

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

A President guilty of sexual abuse. A Prime Minister indicted on charges of corruption and bribery. Rabbis in several countries accused of financial impropriety, sexual harassment and child abuse. That such things happen testifies to a profound malaise in contemporary Jewish life.

More is at stake than simply morality. Morality is universal. Bribery, corruption and the misuse of power are wrong, and wrong equally, whoever is guilty of them. When, though, the guilty are leaders, something more is involved: the principles introduced in our parsha of Kiddush ha-Shem and Chillul ha-Shem: "Do not profane My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the Israelites, I the Lord who sanctify you" (Lev. 22:32).

The concepts of Kiddush and Chillul ha-Shem have a history. Though they are timeless and eternal, their unfolding occurred through the course of time. In our parsha, according to Ibn Ezra, the verse has a narrow and localized sense. The chapter in which it occurs has been speaking about the special duties of the priesthood and the extreme care they must take in serving G-d within the sanctuary. All Israel is holy, but the priests are a holy elite within the nation. It was their task to preserve the purity and glory of the Sanctuary as G-d's symbolic home in the midst of the nation. So the commands are a special charge to the priests to take exemplary care as guardians of the holy.

Another dimension was disclosed by the prophets, who used the phrase chillul haShem to describe immoral conduct that brings dishonour to G-d's law as a code of justice and compassion. Amos (2:7) speaks of people who "trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground, and deny justice to the oppressed... and so profane my holy name." Jeremiah invokes chillul ha-Shem to describe those who circumvent the law by emancipating their slaves

In Loving Memory of
David I. Rosenberg
On his 52nd Yortzeit
Died: May 29, 1962

ל"נ אבי מורי ר'דוד יצחק בר'רפאל רוזינברג
שנפטר כה אייר תשכב תנצבה
מאת בתו רחל לאה ווייסבערג תח' ומשפחתה

only to recapture and re-enslave them (Jer. 34:16). Malachi, last of the prophets, says of the corrupt priests of his day, "From where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honored among the nations... but you profane it" (Mal. 1:11-12).

The sages (Bereishit Rabbah 49:9) suggested that Abraham was referring to the same idea when he challenged G-d on his plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if this meant punishing the righteous as well as the wicked: "Far be it from you [chalilah lekha] to do such a thing." G-d and the people of G-d must be associated with justice. Failure to do so constitutes a chillul ha-Shem.

A third dimension appears in the book of Ezekiel. The Jewish people, or at least a significant part of it, had been forced into exile in Babylon. The nation had suffered defeat. The Temple lay in ruins. For the exiles this was a human tragedy. They had lost their home, freedom and independence. It was also a spiritual tragedy: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Psalm 137:4) But Ezekiel saw it as a tragedy for G-d also: "Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions... I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions. And wherever they went among the nations they profaned My holy name, for it was said of them, 'These are the Lord's people, and yet they had to leave his land.'" (Ez. 36:17-20)

Exile was a desecration of G-d's name because the fact that He had punished his people by letting them be conquered was interpreted by the other nations as showing that G-d was unable to protect them. This recalls Moses' prayer after the golden calf:

"'Lord,' he said, 'why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people.'" (Ex 32:11-12)

This is part of the divine pathos. Having chosen

Please keep in mind
Binyomin Simcha ben Adina Minya
for a refuah shelaima

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NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
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to identify His name with the people of Israel, G-d is, as it were, caught between the demands of justice on the one hand, and public perception on the other. What looks like retribution to the Israelites looks like weakness to the world. In the eyes of the nations, for whom national gods were identified with power, the exile of Israel could not but be interpreted as the powerlessness of Israel's G-d. That, says Ezekiel, is a chillul ha-Shem, a desecration of G-d's name.

