

Parshas Shemini

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1. How Does One Maintain the Vibrancy of Torah?

The Torah tells us that Moshe officiated as the Kohen (Priest) in the Mishkan (Sanctuary) for the first seven days of its inauguration. On the eighth day, Moshe was told by Hashem to install Aaron and his sons to be the Kohanim. The Torah states regarding Aaron and his sons, **“At the entrance of the Tent of Meeting shall you dwell day and night for a seven-day period, and you shall protect Hashem’s charge so that you will not die; for so have I (Moshe) been commanded. Aaron and his sons carried out (*vaya’aas*) all the matters that Hashem commanded through Moshe.”**

During the first seven days of inauguration, all that Aaron and his sons were required to do was to remain in the Tent. The Torah nevertheless, extols them for carrying out all that Hashem had commanded them through Moshe. What was the praiseworthiness of Aaron and his sons? During this period, there was no proactive stance that was needed. All that was asked of them was to remain in a passive state. Rashi cites Chazal who state that Aaron and his sons were being praised because “they did not deviate to any degree, not to the right or to the left.” How do we understand this?

The *Yalkut* explains **“*Vaya’aas Aaron ubanov - Aaron and his sons carried out...*”** to mean that Aaron and his sons rejoiced with every word that was commanded to them by Moshe. When Moshe communicated to them the word of Hashem, they valued his words as if they were communicated directly from G-d Himself and they felt fortunate.

It is important to note that one feels differently when one is asked to perform a task directly by the king rather than from his emissary. Aaron and his sons valued Moshe’s words as if they came directly from G-d and thus were overjoyed with this communication. This is the praiseworthiness of Aaron and his sons indicated by **“*Vaya’aas Aaron ubanov...*”**

At Sinai, Moshe communicated the Torah to the entire Jewish people – a population of millions. Chazal tell us that at Sinai when Moshe spoke to the Jewish people, it was the Voice of the Divine Presence that emanated from the *“throat of Moshe.”* Thus, it was the equivalent of hearing the Voice of Hashem. However, regarding Aaron and his sons, they had only heard Moshe communicating to them the Word of G-d. Nevertheless, they received this communication as if they were being directly communicated by G-d Himself.

We say in the *Shema*, **“Let these matters that I command you today (*ha’yom*) be upon your heart.”** The Gemara interprets the word *“ha’yom - today”* to mean, “They should be in your

eyes as if they were new.” Despite the fact that the Torah was given at Sinai thousands of years ago, one should relate to it as if it were given to him today. Is the significance of “newness” vis-à-vis the Torah an issue of retaining “specialness” about the Torah or is it something else? With our understanding of “*Vaya’aas*,” regarding the perception and internalization of Aaron and his sons, we are able to understand the meaning of “I command you *ha’yom* – (today).” When we experience the Torah, it should be as if Hashem communicated it Himself to us today (as at Sinai).

If one experiences the mitzvos as if he himself had heard them at Sinai directly from Hashem, they would be valued to such a degree that one could not be distracted from them. “*Ha’yom*” does not only mean that the mitzvos should be novel or special because they were recently given, but rather one should experience them in the most special way because we should view them as if they were directly communicated to us by Hashem - as Aaron and his had experienced.

2. The Ability to Appreciate Tragedy

On the eighth day of the inauguration of the Mishkan (Sanctuary), Aaron and his sons officiated as the Kohanim (Priests). The Torah states, “***Vayhi ba’yom ha’shmuni – It was on the eighth day, Moshe summoned Aaron and his sons...***” The Gemara in Tractate *Megillah* tells us that whenever Scripture uses the term “*Vayhi ba’yom*- It was on that day” it is to indicate tragic events. The Gemara tells us that although on the eighth day of the Mishkan Hashem rejoiced to the same degree that He had at the time of creating heaven and the earth, nevertheless the Torah uses an expression to indicate tragedy because on that day Nadav and Avihu (the sons of Aaron) died.

