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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

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Covenant & Conversation

In its account of the festivals of the Jewish year, this week's parshah contains the following statement: "You shall dwell in thatched huts for seven days. Everyone included in Israel must live in such thatched huts. This is so that future generations will know that I caused the Israelites to live in sukkot when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your G-d."

What precisely this means was the subject of disagreement between two great teachers of the Mishnaic era, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva. According to the Talmud Bavli (Sukkah 11a), Rabbi Eliezer holds that the reference is to the clouds of glory that accompanied the Israelites on their journey through the desert. Rabbi Akiva maintains that the verse is to be understood literally (sukkot mammash). It means "huts" -- no more, no less.

A similar difference of opinion exists between the great medieval Jewish commentators. Rashi and Ramban favour the "clouds of glory" interpretation. Ramban cites as proof the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the end of days: "Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over all the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain." (Isaiah 4:5-6) Here the word sukkah clearly refers not to a natural but to a miraculous protection.

Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, however, favour the literal interpretation. Rashbam explains as follows: the festival of Sukkot, when the harvest was complete and the people were surrounded by the blessings of the land, was the time to remind them of how they came to be there. The Israelites would relive the wilderness years during which they had no permanent home. They would then feel a sense of gratitude to G-d for bringing them to the land. Rashbam's prooftext is Moses' speech in Devarim 8: "When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your G-d for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your G-d... Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your G-d, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery... You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the Lord your G-d, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth, confirming his covenant which He swore to your forefathers, as it is today." (8:10-18)

According to Rashbam, Sukkot (like Pesach) is a reminder of the humble origins of the Jewish people, a powerful antidote to the risks of affluence. That is one of the overarching themes of Moses' speeches in the book of Devarim and a mark of his greatness as a leader. The real challenge to the Jewish people, he warned, was not the dangers they faced in the wilderness, but the opposite, the sense of wellbeing and security they would have once they settled the land. The irony -- and it has happened many times in the history of nations -- is that people remember G-d in times of distress but forget him in times of plenty. That is when cultures become decadent and begin to decline.

A question, however, remains. According to the view that sukkot is to be understood literally, what miracle does the festival of Sukkot represent? Pesach celebrates the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt with signs and wonders. Shavuot recalls the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, the only time in history when an entire people experienced an unmediated revelation of G-d. On the "clouds of glory" interpretation, Sukkot fits this scheme. It recalls the miracles in the wilderness, the forty years during which they ate mannah from heaven, drank water from a rock, and were led by a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night (In 1776, Thomas Jefferson chose this image as his design for the Great Seal of the United States). But on the view that the sukkah is not a symbol but a fact -- a hut, a booth, nothing more -- what miracle does it represent? There is nothing exceptional in living in a portable home if you are a nomadic group living in the Sinai desert. It is what Bedouin do to this day. Where then is the miracle?

A surprising and lovely answer is given by the prophet Jeremiah: "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: / I remember the devotion of your youth, / how, as a bride, you loved me / and followed me through the desert, / through a land not sown."

Throughout Tenakh, most of the references to the wilderness years focus on the graciousness of G-d and the ingratitude of the people: their quarrels and complaints, their constant inconstancy. Jeremiah does

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the opposite. To be sure, there were bad things about those years, but against them stands the simple fact that the Israelites had the faith and courage to embark on a journey through an unknown land, fraught with danger, and sustained only by their trust in G-d. They were like Sarah who accompanied Abraham on his journey, leaving "his land, birthplace and father's house" behind. They were like Tzipporah who went with Moses on his risk-laden mission to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. There is a faith that is like love; there is a love that calls for faith. That is what the Israelites showed in leaving a land where they had lived for 210 years and travelling out into the desert, "a land not sown", not knowing what would befall them on the way, but trusting in G-d to bring them to their destination.

Perhaps it took Rabbi Akiva, the great lover of Israel, to see that what was truly remarkable about the wilderness years was not that the Israelites were surrounded by the clouds of glory but that they were an entire nation without a home or houses; they were like nomads without a place of refuge. Exposed to the elements, at risk from any surprise attack, they none the less continued on their journey in the faith that G-d would not desert them.

