

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Akedoshim contains the two great love commands of the Torah. The first is, “Love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord” (Lev. 19:18). Rabbi Akiva called this “the great principle of the Torah.” The second is no less challenging: “The stranger living among you must be treated as your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt. I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 19:34).

These are extraordinary commands. Many civilisations contain variants of the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do to you,” or in the negative form attributed to Hillel (sometimes called the Silver Rule), “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary; go and learn.”¹ But these are rules of reciprocity, not love. We observe them because bad things will happen to us if we don’t. They are the basic ground-rules of life in a group.

Love is something altogether different and more demanding. That makes these two commandments a revolution in the moral life. Judaism was the first civilisation to put love at the heart of morality. As Harry Redner puts it in *Ethical Life*, “Morality is the ethic of love. The initial and most basic principle of morality is clearly stated in the Torah: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” He adds: “The biblical “love of one’s neighbour” is a very special form of love, a unique development of the Judaic religion and unlike any to be encountered outside it.”²

Much has been written about these commands. Who exactly is meant by “your neighbour”? Who by “the stranger”? And what is it to love someone else as oneself? I want to ask a different question. Why is it specifically here, in *Kedoshim*, in a chapter dedicated to the concept of holiness, that the command appears?

Nowhere else in all Tanach are we commanded to love our neighbour. And only in one other place (Deut. 10:19) are we commanded to love the stranger. (The Sages famously said that the Torah commands us thirty-six times to love the stranger, but that is not quite

accurate. Thirty-four of those commands have to do with not oppressing or afflicting the stranger and making sure that he or she has the same legal rights as the native born. These are commands of justice rather than love).

And why does the command to love your neighbour as yourself appear in a chapter containing such laws as, “Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material”? These are *chukim*, decrees, usually thought of as commands that have no reason, at any rate none that we can understand. What have they to do with the self-evidently moral commands of the love of neighbour and stranger? Is the chapter simply an assemblage of disconnected commands, or is there a single unifying strand to it?

The answer goes deep. Almost every ethical system ever devised has sought to reduce the moral life to a single principle or perspective. Some connect it to reason, others to emotion, yet others to consequences: do whatever creates the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Judaism is different. It is more complex and subtle. It contains not one perspective but three. There is the prophetic understanding of morality, the priestly perspective and the wisdom point of view.

Prophetic morality looks at the quality of relationships within a society, between us and God and between us and our fellow humans. Here are some of the key texts that define this morality. God says about Abraham, “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right [tzedakah] and just [mishpat].”³ God tells Hosea, “I will betroth you to Me in righteousness [tzedek] and justice [mishpat], in kindness [chesed] and compassion [rachamim].”⁴ He tells Jeremiah, “I am the Lord, who exercises kindness [chesed], justice [mishpat] and righteousness [tzedakah] on earth, for in these I delight, declares the Lord.”⁵ Those are the key prophetic words: righteousness, justice, kindness and compassion – not love.

When the Prophets talk about love it is about

¹ Shabbat 31a

² Harry Redner, *Ethical Life: The Past and Present of Ethical Cultures*, Roman and Littlefield, 2001, 49-68

³ Genesis 18:19

⁴ Hosea 2:19

⁵ Jeremiah 9:23

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God's love for Israel and the love we should show for God. With only three exceptions, they do not speak about love in a moral context, that is, vis-à-vis our relationships with one another. The exceptions are Amos' remark, "Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts" (Amos 5:15); Micah's famous statement, "Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8) and Zechariah's "Therefore love truth and peace" (Zech. 8:19). Note that all three are about loving abstractions – good, mercy and truth. They are not about people.

The prophetic voice is about how people conduct themselves in society. Are they faithful to God and to one another? Are they acting honestly, justly, and with due concern for the vulnerable in society? Do the political and religious leaders have integrity? Does society have the high morale that comes from people feeling that it treats its citizens well and calls forth the best in them? A moral society will succeed; an immoral or amoral one will fail. That is the key prophetic insight. The Prophets did not make the demand that people love one another. That was beyond their remit. Society requires justice, not love.

