

Yad Avraham Institute
Weekly Torah Commentaries Series
Portion of Shemini

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkofa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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Shemini

Presented by

Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita

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1. The Need to Supplicate G'd for Mercy

The Torah states, **“Moshe and Aaron came to the Tent of Meeting, and they went out and they blessed the people – and the Glory of G'd appeared to the entire people.”** Rashi cites *Toras Kohanim* which explains that after Aaron had officiated on the eighth day and brought all of the required sacrifices, a fire did not descend from heaven to consume them. The fire would have been a representation of the Divine Presence entering into the Mishkan. When Aaron had done all that he was commanded to do and saw that the Divine Presence had not descended, he was pained. He said to Moshe, “I understand that the reason the Divine Presence did not enter is because G'd is angry with me (because of his participation with the Golden Calf). Moshe my brother by putting me in this position you have embarrassed me!” Moshe and Aaron immediately entered into the Tent to pray for Mercy so that the Divine Presence should descend. It was only after their supplication for Mercy that the Divine Presence appeared before the Jewish people.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that Chizkiyahu, the king of Judah was meant to be Moshiach and Sancherev, the Assyrian king was meant to be the Armageddon, (*gog umagog*). However, it did not happen. The Gemara tells us that when Chizkiyahu assumed the throne, he assembled the entire Jewish people and placed a sword alongside a Torah scroll. He had given them an ultimatum, “You can either live by the Torah or be pierced by the sword.” It was because of this mandate that the Jewish people became fully committed and engaged in Torah study. Within a period of two and a half years, every woman and child from Dan to Beer-Sheva became fully proficient in the laws pertaining to spiritual purity. Because the Jewish people were so preoccupied with their spiritual pursuits they allowed the fruit in their vineyards to rot on the vine.

The Gemara tells us that Sancherev, the Assyrian king came upon Jerusalem and the Temple with millions of soldiers with the intent to destroy it. In order not to distract Chizkiyahu and the Jewish people from their

Torah studies, G'd instructed the archangel Gabriel (the angel of Justice) to “sharpen his sickle.” That night, the entire camp of Sancherev was destroyed in an instant. The miracle that had taken place was in the merit of the Torah study of king Chizkiyahu and the Jewish people. Although G'd wanted to designate Chizkiyahu as Moshiach, the Attribute of Justice claimed that he was not qualified. The claim against him was that after being a beneficiary of a miracle of such magnitude, how could have Chizkiyahu not have said *shira* (*praises to G'd*)? He should have sung the praises of G'd just as Moshe and the Jewish people had done after the splitting of the Sea. It was because of this claim that Chizkiyahu was disqualified.

Whenever the Jewish people encounter a moment in which they could greatly advance spiritually, it evokes prosecution. If there is the slightest deficiency, the Attribute of Justice will not allow it to take place. However, within the context of the Attribute of Mercy, the Jewish people would be allowed to advance, despite their spiritual deficiency. Aaron, the brother of Moshe, was the only one qualified to be the High Priest. If his service was not sufficient to bring the Divine Presence into the Mishkan, then the Jewish people would have not been able to have G'd in their midst. Their entire value and standing in existence would be minimized. The claim against Aaron was that he had participated in the Golden Calf. Thus, he was deemed by the Attribute of Justice to be unfit to bring the Divine Presence into the midst of the Jewish people. However, because Moshe and Aaron supplicated G'd for Mercy, the Attribute of Justice was silenced and the Divine Presence entered into the Mishkan.

Although Chizkiyahu was qualified to be Moshiach, because of the profundity of the moment, the Attribute of Justice had protested the decision. Chizkiyahu should have sung the praises of G'd for the miracle that had taken place, but he did not. If he would have been aware of the claim of the Attribute of Justice, he would have supplicated G'd for Mercy. However, because he did not, it was determined that he should not be Moshiach.

The Torah states regarding Yaakov's blessing of Ephraim and Menasha, **“Then Israel saw Yosef's sons**

and said, 'Who are these?'" Rashi cites Chazal who explain that when he was about to bless Yosef's children, Yaakov had an interruption in his prophetic vision that caused him concern regarding who he was about to bless. Yaakov had sensed that the cause of the lapse in Divine Inspiration was due to some of the evil descendants that were to come forth from Ephraim and Menasha in the future. When Yosef realized what had happened, he immediately supplicated G'd for Mercy. It was only because of Yosef's supplication for the Attribute of Mercy did the Divine Presence return to Yaakov and allowed him to bless Ephraim and Menasha to establish them as tribes, who were the equivalent of Reuvain and Shimon.

