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Tonight, Friday evening will be
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from: Shema Yisrael Torah Network <shemalist@shemayisrael.com>
to: Peninim <peninim@shemayisrael.com>
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Peninim on the Torah
by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum –

Parshas Shemini - I will be sanctified through those who are nearest to Me, thus I will be honored before the entire People. (10:3)

Bikrovai ekadeish, "I will be sanctified through those nearest to Me," are two words that instill fear and awe, because they are words that are often uttered following a tragedy in which the best, those closest to Hashem, are taken from within our midst. One who is exposed to greater inspiration, to greater Heavenly illumination - whose spiritual cognition is more profound - is on a higher spiritual plane. He is nearer to Hashem; therefore, more is expected of him. Horav Chaim Zaitchik, zl, explains that this was the reason for the punishment received by the mekoshesh eitzim, one who gathers twigs on Shabbos. True, it is chillul Shabbos, desecrating the Sabbath, but it is not as if he had been observant for that long. Why not give him a break?

Rav Zaitchik suggests that the Torah answers this question when it writes, Vayiheyu Bnei Yisrael bamidbar; "And Bnei Yisrael were in the wilderness" (Bamidbar 15:32). What difference does it make where they were? Does being in the desert change the sin? Yes! The nation was exposed to the greatest possible centralized kedushah: Moshe, Aharon, Miriam, the Zekeinim - they were all there - teaching, praying, talking, inspiring. What more utopian spiritual life does one require? When one is surrounded with kedushah, holiness, when it is palpable, the sin becomes commensurately magnified. One who is spiritually greater must act in a manner that coincides with his spiritual position.

We now understand why the punishment of Nadav and Avihu was so quick and so harsh. They had reached the epitome of kedushah. At that point, one's spiritual persona and demeanor must reflect his closeness to Hashem. Otherwise, he becomes an example of bikrovai ekadeish. Indeed, this is to be noted from the pasuk later in Acharei Mos (Vayikra 16:1), "After the death of Aharon's two sons, when they approached (b'karvasam) before Hashem, and they died." Because they were so close to the Divine, they were judged with meticulous and unforgiving exactitude. As the Abarbanel writes, "Those who are close to Hashem are like the soldiers who fight in the fray of war, who are at the front of battle. The risk is that much greater."

The Divrei Chaim, Horav Chaim Halberstam, zl, of Sanz, met his close friend the Ateres Yeshuah, zl, Rebbe of Dzikov. These two great Admorim were the ziknei ha'dor, elder spiritual statesmen, of their generation. The Sanzer complained to his friend, "Oy, where have the days gone? My beard is already white, and I have yet to repent for the sins that I committed in my youth."

The Ateres Yeshuah noticed that a younger man who was listening remarked, "If the holy Sanzer has yet to repent for the sins of his youth, then I do not have it so bad." The Rebbe looked at him with a sort of derision and said, "Do you know what you are saying? Do you have any idea what constitutes the sins of the Sanzer? His sin was thinking of a question on the Rambam during Shemoneh Esrai! His devotion to Hashem was interrupted because he could not detract his mind from Torah study. For this, he has been repenting for seventy years! Are you prepared to compare your sins to his sins?" In other words, our mitzvos pale in comparison with their aveiros.

We infer from here a new term for defining a holy, devout, righteous Jew: karov. The goal of religious observance should be to bring us closer to Hashem to the point that He refers to us as Kerovi, My close ones. From a psychological perspective, interdependence characterizes a close relationship. Obviously, someone who is close to Hashem feels dependent upon the Almighty. Hashem, of course, does not maintain that degree of closeness to us. Furthermore, interdependence in a close relationship can be experienced along three dimensions: cognitive; emotional; behavioral. Cognitively, emotional closeness means that one thinks of the other person. Emotionally, one misses the other person when they are physically apart. Behaviorally, one seeks every avenue to make the relationship a priority. While these terms describe a physical relationship between two people, there is no reason we should be any different vis-?-vis Hashem. We should depend only on Him. We crave davening and learning because, through these acts, we feel His Presence. Closeness to Hashem should be our priority in life. Whenever we are unable to experience this closeness, we should feel that something is missing from our lives.

In an alternative exposition of Bikrovai Ekadeish v'al pnei ha'am Echabeid, Horav Baruch, zl, m'Komarna taught that only those who are close to Hashem, who have achieved spiritual ascendency, are able to accept without question what appears to be enigmatic decrees from Hashem. Everyone else, the am, members of the nation, have difficulty accepting what appears to be harsh decrees.

