

Parsha Tazria-Mitzora

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1. The Importance of Jewish Identity

Moshe on his return to Egypt as the Redeemer of Israel stopped with his wife and two sons to take up lodging for the night. The Torah tells us that Moshe “...**was encountered by Hashem who sought to kill him**”. Rashi in his commentary cites the Midrash that tells us that when Moshe embarked on his journey to Egypt, Eliezer (his second son) had already been born but was not yet circumcised. Moshe believed that circumcising him prior to embarking on the journey would endanger the life of his newborn (Eliezer). On the other hand, to delay the journey would be unacceptable because Hashem told him to go to Egypt.

Moshe’s obligation to circumcise his son would have been at the first available moment. When Moshe stopped for his night’s lodging, he first attended to unloading his pack animal rather than circumcising his son. Because of this delay an angel came upon him in the form of a serpent to swallow him “**from his feet to his thighs and from his head to the location of circumcision.**” This indicated that he deserved to die because he was lax in his obligation to circumcise his son. Tzipora, the wife of Moshe, understood why her husband’s life was in jeopardy and immediately picked up a stone and circumcised her son, thus saving Moshe’s life.

Firstly, we must understand why did Hashem react to Moshe’s delayed performance of this mitzvah to the degree that Moshe was liable for death? Secondly, Chazal tell us that Moshe was the only individual who was qualified to be the Redeemer of the Jewish people. If the serpent had killed Moshe, the Jews would never have left Egypt. Consequently there would never have been a Jewish People. The Midrash tells us that at the beginning of *Bereishis (Genesis)* that existence was created only for the sake of the Jewish people and for the sake of the Torah. How is it possible that Moshe’s hesitance in the performance of a mitzvah would jeopardize the initial intent of creation and existence? Why did Hashem allow the Attribute of Justice to prosecute Moshe so harshly - resulting in such dire consequences.

The Midrash at the beginning of *Shemos (The Book of Exodus)* tells us that the bondage in Egypt only started after the Jews stopped circumcising themselves. The Jews wanted to identify with the Egyptians and the rest of the world who were not circumcised. At that moment Pharaoh plotted and initiated the bondage – thus enslaving the Jews until their time of redemption. G-d allowed the events to evolve and unfold as they did because the decision of the Jews to be in an uncircumcised state.

The Torah refers to circumcision as “*Ohs Bris Kodesh (the sign of the Holy Covenant).*” The circumcision itself is the sign of the Covenant between the Jews and G-d – that they identify as His subjects. Therefore when the Jews decided to disassociate themselves from this identification, G-d allowed us to become victims of the bondage. The Jews themselves could not be redeemed until they would re-identify with G-d – which is ultimately demonstrated through circumcision.

Although Moshe was the only individual in existence qualified to take the Jews out of Egypt, if there would be any degree of failing in this area of identification with G-d (circumcision- the sign of the Covenant) this would re-intensify the prosecution upon the Jewish people - thus not allowing them to be redeemed. Moshe’s momentary delay was sufficient to activate this prosecution. Only through Tzipora’s immediate initiative of circumcising her son was this prosecution silenced.

Prior to receiving the Torah at Sinai, a person could not have a relationship with G-d unless he identified with G-d in a manner such as circumcision; however, after Sinai the Jewish people entered into an unconditional relationship with G-d. Although the Jewish people may choose to disassociate themselves from G-d the nation as a whole would not be destroyed. Hashem promised us that ultimately the Torah would not be forgotten from the Jewish people.

A relationship is determined through one's feelings, behavior, and attitude to the one with whom he has the relationship. Therefore there is no reason for us as Jews to hide our relationship with Hashem because of society. The basis for our survival and success as a people is only because we identify as the *Am Hashem (the People of G-d)*. As we are taught from the lessons of history and assimilation, hiding our relationship with Hashem has never saved us from persecution. The only way to merit the protection of Hashem is to proudly identify as His People.

2. *Humility is an Essential Characteristic*

There is an argument in the Gemara concerning the death of Nadav and Avihu who were struck down by Hashem on the day of the inauguration of the Mishkan. One opinion states that they deserved to die because they had made and acted upon a halachic (legal) decision of their own without consulting with their teacher, Moshe Rabbenu. Nadav and Avihu brought an *“aish zarah (a strange fire)”* “which was an incense offering, without consulting Moshe. The other opinion states that they were struck down by G-d because they officiated in the Mishkan after consuming an amount of wine that put them in a state that was inappropriate for them to officiate before G-d. The question is why did they not consult with Moshe who was the conduit for all Torah knowledge? Nadav and Avihu were destined to be the future leaders of the Jewish people – how could they be so brazen as to not consult with Moshe or attempt to go before Hashem in a slightly impaired state?