2. The Joy in Aaron's Heart

The Torah tells us that on the eighth day of the inauguration of the Mishkan, Moshe installed Aaron as the High Priest just as he was commanded to do so by G'd. The Midrash states, "Moshe said to Aaron, 'G'd has said to me that I should install you as the High Priest.' Aaron responded, 'You have toiled and sacrificed for the building of the Mishkan, and I should be made the High Priest?'" It is interesting to note that Aaron believed that Moshe's qualification to be the High Priest was because of the fact that he had "toiled" for the building of the Mishkan and not because of his superior spiritual standing as mentor of the Jewish people. Chazal refer to the Mishkan as "the Mishkan of Moshe" because he sacrificed and toiled for its sake. Moshe was synonymous with the Mishkan. It was thus logical for him to have been the one chosen as the High Priest. However, Aaron was chosen by G'd.

The Midrash continues, "Moshe replied, 'I swear by your life! That although you have been appointed to be the High Priest I regard it as if it were me. Just as you rejoiced when I was chosen to be the Redeemer (despite the fact that Moshe was the younger brother), so too do I rejoice in your advancement. As the Torah states, '**G'd said to Moshe, "When Aaron will be informed of your elevation, he will come out to greet you in the desert and he will see you and have joy in his heart."**'"

Before Moshe returned to Egypt as the Redeemer, G'd had engaged with him at the burning bush over a seven-day period in order to convince him that he was qualified and would succeed as the Redeemer. Throughout his dialogue with G'd, Moshe continuously tried to disqualify himself. Chazal tell us that Moshe's underlying issue was that if he were chosen to be the Redeemer, his older brother Aaron would be slighted. G'd responded to Moshe that Aaron his brother would not be

slighted, but rather, when he will be informed he will have a special joy in his heart. Despite the fact that even the most devout person would have had a trace of disappointment, to the contrary, Aaron experienced exceptional joy in his heart for Moshe. It was the equivalent as if Aaron himself was chosen to be the Redeemer. Because he expressed this level of joy when he was informed of Moshe's designation as the Redeemer, he understood Aaron's unique level of humility. Although he is not considered to be as humble as Moshe, his display of humility was a semblance of Moshe.

It was because Aaron demonstrated a similar level of humility as his brother that Moshe rejoiced in his appointment as the High Priest. Because Aaron was able to rejoice when he was informed that Moshe was chosen to be the Redeemer, Moshe understood that his brother was truly qualified to be the High Priest. It is only the one who has an exceptional level of humility who could be sufficiently dedicated on behalf of the Jewish people as their representative.

The Gemara in Tractate Nidarim tells us that when Aaron passed away the entire Jewish people (men and women) grieved. This was because Aaron was dedicated to bring peace and harmony between his fellow Jews. As it is stated in the Mishna, "Aaron loved peace and he pursued peace." The Gemara tells us that a husband made a vow that his wife cannot benefit from him in anyway unless she spits in the eye of the High Priest. When Aaron became aware of this woman's untenable situation, realizing that she would never do this and thus end her marriage, he approached the woman and asked her to spit in his eye because the doctor prescribed that only saliva could cure his eye ailment. Thus, Aaron secured the marriage. This conduct clearly confirmed Aaron's selfless dedication to his fellow. As the High Priest he was responsible for the atonement of the Jewish people. He would supplicate G'd on their behalf and be responsible for their atonement through the sacrifices that were brought in the Mishkan. Since Moshe understood the purity of his brother, he thus rejoiced when Aaron was chosen to be the High Priest. Perhaps this is the meaning of the words of Chazal which tell us that Moshe and Aaron were of equivalent spiritual status. Although Moshe was definitely the most spiritually advanced and special, Aaron was similar to him because of his exceptional level of negation and selfless love and dedication to the Jewish people.