The wisdom voice in Torah and Tanach looks at character and consequence. If you live virtuously, then by and large things will go well for you. A good example is Psalm 1. The person occupied with Torah will be "like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers." That is the wisdom voice. Those who do well, fare well. They find happiness (ashrei). Good people love God, family, friends and virtue. But the wisdom literature does not speak of loving your neighbour or the stranger.

The moral vision of the Priest that makes him different from the Prophet and Sage lies in the key word *kadosh*, "holy." Someone or something that is holy is set apart, distinctive, different. The Priests were set apart from the rest of the nation. They had no share in the land. They did not work as labourers in the field. Their sphere was the Tabernacle or Temple. They lived at the epicentre of the Divine Presence. As God's ministers they had to keep themselves pure and avoid any form of defilement. They were holy.

Until now, holiness has been seen as a special

attribute of the Priest. But there was a hint at the Giving of the Torah that it concerned not just the children of Aaron but the people as a whole: "You shall be to Me a Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). Our chapter now spells this out for the first time. "The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:1-2). This tells us that the ethic of holiness applies not just to Priests but to the entire nation. We, too, must be distinctive, set apart, held to a higher standard.

What in practice does this mean? A decisive clue is provided by another key word used throughout Tanach in relation to the Kohen, namely the verb *b-d-l*: to divide, set apart, separate, distinguish. That is what a Priest does. His task is "to distinguish between the sacred and the secular" (Lev. 10:10), and "to distinguish between the unclean and the clean" (Lev. 11:47). This is what God does for His people: "You shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and I have distinguished you [va-avdil] from other peoples to be Mine." (Lev. 20:26).

There is one other place in which *b-d-l* is a key word, namely the story of creation in Genesis 1, where it occurs five times. God separates light and dark, day and night, upper and lower waters. For three days God demarcates different domains, then for the next three days He places in each its appropriate objects or life-forms. God fashions order out of the *tohu va-vohu* chaos. As His last act of creation, He makes man after His "image and likeness." This was clearly an act of love. "Beloved is man," said Rabbi Akiva, "because he was created in [God's] image."⁶

Genesis 1 defines the priestly moral imagination. Unlike the Prophet, the Priest is not looking at society. He is not, like the wisdom figure, looking for happiness. He is looking at creation as the work of God. He knows that everything has its place: sacred and profane, permitted and forbidden. It is his task to make these distinctions and teach them to others. He knows that different life forms have their own niche in the environment. That is why the ethic of holiness includes rules like: Don't mate with different kinds of animals, don't plant a field with different kinds of seed, and don't wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.

Above all the ethic of holiness tells us that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. God made each of us in love. Therefore, if we seek to imitate God – "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy" – we too must love humanity, and not in the abstract but in the concrete form of the neighbour and the stranger. The ethic of holiness is based on the vision of creation-as-God's-work-of-love. This vision sees all human beings – ourselves, our neighbour and the stranger – as in the image of God, and that is why

⁶ Mishnah Avot 3:14

we are to love our neighbour and the stranger as ourself.

I believe that there is something unique and contemporary about the ethic of holiness. It tells us that morality and ecology are closely related. They are both about creation: about the world as God's work and humanity as God's image. The integrity of humanity and the natural environment go together. The natural universe and humanity were both created by God, and we are charged to protect the first and love the second. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2020 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd you shall observe My decrees and My laws which a human being shall perform and he shall live by them; I am the Lord." (Lev. 18:5) It is fascinating that our Bible commands us to perform the laws and statutes of the Lord, and then it adds "and he shall live by them." Would any moral individual think to perform laws that could cause him to die? Our Sages use this seemingly superfluous phrase to teach a most important lesson, one which distinguishes Judaism from some other religions: "You shall live by these My laws and not die by them. If someone says to you, 'Desecrate the Sabbath or I'll kill you,' you must desecrate the Sabbath; desecrate one Sabbath so that you will live to observe many more Sabbaths" (BT, Yoma 85b).

Our religion revels in life. To be sure, there are instances when one must be ready to die for one's faith, but this is limited to three most egregious crimes: murder, sexual immorality and idolatry. If one says to a Jew "kill X or I'll kill you; rape Y or I'll kill you," the Jew must give up his or her life rather than commit these crimes. Similarly, in times of persecution, Jews must demonstrate that they will not give in to gentile pressure – even pressure unto death – to relinquish their faith or to relinquish their land in milchemet mitzva. But under ordinary conditions, no Jewish law overrides the preservation of human life – as we have recently experienced surrounding the Corona epidemic.