A fourth sense became clear in the late Second Temple period. Israel had returned to its land and rebuilt the Temple, but they came under attack first from the Seleucid Greeks in the reign of Antiochus IV, then from the Romans, both of whom attempted to outlaw Jewish practice. For the first time martyrdom became a significant feature in Jewish life. The question arose: under what circumstances were Jews to sacrifice their lives rather than transgress Jewish law?

The sages understood the verse, "You shall keep my decrees and laws which a person shall keep and live by them" (Lev. 18:5) to imply "and not die by them." (Yoma 85b) Saving life takes precedence over most of the commands. But there are three exceptions: the prohibitions against murder, forbidden sexual relations and idolatry, where the sages ruled that it was necessary to die rather than transgress. They also said that "at a time of persecution" one should resist at the cost of death even a demand "to change one's shoelaces," that is, performing any act that could be construed as going over to the enemy, betraying and demoralizing those who remained true to the faith. It was at this time that the phrase kiddush ha-Shem was used to mean the willingness to die as a martyr.

One of the most poignant of all collective responses on the part of the Jewish people was to categorise all the victims of the Holocaust as "those who died al kiddush Hashem," that is, for the sake of sanctifying G-d's name. This was not a foregone conclusion. Martyrdom in the past meant choosing to die for the sake of G-d. One of the demonic aspects of the Nazi genocide was that Jews were not given the choice. By calling them in retrospect, martyrs, Jews gave the victims the dignity in death of which they were so brutally robbed in life.

(There was a precedent. In the Av ha-Rachamim prayer (Authorised Daily Prayer Book, p. 426), composed after the massacre of Jews during the Crusades, the victims were described as those "who sacrificed their lives al kedushat haShem." Though some of the victims went to their deaths voluntarily, not all of them did.)

There is a fifth dimension. This is how Maimonides sums it up: "There are other deeds which are also included in the desecration of G-d's name. When a person of great Torah stature, renowned for his piety, does deeds which, although they are not transgressions, cause people to speak disparagingly of him, this is also a desecration of G-d's name... All this depends on the stature of the sage..." (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah 5:11)

People looked up to as role models must act as role models. Piety in relation to G-d must be accompanied by exemplary behavior in relation to one's fellow humans. When people associate religiosity with integrity, decency, humility and compassion, G-d's name is sanctified. When they come to associate it with contempt for others and for the law, the result is a desecration of G-d's name.

Common to all five dimensions of meaning is the radical idea, central to Jewish self-definition, that G-d has risked his reputation in the world, His "name," by choosing to associate it with a single and singular people. G-d is the G-d of all humanity. But G-d has chosen Israel to be His "witnesses," His ambassadors, to the world. When we fail in this role, it is as if G-d's standing in the eyes of the world has been damaged.

For almost two thousand years the Jewish people was without a home, a land, civil rights, security and the ability to shape its destiny and fate. It was cast in the role of what Max Weber called "a pariah people." By definition a pariah cannot be a positive role model. That is when kiddush ha-Shem took on its tragic dimension as the willingness to die for one's faith. That is no longer the case. Today, for the first time in history, Jews have both sovereignty and independence in Israel, and freedom and equality elsewhere. Kiddush ha-shem must therefore be restored to its positive sense of exemplary decency in the moral life.

That is what led the Hittites to call Abraham "a prince of G-d in our midst." It is what leads Israel to be admired when it engages in international rescue and relief. The concepts of kiddush and chillul ha-Shem forge an indissoluble connection between the holy and the good.

Lose that and we betray our mission as "a holy nation." The conviction that being a Jew involves the pursuit of justice and the practice of compassion is what led our ancestors to stay loyal to Judaism despite all the pressures to abandon it. It would be the ultimate tragedy if we lost that connection now, at the very moment that we are able to face the world on equal

terms.