3. Moshe's Understanding of Himself

The Torah states, "**It was on the eight day, Moshe summoned Aaron and his sons...**" It was on the

eighth day that Aaron and his sons began to officiate in the Mishkan. The Midrash states, "During the seven day period that Moshe was at the burning bush G'd had said to him, 'I want you to go (to Egypt) to redeem My children.' Moshe responded, 'You should send the one who is qualified. You should send Aaron my brother who is more qualified than I am.' This dialogue repeated itself on the first day, the second day, etc. G'd said to Moshe, 'Every day I tell you to go and every day you answer Me that I should send your brother, who is more qualified. I swear on your life that tomorrow you will be repaid for your obstinacy. When the Mishkan will be completed, initially you will believe that you will be the High Priest. However, I will surprise you by informing you that Aaron is the one who will officiate as the High Priest. You will then summon Aaron and his sons.' Thus, the verse states, '**...Moshe summoned Aaron and his sons...**'"

On the seventh day of Moshe's dialogue at the burning bush, when Moshe had said, "Send the one who You would normally send as Your Agent." G'd responded, "Aaron, your brother, the Levy." Rashi cites Chazal who explain the verse to mean that Aaron is only a Levy until now; however, because of Moshe's obstinacy, Aaron will be the Priest (Kohen). From Chazal that is cited by Rashi, it would seem that Moshe understood immediately that he had forfeited his priesthood because of his obstinacy. However, according to the Midrash cited above, it is evident that Moshe was not aware that he had lost the priesthood because of what had transpired at the burning bush. Until the eighth day of the inauguration of the Mishkan, he had believed that he would be the High Priest. If Moshe had believed that his brother Aaron was qualified to be the Redeemer of Israel, why would he not also be the one qualified to be the High Priest? Why was he surprised when G'd informed him that Aaron and his children would be the Kohanim?

There was no individual in the history of mankind that had a closer relationship with G'd than Moshe. His dimension of spirituality was unique. He understood all the inner workings of existence. After the sin of the Golden Calf, G'd wanted to destroy the Jewish people. It was only because of Moshe's supplications that they were spared. When the Jewish people had sinned with the spies, Moshe again evoked G'd's Mercy, preventing their destruction. It was only Moshe who had the ability to evoke the most intense level of Mercy. The concept of atonement is based on the principle of Mercy. As the Midrash tells us that the appellation of G'd that is associated with sacrifices is the appellation of "YKVK," which connotes the Attribute of Mercy. The appellation of G'd that connotes the Attribute of Justice is never mentioned in the Torah

regarding atonement. The Kohen, was the individual who was qualified to bring about forgiveness and atonement for the Jewish people. It would therefore be logical to assume that Moshe would be the most qualified to be the High Priest. He would be able to evoke the most advanced level of Mercy on behalf of the Jewish people. Despite this fact, because of his obstinacy at the burning bush (which was considered a disrespect), G'd surprised him on the eighth day by informing him that Aaron, his brother was the only one qualified to be the High Priest. Where else to do we find that Moshe believed himself to be qualified and was subsequently informed that he was not?

When Moshe was in heaven and was being instructed regarding the building of the Mishkan, he had believed that he would be the one to oversee its building. However, G'd revealed to him at the last moment that Bezalel was the only one that was qualified to oversee the building of the Mishkan. Although Moshe had reason to believe that he was the one to build the Mishkan, G'd had informed him otherwise.

Every aspect of the Mishkan needed to be infused with a specific intent. The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that Bezalel understood how to conjugate the letters of the Hebrew alphabet that brought about Creation. The Mishkan had to be infused with the same forces that were used to create existence. The Mishkan was a microcosm of Creation. This ability was not unique to Bezalel. Moshe, as the conduit of Torah to the Jewish people, had acquired all 49 levels of understanding (Binah) except for the 50th which is the understanding of G'd Himself. If this is so, then Moshe should have been the one to oversee the building of the Mishkan, being the most qualified. Nevertheless, Bezalel was chosen by G'd to oversee its building. Bezalel possessed something that Moshe did not. Bezalel, was a grandson of Chur who had given his life at the time of the Golden Calf to sanctify G'd's Name. When the Jewish people came to Aaron to provide a deity for them, Chur, the son of Miriam vehemently protested and opposed their demand. Because of his objections he was killed. Although Moshe understood from G'd's choice that Bezalel was more qualified than he was, he had no reason to believe that he was not the most qualified to officiate as the High Priest.