During the Holocaust, many were overcome with questions of faith. Death and deprivation was everywhere, with the Jewish people representing one large tragedy. Ein bayis asher ein sham meis, "There was no home/family that had not experienced a death." People were distraught, unable to grapple with the overwhelming issues they confronted. The Rebbe explained, "Following the tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu, Hashem Yisborach knew that people would be overcome with questions, wondering: Is this the reward one receives for devotion to Torah? Of all people, should Aharon HaKohen, the individual whose love for all Jews was boundless, be the one to suffer such a tragic loss?"

Hashem said to Moshe Rabbeinu, Bikrovai Ekadeish, "By those whose belief in Me is unequivocal, who have no questions, I will be sanctified. They will understand that this was necessary to sanctify My Name. V'al kol pnei ha'am, but, with regard to the rest of the nation, the simple Jew, who is not yet able to grasp the larger picture, Eichabeid, 'I will weigh down/become heavy with questions (from the word kaveid, heavy).' They will not understand why it

was specifically Aharon who sustained such an unprecedented, unparalleled loss."
The Rebbe concluded, "Let us be from among those who are close to Hashem, who have no questions, who accept His decree with love."

Do not leave your heads unshorn and do not rend your garments that you not die… And your brethren the entire House of Yisrael shall bewail the conflagration that Hashem ignited. (10:6)
Two reactions, two varied responses to the same occurrence. The Kohanim were not to interrupt the joy of their service - despite the tragic passing of two of their own. On the other hand, Klal Yisrael must mourn the deaths of two saintly Kohanim. The people must mourn; the Kohanim, however, must continue their joyful service. Two opposites - how is it possible? If it is a joyful occasion, be joyful. If it is a sad time, be sad. How do we reconcile two contradictory emotional responses to the same occurrence?
Horav Gamliel Rabinowitz, Shlita, understands that there are vantage points from which we establish our perspective on what happened to Nadav and Avihu. One point is clear: the action taken against these two righteous sons of Aharon was not the result of Middas HaDin, the Attribute of Strict Justice; rather, it was a manifestation of Kiddush Hashem, Sanctifying Hashem's Name. Thus, it was absolutely necessary that the Kohanim not halt their avodah, service - at all. Otherwise, it would be viewed as a desecration of Hashem's Name. The service of the Kohanim transcends everything. As agents selected to sanctify Hashem's Name, they must remain b'simchah, joyful.
Although the people experienced the joyful inauguration of the Mishkan, they were still spectators (not agents) to a tragedy which took the lives of the young giants of Torah who perished. They needed to respect this moment with aveilus, mourning, the sreifah asher saraf Hashem, "conflagration that Hashem ignited." Thus, we see that, concerning one experience, there can be two opposing views - and they are both proper and correct. The difference is the perspective based upon the vantage point.
Rav Gamliel notes that this phenomenon occurs in a number of instances. On Tishah B'Av, our national day of mourning, we do not recite the Tachanun prayer, since the day is referred to as a mo'ed, a term reserved for Festivals. Our Sages cite the Perek, chapter, in Tehillim 79, Mizmor l'Asaf, A Song for Asaf, a chapter that addresses the destruction of the Temple and the ensuing galus, exile. Why is it referred to as mizmor, song? It should be kinah, a lamentation. True, explain Chazal, it does depict destruction, but, concomitantly, we are happy that Hashem released His wrath primarily on eitzim v'avanim, wood and mortar. We were dispersed; a multitude was brutally killed - but Klal Yisrael as a nation survives. Amid the celebration of Pesach night, commemorating our release from bondage, we eat an egg, a food often eaten following a funeral. One reason for this anomaly: Pesach Seder always coincides with the night of the week (that year) of Tishah B'Av. Even when we celebrate, we should not lose sight of our tragic past - or what could occur (by G-d's decree) tomorrow.
The avodah, manner of service, of a Jew is to follow Hashem's will, to abrogate himself to the Divine mandate and live in accordance with that which Hashem asks of us. When we live in such a manner, giving ourselves over to His care and instruction at all times, then there are no ambiguities, no questions, no challenges. It is the will of Hashem.