Long ago we were called on to show the world that religion and morality go hand in hand. Never was that more needed than in an age riven by religiously-motivated violence in some countries, rampant secularity in others. To be a Jew is to be dedicated to the proposition that loving G-d means loving His image, humankind. There is no greater challenge, nor in the twenty-first century is there a more urgent one. ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Ynd I shall be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel" (Leviticus 22:32). The portion of Emor opens with a strange commandment to the kohanim-priests of Israel: "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Say to the priests children of Aaron, and tell them: "Do not defile yourselves by contact with the dead of the nation.'" (Leviticus 21:1). The Bible then lists the exceptions to this rule. A Kohen may defile himself only for the burial of his wife, his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother and his unmarried sister.

Judaism is not chiefly concerned with death and the hereafter; rather, it is principally engaged with life in the here-and-now. Our major religious imperative is not how to ease the transition from this world to the next, but how to improve and repair our own society. What does seem strange, however, is that our same portion goes on to command (as quoted above): "You shall not desecrate the name of my holiness; I shall be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel" (Lev. 22:32).

Our Talmudic sages derive from this verse the necessity of sacrificing one's life-sanctifying the name of G-d-for the sake of the commandments of the Bible. Jews must give up their lives rather than transgress any of the three major prohibitions of murder, sexual immorality or adultery; in times of persecution, Jews must die rather than publicly transgress even the simplest or most "minor" of Jewish laws, even a Jewish custom involving our shoelaces (B.T. Sanhedrin 74a,b). Our Talmudic Sages insist, however, that when Jews are not being persecuted, it is forbidden for Jews to forfeit their lives in order not to desecrate Shabbat, far better that they desecrate one Shabbat and remain alive to keep many Shabbatot. Then why command martyrdom at all? And the sad truth is that our history is filled with many sacred martyrs who gave up their lives in sanctification of the Divine Name.

The answer lies in the very juxtaposition of the law of priestly defilement emphasizing the importance of life, and the law of martyrdom enjoining death, within that same biblical portion. Yes, preservation of life is crucial and this world is the focus of the Jewish concern-but not life merely for the sake of breathing.

Living, and not merely existing, means devoting one's life to ideals and values that are more important than any individual life. We participate in eternity by dedicating our lives to the eternal values that will eventually repair the world and establish a more perfect society.

Hence we must value and elevate life, but always within the perspective of those principles which will lead us to redemption. Yes, "live by these [My laws]," but eternal life can only be achieved by a dedication which includes the willingness to sanctify G-d's name with martyrdom, albeit only under very extreme circumstances.

But how can we justify martyrdom, even if only during periods of persecution, for the sake of a Jewish custom regarding our shoelaces? What can there possibly be about a shoelace which strikes at the heart and essence of our Jewish mission? The Talmudic commentary of the French and German sages of the 11th and 12th centuries, when many Jews were martyred by the Crusaders, suggest that the general custom in Rome and its numerous colonies during the second century was to wear white shoelaces. Jews, however, wore black shoelaces, as a memorial to the loss of our Holy Temple and the disappearance of Jewish national sovereignty. When Gentiles in times of persecution attempted to force Jews to wear white shoelaces-and thereby force the Jewish community to cease mourning for the loss of our national homeland-the Jew must respond with martyrdom (B.T. Sanhedrin 74b, Tosafot ad loc.).

My revered teacher Rav Joseph B. Solovetchik added a crucial point: There are many Jewish laws, decrees and customs which have developed from biblical times to the present, which Jews themselves do not always realize are truly vital for our national and religious preservation. The Gentiles, on the other hand, always do, because they-wishing to persecute and destroy us-strike at the jugular. Hence whatever they insist that we abandon, we must maintain even at the price of our lives! From this perspective, it becomes easier to understand why anti-Semitism expresses itself in unfair attacks on the free and democratic State of Israel, condemning us while championing the cause of our non-democratic enemies; we must focus on how crucial and vital the State of Israel is for Jewish survival today.