To a remarkable degree Sukkot came to symbolise not just the forty years in the wilderness but also two thousand years of exile. Following the destruction of the second Temple, Jews were scattered throughout the world. Almost nowhere did they have rights. Nowhere could they consider themselves at home. Wherever they were, they were there on sufferance, dependent on a ruler's whim. At any moment without forewarning they could be expelled, as they were from England in 1290, from Vienna in 1421, Cologne, 1424, Bavaria 1442, Perugia, Vicenza, Parma and Milan in the 1480s, and most famously from Spain in 1492. These expulsions gave rise to the Christian myth of "the wandering Jew" -- conveniently ignoring the fact that it was Christians who imposed this fate on them. Yet even they were often awestruck at the fact that despite everything Jews did not give up their faith when (in Judah Halevi's phrase) "with a word lightly spoken" they could have converted to the dominant faith and put an end to their sufferings.

Sukkot is the festival of a people for whom, for twenty centuries, every house was a mere temporary dwelling, every stop no more than a pause in a long journey. I find it deeply moving that Jewish tradition called this time zeman simchatenu, "the season of our joy". That, surely, is the greatness of the Jewish spirit that, with no protection other than their faith in G-d, Jews were able to celebrate in the midst of suffering and affirm life in the full knowledge of its risk and uncertainty. That is the faith of a remarkable nation.

R. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev once explained why the festival of Nissan has two names, Pesach and Chag haMatzot. The name Pesach represents the greatness of G-d who "passed over" the houses of the Israelites in Egypt. The name Chag haMatzot represents the greatness of the Israelites who were willing to follow G-d into the wilderness without provisions. In the Torah, G-d calls the festival Chag haMatzot in praise of Israel. The Jewish people, however, called it Pesach to sing the praise of G-d. That, it seems, is the argument between R. Eliezer and R. Akiva about Sukkot. According to R. Eliezer, it represents G-d's miracle, the clouds of glory. According to R. Akiva, however, it represents the miracle of Israel -- their willingness to continue the long journey to freedom, vulnerable and at great risk, led only by the call of G-d.

Why then, according to Rabbi Akiva, is Sukkot celebrated at harvest time? The answer is in the very next verse of the prophecy of Jeremiah. After speaking of "the devotion of your youth, how, as a bride, you loved me," the prophet adds: "Israel is holy to G-d, / The first fruit of His harvest."

Just as, during Tishri, the Israelites celebrated their harvest, so G-d celebrates His -- a people who, whatever else their failings, have stayed loyal to heaven's call for longer, and through a more arduous set of journeys, than any other people on earth.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"I shall be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel..." (Leviticus 22:32) Neither the Bible nor Jewish law has ever seen martyrdom as an ideal to be courted. There is the commandment that "G-d must be sanctified," however, prior to this commandment for martyrdom, we find in last week's portion the words: "You shall guard My statutes and My laws which person shall do and live by" (Leviticus 18:5). As our sages teach, "You shall live by My laws - and not die by them."

Fascinatingly, Maimonides begins his discussion of the laws pertaining to sanctifying G-d's not with the occasions when we must give up our lives, but rather with the times that we must live: "All of the House of Israel is commanded concerning sanctifying the great name of G-d... and are warned against desecrating His name... How so? When an idolater comes and forces an Israelite to transgress one of the biblical laws or be

killed, the Jew must transgress the law rather than be killed; as it is written 'You shall live by them and not die by them.' And someone who allows himself to be killed rather than transgress the law is considered culpable for his [own] soul." (Laws of the Fundamentals of the Torah 5)

Maimonides cites the Talmudic passage which states that one must give up his life rather than commit idolatry, adultery or murder. In all other cases, one must transgress the law rather than accept martyrdom. This Talmudic approach is encapsulated by the phrase, "it is better to desecrate one Sabbath and remain alive so that you can keep many more Sabbaths." (B.T.Yoma 85b) However, our Talmudic sages further ruled that during a time of persecution, a Jew must be willing to give up his life rather than commit the most minor transgression "regarding his shoelaces" (B.T. Sanhedrin 74).

So the value of a human life is heavily emphasized, and martyrdom seems to be only a position of last resort, but in times of persecution we must be willing to give up our lives rather than change the smallest detail of how we ties our shoes. How can one's shoelace be so consequential?