A similar idea emanates from a much earlier commentator. The Rashbam (in his commentary to the death of Nadav and Avihu 10:3) writes: "As soon as Nadav and Avihu died, Aharon was prepared to mourn them. Moshe Rabbeinu immediately instructed him: 'Do not mourn; do not weep; do not interrupt the Divine service.' Hashem has said, Bikrovai Ekadeish, 'Through My close ones I will be sanctified.' The Kohanim will (be the medium to) sanctify Me among the People, when they see that, despite the tragedy, the service to Hashem continues unabated, for it transcends all. This is giving glory to Hashem - when the people see that Aharon continues his service (despite having every reason to be overwhelmed with grief)."
In his hesped, eulogy, on the occasion of the Sheloshim, thirty day mourning period, for Horav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, zl, Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl, related that, earlier, Rav Dessler's Rebbetzin had passed away on a Shabbos. Rav Elya came to be menachem, comfort him, in his grief. Despite the cloak of sadness that enveloped Rav Dessler's home, the Mashgiach (of Ponevez) seemed to be acting in his usual spiritually-elevated manner as per the holy Shabbos. Rav Dessler cited the Rashbam (mentioned above) to explain why, despite being personally absorbed in mourning over the passing of his life's companion, in addition to the fact that she was the daughter of his illustrious rebbe and life's mentor, he understood that Shabbos is Shabbos, and serving Hashem supersedes all.
Rav Elya wondered how is it possible to serve Hashem with joy (as evidently Aharon did) while he was overwhelmed by grief. He explained that, when one properly fulfills the mitzvah of ahavas Hashem, loving the Almighty, this love transcends all forms of opposing emotion.
Rosh Hashanah 1930, six weeks following the terrible slaughter which occurred in Yeshivas Chevron on August 18, 1929, the survivors of the Chevron massacre gathered together with their families to daven in the general vaad, meeting hall, in Yerushalayim.
Those survivors - who had seen friends, family and students slaughtered before their eyes - were themselves physically and emotionally scarred. Their idyllic Torah life had been shattered. The atmosphere in the hall that night was heavy and emotion filled. A pall of pain and anguish permeated the room. Feelings of dejection and despair had overwhelmed many. The venerable Mashgiach, Horav Yehudah Leib Chasman, zl, stood up and went over to an unmarried student, Aryeh Leib Shikovitzky, and asked him to lead the services.
Aryeh Leib was known for his sweet tenor voice and deep emotion in song. Nonetheless, he was stunned by the Mashgiach's request. "Rebbe," he began, "I am not married, nor I do I have a beard" (preferable requirements of a chazzan for the High Holy Days). The Mashgiach repeated his request, "I want you to lead the services."
Aryeh Leib stepped up to lead the davening. With his sweet, melodious voice, he began chanting the preparatory Rosh Hashanah tune prior to Barchu. The first bracha (Maariv aravim) was completed, and now the assembly began to recite the tefillah of Ahavas olam. The chazzan began the phrase, V'ahavascha al tasir mimenu l'olamim, "And may You never remove Your love from us." Tears choked his throat as he began to quietly weep. Again, Aryeh Leib repeated the words, this time accompanied by a wail. Tears streamed down his face as he repeated the phrase over and over, each time with greater pronouncement and emotion. He was intimating to Hashem: "Everything that happened to us in the recent violence, You brought upon us - with love!"
Like a burst dam, all of the accumulated pain and anguish of those assembled burst, as they all raised their voices and wept, wailing along with the Chazzan. V'ahavascha al tasir mimenu l'olamim. "We know that You love us. Please, please never remove that love from us - forever!" They had just performed Tziduk HaDin, Justified the Heavenly judgment, that had been meted out six weeks earlier. It was an expression of love.
The tefillah continued, emotion laden and tear-filled. After the conclusion of the services, the Mashgiach went over to Aryeh Leib and said, Ot dos hab ich gemeint. "That is what I had in mind!" Concise and incisive.
Supposedly, it was that Tefillas Maariv that sparked the turn-around of the yeshivah, as it began to rebuild.

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http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-parashat-shemini
S.A.L.T. - Parashat Shemini
Rav David Silverberg
Sunday
The Shulchan Arukh (O.C. 226), based on the Gemara (Berakhot 43b), codifies the obligation of birkat ha-ilanot, to recite a berakha upon the sight of budding fruit trees during the springtime. This halakha is formulated as a

requirement to recite birkat ha-ilanot upon seeing budding trees "bi-ymei Nissan" – "during the days of Nissan."