The memorials of Holocaust Remembrance Day and Remembrance Day for the Fallen of Israel's Wars quickly followed by Independence Day and Jerusalem Day must remind us that Israel is not merely a destination but is our destiny. Israel is not only the place of our survival, but it is the heart of our mission for world salvation, from whence the word of G-d-a G-d of life, love and peace-will spread to all of humanity. ©2015 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

When our oldest daughter Dena was wed to Mark, I found myself in deep thought. A dear friend came by and said, "Loosen up Avi. Enjoy it. You'll have time to think later."

This exchange helps to shed light on the mandate in this week's portion to count 49 days between Passover and Shavuot. (Leviticus 23:15) Sefer Ha-Hinukh asks why we begin the count from the second day and not the first day of Passover.

The way Jewish ritual approaches celebratory and tragic moments in life may reveal the answer. Consider the painful experience of death. Halakha insists the bereaved be able to become totally involved in the tragedy to the extent that family members are relieved from performing affirmative commandments between death and burial. Only after burial does the period of Shivah, of deep reflection set in.

Similarly, in moments of joy. When leaving Egypt, Am Yisrael was immersed in the euphoria of the Exodus. Only following that euphoria, which manifests itself through the Passover Seder, do we begin counting towards the receiving of the Torah-the event that gives meaning and purpose to the Exodus. Jewish law allows for the full experiencing of the event. Only then does it ask for separate distinct moments of evaluation.

My son Dov noted that there is psychological benefit to this principle. After all, when something of import occurs, we should be encouraged to feel deeply and wholly what is happening. We should literally be in the moment. Only afterwards, from a distance, can we step back and with clarity, contemplate the significance of the event and begin to put it in perspective.

Not coincidentally, this portion is read between Israel Independence Day and the anniversary of the liberation of Jerusalem. Some erroneously suggest these days should be de-emphasized as we are in the post - Zionist era. To the contrary. These days deserve greater focus as we are, in fact, in a new, even more challenging phase within the modern Zionist period. For sixty years we ecstatically celebrated the coming into being of the State. Now begins the more reflective period of looking inward and defining what is the significance of the State to the Jewish people and the world at large.

Evaluating only after the event occurs is a lesson for all of us. And that's why we begin counting from the second day of Passover - so we can enjoy moments when they come and then afterwards take the time to reflect and anticipate. ©2012 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 BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There are numerous thoughts in rabbinic literature expressed as to the intent of the Torah in banning kohanim – the priestly male descendants of Aharon – from coming into contact with the deceased. Ramban expositis that it is the “ordinary” Jew, so to speak, the non-kohein, who is immersed in the daily material existence of competitive life that requires constant reminders of one’s own mortality in order to temper excessive desires and evil acts. Not so the kohein, the priest who serves in the Temple and who is thereby removed from the daily spiritually debilitating struggles of mundane society.

Such a kohein needs no such reminders since the closeness to G-d’s spirit so to speak, which service in the Temple brings with it, is sufficient to have the kohein not needing to experience the lesson of seeing death at close hand. This idea of the Ramban certainly spoke to the milieu of his times – the late Middle Ages of Christian Europe.

I am reminded by it of the great, almost bizarre, clock tower that overlooks the main town square in Prague. In a graphic exhibition of medieval art and then technical ingenuity it portrays a hideous Angel of Death that strikes the hour bell and thereby marks the passage of time. That clock tower certainly spoke to its original generations of observers whose life spans were short. Medicine was primitive, plagues and unending violence abounded and death was an everyday event and companion in the lives of most. But today, the clock tower of Prague is mainly a tourist attraction, bizarrely curious and not really real in the message that it once intended to convey and represent.

Certainly, death has not been banished from our world. Its inevitability has not abated. But its impression upon us is far different than it was for our ancestors of a few centuries ago. There is almost a casualness regarding it in our modern society. And I notice that even in the span of my own lifetime, the attitude towards it even by kohanim has changed. In today’s world kohanim do attend funerals though they are careful to technically avoid violating the legal halachic restrictions regarding being present within the confines of the area where the dead body itself is present.

