that time. The conversation is based on the famous Medresh that only after G-d offered the Torah to the other nations and they turned Him down, did He offer the Torah to the Jews, who accepted. Nations:

Why do we deserve to be punished? Did You give us a Torah that we did not keep? G-d: I offered it to you just like I offered it to the Jews. They accepted it and you did not.

Nations: True, but in the end we did not accept it. How can You find us guilty for not doing Your commandments? They were not commanded to us! G-d:

That is why I find you guilty. You had the chance and you turned it down. The Jews accepted My Torah and will be rewarded. Nations: What about the fact that You coerced them into accepting when you threatened to destroy them if they did not accept? Had You coerced us we too would have accepted! G-d: You misunderstand Me. I am not concerned about the commandments that you did not accept. I find you guilty of not fulfilling the Seven Mitzvos Commanded to the Sons of Noach (all of humanity-not just the Jews) that you did accept!

The Talmud goes on to present scriptural proof for the non-compliance of the other nations in fulfilling the Seven Noahide Laws and states, "Because the nations were not keeping the Seven Noahide Laws G-d voided their obligation to do so."

The Talmud questions the voiding of the obligation by asking, "G-d's voiding the other nation's obligation to keep the Seven Laws because of non-compliance is a reward not a punishment! Why reward the guilty?"

G-d answered: The Seven Mitzvos were not voided. The nations must still keep the Seven Laws. The difference is that until now they were commanded by Me to keep the Seven Laws; now they will have to

keep them because of social and rational humanism. Acting because of rational humanism has social benefit in this world and the reward for doing so is enjoyed in this world; however, doing them because I commanded them to do so benefits them in this world and in the world to come!

A fundamental Hashkafa (philosophical principle) in Judaism is that we want to be commanded. As the Rambam (Maimonides) explains, the only person who can claim to be doing a commandment and the only person who should receive reward for doing a commandment is the one who believes that it is a commandment commanded by the Commander. The one who does a "good-deed" because it is socially correct and intellectually justifiable is not doing a Mitzvah; instead, he is serving himself, his own rational, his own intellect, and his own feelings-not the wishes of G-d. Remember, the great danger of rational, social, humanism is that values, ethics, and morals change with circumstances. What is good and right today may be determined bad and wrong tomorrow. On the other hand, divinely mandated values, ethics, and morals are as immutable as G-d Himself. They never adjust to society; instead, society must adjust to them.

The ultimate goal of having free will is to willingly give it up. We want to do what G-d wants us to do, not because we decide that we want to but because we have no other option but to do G-d's wishes. The goal is to attain that level of servitude and subjugation that negates any possibility of doing a Mitzvah for any other reason than because it is a commandment commanded by the Commander.

The story of Nadav and Avihu in this week's Parsha is all about their desire to attain the highest level of absolute subjugation to G-d. What went wrong? Why did they have to die?

The verse states, (10:1) "...and they brought near to G-d an offering that they had not been commanded to bring." The commentaries explain that they brought the Ketores (incense) offering into the Holy of Holies, an offering that could only be brought by the Kohain Gadol (High Priest) on Yom Kippur. The commentaries also explained that their motives were noble but tragically misguided. Their desire was to be as close to G-d as possible. They were single minded in their drive to understand more about G-d and do more to emulate Him. They were also gifted with exceptional talent and intellectual acumen. As the Talmud states, "They were equal to Aharon and Moshe." The Medresh also says that everyone assumed that they would eventually replace Moshe and Aharon as the leaders of the nation.

Unfortunately, Nadav and Avihu were not yet equal to Moshe and Aharon. Moshe and Aharon had attained a level of subjugation nearing ultimate servitude because of their humility. In fact, Moshe transcended Aharon's level of humility so that G-d

confirmed him as the humblest of all to ever be. Nadav and Avihu were not there yet.

Nadav and Avihu knew better than everyone else (except Moshe and Aharon) that the ultimate goal of having free will was to willingly give it up. In fact, they believed that they had attained it. They believed that they had achieved a level of servitude beyond that of their father, and maybe even beyond Moshe. Of course they were tragically mistaken, but that is what they believed.