The halakhic authorities debate the question of whether this reference to the month of Nissan should be taken literally as establishing the time-frame within which the berakha must be recited. Rav Yaakov Chagiz, in his Halakhot Ketanot (2:28), takes the Gemara's formulation at face value, and rules that the berakha may be recited only during the month of Nissan. And thus even if a person sees a budding fruit tree earlier, during Adar, or later, during Iyar, he may not recite the berakha at that point. The Mishna Berura (226:1), however, based on earlier Acharonim, writes that the Gemara mentioned Nissan only because trees normally blossom during that month, and not to restrict the requirement to Nissan. According to this view, one may recite birkat ha-ilanot anytime he sees blossoming fruit trees, regardless of whether or not this occurs during Nissan.

This issue is discussed at length by Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank, in his Har Tzevi (O.C. 118), where he suggests qualifying the position of the Halakhot Ketanot. Rav Frank notes a passage in the Ritva's commentary to Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (11b), where the Ritva writes that the Gemara did not intend to require reciting the berakha specifically during Nissan, but rather, the berakha is recited "in each and every place, according to when it blossoms." The Ritva implies not that the berakha may be recited whenever one sees the blossoming of a tree, but rather during the predominant blossoming season in one's geographic location. Rav Frank suggests explaining the ruling of the Halakhot Ketanot on this basis. In and around the Land of Israel, most blossoming generally occurs during the month of Nissan, and thus the berakha must be recited during that month. Even if one sees blossoming prior to Nissan – such as if one sees the blossoming of almond trees, which begins well before the onset of Nissan – or later in the spring, the berakha is to be recited during Nissan, the month when most blossoming occurs in most years. In other geographic locations, however, where blossoming occurs at other times, the berakha must – according to the Halakhot Ketanot – be recited during the month when most of the blossoming takes place.

Rav Frank applies this analysis to the question of whether the Halakhot Ketanot would classify the obligation of birkat ha-ilanot as a mitzvat asei she-ha'zman gerama – a time-bound obligation, from which women should therefore be exempt. At first glance, one might assume that since the berakha is limited to a particular calendar period – the month of Nissan – it falls under the category of mitzvot asei she-ha'zman gerama. Seemingly, then, according to the view that women's exemption from time-bound mitzvot applies even to obligations enacted by Chazal, women would – in the view of the Halakhot Ketanot – be exempt from birkat ha-ilanot. However, Rav Frank dismisses this argument, in light of his analysis of the Halakhot Ketanot's position. As we have seen, Rav Frank understood the Halakhot Ketanot as requiring reciting birkat ha-ilanot during Nissan not because it is intrinsically linked to the month of Nissan – like the obligation of shofar, for example, is intrinsically bound to the first of Tishrei – but because Nissan is when trees generally blossom in Eretz Yisrael. This requirement applies not a particular calendar date, but rather in a particular circumstance – the month when most trees blossom in one's geographic area – and thus even according to the Halakhot Ketanot, women would be obligated to recite birkat ha-ilanot, as it does not fall under the formal category of mitzvot asei she-ha'zman gerama.

Monday

Yesterday, we saw the debate among the halakhic authorities as to whether birkat ha-ilanot – the berakha which one must recite over the sight of blossoming fruit trees in the spring – must be recited specifically during the month of Nissan. The Gemara (Berakhot 43b) and the Shulchan Arukh (O.C. 226) specifically mention the month of Nissan as the time for reciting this berakha. While many Acharonim (as noted by the Mishna Berura 226:1) understood that Nissan is mentioned here only because most trees blossom during Nissan, but in truth the berakha may be recited at any time one sees blossoming, the Halakhot Ketanot (2:28) disagreed. In his view, the berakha must be recited during the month of Nissan. As we saw, Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank, in his Har Tzevi (O.C. 118), suggested a different reading of the Halakhot Ketanot, but the straightforward reading of the Halakhot Ketanot indicates that he established an ironclad rule that birkat ha-ilanot may be recited only during Nissan, and not at any other time of year.