Moshe, although he was the most humble person who ever lived, understood his own capabilities. He had believed, because of his special relationship with G'd, that he was the most qualified to act as the representative of the Jewish people to evoke His Mercy through the bringing of offerings. It was only after he was informed that Aaron, his

brother would be the High Priest that he realized and appreciated his failing at the burning bush.

4. Dietary Laws, a Confirmation of the Eternity of the Jewish People

The Torah states, "**Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aaron, saying to them: Speak to the Children of Israel saying: These are the creatures that you may eat from among the animals that are upon the earth.**" The Midrash cites a verse from Chavakuk, " 'G'd had stood and measured/evaluated the Earth. He saw and released the nations.' What is the meaning of 'G'd measured the Earth?' When G'd wanted to give the Torah to the Jewish people, He evaluated the Earth (existence) and decided to give it in the desert in a public setting. Initially, when the nations of the world rejected the Torah, G'd was going to cause the world to revert back to a state of water (pre-existence). However, when the Jewish people accepted the Torah unequivocally with their declaration of 'Naaseh V'nishma – we will do and we will listen' existence continued. It was only when the Jewish people accepted the Torah that the world became tranquil. As it states in Psalms, 'The Earth was fearful and tranquil.' When the Jewish people accepted the Torah, the nations of the world received their release. They were permitted to eat the forbidden contaminated species such as rodents. To what is this analogous? To a doctor who evaluated two patients. One was deathly ill with no chance of recovery. The doctor told his relatives that he should not be denied anything that he wants to eat. Afterwards, the doctor evaluated the second patient and believed that he would recover. He then instructed the family that he was only permitted to eat certain foods; however, other foods must be withheld from him so that he should be able to recover. After hearing the doctor's prescription to each of the patients, the doctor was asked, 'Why do you differentiate between the two patients regarding what they are permitted to eat?' The doctor responded, 'Regarding the patient who is deathly ill, since he will die in any case, there is no reason to deny him anything that he desires. However, the patient, who has relevance to life, must adhere to a strict dietary regiment if he is to live.' Similarly, G'd permitted to the nations of the world to eat anything that they desired. However, since the Jewish people have relevance to eternity, they need to maintain their spiritual purity and sanctity. Therefore, G'd forbade them from eating the species that would contaminate them. As it states, 'You who cling to Hashem, your G'd, you are all alive today.'"

Initially G'd had offered the Torah to the nations of the world. Each nation rejected it for their own reason.

However, when the Jewish people chose to accept the Torah they did so unequivocally with their declaration of "Naaseh V'nishma." Had the Jewish people not done so, the world would have reverted back to a state of pre-existence. Because of their acceptance of the Torah, the world assumed a state of permanency. G'd chose to give the Torah to the Jewish people in a public setting which was Mt. Sinai. Why did G'd choose to give the Torah in the desert, which is a location that is the ultimate setting of desolation?

The Gemara in Tractate Nedarim explains that the reason G'd chose to give the Torah to the Jewish people in the desert was because it is a location that is ownerless and barren. Just as the desert has no innate value, so too must the one who wants to acquire Torah render himself ownerless like the desert (humble). It is only through one's self-negation does one become a proper receptacle for the processing and retention of Torah. It seems from the Midrash that G'd chose to give the Torah in the desert because He wanted to give It in a public setting that had no distractions. Because if there were any distractions at the moment of the giving of the Torah, one would not be able to appreciate the profundity of the event.

G'd wanted the Torah to be given in the most public setting because He wanted the nations of the world to understand that the world only exists in the merit of the Jewish people. It was only because the Jewish people embraced the Torah, unequivocally, that existence has any value. The nations of the world needed to appreciate and understand that they owe their very existence to the Jewish people, who dedicated themselves to G'd.

Chazal tell us that there was a negative aspect to receiving the Torah in a public setting. The Midrash tells us that the reason the Jewish people were vulnerable to the Sin of the Golden Calf was because the nations of the world had given them an "evil eye," which was rooted in envy. Had they received the Torah in a more private setting, they would not have been minimized by the envy of the nations. Although the Jewish people were put in a compromised position, as a result of the public setting, G'd chose to give the Torah before the eyes of the world, so that they could understand that their existence is only due to the Jewish people receiving the Torah at Sinai.