The very verse that teaches us to live by our laws (Leviticus 18:5) is followed by 30 verses prohibiting sexual immorality. Each of these laws falls under the rubric of adultery, one of the sins which we may not transgress, even on pain of death. Why does the Bible present a ringing declaration of the importance of living by our laws and follow it with a list of laws that demand death rather than transgression?

To understand this, we must first understand how our sacred texts view life. There is an amazing dialogue in the Talmud between Alexander the Great and the rabbis: Alexander asked, "What must a person do in order to live?" They responded, "He must kill himself." He further asked, "What must a person do in order to die?" They responded, "He must preserve his life" (B.T. Tamid 32a).

Our sages are teaching a crucial principle: The only life truly worth living is a life consecrated to an ideal that is greater than any individual life. No one lives forever. If a person lives his entire life only in order to keep on living, he is bound to fail. However, if someone gives up his life for an ideal that is greater than himself, he succeeds in continuing that ideal-and something of himself-into the future.

This idea is also found in the biblical story of the Binding of Isaac. G-d teaches Abraham the greatest paradox of life: only if we are willing to sacrifice our future will our nation continue into the future. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the leader of African Americans' struggle for equality in America, said it very cogently: "If a man has not found a value for which he is willing to die, he is not fit to live."

Many years ago, my revered teacher Rav Soloveitchik explained that it is very difficult to assess the relative importance of any one of our commandments; each is important in and of itself, but the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. However, there are certain commandments that assume special importance in certain historical periods. The descendants of Amalek who attempt to destroy the Jewish people are the ones with the best sense of which commandment is most significant for each generation.

After the destruction of the Second Temple, all of the Roman populace wore white shoelaces; the rabbis decreed that Jews wear black shoelaces in mourning for the Temple. The Romans were anxious to make us forget our national sovereignty and the dream of our Holy Temple. Hence it was crucial, even to the point of giving up our lives, that we wear black shoelaces so that future generation would never forget Jerusalem.

Rav Soloveitchik said then, and it is even truer today, that after the Holocaust, the most significant event in Jewish history was the declaration of the State of Israel and Israel is the most important means for securing the Jewish future. Anti-Semites realize this; hence their ongoing efforts to delegitimize the Jewish state. Giving up one's life for the State of Israel is eternalizing one's life for Jewish future.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The review of the yearly holidays of Israel appears in this week's parsha. This type of review also appears in a number of different places in the holy Torah. The reasons advanced by the commentators for this seemingly unnecessary repetition are many, varied and insightful. But there is one that truly resonates with me and I think it has great relevance to our times and circumstances.

And the gist of this explanation, of the necessity for repeating the holiday cycle a number of times, is as follows: The original mention of the holiday cycle is directed to a generation that seemingly needed no such reminders or instructions.

The holiday of Pesach and the commemoration of the exodus from Egyptian bondage were fresh in the minds and memories of the generation of the desert.
And the holiday of Succot was a daily event in their lives, living as they did in their tents and underneath the heavenly clouds in the desert of Sinai. The agricultural nature of Succot - the ingathering of the summer produce of the land - and of Shavuot - the harvest of the spring and winter grain crop and the offering of the first fruits of the land in the Temple - were not yet relevant to that generation, a generation that would not live to see the Land of Israel inhabited by the people of Israel.

That description of the holiday cycle came to teach Israel that this cycle was eternal, independent of

geographic reality, and not subject to the actual circumstances of life and locality then present in the Jewish world.

The further repetitions of the holiday cycle dealt with the service of the sacrifices to be offered in the Temple. This repetition is Temple service oriented. In the absence of the Temple and its sacrificial service and of the loss of the Jewish homeland and its agricultural produce, one would have possibly thought that the holidays no longer had true meaning, and in effect could stop to exist. This is what happened to other faiths, cultures and even mighty empires.

The loss of power, homeland and sovereignty also made their holidays and days of historical and national commemoration extinct. The Jewish people, faith and its Torah have survived for millennia without nationhood, homeland and with the absence of any vestige of temporal power. One of the main reasons for this near miraculous ability to survive and even thrive has been the proper halachic observances of the holidays of the Jewish calendar year.

There is almost an unconditional and unconnected review of the holidays again in the book of Dvarim, for the observance and importance of the holidays is never relegated to particular generations or geographic locations. The holidays denote the passage of time on the Jewish calendar but they themselves are timeless and, in a certain sense, they are above purely historical time.