Even the famous test of Abraham, the apparent Divine command that Abraham sacrifice his son to Him, concludes with Abraham being forbidden to harm his son (Kierkegaard notwithstanding). The most classic commentary, Rashi, even goes so far as to say that Abraham misunderstood the Divine command, that God never meant that he should slaughter his son, but rather dedicate him in life and not in death.

Unlike the Christian symbol of the cross, which eternalized the martyrdom of the founder of Christianity, and far from the glory some militant Islamic groups ascribe to the shahidim—the so-called martyrs who are

urged (and handsomely paid) to blow themselves up together with innocent Israelis amid the promise of eternal bliss with 72 virgins—Judaism has never courted martyrdom.

Indeed, our priests-kohanim aren't even allowed to come into contact with a dead body, so consistent are we in promoting Judaism as a life-fostering and this-world oriented religion.

What still remains strange and difficult to understand is that immediately following the biblical mandate to "live by God's laws," in our weekly portion of Aharei Mot comes a long list of prohibited sexual relationships which fall under the rubric of "one must die rather than transgress." If living by God's laws is so important, why follow that stricture with laws for which one must be willing to die rather than transgress?

I believe the answer is to be found in a difficult conundrum suggested by the Elders of the Negev. The Talmud (BT, Tamid 32b) records a discussion between Alexander the Great and the Elders of the Negev: Alexander asked, "What ought people do if they wish to keep on living?" The Elders answered, "They must slay themselves". Asked Alexander: "What ought people do if they wish to die?" Answered the Elders. "They should try to stay alive!" Permit me to explain. Let us answer the second question first. If an individual lives only in order to keep on living, he is bound to fail, and he will die in the end; after all, I am not aware of any individual who got out of this world alive! Hence if a person wishes to die, let him continue to try to stay alive forever. He will surely die because he will surely fail.

And what ought someone do if he wants to keep on living? Let him slay himself, or at least let him find an ideal to live by and for which he is ready to give up his life. Then even if he dies in pursuit of that ideal, his life will have gained ultimate meaning, and he will thereby be linked to eternity.

Martin Luther King, Jr. put it very well in his Detroit speech in June 1963: "And I submit to you that if a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he is not fit to live."

The only life that is truly meaningful is a life dedicated to an idea which is greater than one individual's life.

Hence it is specifically our portion which praised the value of life teaching that "You shall live by My laws," which appears within the context of a group of laws for which one must be willing to give up his life!

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The death of the two sons of Aaron remain one of the great mysteries that the Torah presents to us.

The Talmud and Midrash have advanced several ideas as to why such a tragedy occurred and it may seem to a certain extent it was self-inflicted. The

reasons for their failures are listed - they had drunk too much wine, they never intended to marry and father a family and they wanted their elders to pass on so that they could be the leaders of the people. Over the centuries other ideas of their failings have been enumerated by the commentators.

In the face of all of this we have the record of the Torah itself that their father Aaron was silent. The silence many times is the only acceptable answer in the face of tragedy. The silence indicates the line between the judgment of heaven and the understanding of life that humans bring to it. My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways, that is what the Lord says, and man must adjust to that difficult reality.

So, Aaron is silent. He does not complain, and he does not cast blame. Is he aware of the behavior of his sons? The Torah does not comment upon that either. Many times, parents really do not comprehend their children nor are they privy to their ambitions or thoughts. But the Torah leaves all of this as an open question as far as Aaron and his sons are concerned. We have no idea as to what he thought of his sons, but we can understand the anguish and pain that he must have suffered on that terrible day of tragedy. Aaron remains a symbol therefore of the ability to continue life even when life has struck a deadly blow to the person. In this respect I always felt that he is a prototype of *Iyov* who also seems to suffer for causes that are unknown and inexplicable. However, *Iyov* complains loudly and demands to know why. Aaron is silent and does not raise his voice either in anger or in doubt.