If a person understood the gravity of officiating before Hashem he could not drink any amount of an intoxicating beverage before officiating. The Gemara states that if a person drinks even as much as *reveis of wine (2.9 ounces)* he is no longer qualified to give a Halachic ruling because he is not in a total state of clarity. How could Nadav and Avihu even consider officiating before Hashem after drinking?

The *Yalkut (Midrash)* asks why does the Torah need to identify Nadav and Avihu as the sons of Aaron when this has been mentioned many times before? The *Yalkut* answers to indicate that Nadav and Avihu were slightly deficient regarding their respect and reverence for their father Aaron. Although Nadav and Avihu were both performing the identical service, seemingly together the Torah tells us that each of them took their own fire pan. This indicates that before taking this initiative they did not even consult with one another because of their self-confidence and independence of mind.

Another interpretation stated in the Midrash is that Nadav and Avihu, as they walked behind Moshe and their father Aaron, said to themselves **“when are these elders going to pass away so that we could assume the leadership of the Jewish people?”** Upon hearing this, Hashem responded by saying, **“We will see who will bury who.”** Thus, Nadav and Avihu were condemned to die. How is it possible that Nadav and Avihu, understanding and appreciating the greatness of Moshe and Aaron, could even hope for such a tragedy to take place? The Midrash seems to be difficult because the only consideration for the cause of their death was either the bringing of the “strange fire” or the drinking of the wine. There is no indication or mention of this lack of humility in the Torah.

Given that Nadav and Avihu were special and holy individuals we must certainly conclude that their position regarding the leadership of the Jewish people was with best intentions. They had believed that the older generation would soon pass on and the new generation (comprised of younger people) would need new leadership who could understand and relate to their issues. Therefore they believed that they would be more appropriate leaders for the new generation. Hashem's response to this understanding was –“ We will see who will bury who.” This indicated

that to a degree this attitude was rooted in a lack of humility.

This failing in humility either led Nadav and Avihu to forgo consulting with their spiritual mentor – Moshe, or to officiating before Hashem after drinking even a small amount of wine.

Very often we find people who belittle the understanding and the halachic (legal) perspective of the leading Torah sages who may have emigrated from Europe or are from the previous generation. These detractors believe that these sages, although they are great Torah scholars, are out of sync with the “real world.” The truth is that these Torah giants *understood* and *understand* reality to a greater degree than anyone in our generation. These misguided attitudes only stem from ignorance, arrogance and self-absorption.

Nadav and Avihu committed only one sin in their lives and it caused their death. They believed that they did not need to consult with Moshe because they had a better understanding. They drank the wine because they independently felt that it was not inappropriate since it was only a small amount. Their lack of humility led them to their death.

As Rambam states in *Hilchos Deios*, even one’s behavioral characteristics should not be extreme, in the case of humility one should continuously go to the extreme (because one’s natural tendency is to be self-centered). Only through heeding the words of Rambam will we achieve greater clarity.

3. Distraction is an impediment to Spirituality

The Torah states, “**Upon completion of the days of her purity for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring a sheep within its first year for an elevation-offering, and a young dove or a turtledove for a sin-offering, to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, to the Kohen. He shall offer it before Hashem and atone for her...**” After a woman gives birth why does she need to bring an offering for atonement? What did she do wrong?

The Gemara tells us that at the time of childbirth when a woman is in tremendous pain she takes an oath that she will never again engage in relations with her husband. As a result of this oath, she needs to be atoned.

The Sforno explains that the reason why a woman needs to be atoned after childbirth is because until the woman recovers from the birth she is totally preoccupied with her physical state and cannot focus on spiritual matters. Therefore, she is not qualified to approach anything of a consecrated status (offerings or the Sanctuary) until she brings her offering for atonement, which will allow her again to partake and engage in these items.

The Rambam tells us in *Hilchos Deios* that a person is obligated to maintain his health because it is only through a healthy body that one can have a healthy mind. One cannot focus on his spirituality if he is distracted by pain or physical ailments. Therefore the Torah obligates one to maintain our health.

The Mishna in *Tractate Chulin* tells us that Yaakov Avinu (Our Patriarch) went back to retrieve the small earthenware vessels because, “**A tzaddik (righteous person) values his possessions more than he values his life.**” The Gemara explains that this is because the tzaddik understands that Hashem has given him these possessions for a purpose. The tzaddik does not know when these seemingly unimportant items will be needed for his survival. The tzaddik understands that there are no guarantees in life.