The very repetitions of the holidays that appear in the Torah serve to remind us of this fact, of our spiritual existence. As a consequence of our return to our ancient homeland, the agricultural nature of the holidays now exists once more. It in itself confirms the timeless quality that the holidays of the Jewish year represent.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"One who curses the name of G-d shall be put to death; the entire congregation shall stone him. Whether a stranger or a native, when he curses [G-d's] name he shall die." This law (Vayikra 24:16) was taught to Moshe after a member of the Children of Israel blasphemed (24:11), clarifying what should be done to him. This was the only law that needed clarification, yet a whole series of laws was taught to Moshe along with it, laws that had already been taught (in Parashas Mishpatim). Although additional details are learned from the way the laws were taught here, these details could have been included when the laws were taught the first time. Why are civil laws, which seem to have little relevance to the "new" law about the punishment of one who blasphemes, included here?

Some suggest (see Daas Sofrim) that after being taught that one who blasphemes is put to death, there was a need to reiterate the sanctity of life (including the life of an animal), that killing another person is a serious offense, punishable by death. However, this wasn't the only (or, by most accounts, first) case of having to put someone to death in the desert; in Bamidbar (15:32-36) we learn that there was someone who desecrated the Sabbath and was put to death. If the point of teaching these laws is to reiterate the sanctity of life, shouldn't they have been taught there? (It is possible that since there were many more people involved in the stoning of the blasphemer than in the stoning of the Sabbath violator, the need was greater by the former. Nevertheless, this would make the reiteration directed specifically towards those involved in administering the punishment, not towards everyone aware of the consequences of blasphemy.) Additionally, what about the other civil laws taught here? Ibn Ezra says that since the incident of the blasphemer started when two people were fighting, this aspect of civil law was included as well. Chizkuni adds that since coming to blows can lead to manslaughter, these laws are merely an extension of the law against murder.

Even within the laws taught here, there seems to be much repetition. Smiting a person is mentioned twice (24:17 and 21), as is smiting an animal (24:18 and 21), that the same laws apply to the stranger and to the native (24:16 and 22) and that the punishment must reflect the damage done (24:19 and 20). Although law details are learned from each aspect of the repetition, an interesting pattern emerges. Modern (frum) scholars often point out examples of this type of pattern in the Torah, referred to as a chiastic structure. (It is a similar concept to "At-bash," where the first letter of the Aleph-bais corresponds to the last letter, the second letter to the second to last letter, etc.) Rabbi Meir Spiegelman (http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.64/31emor.htm) shows how this pattern is present in the civil laws taught here. It is a bit difficult to portray in words without demonstrating it graphically (as Kaeren Fish did when he translated Rabbi Spiegelman's shiur), but imagine the verses written out on a triangle, with the first verse (or part of it) on the bottom right of the triangle, and its corresponding verse (or verse segment) opposite it on the bottom left. As we go up one level on the triangle, the next part is a bit higher and closer to the center on the right side, while the second to last part is parallel to it on the left side. This pattern continues until we reach the tip; the verse or clause that sits on top, in the center of the section, would be the focal point of the entire section. I will try to recreate this pattern of parallel clauses, designating "0" as the "center," with corresponding numbers on the right ("a") and left ("b") sides of the focal point. The thrust of the section should become apparent once we discover what its focal point

is. What follows is an exact quote (my translation) of the section of laws taught to Moshe after he was told what to do to the blasphemer (24:16-22):

"The stranger and the native are [treated] the same (6a), if he curses [G-d's] name, he shall die (5a). And if someone kills another person, he shall be put to death (4a). And if he kills an animal, he shall pay for it, life for life (3a). And if a person maims another, as he did so shall be done to him (2a). A break for a break (1a), an eye for an eye (0), a tooth for a tooth (1b) as he maimed another, so shall be [done] to him (2b). And one who smites an animal shall pay (3b), and one who smites a person shall die (4b). There shall be one law for (the plural) you (5b), the stranger and the native shall be [treated] the same (6b)." [I divided it slightly differently than Rabbi Spiegelman did; I separated 5/6 into two clauses by comparing the specific law to general law, while he combined them into one clause and added two additional layers. Besides his needing to explain a clause that has no parallel (unless "for I am Hashem your G-d" somehow corresponds to "whomever curses his Superior--or superior--shall bear his iniquity," which is plausible if not direct, and adds an additional layer to the pattern), and the summation of "for I am Hashem your G-d" being an appropriate closing, the issue at hand is the section of laws, not the narrative that surrounds it.]