I can only imagine that the surviving sons of Aaron, Elazar and Itamar, are placed under enormous personal and emotional pressure. The older sons, Nadav and Avihu, were seen as the heads of the family and as the ones who bore responsibility for preserving the line of the priesthood and the holiness of the Tabernacle and Temple. Now they have suddenly been removed from the scene. Elazar and Itamar are the only ones left. Many times in human history we have seen that younger brothers who never expected to become a monarch or have a position of importance and influence, when fate decreed otherwise and made that younger person the head of the family or the leader of the country, rose to the occasion.

It is not that they imitated their older siblings who no longer were present, but rather it was that they were able to assert their own personality and their own inner greatness. One never knows the capabilities and potential that one has until and unless one is challenged by fate and life itself. Potential exists within everyone. The ability to bring forth that potential and to further it and strengthen it and make it beneficial, that is a challenge.

So, included in the tragedy of the deaths of the two older sons of Aaron is the response of the two

younger sons who apparently rise to the occasion. Elazar will be the high priest that leads the Jewish people to the land of Israel and Itamar will be the one that is able to organize and correctly finance the building of the tabernacle in the desert and other projects as well. The line of the priesthood of Israel that exists until today runs through Elazar and Itamar who never expected to be the ones that would have to bear that burden and meet that challenge. That is also part of the idea of Aaron's silence. For who knows how people will respond and who knows what potential will be released that will help build the Jewish people and humankind. ©2020 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's reading includes a sentence, which deals with the requirement to rebuke one who has done wrong. (Leviticus 19:17)

The Torah term for admonishing another is *hochei'ach*. Truth be told, the word means to prove (*le-hochi'ach*) rather than reprove. In other words, the key to rebuke is to prove to another that he/she possesses inner goodness that waits to be tapped.

The Talmud tells the story of Elisha b. Abuya, a devout and gifted scholar who had gone astray. Elisha's student Rabbi Meir implored him to repent. Elisha, who had become known as "Acher," which literally means "other" or "stranger," responded, "I cannot repent, because I heard a bat kol, a heavenly voice exclaim, 'repent, wayward children, except for Acher.'" (Chagigah 15a)

Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik explains that Elisha was called Acher, as he was a stranger to his true being. He did not repent because Elisha was laboring under the erroneous conviction that he was corrupt, basically evil. But this was not true. Acher had failed to understand when he heard the bat kol that its message was: Acher cannot repent, but Elisha b. Abuya can.

Rabbi Soloveichik adds that every time the Talmud records an individual who speaks of doing something wrong, the third person singular is used – *hahu gavra* – "that person," as if the individual had been overtaken by an outer evil force. When the individual, however, recalls having acted righteously, the first person singular – *ana* – is used, as acting righteously is one's true essence.

This idea has halachic (religio-legal) standing. A Jewish court in certain circumstances has the right to force a husband to give his wife a *get* (Jewish divorce). Rambam asks why is this *get* not void? After all, a *get* must be given voluntarily. He responds that although this person outwardly refuses to divorce his wife,

inwardly, he wishes to do the right thing and grant the divorce. (Rambam, Laws of Divorce, 2:20)

Growth, by and large, comes through love, not through harsh words, not through hochei'ach as rebuke, but hochei'ach as to prove to the other that his or her inner spark is good.

If only it would be ignited. ©2020 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd he shall put the incense on the fire before Hashem and the cloud of the incense shall cover the lid that is upon the testimony and he shall not die." (Vayikra 16:13) One of the highlights of the Yom Kippur service was the Kohain Gadol's entry into the Kodesh HaKedoshim, the inner sanctum which housed the Aron with the luchos. Upon this ark, the countenance of Hashem "appeared." The Kohain Gadol would enter, offer incense, sprinkle the blood of animal offerings, and recite a short prayer. Then he would leave.

It seems from this posuk that an integral part of his entry was not only setting the incense upon the coals inside (which was a matter of debate with the Sadducees,) but that it should create a cloud of smoke sufficient to cover the lid of the ark. If he did not do so, he was liable for death.

The commentaries discuss what exactly this was about. Some explain that the reason the Ketores incense did not produce smoke was because it was lacking an ingredient called 'maaleh ashan' which made the mixture emit a rising smoke cloud. For leaving out an ingredient, one is liable to death as we previously learned.