The Gemara in *Tractate Shabbos* refers to wealth as the “wheel of fortune” because at one point one can be on top and at another time one can be at the bottom. The Gemara states that money is referred to as “*zuz*” because it is derived from the word that means to “move” because it moves from person to person. Therefore one must value everything that Hashem gives him because one

does not know when it will be needed. Yaakov understood that he could not afford to be distracted even for a moment. He therefore valued even the small earthenware vessels.

The Chofetz Chaim would sigh when he looked at his Holy books because he understood that his books cost money and money is time. Although earning the money to purchase his Holy texts was a necessity, it was at the expense of the time he could have used to study Torah.

Life has many necessary distractions. We need to earn a livelihood. The question is do we differentiate between a necessary distraction and an unnecessary one? The Torah tells us that when the woman is distracted by her physical concerns after childbirth, she is not qualified to engage in Holy matters because of her own personal distractions. It is only when we have focus that we have relevance to spirituality. How can we keep ourselves from being distracted? We need to, as stated in *Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers)*, **“Make your Torah (study) primary and your livelihood secondary.”** If our Torah study is primary than we will remain focused and have the necessary clarity understand what is necessary.

4. Human Understanding vs. the Divine Mind

The Torah is divided into three categories: *Mishpatim* (Laws), *Eidus* (Testament to Hashem), and *Chukim* (Statutes). Chazal explain that *Mishpatim* are rational laws that even if Hashem had not commanded us we would have legislated them on our own i.e. the laws of stealing, killing, damaging etc. *Chukim (Statutes)* are laws that cannot be understood within a rational context. For example *Shatnez* (the law that prohibits wearing a combination of wool and linen), the prohibition of cooking milk and meat, and the *Chok* (Statute) of the Red Heifer (the animal used for spiritual purification after coming in contact with the dead) are all *Chukim*. We observe these laws only because Hashem commanded us.

Rashi in the portion of *Chukas* cites the Midrash that says, Satan and the nations of the world will ridicule the Jewish people saying, “Could you explain these irrational laws to us?” The Torah therefore states, **“This is the *Chok* of the Torah. This is My Statute. It is My decree regardless of your lack of understanding and you have no right to question it.”** Is not being able to understand the Statutes a basis for ridicule? In life there are many things we do not understand and we accept them as a matter of fact.

Chazal explain that *Shatnez* (wearing a combination of wool and linen), *Basar B’Chalav* (meat that was cooked with milk), *Nidah (a woman who is a menstruant)*, and *Para Adumah* (Red Heifer) are examples of *Chukim*. The Torah states that when a woman gives birth to a male she is contaminated for a period of seven days. If she gives birth to a female she is contaminated for a period of two weeks. However after this period of contamination passes, even if she continues to bleed she is considered spiritually pure because the Torah refers to the menstrual blood as *Demai Tahara (Blood of Purity)*. Even though the *Demai Tahara* is emanating from the uterus, which is the same uterine blood that normally contaminates, nevertheless the woman after childbirth is considered spiritually pure. How do we understand this? If uterine blood innately is a contaminant, how can the same blood at another period of time (such as after childbirth) not contaminate?

The Torah states that the combination of wool and linen in a garment is a forbidden combination (regarding wearing); seemingly indicating that it is detrimental to one’s spirituality. However, if on the other hand one has a four-cornered linen garment one must attach woolen fringes (*tzitzis*) to the corners of the garment in order to be permitted to wear it. Seemingly this again causes an inner contradiction regarding the laws of *Shatnez*. If the combination of wool and linen is innately a detriment to one’s spirituality, then why when one attaches *tzitzis* to its corners is it not a detriment?

The Torah tells us that if one cooks meat in milk one is not permitted to partake of it or even benefit from it. However if one marinates meat in milk until it is fully permeated with milk one is permitted to benefit from it. Again we see this inner contradiction.

If a man cohabits with his brother's wife after the brother's death or divorce it is considered an incestuous relationship. However if the same brother passes away and leaves no living descendent it is a Torah Commandment to perform levered marriage with the living brother to perpetuate the name of the deceased brother. Again the same inner contradiction exists. If a union with a sister-in-law is intrinsically detrimental to one's spirituality and forbidden, then why in the context of perpetuating the name of the deceased is it permitted?

The *Para Adumah (The Red Heifer)* purifies the person who was contaminated by coming in contact with the dead; however, the one who is pure (who administers and is involved in the *Para Adumah* process) is contaminated. King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived states his position regarding the *Para Adumah* by saying, "It is beyond me." If the *Para Adumah* has the ability to relieve a person from the most intense level of contamination – why does it contaminate the one who is pure?