I remember that in my youth, kohanim stayed away from any and all funeral attendance in all circumstances and almost at all costs. For a long period of time in Jewish history, communities and synagogues were reluctant to hire as their rabbi someone who was a kohein since he would be unable to officiate at funerals or monument/stone settings.

Modern technology and using halachic ingenuity and legalities has alleviated much of these problems for the modern rabbi today who is a kohein. I

think that this is an example of how the thinking of our modern generations towards death has changed. We know that it occurs in that all are doomed eventually to succumb to its presence. Nevertheless, it is not a serious matter to be discussed and should not be allowed to overly burden or disturb our lifestyle and mental attitudes. This parsha always brings home to me this great change in our view towards life and death. The insight of Ramban reminds me of this vast change in our thoughts and actions. ©2015 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

AL SHEIM HARAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L

Bais Hamussar

We say in the tefillah of Nishmas, "Even if our mouths were filled with praise like the ocean and our tongues were full of song like its multitude of waves... we would still not be able to properly thank you for even one of the millions and trillions of acts of kindness that You have performed for us." Rav Wolbe (Daas Shlomo) notes that Chazal's perception with regard to a person's obligation to give thanks to Hashem is astounding. Accordingly, one would have to be on the spiritual level of Dovid Hamelech to properly say thank you for a single bite of food!

In a similar vein Chazal tell us (Ta'anis 6b) that when the first rain of the season falls, one should bless Hashem and thank Him for "each and every drop of rain." A single rainfall, comprised of billions of drops, warrants billions of expressions of gratitude. Additionally, Chazal assert, "For each and every breath a person breathes he should praise Hashem" (Yalkut Tehillim 150). Analogously, while we perceive an orchard merely as a large group of trees, Chazal looked at an orchard as thousands of trees, each with tens of branches, thousands of leaves and hundreds of fruits. They appreciated each tree, branch and fruit as a gift from Hashem and they acted accordingly: They paid tribute for each drop of rain, they expressed their gratitude for each breath, and they blessed Hashem for every k'zayis that they ate.

Hashem could have designed the world in a way that people would not need to breathe more than once a day or eat more than once a year. Yet, He specifically created it in a manner that requires one to breathe numerous times every minute and eat several times a day. A world wherein one is constantly receiving new life and Heaven sent bounty, makes it easier for the recipients of such beneficence to acknowledge that every minute of their life is dependent solely on the will and kindness of the Creator.

How can it be, wonders Rav Wolbe, that

despite the infinite acts of kindness that Hashem performs for us on a daily basis, not only do we not feel an enormous debt of gratitude, we still ask Hashem at any given opportunity to shower us with even more kindness? Such behavior seems to stand diametrically opposed to the conduct of Chazal where they felt obligated by each breath and every droplet of water!

The Mishna in Avos (5:22) enlightens us to the root of the issue. "Those who have a good eye, humble spirit and meek soul are among the disciples of Avraham Avinu, while those who have an evil eye, greedy spirit and arrogant soul are among the disciples of the wicked Bilam." What is the difference between a humble spirit and a greedy spirit? Bilam, as he expressed to Balak, felt that he deserved a "houseful of gold and silver." He wished to amass as much as the world could offer. In contrast, Avraham's attitude was similar to one who is impoverished and meek and rejoices even in the smallest things. It was this trait of appreciating every single solitary aspect of creation that led to his discovery of the Creator at age three and ultimately to him being picked to be the father of the Chosen Nation.