The "bookends" of this section, that the stranger and the native are treated the same, was an appropriate message for this situation. After all, the blasphemer's father was an Egyptian; G-d had to make it absolutely clear that this law was not limited to "outsiders," but applied equally to everyone. As Ramban and S'fornu explain (24:23), "the Children of Israel did as G-d commanded Moshe" teaches us that they did it because G-d commanded it, not because of any grudge held because of lineage wasn't as pure as theirs. However, the center clause, "an eye for an eye," seems to be just part of the civil laws, not a "focal point." Why are all of these parallel clauses surrounding this thought? How is this the "focus" of the laws taught here, and by extension the purpose of teaching them now?

In "Recalling the Covenant" (Parashas Mishpatim, pgs. 399-406), Rabbi Moshe Shamah discusses the meaning of this term. He writes (pg. 404), "Hammurabi...introduced the "eye for an eye" concept against the traditional practice of monetary compensation for physical injury. His purpose with this innovation was to improve the legal justice system by removing one of its blatant deficiencies... The system was rife with uneven application, exploitation and abuse. Hammurabi's reform transformed the infliction of physical damage into an objective violation with governmental guidelines as to definitive, equitable and limited punishment." Instead of haphazard consequences, determined on a case-by-case basis based on status, wealth and negotiating ability, "an eye for an eye" meant that there was one set of standards for everyone, based on an objective determination of the damages rather than on the status of the person who did the damages or the person who was damaged. Even though it was likely never carried out literally, the expression "an eye for an eye" became synonymous with a consistent system of justice, and was understood that way when used in the Torah. It is therefore an appropriate focal point within the set of laws included to make it clear that the punishment given to the blasphemer was not because of his (lack of) status, or his status compared to the person he was quarreling with, but because it was the objective law, to be applied equally to everyone. Just as the rest of the Torah's civil laws are applied justly and equally, so would this one be.

There is some discussion as to why the narrative of the blasphemer (and the laws that became part of it) was included in Sefer Vayikra, which, except for this narrative and that of Nadav and Avihu's death, is comprised of laws and covenantal commitment, specifically the laws of holiness, ritual purity, and sanctity. There is something that these two episodes have in common (see http://vbm-torah.org/archive/parsha71/31-71emor.htm for a similar idea). In both situations, individuals attempted to go beyond their appropriate "holiness" boundary. Nadav and Avihu had attained the level/status of a Kohain Gadol (because they were anointed with the anointing oil; this was why Elazar and Isamar couldn't remove their brothers' bodies even though "regular" Kohanim can become ritually impure for immediate family, and why they couldn't leave their Mishkan service), yet they suffered severe consequences when they entered the inner sanctum of the Mishkan, where they didn't belong. The blasphemer wanted to dwell in the Camp of Israel even though his father was an Egyptian, and cursed G-d when he was told that he wasn't allowed to (see Rashi on 24:10). These two narratives demonstrate how important it is to not to trespass areas of holiness beyond our grasp--whether it's at the top of the scale, like Nadav and Avihu, or the bottom of the scale, like the blasphemer who couldn't even get into the main Israelite camp. Yet, when it comes to how they are treated by the law, everyone is treated equally. And in case there was any doubt, G-d reiterated it by including civil laws, which are based on the concept of "an eye for an eye," when he instructed the nation to put the blasphemer to death.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's Torah portion presents many rules pertaining to the Kohen (Jewish priest). Among these laws is the prohibition against any contact with the dead. Except for his closest family members, the Kohen cannot touch a dead corpse, be present at burial or even be in the same room as a dead body.

What is the rationale of this prohibition and what is its relationship to the Kehuna (priesthood)?

Perhaps the reasoning of this law lies with an understanding of the difference between the ultimate goal of life itself. Some faith communities see the ultimate goal of existence the arrival in the life hereafter. Christianity, for example, insists that redemption is dependent upon the belief that Jesus died for one's sins. In Islam, martyrdom is revered, as only through death can one reach the ultimate world.