The eighth day of the Mishkan was not only the day that Aaron and his sons officiated as Kohanim, it was also the day that the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) entered into the Mishkan. The Torah tells us that when the *Shechina* descended, which expressed itself as fire that consumed the offerings, the Jewish people sang out and prostrated themselves. At that moment, Nadav and Avihu brought forth fire pans for an offering to Hashem (when they should not have done so). Because of their improper behavior, the Torah states, “**A fire came forth from Hashem and consumed them (Aaron’s sons), and they died before Hashem. Moshe said to Aaron: Of this did Hashem speak, saying, “I will be sanctified through those who are nearest to Me, thus I will be honored before the entire people. And Aaron remained silent.”**” Indicating that the death of Aaron’s sons was a *Kiddush Hashem* (Sanctification of G-d’s Name).

Rashi cites Chazal who explain that Moshe initially understood that Hashem’s Name would be sanctified by the death of one who is closest to Him. Moshe said to Aaron, “Initially I had thought it would be either you or me to bring about this sanctification through our death. However, after the death of Nadav and Avihu I understand that they are greater than us.” How was the death of Aaron’s sons a sanctification of G-d’s Name? Secondly, why did the sanctification of G-d’s Name need to occur precisely at the time when Hashem’s Presence, the *Shechina*, entered into the Mishkan?

Since G-d is the All Merciful One, how is taking the person who is closest to Him (Hashem) a sanctification of His Name? It seems contradictory. Why did Hashem's Judgment come upon the sons of Aaron at the same moment that He was demonstrating His intimate relationship with the Jewish people? Evidently, this is a clear indication that one can only have an intimate relationship with Hashem (G-d's Presence in our midst) if one conducts himself in accordance with His Will. Because Aaron's sons acted in an inappropriate context, they could not be allowed to live. They were made an example of in order to communicate this message.

Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk z'tl in his work *Meshech Chochmah* explains that at Sinai the Jewish people reached the pinnacle of their spirituality when they said **"Naaseh V'nishma – We will do and we will listen."** This statement indicated that that they were negated to the point that all that mattered was the Will of G-d. Because of this declaration, Hashem bestowed two crowns upon the Jewish people (levels of spirituality) – one for *"Naaseh"* and one for *"Nishmah."* As a result, of the sin of the Golden calf the Jewish people were forced to relinquish their crowns. Thus, they were no longer worthy to have the Shechina dwell in their midst.

According to Reb Meir Simcha, Hashem's forgiveness to the Jewish people came about through Moshe beseeching Him. Hashem saw that the Jewish people did not fully appreciate and understand the basis for being forgiven. They did not attribute it to their *teshuvah* (repentance) but rather to the fact that G-d chose to look away (Hashem turned a blind eye to their past behavior). However, viewing G-d as a judge who is not fully equitable was considered a *chillul Hashem* (a desecration of His Name). The Gemara tells us in Tractate *Bava Kama* that if one says that G-d looks away and does not evaluate every aspect of behavior within the context of Judgment, he deserves to forfeit his life. Therefore, this misperception of G-d needed to be corrected at all costs.

Reb Meir Simcha explains that Hashem chose the moment of the Shechina entering into the midst of the Jewish people, to dispel their misconception. As perfect as one may be and as insignificant as one may perceive a spiritual failing (sin) to be, there is nothing that G-d overlooks. This was proven through the death of Nadav and Avihu, the two most special sons of Aaron. When they brought the unauthorized incense offering, G-d immediately meted out His Justice. When Moshe told his brother Aaron that G-d had said, "I will be sanctified through those who are closest to Me," the Torah tells us that Aaron remained silent. Meaning, Aaron understood that through the death of his sons, a sanctification of Hashem came about. Consequently, the Jewish people had an appreciation and an understanding that G-d is equitable and does not allow anything to be overlooked.