Others say the problem was that he was entering the Holy of Holies without the proper items, since his incense was lacking and therefore null and void. Both of these answers leave us wondering, however, why the Torah seems to imply the problem was that the smoke didn't cover the ark. If cinnamon had been left out, the same reasons would apply, even though the incense as prepared might indeed create a puffy cloud.

R' Yaakov Bechor Shor, a Tosafist, comments simply, "The cloud of incense shall cover: So that he not feast his eyes on the place of the Holy of Holies." Simply put, the Kohain Gadol, finally getting a brief opportunity to visit the holiest place in the physical world, is not supposed to indulge himself and take in all the glory!

Instead, his view must be obstructed. Not merely because "one cannot see Me and live," but because it is disrespectful for the Kohain to focus on his

own pleasure and not maintain the proper reverence for Hashem. Even though it was a yearning for spirituality, it would be wrong to take physical pleasure in it.

In Parshas Kedoshim, we are adjured to be holy as Hashem is. One way to do this says the Ramban, is to not indulge ourselves even in things which are permissible. The all-you-can-eat buffet might have the best hechsher, but gorging is not going to bring you to holiness. Rather, hold back on that which is permissible, and through the exercise of your self-control you will become closer to Hashem.

The lesson for us is that as we constantly battle to rise above our physicality, every victory, even only once a year like the Kohain Gadol, qualifies us to be called holy, like Hashem.

On May 29, 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary became the first man to climb Mount Everest. It wasn't easy, and in his book, High Adventure, we learn that Hillary had to grow into this success.

In 1952, he attempted to climb Mount Everest but failed. A few weeks later a group in England asked him to address its members. Hillary walked on stage to a thunderous applause. The audience recognized an attempt at greatness, but Edmund Hillary only saw his failure. At one point, he walked to the edge of the speaker's platform.

He made a fist and pointed at a picture of the mountain. He then said in a loud voice, "Mount Everest, you beat me the first time, but I'll beat you the next time because you've grown all you are going to grow... but I'm still growing!" ©2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Hashem, Not Us

The combination of the two parshiot enables us to see them as a unit of combined thought, the laws of Acharei Mot flowing into the laws of Kedoshim.

HaRav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that these parshiot are designating for us a view of Man and specifically Jewish Man as distinguished from other species of animals on the land. Animals have "free, uncontrolled, impulsive lives" which must be separated from the elevated purposes of mankind. Man controls what he eats as in the laws of Kashrut, yet even within the boundaries established by those laws, there are additional restrictions, namely: slaughtering an animal without bringing it first to the Temple, covering of the slaughtering blood, eating of an animal (or bird) that died of its own, and the prohibition of eating blood of an animal. These limitations require that we demonstrate a level of respect for animals, which elevates them into our service to Hashem.

The Torah continues with what Hirsch describes as "the most powerful factor of this animal life (of) just following instinct, which free-willed morality mastering and using in the service of Hashem forms the foundation of personal and national civilization,

(that) is sexual life, the Divine regulation for which forms the contents of the laws contained in this chapter." As an introduction to these laws the Torah tells us, "Speak to the B'nei Yisrael and say to them 'I am Hashem your Elokim (Judge). Like the actions of the Land of Egypt wherein you lived, you shall not do, and like the actions of the Land of Canaan to which I will take you, you shall not do and neither shall you walk (go) according to their laws. My social laws you shall practice and my laws you shall guard to walk (go) in them, I am Hashem your Elokim."

It is important to note that Hashem begins and ends this discourse with the words "I am Hashem your (plural) Elokim." These words remind us of the opening of the Ten Commandments, "I am Hashem your (singular) Elokim." These same words are repeatedly found after many of the commandments given in the parshiot this week. There Hashem uses the phrase to command the people to be Holy, Kadosh, which we have seen to mean "separated for a unique or special reason". Here the B'nei Yisrael are instructed to act differently than the people around them. They must not live the baseless life of animals but must elevate Man's morality to emulate Hashem. Man must take control of his desires and his instincts and restrict those desires and instincts to a moral code even when those actions are part of our animal instinct.