The Torah, on the other hand, is fundamentally a system that accentuates commitment to G-d, in this world-the world of the living. While Judaism does believe that the hereafter is of important status, it takes a back seat to this world. As the Psalmist states, "I shall not die but live and proclaim the works of the Lord," (Psalms 118:17) and "The dead cannot praise the Lord....but we (the living) will bless the Lord now and forever." (Psalms 115:17-18)

To teach this point the Kohen, the teacher par excellence is mandated not to have any contact with the dead. This is a way of imparting the concept that the ultimate sanctification of G-d is not through death but through life.

My dear friend and teacher, Rabbi Saul Berman has suggested another approach. It was the priest of old who was often called on to intercede on behalf of the deceased. In ancient times, families hoped that through such intercession, the dead person would receive a better place in the life hereafter. In such situations, the priest may have been tempted to, and sometimes did, take payoffs for intervening.

It is then understandable that the Torah insists that the Kohen have no contact whatsoever with the deceased. This would make it impossible for him to take advantage of people, particularly when they are going through a deep loss, when they are most vulnerable.

Today, the community, whether justified or not, sees the rabbi as the primary intermediary between G-d and humanity. Although most rabbis are not Kohanim (descendants of priests), I have the great honor of being both a rabbi and a Kohen. Due to my status as a Kohen, it has not always been easy for me to fulfill my role as the rabbi. Due to this limited ability to become involved in the bereavement process, I have gained a unique perspective toward death and mourning. The requirement to not fully engage has taught me that although in their time of most intense grief mourners need the support of family, friends and rabbis, there is such a thing as over involvement. No one fully understands the mystery of death, and no one can solve this age old question for a mourner as s/he sits beside her or his deceased loved one.

Only G-d knows these answers. Although they must stand as a support and comfort, no rabbi nor priest can serve as a buffer or intermediary between the intense dialogue between a grief stricken mourner and the Almighty One at the deepest moment of loneliness, the moment of loss.

RABBI AVI HELLER

Weekly Dose of Torah

I was asked recently by someone – earnestly – why the Jews have so many holidays. I was tempted to say that that's the consequence of so much history. Or that we have a lot to be thankful for, to cry for and to feel guilty about. Or that we like to eat, especially after our enemies have tried (and failed, yet again) to kill us. But what I really said was: "Really? You think there are so many?" I might feel differently after a 3-day odyssey of yontef (festival), like the upcoming Shavuot holiday. But I don't think there are SO many. That is, as long as you don't count Shabbat, which rolls around like G-d's clock-work every seven days. American housewives (and liberated gustatory men) tend to start getting nervous about Thanksgiving feasts weeks before, but anyone who has Shabbat guests can turn one around in a few Friday afternoon hours (I don't know how Shira does it, honestly), creating a delicious and beautiful religious affair that will send you straight into your Shabbat nap. But is Shabbat a festival? And if it's not, what is it?

Our Torah portion explores this question, in the 23rd chapter of Vayikra (Leviticus). It begins with an exhortation from G-d to Moshe to tell the people about "mo'adei Hashem", the special times of G-d (ie. festivals), when the people gather together to celebrate, commemorate (and eat). But then—in a sort of parenthetical detour – it says: "Six days you shall do melacha[1] and on the seventh day it shall be] a Shabbat shabbaton, a holy convocation, no melacha shall you do, it is a Shabbat for Hashem, in all your habitations." (23:3) The Rabbis (see Rashi), rather bluntly, ask "what does Shabbat have to do with the festivals?"

This underlies a key assumption: that Shabbat and the festivals are two very different things. In Jewish law, a number of key learnings are derived from this section. One, that the essentials of Shabbat and festival observance are the same. However, certain leniencies apply on festivals, specifically the permitting of cooking food, of carrying (transferring property) from a private to a public domain (or vice-versa) and of transferring flame from an existing flame. These three things are all permitted in order to make it easier to enjoy festival meals. The Talmud learns from the juxtaposition that when a holiday falls on Shabbat, the laws of Shabbat supercede. In other words, these are my festivals (but don't forget about Shabbat.)

[1] Sometimes translated as "work", probably better as "creative endeavor"

I saw in the name of Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Weinreb (the former head of the OU) two additional distinctions: one, that Shabbat has been operative since the time of Creation, as it recalls the first six days in which G-d created the world, and the seventh on which He concluded it. However, the holidays are connected to the historical experience of the Jewish people and our connection (post-exodus) to the land of Israel. Second, he suggested that Shabbat caters to the introvert within us, asking us not to carry, travel or cook, but to stay within our homes. The festivals, however, cater to the extrovert within us, encouraging us to come together as a community and share the experiences of our people and our connection each other.