Moshe had said, **"And the entire Jewish people should weep for this burning (the death of Nadav and Avihu)."** The reason the Jewish people had an obligation to grieve and mourn this enormous tragedy was because the death Nadav and Avihu only came about because of the Jews' misperception of G-d as a Judge (who looks away). If the Jews had not sinned with the Golden Calf, this lesson would not have been needed.

The death of Aaron's sons is juxtaposed to the Yom Kippur service. The Midrash explains that this juxtaposition teaches us that just as Yom Kippur atones for sin only when one recognizes his failing (and attempts to rectify the wrong), so too, the death of tzaddikim (righteous people) only atones when one realizes that it was not in vain. The tzaddik is only taken to cause the Jewish people to introspect and recognize what aspect of their spirituality has to be corrected. However,

if a tzaddik should pass away and one remains unaffected, then the death of the tzaddik does not bring about atonement. Yom Kippur and the passing of the tzaddik only rehabilitate one's spirituality if it causes him to realize that correction must be made.

3. Setbacks Could be the Basis for Understanding

The Torah tells us that after Aaron had brought his personal offering and that of the Jewish people, he entered into the Tent of Meeting with Moshe. Rashi cites Chazal who explain that after Aaron officiated and brought all the offerings, the fire did not descend from heaven to consume them. The fire was a representation of the Shechina (Divine Presence) entering into the Mishkan. When Aaron saw that he had done all that he was commanded to do and the Shechina did not enter, he was pained. Aaron said to Moshe, "I understand the reason the Shechina has not entered is because Hashem is angry with me (because of his involvement with the Golden Calf)." Aaron said to Moshe, "Moshe my brother by putting me in this position you have embarrassed me!" Moshe and Aaron immediately entered the Tent to pray for Mercy so that the Shechina should descend.

Initially Moshe told Aaron that he was chosen to be the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest). Meaning that G-d selected him for that position. Seemingly, Aaron understood that his appointment came about through Hashem's dictate – unrelated to Moshe's choice. If this is the case, when the Shechina did not descend after he officiated, why did Aaron say to Moshe, "You have embarrassed me by placing me in this position"? The claim should not have been directed against Moshe, but rather the question should have been, "why did *Hashem* put me in an embarrassing position?"

The Torah tells us that Korach attempted to usurp Moshe's authority by questioning the authenticity of the Divinity of the Torah. Korach's claim against Moshe was that Aaron's appointment was Moshe's choice. Korach accused him of nepotism. It is interesting to note that although Korach experienced the Sinai event and openly witnessed G-d speaking to Moshe face to face, he nevertheless questioned his credibility. The Torah tells us that G-d spoke to Moshe after the Sinai event saying, "**In you, they (the Jewish people) will believe forever**" – meaning that Moshe's word is synonymous with that of Hashem. If G-d had said that Moshe's word is His word then how could Korach have questioned his authority?

Korach believed that because of Moshe's special level of spirituality he had a unique and intimate relationship with Hashem. Because of this, when Moshe would make a request of Hashem, He would acquiesce and grant him his wishes. Therefore, Korach felt that the choice of Aaron to be the High Priest was not the choice of G-d, but rather the choice of Moshe. Hashem acquiesced to that request and was agreeable that Aaron was to be the High Priest. This was the basis for Korach's mutiny against Moshe. He had also believed that many of the other laws of the Torah evolved in a similar manner.

Aaron's understanding and initial reaction was similar to that of Korach. He believed that Hashem had only appointed him as *Kohen Gadol* due to the request of Moshe. Since Moshe

wanted him to be the High Priest, and G-d merely acquiesced, then when the Shechina did not descend, he said, “Moshe my brother by placing me in this position *you* have embarrassed me!”

Upon hearing this, Moshe took his brother Aaron into the Tent of Meeting and they prayed for G-d’s Mercy. It was only after they prayed that Hashem responded. At this moment, Aaron understood that his predicament was not due to Moshe initiating his appointment but rather, even if one is chosen by Hashem, one needs to call upon the Attribute of Mercy to assist him in his mission.