The law was very clear. They had been taught by Moshe and Aharon that only the Kohain Gadol could enter the Holy of Holies, and only on Yom Kippur. They knew that it was forbidden for the service in the Mishkan (Tabernacle) to be performed with any privately owned vessel. The service was for the public and had to be performed with items owned by the public. Yet, the verse says, (10:1) "And the sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, each took their own fire pans..." They (independent of each other) took their own vessel, took the special incense, and entered the Holy of Holies. How could they do so? How could they have been so mistaken about laws that were so clear? Why didn't they at least ask Moshe if their thinking was correct? How could they think that they were doing the will of G-d when it is so clear to all of us that they were only doing what they wished to do, not what they were commanded to do?

I would like to suggest that Nadav and Avihu believed that they had ascended so high in their relationship with G-d that they were the absolute manifestation of G-d's will. They had become what the Mishnah in Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers) says, "Make G-d's will your will so that G-d will make His will as yours." (So that He will grant you what you wish.) They believed that there was no barrier of free will between themselves and G-d. They were incapable of doing anything else except for the will of G-d. They saw themselves as any other non-free-willed animal whose every response is dictated by instinct and not choice.

When they conceived of the idea of bringing an offering that had not been commanded they immediately justified it by saying, "Why else would we feel this way if it was not the will of G-d. Clearly, G-d wants us to bring this offering regardless of what He commanded everyone else!" That is why their transgression included so many illegalities from not first asking Moshe and Aharon to using their own fire pans to entering the Holy of Holies! They believed they were doing G-d's will. In fact, because each one independently thought to do the same thing it proved to them that it had to be the will of G-d!

In the end they tragically died. They were truly great and their punishment reflected their righteousness and their closeness to G-d; and yet, in this instance they were absolutely wrong. Instead of proving their own level of absolute servitude, the burden of subjugation and servitude fell to their father Aharon. He was the one

who had to accept G-d's punishment, the death of his two sons, with humility and love. (10:3) "... And Aharon was silent."

Parshas Parah

This week, in addition to the regular Parsha, we read the section known as Parah. The additional sections of Shekalim, Zachor, Parah, and Chodesh are read prior to Pesach for both commemorative and practical reasons. Shekalim, the first additional section, dealt with the 1/2 Shekel and the public sacrifices. The reading of the second section, Zachor, facilitated our fulfillment of the Mitzvah to remember the evil of Amalek. The two sections of Parah and Chodesh are directed toward our preparations for Pesach.

For Parshas Parah, we read the section found in the beginning of Chukas known as Parah. It discusses the necessary steps that had to be followed for the removal of impurity caused by contact with a dead body. The process involved a seven day period during which the impure-Tameh person underwent a process involving the ashes of the Red Heifer. The process was facilitated by a Kohain, and had to take place in Yerushalayim.

Being Tameh restricted a person from entering the Temple compound and / or participating in certain select activities. Although the restrictions are less applicable today because we do not have the Bais Hamikdash; nevertheless, it is incumbent upon all people, male and female, to keep these laws to the degree that they do apply.

In the time of the Bais Hamikdash it was required of every male adult to visit the Bais Hamikdash and offer a sacrifice a minimum of three times a year: Pesach, Shevout, and Succoth. However, it was even more important to be there on Erev Pesach to sacrifice the Korban Pesach-Pascal Lamb. Anyone Tameh from contact with a dead body had to undergo the process of the Parah Adumah-the Red Heifer, to remove the Tumah and be permitted to bring his Pascal Lamb to the Bais Hamikdash.

The Talmud tells us that the furthest point in Israel to Yerushalayim was a two weeks travel. If so, a Tameh person living two weeks travel time away from Yerushalayim required a minimum of three weeks to travel to Yerushalayim and go through the one week process of the Red Heifer enabling him to bring the Korban Pesach. Therefore, Chazal ordained the reading of Parah on the week before the reading of Chodesh (approx. 3 to 4 weeks before Pesach) as a public reminder to those who are Tameh that they must immediately arrange to get to Yerushalayim so that they can purify themselves in time to bring the Korban Pesach. © 2005 Rabbi A. Tendler & www.torah.org