Perhaps another way to approach it is that the two kinds of holy day (Shabbat and festival) suggest two different paradigms in our relationship with Hashem.

(1) Shabbat – all about the Creator. On Shabbat, we engage in imitatio dei, the imitation of G-d. As G-d rested (i.e. ceased from creativity) on the seventh day, so do we. As G-d appraised His creation and saw that it was good, so should we appraise that which we have done that is "good." We reflect on the week that was and resolve for the week that will be. But – other than imitation – Shabbat is not about us. It is about G-d and the island in time that He (or She) created. We relate to G-d's creation in admiration, love and respect, but it is G-d's creation that we celebrate. There is no human role in Shabbat other than to "be" in it; it rolls around every seven days – as G-d ordained, in Her infinite wisdom – whether we are ready or not.

(2) Festivals – our partnership with G-d. Yet, we relate to G-d in another way as well; as partners in the stewardship of creation. The festivals, which are dependent upon the lunar calendar, were designed to be agreed upon by G-d and the Jewish people. The day of Passover could not be determined until the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem declared when it would be. In the Talmud, it says that even if they were astronomically wrong (and even if they did it on purpose) the holidays fall on the day that the human court decreed. The power to consecrate the festival days is ours; it belongs to the Jewish people, as partners with Hashem.[2] In the Talmud (Pesachim 68b), the idea that the festivals are a celebration of our partnership with G-d is expressed in the saying: "chatzi lashem, chatzi lachem", that half the enjoyment of the festival is for G-d and half is for us.[3]

This is also expressed in our prayer service, where the overriding idea of Shabbat is expressed as "b'ahava", with love, whereas the idea of the festival is expressed as "b'simcha", with joy. Shabbat is an act of love towards G-d and festivals are an act of joy, celebrating with G-d and each other. Both are important aspects of our relationship to G-d and – in our religious lives — we need to have both.

It is often difficult to celebrate the holidays in today's worlds. Though Saturdays (thanks to Christian America) have become part of the weekend and easy (most of the time) not to work, festivals (because of their fluctuating times) often fall out on weekdays. It is much more challenging to have to take off work. In addition, many holidays are not well-understood; Jews with less educational background are often hard-pressed to explain the meaning and main observances of Shavuot, Sukkot or Shemini Atzeret. However, it is important to recognize the importance the Torah places on the celebration with a community of the festival days. In our portion, the Torah puts Shabbat and the festivals together (as we noted at the beginning) as if to say: you need both of these in your lives! It may often take some work: respectful and persistent communication with an employer, planning ahead and even some self-sacrifice of vacation days to make it happen. But without it, we have only a half experience of our Jewish holy times and we opt out – conceptually – of our partnership with Hashem.

In closing, I love this story that I heard from one of our MJE Fellowship teachers, Rabbi Zev Reichman: Once, on the third day of Passover, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev announced that he wanted to break the law. The Czar had forbidden many kinds of materials as contraband and the Rebbe wanted a spool of yarn that had not been subject to the regime's 2 ruble tax. Word went out among the Chassidim that the Rebbe wanted the contraband and soon the illegal yarn was delivered to his front door. The Rebbe took the yarn, marched to the synagogue and announced to all his followers: "Next, I want a piece of challa from the house of a Jew!" His followers looked at him aghast. "But Rebbe", they stammered, "it's the middle of Pesach!" The Rebbe insisted: "I will pay 2000 rubles for a slice of bread from the house of a Jew!" But, they said back to him: "There just isn't a single slice of bread or chametz anywhere in Berditchev that belongs to a Jew." Proudly, Reb Levi Yitzchak lifted up his hands to Heaven and said: Master of the Universe, see the love of your people! The czar has many soldiers, and he punishes smugglers harshly and there was no reward, but to save me two rubles, I received illegal material in an instant! You, you have no soldiers, and no whips or jails, and despite a reward of 2000 rubles, I could not find a single piece of bread in Berditchev! And why do they observe the commandments with no thought of gain or reward? Because they are yours!"