The Jewish people witnessed this incident; it sowed the seeds of descent, which allowed Korach to initiate his mutiny. One could have interpreted the situation, as Aaron had initially understood it to be. Aaron’s misperception was corrected; however, Korach was not able to see it in this manner because of his desire for acknowledgement and glory.

One could ask -if we are the Chosen People, then why do we experience such difficulties and hardships? G-d forbid, these questions could undermine our belief in who we really are. The Jewish people were chosen by G-d to be His priestly, kingly nation. He identified us as His holy people. The basis for all the travails and difficulties of the Jewish people are rooted in our spiritual setbacks. We learn from Moshe and Aaron that with the power of prayer one is able to call upon the Attribute of Mercy (*Midas Ha’Rachamim*) to intervene and bring about *bracha* (blessing).

4. Understanding the Spirituality of the Jew

The Torah states regarding the kosher species that one is permitted to eat, **“Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aaron, saying to them: Speak to the Children of Israel saying: *zos ha’chaya* - These are the creatures that you may eat from among the animals that are upon the earth.”** The Torah usually uses the term “*chaya* (creature)” to refer to the undomesticated animal. Why does the Torah use the term “*chaya*” in the context of kosher species? Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the word “*chaya*” is derived from the word “*chaim*,” which means eternal “life” in the spiritual sense. The Midrash continues, “Since the Jewish people are attached to Hashem and have the capacity to cleave to *chaim* (eternal spiritual life which is rooted in Hashem), they must be separated from spiritual contamination in order to maintain the proper level. Hashem commanded the Jewish people to observe His mitzvos unlike other nations who do not have that capacity.” It is only through the observance of mitzvos that the Jew maintains his relevance to *chaim*.

Sforno in his commentary writes that before the sin of the Golden Calf, the Jewish people had a capacity of spirituality that they were able to have a direct relationship with the *Shechina* (Divine Presence). They did not require the setting of the Mishkan (Sanctuary) to have Hashem dwell in their midst. However, after the failing of the Golden Calf the Jewish people regressed spiritually from where they had been at Sinai. They no longer had the capacity to directly accommodate G-d’s Presence in their midst. It was only because of the *tefillah* (prayer) of Moshe that Hashem was agreeable to allow the Mishkan to be the conduit and medium to accommodate His Presence in their midst.

In addition, Sforno continues to explain that the Jew has specific dietary laws (kosher) that are meant to maintain his spirituality and his connection to *chaim* (eternal life/Hashem). The Jew must separate himself from anything that could diminish his spirituality. This is not only limited to food items but to anything which is classified as spiritually contaminating.

The Midrash states, “The Torah was only given to those who consumed the Mann (Manna).” Chazal tells us that the Mann was the spiritual food that was the equivalent of that which sustains the angels. Ramban explains that the Mann was the radiance emanating from Hashem in physical form. It sustained the Jewish people for a period of forty years and spiritualized the Jew. The Mann enabled the Jew to process the Torah, which is the ultimate spiritual sustenance of the Jewish people.

The dietary laws were communicated to the Jewish people in order to allow them to function in a spiritual context. It is interesting to note that the food, which sustains mankind, although it is mundane and earthy, nevertheless can affect one’s spirituality. How do we understand this? The mission of the Jew is to spiritualize the mundane. This can be done through consecration. Rambam, in the *Laws of Deios* states that a Jew has the ability to consecrate all aspects of his physical existence. If one lives his life within the parameters set forth by the Torah, then one’s entire existence becomes spiritualized. Rambam writes that if one eats, sleeps, or cohabits, all for the sake of being physically fit to serve Hashem in a more perfect manner, then it is considered the fulfillment of the mitzvah of “knowing G-d in all your ways.”

The Midrash tells us that if the Jewish people had entered the Promised Land immediately (without wandering in the desert for forty years) they would not have succeeded as a spiritual people because they would have been preoccupied with tilling and cultivating the Land. They would not have had sufficient time to be dedicated to Torah study. Hashem retained them in the desert for a period of forty years with Moshe Rabbeinu as their teacher and the Shechina on their minds. Their sustenance was the Mann and the Clouds of Glory protected them. They were completely encircled and engulfed in spirituality. The Jews were incubated in a spiritual context for a forty-year period.