The very next words in our passage refer to the basic instinct of sexual relations. The B'nei Yisrael are cautioned to avoid performing acts like those in which they participated in Egypt and like those that they will witness in Canaan. Ibn Ezra refers to, "They shall no longer slaughter their sacrifices to the demons after whom they stray; this shall be an eternal decree to them for their generations." These demons were part of the false gods of the Egyptians. Ibn Ezra explains that we should not bring sacrifices to these demons, these false gods. The Chachamim however explain that this pasuk refers to the sexual misconduct of the Egyptians, not the Jews. The opinion of the Chachamim is found in Torat Kohanim and says that "the Egyptians were also addicted to carnality, in all forms of forbidden relationships."

Hashem goes even further in His warnings concerning the Canaanites. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin emphasizes that Hashem not only cautions the B'nei Yisrael about the actions of Eretz Canaan, but also warns the B'nei Yisrael about following in their laws. The Jews had been careful to avoid the laws of Egypt even before they were enslaved. Once they saw the injustice of slavery, they were certain not to accept the Egyptian laws. They would not be enslaved, however, when they arrived in Canaan. For that reason, the B'nei Yisrael might not be so cautious. They might be repelled by the actions of the Canaanites but the Canaanite laws were not directly connected to these abominations. These laws would still reflect an outlook

about Man that would conflict with the ways of Hashem. HaRav Sorotzkin reflects on the words, "and you shall not walk (go) according to their laws." He explains that it is not uncommon for people to study other nations' laws and to adopt those laws which they find to be "meaningful". Those laws are not given to them by Hashem, whose system of laws is "truth". Hirsch explains that "the traits of the private and family life, and also the personal national traits, i.e. those which are characteristic of a nation, are usually influenced by the more or less obscure ideas of the relation of the supernatural to individuals and nations.... To obtain grace from the gods, or at least to ensure their non-interference in projects and undertakings, becomes a consideration and purpose in the name of which conventions are regulated, and customs showing honor to the gods and supposedly gaining their favor become embedded in the private and public life of nations." In Egypt this concept "dug the grave of all consideration of the dignity of a human being as such and of human freedom." In Canaan this concept "sanctified moral excesses to the depths of bestial depravity."

The Torah is very clear and complete in its understanding of our relationships in the world. Others have placed their own prejudices above the laws of the Torah and have accepted into their laws the very ideas that distort Hashem's idea of justice and truth. It is difficult for us to argue with their logic because it utilizes many of the same concepts which are found in the Torah. But it is similar to the warnings that the people are given about a false prophet. The false prophet will be able to use the Torah for his benefit but will deviate and distort the Torah in the end. As with the false prophet, our emotions and our desires for solutions to our problems can cause us to distort the law to satisfy our desires and needs or societies new "moral" concepts.

Perhaps that is why this entire section falls in the parasha of Acharei Mot (After the death). The sons of Aharon who died were not trying to break the law. They wished to serve Hashem fully and they sought a way to become closer to Hashem. But they allowed that desire to distort the law and failed to ask their elders if what they wished to do was a distortion. Their deaths were a sign to us of the danger of acting on our emotions alone. May we learn to understand Hashem's desires and place them above our own. © 2020 Rabbi D. Levin

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Touching Food

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

In our Parsha it states the words "V'initten et Nafshsechem" 17;31 (you shall afflict yourselves). This language "to afflict" appears four more times with relation to the holiday of Yom Kippur, in which our Rabbis derive the five activities that one must refrain

from doing on Yom Kippur (eating, drinking, anointing, wearing leather shoes, and marital relations).

In the Jerusalem Talmud, Law Five, it states that the showbread which was usually divided by the Kohanim (priests) on Shabbat, when Yom Kippur falls on a Shabbat they would divide it after the completion of Shabbat. It would seem that even touching this bread, and by extension even touching food would similarly be forbidden on Yom Kippur.

There are those who say, that touching food on Yom Kippur is really not an issue since the severity of the day is upon the individual and one would never therefore eat food because one touches it. The Imrat Chasidim seems to concur when he states that even if all the fast days were eliminated, people would still fast on Yom Kippur because of the seriousness of the day.

In order to explain the Jerusalem Talmud that was quoted earlier, one must say that it was sited not in the context of a law but rather according to the view that states that one may prepare from Yom Kippur (if it falls on a Shabbat) to after Shabbat, and in that setting even on Yom Kippur it would be forbidden because one might come to eat it by touching it.