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[2] Unfortunately, this system was dependent upon having a Sanhedrin, among other things, and nowadays we have no more role in the holidays than looking at the Jewish calendar sent to us by our local funeral home.

[3] The first half of the day is devoted to prayer and study and the second half to a festive meal and time together. There is an opinion that this is true for Shabbat as well (which, in practice, as is how we do it in 21st century America) but is not indicative of the idea of the day.

May we increase our love of G-d this omer season, enjoy and appreciate our Shabbats and our festivals, and may we learn to be partners with G-d so that it will be good for Heaven and good for us

RABBI DAVID LAPIN

Succeed

Would you not be shocked if a rabbinic search committee told you the qualities they were looking for in their next rabbi, in addition to wisdom were physical strength, good looks, wealth, and old age? Well, these are the five leadership qualities enumerated by Chazal (Vayikra Rabbah 26:9) that set the Kohein Gadol (Chief Kohein) apart from his team. Really? How superficial! How limiting! What if there was a really good candidate who was saintly, empathetic and decisive but wasn't physically strong or good-looking, would he not make the cut?

In this essay we will analyze the meaning of strength, koach, in the qualifications for a Kohein Gadol. The Hebrew word for strength, koach, like many words in Hebrew, has a variety of shades and overlays of meaning. Koach also means energy and it means potential. When the word koach is used in Torah it usually has a richer and a more subtle meaning than just "strength."

The Midrash proves that the Kohein Gadol needed to have strength from the fact that Aharon conducted 22,000 waive-offerings in one day, one for each Levi, when he inducted them into their service. Rabbi Chaim Schmuelewitz (Sichos Musar Ma'amar 24) calculates this as two seconds per waive offering all day without a break; a physical impossibility. This fact leads Rabeinu Bechaya (Bamidbar 8:20) to say that Ahron's accomplishment was not natural, it was miraculous. If miraculous, asks R' Chaim, how could the Midrash possibly prove from this action of Ahron that he had great physical strength?

I remember R' Chaim z"tzl explaining this Midrash when I studied under him in Mir. His explanation was life changing and has probably impacted every day of my life. He explained that miracle only begins where nature leaves off. Until a person has exhausted all his or her natural abilities to achieve an outcome, the miraculous does not start. A person has to use all of their energy, skills, intellect and talent to achieve what they want to. Once they have done that however, the miraculous kicks in and turbo-charges a person's efforts to achieve outcomes that could not possibly have been accomplished by the individual alone.

The relationship between effort and outcome from a Torah perspective is a unique relationship. Effort is a condition for success, not the cause of it. Without effort there is no success, however, if we are connected to Hashem then success is not the result of our efforts it is the result of His miraculous intervention.

We have a choice to make. We can choose to ignore our connection to the Divine and do it all on our own. In this case we will need to exert great effort for possibly mediocre results. Or, by staying connected to G-d in our thoughts, prayer and actions we can have Him partner us in our undertakings adding to our success when we have exhausted the natural means available to us.

Ahron's koach means both his physical strength and his moral strength (as the Yefei To'ar explains the Midrash in Vayikra). Without both physical and moral strength he could not have succeeded in his mammoth task nor merited Divine assistance. However the physical strength implied in the word koach does not refer to an objective measure of strength that Ahron needed to have. Rather, koach means the actualization of every ounce of his potential energy -- both physical and mental. He needed to focus his mind on the task and apply all the strength he had to its accomplishment. Even then Ahron could not have naturally accomplished his goal. However, having applied all of his koach to his objective, Hashem would accelerate his efforts to manage the work successfully.

I often find myself taking success for granted and not fully appreciating how little of it directly results from my own planning and efforts. Even little successes, the things we might call coincidences, are all G-d's watchful eye and guiding hand helping along His loved ones whose efforts He admires. When I stop to think about how much could have gone wrong and didn't, how many little successes along the way were not, and could not have been planned, I see Hashem's hand more clearly. And, when I take time to look at bigger successes in retrospect, it is even clearer that these were not the outcomes of my thoughts and plans.

On the other hand, as much as I realize that my successes are the work of Hashem, I know too both from experience and from my teacher's brilliant insights, that without tireless effort and expending every bit of effort I have, these successes could not have happened either. The outcomes of our efforts can exceed anything we thought possible if we apply all the potential with which we have been blessed and we nurture our connection to the Divine.

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