The Mishna in Tractate *Berachos* tells us that the *chassidim rishonim* - original chassidim (scrupulously devout individuals) - would prepare for one hour before *tefillah*, pray for one hour, and reflect for one hour upon the prayer that they had just prayed. Given that there are three prayer services a day, it means that the *chassidim rishonim* were minimally engaged in prayer for a nine-hour period every day. The Gemara asks, “If this was the case then when would they have time for Torah study and review? In addition, there was not sufficient time to earn a living.” The Gemara answers that since they were at this special spiritual level, they would retain the Torah they had studied without any difficulty and their living would come through the labor of others. Because they were completely focused on spirituality, all their spiritual and physical needs came to them without difficulty.

If the Jewish people had not sinned with the Golden Calf, they would have been minimally at the level of the *chassidim rishonim*. The reason the Jewish people needed to have a Mishkan was that they became spiritually diminished. The reason the Jewish people needed to remain an additional forty years in the desert was the sin of the Spies. In each case, Hashem provided a setting for the Jewish people to maintain and advance themselves spiritually. Since a Jew

possesses the spiritual capacity to be attached to *chaim* (life/Hashem), he is required to live within the context of Torah observance. It is only through this way of life, does the Jew have relevance to spiritual eternity.

5. Torah – the Protector of Israel

The Torah states, “***Vayhi ba’yom ha’shmuni – It was on the eighth day, Moshe summoned Aaron and his sons...***” The Midrash Tanchuma states that whenever the term “*Vayhi ba’ yom*- It was on that day (those days)” is found throughout scripture it is to indicate tragic events. The Midrash cites the five incidents of “*Vayhi ba’ yom*” and expounds upon them. One of the examples cited is “*Vayhi b’may Achaz Melech Yehudah – These are the days of Achaz King of Yehudah.*” The Midrash asks, “To what tragedy is the verse alluding?”

The Midrash cites the verse which states, “***Aram was in the east and the Philistines were behind them.***” The verse indicates that the Jewish people were surrounded by their enemies. If this was the case, then to what tragedy are words “*Vayhi b’may*” alluding? One would think that it is an obvious tragedy that the Jewish people were surrounded by their enemies. Thus, not requiring an allusion. The Midrash answers that the tragedy was that Achaz the king of Yehudah denied a Torah education to the youth. He shut down the Torah education system. He did this because he wished to eliminate Torah from existence, thus removing G-d’s interest from this world. Achaz had said, “***If there are no young sheep there will be no mature sheep. If there are no flocks then there is no need for a shepherd (Hashem). If there are no youngsters, being educated in Torah there will be no teachers. If there are no qualified teachers, there will be no talmidim (students). If there are no talmidim there will be no Torah scholars. If there are no Torah scholars there will be no Torah. If there is no Torah then there will be no synagogues and study halls. And if there are no synagogues and study halls then Hashem is removed from this existence.***”

The Midrash cites a verse that indicates that Achaz shut down the Torah, thus causing it to be unavailable to the Jewish people. When the people understood what Achaz intended to bring about they began calling out, “Woe to us the world will be destroyed because they have annulled the Torah!”

The painful and tragic event that the prophet is alluding to is not the Land of Israel being surrounded by its enemies but rather to the ultimate end of existence because of the lack of Torah study. If Jews are not engaged in Torah study, then being surrounded by their enemies is a secondary problem.

Rabbeinu Bachya cites a Midrash in which one of the Roman emperors approached Reb Yehoshua ben Chananiya (a Tanna – one of the leading Torah Sages of the generation) and said, “We have been trying to eliminate the Jewish people for many years without success. You Jews are a tough flock.” Reb Yehoshua responded, “It is not that the Jewish people are a tough flock, but rather we have a tough shepherd (Hashem).” Despite our enemies, if the Jewish people are properly engaged in Torah study, Hashem will watch over us.