However according to the accepted law, this is not necessary. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI ZALMAN MELAMED

Yom HaAtzmaut 5756

[Ed Note - this piece was written in 1996]

As Israel Independence Day nears, the questions once again arise - perhaps with even greater force than previously, in light of recent events that have occurred here: Is there really any religious significance to the State of Israel and its establishment? Need we give thanks to G-d with special prayers on this day?

In 1946, following the European Holocaust, and before the founding of the State of Israel, Rabbi Tzvi Yehudah Kook - son of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook - was asked concerning the proper approach of Torah Judaism to the establishment of the Jewish State. His response was that not only are religious Jews permitted to support such a move, but are required to. But, persisted the questioners, there is no guarantee that the State would be run according to Torah dictates? Answered Rav Tzvi Yehudah, yes there is such a promise - not one from Jewish or foreign powers, who do not feel themselves bound to a Torah-based value system, but rather a promise that we ourselves must provide. It is solely dependent upon us, the people of Torah and strong faith. To the extent that we - Israel - all of us come with a pure heart, sincere faith, a sense of awe and holiness, to rebuild the People of Israel in their Land, such will be the level of Torah in our State.

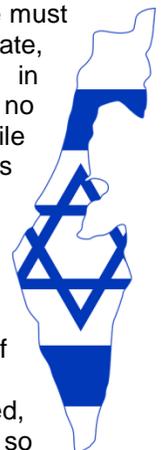
Rabbi Kook continued to say that our obligation in this regard is a triple one: for the sake of the people,

for the Torah, and for the Land. That the establishment of a State would save Jews seemed fairly obvious at the time: their lives were still in physical and spiritual danger in many parts of the world, and the events of the Holocaust years had shown the world that we could count on no one, even in our darkest hour. It was obvious that any mass immigration of Jews to our Land could be arranged only under our sovereignty. How true ring the words of Rav Tzvi Yehuda in our time, when Jewry in the Soviet Union and Ethiopia was saved by the very existence of the State of Israel, which directly or indirectly arranged the rescue of hundreds of thousands, and to where they were able to escape, without fear of their lives or of their spiritual heritage. If for this alone the State had been established, dayenu - it would have been enough.

It is true that the existence of the Jewish Nation is eternal and absolute, just as that of the heavens and the earth, as written in the Torah and by the Prophets. The great scholar Maimonides, in the Laws of the New Month, writes that "G-d promised that never would the Nation be obliterated." The fact of the coming of the Redemption is without doubt. At the same time, however, we must hearken to the voice that calls upon us, that demands of us, to participate with G-d in His wondrous works. Just as a judge who decides a law case righteously is considered to be a partner of G-d in the Works of Creation, just as is said that one who sanctifies the Name of the L-rd in public is considered to be His partner, just as one who recites the Kiddush and sanctifies the Sabbath is considered to be His partner - so too must we always participate with G-d in the fulfillment of His will. It is His desire to preserve the Nation of Israel, and He is in the process of nearing the Redemption process, and therefore we must also be alert to take part in this historic phenomenon. We must act upon the Torah tenet that there is no essential or complete existence for the Jewish People anywhere other than in "the Land that the L-rd your G-d cares for, His eyes are always upon it, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year." (Deuteronomy 11,12)

For the sake of the Torah, too, we must demand the establishment of a State, continued Rabbi Kook. The Talmud in tractate Megillah teaches that there is no greater nullification of Torah than the exile of the Jewish People from their Land. This is so because the true fulfillment of Torah is only in the home of the People, in Eretz Yisrael. There is no doubt, then, that our very drive to keep the Torah and its commandments obligates us to work towards a Jewish State in the Land of Israel.

But, again the question is raised, are we to rejoice in a secular State, full of so many of the negative phenomena that we'd thought it



would obviate? Is a family to rejoice upon the birth of a totally non-functional child?