This inner contradiction, within the context of the human intellectual capacity, is irreconcilable. It is only within the Divine realm is this not a contradiction. There are many laws in the Torah, which we cannot understand yet we accept them without difficulty. However the Statutes which we just discussed, because of our limited understanding, cause us to be vulnerable to the ridicule of Satar and the nations of the world. Hashem says, **"This is the Chok of the Torah. This is My Statute. It is My decree regardless of your lack of understanding and you have no right to question it."**

The ultimate level of our spiritual achievement would be to realize that even the *Mishpatim (The Rational Laws)* are to be adhered to for no other reason other than they are "My decree and you may not question them." In actuality we do not steal not because we *feel* that it is wrong but it is wrong only because G-d says, "Thou Shalt not Steal."

5. Our Relationship with Hashem is only through the Jewish People

The Torah tells us that if a person develops a white lesion on the skin he comes to the Kohen to determine the status of the lesion. Is it leprous (*tzaras*) or is it not? If it meets the criteria to be identified as a leprous legion, the Kohen pronounces the person impure (*tomei*). Thus the leper must be sent out of all the camps of Israel and remain in a secluded state until he recovers from his condition.

If the lesion is questionable and the Kohen is not able to determine its status, the Kohen sequesters the individual for a period of seven days to be reexamined. If after one week the status remains undetermined, the Kohen sequesters him for yet another week. If after the second week the lesion remains unchanged the Kohen pronounces him *tahar (pure)* and he must immerse himself and his garments in a *mikvah (ritual pool)*. The question is if the lesion was determined not to be leprous after the periods of seclusion (two weeks) why would the person need to go to the *mikvah* to reestablish his state of purity? How do we understand the fact that the Torah requires the person to go to the *mikvah* if in fact it was determined that he was never a leper?

Whenever the Torah mentions the liability of *koreiss (Spiritual excision, which means that you are cut from Hashem)* the Torah expresses itself by saying **"this soul will be cut off from Israel"** or **"this soul will be cut off from its people"**. If spiritual excision (*koreiss*) is in fact being cut off from Hashem then why does the Torah not express it in that manner? The answer is, that one (even as an individual) can only have a relationship with Hashem within the context of being part of the *Klal Yisroel (the Jewish people)*. If one in fact is part of Klal Yisroel, he does have a relationship with Hashem. If one however is excised from the Klal Yisroel, he has no relationship with Hashem. The source of *kedusha (holiness)* is G-d Himself. Thus if he is cut off from Klal Yisroel, he no longer has relevance to *kedusha*.

The Rambam states that if a person removes himself from the Jewish people and regards himself as a separate entity then he has no share in the World to Come. If one believes that the difficulties of the Jewish people are not his concern because he is not part of the "their" community then he is

removing himself from the Klal Yisroel. Even if that same person adheres to the Commandments of the Torah, he does not have a share in the World to Come because he has severed his link with Hashem by separating himself from the Jewish people. There is no such thing as having a relationship with Hashem other than through the Jewish People.

The Jew who was sequestered for the two-week period because of his questionable status was temporarily segregated from the Jewish people according to Halacha (the laws). Since the state of Purity and Holiness only comes about from the connection to Hashem (which is only through the Jewish people) the person who was according to Halacha separated from his fellow Jew no longer retains the pure status – thus causing him to become contaminated.

The Gemara tells us that a leper is considered like a dead person because just as the corpse the leper is cut off from the source of life (which is G-d) so too is the leper cut off from the source of life (G-d) because he is separated from the Jewish people. An evil person is also considered by the Talmud as a corpse because through his behavior he does not identify with the Jewish people.

The more one is attached and identifies with the Jewish people (such as being empathetic to his fellow Jew) the stronger is his bond to Hashem, Holiness, and Purity. However, the more detached one becomes from his fellow Jew the more relevance he has to impurity, which is the antithesis of *kedusha*.

Rambam in *Hilchos Taanis (The Laws of Fasting)* states that when the Jewish people experience difficulties and suffering there is a Positive Commandment to cry out in prayer and if one does not, it is considered an act of “cruelty.” If one does not identify with another Jew’s problem he is cutting himself off from the source of Purity and Holiness. If a person can identify with another Jew’s plight and is able to love him as he does himself then he does have a special relationship with Hashem.

The questionable leper needed to be separated from the Jewish people for two weeks because he may have spoken *Lashon Hara*. Evil Speech drives a wedge between Jews; therefore, a person who speaks *Lashon Hara* is himself separated from the Jewish people thus causing a state of impurity to come upon him (measure for measure).