It all boils down to our outlook on the world. Is the world all about glitter and glamour with the aim to stuff our pockets with whatever we can? Or is the world made up of an infinite amount of gifts from Heaven above? If the goal is to fill our pockets, there is no reason to thank anybody for anything since we are simply doing what we are supposed to do. In contrast, if we perceive every sparkling raindrop as a diamond and every breath as a Divine gift, we won't stop thanking Hashem for His unending kindness. Indeed, big people appreciate little things. ©2015 AishDas Society

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

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

The prophet Yechezkel conveys this message by drawing our focus to the priestly garb during their

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

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

We can now appreciate the sanctity of the ordinary kohain of Mashiach's times and its message for us. First, a word about the general status of the Jewish people during that era. The prophet Yeshaya refers to this illustrious time in the following terms, "And the land will be filled with the knowledge of Hashem

likened to the water that fills the sea." (Yeshaya 11:9) Rambam elaborates upon this and states, "And in this time there will be no jealousy or quarreling.... the preoccupation of all will be 'to know Hashem'...the Jewish people will be great scholars who will understand Hashem to maximum human capacity." (Hilchos M'lochim 12:5) In essence, the entire Jewish nation will be absorbed in learning Hashem's truthful ways. Their total focus will be on Hashem's expression in every aspect of life thus revealing more and more of His unlimited goodness and knowledge. It stands to reason that if this will be the knowledge of the ordinary Jew, how much greater will be that of the kohain who is privileged to stand in the actual presence of Hashem! One cannot begin contemplating the ordinary kohain's daily experience with Hashem. His profound knowledge of Hashem together with his direct and constant association with Him will truly elevate him to the sanctity of "Holy of Holies". His awareness of Hashem's presence will therefore, in certain ways, become tantamount to that of the Kohain Gadol on the holiest day of the year. May we soon merit to witness and experience such elevated levels of sanctity, so sorely needed in our times. ©2012 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Learning Torah is of paramount religious importance (see Payah 1:1), but there are numerous possible motivations for doing so. Learning purely because it's what G-d wants us to do is ideal, but understanding (or thinking we understand) why G-d wants us to do so can provide motivation as well, wanting those benefits independent of it fulfilling G-d's will. There can be other, less (directly) spiritual benefits too, which can also provide motivation for Torah study, such as peer pressure, social standing and job requirements (if working in related fields). And, as we shall see, some of these may work together, whether by design or not. The relationship between the motivation for learning Torah and the benefit one gets from doing so is discussed by Rabbi Yishmael, the son of Rabbi Yochanan ben B'roka (Avos 4:5).

"One who learns in order to teach is (or isn't, depending on the version of the text you have) given the wherewithal to learn and to teach, and (or, whereas) one who learns in order to do, is given the wherewithal to learn and to teach, to keep and to do." Most versions have the person who learns in order to teach being provided with the ability to teach, with a straightforward reading being that even though his motivation wasn't to learn for its own sake, but to be able to teach it to others, he is still given the ability to successfully do so. Alternatively (but not mutually exclusive with the first approach), based on contrasting it with "learning in order to do," even though his motivation was not to use the knowledge gained to be

able to perform the mitzvos (or to perform them better), he is given the ability to teach it to others. Since someone who does not intend to keep the Torah he is learning is considered “wicked,” and would therefore not be allowed to successfully teach Torah to others, there are various ways the commentators deal with this statement.

Bartenura gives us two possibilities. Either the statement really says that such a person is not given the wherewithal to teach Torah to others (a possibility he rejects because the manuscripts he trusts say that he will be able to teach others), or it is discussing something totally different, contrasting someone who intends to only learn (and teach) Torah with someone who wants to learn (and teach) Torah as well as helping others in need (aside from their need to learn and know Torah). The wording does not fit so smoothly with the latter approach, though, as in the first part teaching seems to be the motivation for learning, without any mention or indication of it being to the exclusion of performing acts of kindness, while in the second part the “doing” (which Bartenura understands to mean “doing acts of kindness”) is motivation for learning, whereas according to his explanation there is a desire to (learn and) teach that co-exists with a desire to perform acts of kindness.