In my opinion, the example is distortive of the true picture, and instead should be phrased as follows: If a family is suffering from all sorts of trials and tribulations, and a healthy baby is born to them, should they then not celebrate? Of course they should, and on the contrary! They should recognize that this is to be their consolation. ****The troubles that we are facing now are not those of the State; they are those of the Jews!**** The State did not instigate the spiritual crisis that we are undergoing - that problem was there way before the State. In fact, without the State, who knows what would have happened to the People from a spiritual standpoint? Assimilation in the Diaspora is frightening; the State of Israel was able to help the People stand proud and tall and put the brakes on world-wide assimilation to a large extent.

We must therefore recognize the spiritual strength that the State provides. At the same time, we must recognize that given the lowly spiritual level of the People in general, we are unable to derive all of the spiritual power that is there in potential. We must be happy for what we have, and pray that we be granted the opportunity to see the full blossoming of the State of Israel in every way. © 1996 Rabbi Z. Melamed & torah.org

DONNY TRENK

V'Chai Bahem

In these trying times, we've been living in a strange sort of exile, deprived of everything that makes us a cohesive Jewish community. There is one particular Torah value however, that has played a decisive role determining how our kehillas, on even a global scale, have been guided.

In this week's parsha we read, "V'Chai Bahem" (Vayikra 18:5). In just two words, the Torah conveys a fundamental lesson: to save a life, is grounds for abrogating nearly all the 613 commandments. As the Gemara in Yoma 85b expounds: "V'Chai Bahem, V'lo Sh'Yamus Bahem - You should live through them, and not die through them". The Torah seems to step aside where human life is at stake, even where the pikuach ha'nefesh is only a safek.

Over the last six weeks, we have all intimately experienced the far reaches of this mitzvah. It all began with that Shabbos where the Mitzvah D'Oraisa of



Parsha Zachor was suspended. From then onwards, there was to be no more shul, nor yeshivas at all – their doors had been locked. Jews were no longer permitted to daven or learn k'hilchaso (had we been foretold of

such a scenario just a month earlier, would we not have surmised that this was the work of Amalek and its Gestapo troops!).

Yet none of this of course, was due to anti-semites. Instead, we were the ones who terminated communal Jewish life. We locked the doors, we issued the prohibitions from joining with our chaverim in some of our most cherished mitzvos; Biur Ha'Chameitz, Siyum Bechoros, Birchas Kohanim, Hallel, and the Pesach Seder together with our loved ones.

All because of what? If coronavirus is our answer, we would be missing the mark.

While fear of Covid-19 was indeed the cause for the myriad of nations across the world grinding to a halt, adherents of the Torah had another consideration in mind. Our primary motivation to take the utmost precautions (beyond even what was medically mandated), and shut down our religious obligations, did not come from fear, anxiety or terror. Rather, our communities were guided by one interest alone – fulfilling the mitzvah of "V'Chai Bahem".

"Anu Ratzim, v'Heim Ratzim – they run and we run" (Brachot 28b). Although we may take the identical course of action as the nations of the world, it is the underlying kavana – the intent of the action – which makes all the difference. Do you run, hide and shut down your way of life trembling before the forces of nature, from a virus run rampant? Or, do you take these very same actions, but by way of mitzvah, because G-d commanded you to embrace life, "V'Chai Bahem".

"Anu Ratzim, v'Heim Ratzim – they run and we run". It is fascinating how with the power of the mind alone, with just a spark of a thought, a Torah-aligned machshava, we can be me'hapech our lives and make a 180 degree turn from running in one direction, to the other.

The mitzvah of "V'Chai Bahem" then, is a gift from heaven as it requires no effort contrary to human nature. The will to live is ingrained in us from birth. All creatures possess a basic survival instinct. Who is the person that needs to be commanded to live?

The Torah's gift is in how it takes something that we all do anyways- live- and says: While you're at it, why not make it into a mitzvah, a way to become closer to Hashem? This is in line with the well-known Chazal we read upon completion of learning: "Rabbi Chanania ben Akashia says: The Holy One, Blessed is He, desired to confer merit upon Israel; therefore He increased for them ["hirbeh lahem"] Torah and Mitzvos".

Why do Jews fight to live? Because the Torah commands us to live. This mitzvah is the basis for all the others. With it, we have everything, without it we have nothing.

The mitzvah of "V'Chai Bahem" comes to remind us that everything we do, down to our most basic instinct of even breathing, can exist in the context of Torah, Mitzvos and Ratzon Hashem. © 2020 D. Trenk