The Torah tells us that the installation of Aaron and his sons as Kohanim needed to be in front of the elders of Israel. Rebbe Akiva says that the Jewish people are compared to a bird. Just as the bird cannot fly without wings, so too the Jewish people cannot function without its elders (Torah Sages).

The survival and success of the Jewish people is determined by its Torah leaders and by the Jews themselves being engaged in Torah study. The Talmud states, "Great is Torah study because the study brings to action." May we all merit an appreciation for our heritage -the Torah itself and partake of it in a more meaningful way.

6. How Does One Hone His Spirituality?

The Torah states regarding the consumption of non-kosher species, **"Do not make your souls abominable by means of any creeping thing; do not contaminate yourselves through them lest you become contaminated (*v'nitmasim*) through them."** The conclusion of the verse seems to be redundant. How do we understand this?

Chazal explain that the word "*v'nitmasim*" (contaminated)" is written with the "*aleph*" deleted. Thus without the vowels it can be read as "*v'nitamtem* (closed/sealed)." This means that when the Jew consumes non-kosher species he becomes spiritually desensitized. He loses his natural sensitivity to spirituality.

The Torah continues, **"For I am Hashem your G-d – you are to sanctify yourselves and you shall become holy, for I am holy..."** If a Jew takes the initiative to achieve holiness, he becomes holy because "Hashem is holy." Holiness is defined by anything with which Hashem is associated. For example, only when the Divine Presence descended upon Mt. Sinai did it become holy. Then when the *Shechina* ascended from the mountain, it returned to its ordinary status. The Jewish people, who were qualified to be taken as G-d's people at Sinai, are referred to as "*Goy Kaddosh* – Holy people." They are only holy because of their association with Hashem.

Partaking of non-kosher species causes the Jew to become spiritually desensitized because the basis for this sensitivity is rooted in our connection to Hashem. The natural senses of a human being only have relevance to the physical and not the spiritual because they are physical senses. However, the Jew has the ability to sense spirituality only because of his association with Hashem. Thus, if the Jew lives his life as prescribed by the Torah and does not contaminate himself, he becomes the proper vessel in which holiness can exist.

Ramban writes at the beginning of the Portion of *Kedoshim*, "When the Torah states the Positive Commandment of "*Kedoshim t'heu* – You shall be holy," it means, "One should sanctify

himself with what is permitted to him.” Although the Torah permits many physical engagements and endeavors, limiting one’s physical indulgence enables one to have a greater acuteness for spirituality. The more one is immersed in physicality, he causes and creates a “*timtum* – a blockage” for spirituality.

The Mishna Tractate *Nidarim* states that a non- Jew, even if he is circumcised, is classified as “*aareil*.” The foreskin that is removed during the circumcision is referred to as “*aarlah* (a covering).” Therefore, the person who is not circumcised is referred to as “*aareil*” because the covering has not been removed. The non-Jew, although he may be circumcised in the physical sense, nevertheless retains the status of “*aareil*.” This is because the verse refers to the non-Jew as “*aarlei lev* – covered heart.” Although he is circumcised, the non-Jew is considered sealed and blocked to spirituality. He does not have that special sensitivity because he does not have relevance to *Kiddusha* (holiness). Only the Jew, who is part of the “*Goy Kaddosh* – holy people,” is the setting for *Kiddusha*. In order for the Jew to retain his spiritual sensitivity, he must maintain himself in a certain context, which allows him to be a location for holiness.

It is not enough for a Jew to observe mitzvos and to study Torah in order to have a greater capacity for holiness. A Jew needs to limit his involvement in the material if it is only for the sake of satisfying the physical. One cannot increase *Kiddusha* in one’s life while simultaneously behaving in a gluttonous manner. For a Jew to have a sense of *Kiddusha* - he must aspire to Holiness.