Rashi has the version (as does the alternate text Avos d’Rav Nasan, 32) where a person who only learns in order to teach is not given the wherewithal to do so, but his reason is not because he didn’t intend to do the mitzvos he learned about, but because the reason he wanted to teach is in order to gain the respect of the community. (This is how Bartenura understands this version as well.) Others (e.g. Rabbeinu Bachye, S’fornu) do not think that having a selfish motivation to learn is reason enough to not be provided the wherewithal to learn and teach. After all, we are supposed to do the right thing even if it’s not for the best reason, as it can lead to doing it for the right reason. It is a bit awkward for the commentators to have such divergent opinions, with some saying that wanting to be a teacher/community leader for the position it provides is so terrible that G-d wouldn’t help such a person succeed while others say that although it’s not ideal, since it can lead to better things G-d will help him succeed.

[Rashi doesn’t explain why not intending “to do” what he learned isn’t reason enough (or more of a reason) to not allow him to be a successful teacher, but other commentators, who have the version that he is given the ability to teach others, explain why not learning “in order to do” isn’t problematic, and their approach can be applied to Rashi (and Bartenura) as well.

Rabbeinu Yonah says the contrast cannot be with someone who has no intention of keeping the Torah (as such a person would not be given the

wherewithal to learn or to teach), but between someone who learns in order to be able to know every detail and gain a fuller understanding of what should be done, and someone who, as far as his doing the mitzvos is concerned, is content with his current level of knowledge (and is only learning in order to be able to teach). Such a person will be helped to accomplish his goal of teaching others, even if ideally he would want to learn in order to gain a fuller understanding of how to perform the mitzvos properly.

Tiferes Yisroel differentiates between materials that have a practical implication, whereby learning and knowing them will enhance his mitzvah observance, and subjects that have no practical implication, such as hashkafic issues or a non-Kohain learning how Kohanim do the service in the Temple. Since studying these subjects will not impact how he does the mitzvos that do apply to him, there is no issue with his not learning them “in order to do.”]

Getting back to reasons people learn, aside from peer pressure (in communities where learning regularly is expected) and to improve social standing (as the learned are usually well respected), there is the desire to connect to G-d (since the Torah reflects His “mindset,” as it were), the need to know what to do and how to do it, the desire understand things, and the desire to help others understand things. Sometimes, several of these can be intertwined, such as the desire to be knowledgeable and/or help others understand things with the allure of being treated with honor. Often, a choice is made to become a teacher in order to be able to spend the time needed to pay the bills involved in Torah learning. However, even if the underlying reason to learn Torah is admirable, each session of Torah learning may not be done for the best reasons. For example, let’s say a person went into the teaching profession because he wants to understand things as well as possible, and he knows that having to teach it to others requires a higher level of clarity. Nevertheless, when he sits down to prepare a lesson, is he doing so in order to understand the material better, or because he has to teach it the next day? The push to know it better right now comes from the deadline of having to give the lesson tomorrow, but the deadline is only there because he chose to put himself in a situation that has such deadlines. When he “learns in order to teach” because he committed himself to teaching, is it the same as “learning in order to teach” because he will then be treated with more respect?

Let’s look at it from the opposite perspective. If someone became a rabbi in order to be the center of attention in religious circles, as part of his duties he (likely) must teach Torah classes. If he immerses himself in the topic because he becomes genuinely interested in it, is his learning still “in order to teach” since that’s why he started to learn it, or is it “for the sake of learning” since he is now totally into it?

"One who learns in order to teach is given the wherewithal to be successful at his learning and his teaching," if he decided to teach for the right reasons, even if when he actually sits down to learn he wasn't similarly motivated. Similarly, "one who learns in order to teach is given the wherewithal to be successful at his learning and his teaching," if he becomes involved in the learning process to the extent that he wants understand it better, even if the reason he began the process was less than ideal. On the other hand, if he became a teacher for the wrong reasons, and his preparation for the lesson is done for the wrong reasons, "he is not given the wherewithal to successfully learn and teach." Both lessons are true; which was taught by Rabbi Yishmael the son of Rabbi Yochanan ben B'roka depends on which version of the text he actually taught. © 2015 Rabbi D. Kramer

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

The last part of our parashah tells the story of the blasphemer. The Torah relates that this individual fought with another Jew and ended up cursing G-d. Not knowing the punishment for that sin, Bnei Yisrael placed the blasphemer in custody and sought instructions from Hashem.