5. The Invaluable Gift of Mitzvos

The Torah states, "**...These are the creatures that you may eat from among the animals that are upon the earth.**" The Midrash cites a verse in Psalms, "

‘To fulfill Your Will My G’d I do desire and Your Torah is in my innards...’ What is the meaning of this? The Torah permeates every aspect of our existence. How fortunate are the Jewish people because each one of their limbs has relevance to a mitzvah. There are 248 limbs in the human body and G’d has given the Jewish people 248 Positive Commandments (to correspond to them). And therefore we say every day (*asher yatzar*) ‘Blessed are You, Hashem, our G’d King of the Universe, Who fashioned man with wisdom and created within him many openings and cavities (*chalulim chalulim*) ...’ The numerical equivalent of ‘*chalulim chalulim*’ is 248, which corresponds to the number of limbs in the human body. This is the meaning of the words of King David in Psalms, ‘Your Torah is in my innards...’”

Reb Chaim Vital explains that just as the human body is comprised of 248 limbs, the Jewish soul is comprised of 248 parts. There is a correlation between the soul and the body. When one fulfills any of the 248 Positive Commandments it perfects the corresponding aspect of the soul. In addition, the physical limb that corresponds to that mitzvah is also spiritualized and elevated. Just as the mitzvos nurture the soul, so too is the body spiritualized. As the Gemara in Tractate Berachos states, “Just as G’d permeates all existence, so too does the soul permeate every aspect of the body.” The soul was created to give life and meaning to every aspect of the human being.

Chazal tell us that contained within the three paragraphs of the Shema, which is the acceptance of the yoke of heaven/dominion of G’d, are 245 words. If one prays within the context of a quorum, the one leading the service concludes the Shema with three words which complete the number 248 (*Hashem Elokechem Emes*). If one prays privately, one introduces the Shema with three words (*Kail Melech Neeman*) in order to bring the number of words in the Shema to 248. When one declares his belief in G’d, he is accepting the yoke of heaven upon every aspect of his physical being.

The human being, regarding his make up and inclination, is the equivalent of an animal, apart from his intellect. All of Man’s tendencies and drives are rooted within the animal. Man was endowed with intellect in order for him to take control of his physicality and spiritualize it through the performance of the mitzvos. It is only through the study of Torah and performance of mitzvos that man can subordinate his physical inclinations and invest them in spiritual endeavors. The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos states, “If the earlier ones are classified as angels, then we can be classified as human beings.

However, if the earlier ones are classified as ‘human beings’ then our classification will be donkeys – and not even the equivalent of the donkey of Reb Pinchas Ben Yair.” The Gemara tells us that the donkey of Reb Pinchas had been stolen and the thieves who had stolen it had attempted to feed it untithed grain. The donkey refused to eat it because it was a forbidden entity. Although the donkey is an unintelligible creature, because it was the possession of Reb Pinchas Ben Yair, who was a uniquely devout and holy person, the donkey assumed a spiritualized state. Thus, instinctively it would not partake of anything that was contrary to the Torah.

Man, in terms of his physical make up, is no different from the donkey. Maharal explains that the Hebrew word “*chamor* – donkey” is derived from the word “*chomer* – material.” Just as the essence of the donkey is material, and thus epitomizes the animal, man in his physical make up is no different. The only way one can dominate and dictate the physical is to assume a spiritual persona. In order to facilitate this, G’d endowed the Jewish people with Torah and mitzvos that correspond to every aspect of their physicality to bring about this spiritual metamorphosis. When one transgresses with a certain part of his body, it becomes compromised. Conversely, when one performs a mitzvah with that part of the body, it becomes spiritualized and thus elevated. Therefore, if one were to steal with his hand, besides the need to correct the sin that had been perpetrated, one should perform acts of kindness in order to spiritualize the limb that had been diminished. If one were to gaze upon something that is inappropriate, he should gaze upon the words of the Torah in order to spiritualize his eyes. This concept is mentioned in The Gates of Repentance, authored by Rebbeinu Yonah.

The Gemara in Tractate Sukkah states, “I (G’d) created the evil inclination. I created Torah as its antidote.” When one engages in Torah study and actualizes it through the performance of mitzvos, one incapacitates and subordinates the evil inclination and brings about a spiritualization of himself.