In response, Hashem informed Bnei Yisrael that one who blasphemes incurs the death penalty. He also taught them the punishments for killing another person, killing an animal, injuring another person, and hitting one's parent. R' Eliezer Ashkenazi z"l (1513-1585; rabbi in Egypt, Italy and Poland) asks:

Why did Hashem teach these laws at this time?

Also, it would seem that it was not necessary for the Torah to tell us about the fight in which the blasphemer was involved just before he "blessed G-d," (in the euphemistic language of our Sages). Why are we being told about his fight?

R' Ashkenazi explains: The Torah wishes to teach us the danger of becoming angry, and to warn us that particularly when a person is angry, he must consider the consequences of his actions. What started as a fight between two Jews ended with one combatant losing control of himself, cursing G-d, and incurring the death penalty. One who does not control his anger may kill an animal one day and may kill a person the next day. Or, he may intend to slap another person lightly and end up injuring him. An angry person may even go so far as to strike his parent. This is what the Torah warns us to avoid. (Ma'asei Hashem)

"He shall not leave the Sanctuary" (21:12)

Literally, this verse is instructing how the Kohen Gadol should behave when he is in mourning. However, says R' Mendel of Premishlan z"l (early chassidic leader; 18th century), there is a message here for every person -- "Do not detach yourself from

the Holy One. No matter what you do, your purpose should be to carry out G-d's desire and not for your personal benefit."

Of course, there are occasions when a person must concentrate on a mundane activity. What should he do then? Before he begins, he should expressly think, "I am now leaving home for a short time, but I plan to return soon." (Darchei Yesharim)

Pirkei Avot (Chapter 4)

"Who is strong ('gibor')? One who restrains his [evil] inclination." Why is this statement phrased in the present tense? R' Baruch Hager z"l (the "Seret Rebbe"; died 1965) explains that restraining one's desires is a constant challenge from which one may never rest. In fact, notes R' Chaim Meir Hager z"l (the "Vizhnitzer Rebbe" and R' Baruch's brother), the Torah does not want us to finish the task. The mishnah does not say, "One who has destroyed his inclination." True, one must restrain his impulses and evil inclination, but there is a time to use them as well. In Chazal's words, "Serve Hashem with both of your inclinations." (Mi'maayanot Ha'netzach, p.195)

"Rabbi Meir said: 'Minimize your involvement in commerce ("esek") and study Torah.'" R' Avraham Pinso z"l of Sarajevo writes: This can be understood in light of the gemara (Avodah Zarah 19b) which promises that if one studies Torah with the proper intentions, his investments will prosper on their own. It does appear superficially that this is not the case, but we cannot gage a person's inner motivations, and we therefore do not know whether he really deserves this blessing. Also, a person may study Torah with the purest of intentions, but forfeit this promise because of his sins. This is the likely explanation any time we see that a promise of the Torah is not fulfilled. (Katit La'maor)

"Rabbi Shimon says, 'There are three crowns—the crown of Torah, the crown of royalty, and the crown of the priesthood— and the crown of a good name is above all of them.'" Then aren't there four crowns? asks Rav Nachum Mordechai Friedman z"l (the "Tchortkover Rebbe"). He explains that the "crown of a good name" is not a separate distinction, but is the "crown jewel" of the other crowns.

All of the Torah, royalty, and priestliness in the world are worthless if their master does not earn a good name as well. (Doreish Tov p. 197) © 2004 S. Katz & torah.org