Rav Yosef Tzvi Rimon (in Sefirat Ha-omer U-virkat Ha-ilanot, pp. 31-32) proposed that the connection between birkat ha-ilanot and the month of Nissan may run deeper than the fact that the trees generally blossom during this month. In birkat ha-ilanot, we express gratitude for the renewal of nature, for the trees that return to life in the springtime after the "death" they experienced throughout the cold, harsh winter months. Renewal and rebirth is also one of the themes of the month of Nissan, the month when, according to Rabbi Yehoshua (Rosh Hashanah 11a), the world was created, and the month when Am Yisrael came back to life, so-to-speak, after the centuries of bondage and oppression in Egypt. We might also add the fact that the Mishkan began operating at Sinai at the beginning of Nissan, marking the spiritual rebirth of Benei Yisrael after the devastation wrought by the sin of the golden calf. The month of Nissan signifies the hope of renewal, that a situation can be drastically transformed from the gloomiest darkness to the brightest light, that "death" can be followed by rebirth and renewal. This concept is most tangibly expressed by the spring blossom, when the barren trees begin once again to produce magnificent, colorful flora, as nature springs back to life from the "death" of winter. And thus, according to the Halakhot Ketanot, an inherent connection exists between birkat ha-ilanot, the blessing of gratitude recited over nature's springtime rebirth, and the month of Nissan, the month of renewal and resurgence, which teaches us to never despair, and to always remain hopeful about the prospects of positive change even under the darkest circumstances.

Motzei Shabbos

Over the last two days we have discussed the question of whether one may count the omer during the period of bein ha-shemashot – the period between sunset and nightfall – when it is uncertain whether or not the obligation of counting has already set in. Some Rishonim permitted counting during this period, as counting nowadays constitutes a rabbinic obligation, regarding which we may apply the principle of "safeik de-rabbanan le-hakel," allowing us to rely on the lenient possibility in cases of uncertainty when a rabbinic provision is at stake. Others, however, maintained that this principle applies only after the fact, but does not allow us from the outset to knowingly place ourselves in a situation where we need to rely on one of two uncertain possibilities.

This debate likely revolves around the broader question as to the reason and nature of the principle of "safeik de-rabbanan le-hakel." Conceivably, we could explain this rule in one of two ways. The simpler and more intuitive approach is that this rule reflects a lower level of severity. Violating a law enacted by our Sages is certainly a grave matter, by virtue of the authority which the Torah invests in them to enact provisions and safeguards, but it is less severe than transgressing a law introduced by the Torah itself. In cases of uncertainty, then, the stakes are lower, so-to-speak, when dealing with a rabbinic provision, and thus Halakha permits relying on the lenient possibility. If so, then it is certainly conceivable that the rule of "safeik de-rabbanan le-hakel" applies only after the fact. Although violating rabbinic ordinances is not as severe a religious offense as violating a Torah law, they certainly must not be treated lightly, and thus it stands to reason, or it is at least very possible, that one optimally ought to be stringent in situations of uncertainty even when a rabbinic law is at stake. It is only when a mistake was made that the rule of "safeik de-rabbanan le-hakel" allows for leniency.

A different approach, however, appears in a famous passage in the Ramban's critique to the Rambam's Sefer Ha-mitzvot. At the very beginning of the Sefer Ha-mitzvot, the Rambam asserts that all the laws enacted by Chazal must be obeyed by force of the Torah prohibition of "lo tassur" (Devarim

17:11), which forbids disobeying the nation's leading body of rabbinic authority. The Ramban, in his critique, raises the question of why, according to this perspective, Halakha treats rabbinic laws differently from Biblical laws. If every rabbinic law must be obeyed by force of the Torah prohibition of "lo tassur," then there should be no reason for greater leniency in situations of uncertainty regarding a rabbinic provision than in those involving Torah law. The Ramban suggests defending the Rambam's position by postulating that Chazal from the outset enacted their provisions to apply only in situations of certainty. Meaning, the rule of "safeik de-rabbanan le-hakel" is based not on the lower level of severity of rabbinic enactments, but rather on the fact that Chazal initially intended for their rules to be followed only when they are definitively applicable. Thus, although transgressing a rabbinic law amounts to a violation of the Torah law of "lo tassur," rabbinic laws are treated more leniently in situations of uncertainty because this is how they were formulated from the outset.

According to this understanding, it seems reasonable to assume that the rule of "safeik de-rabbanan le-hakel" applies even "le-khatechila" (optimally), and not just after the fact. If Chazal from the outset enacted their laws to apply only in situations of certainty, when they are definitively relevant, then in cases of uncertainty one need not be concerned at all with the law in question. This perspective, then, would likely underlie the view among the Rishonim permitting counting the omer during bein ha-shemashot, despite the uncertainty involved.

(See also Rav Asher Weiss' extensive article on this topic http://tinyurl.com/ko3592x)

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from: Shabbat Shalom shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org
subject: Shabbat Shalom from the OU

A Stunning Statistic About the Orthodox Community

By Rabbi Haim Jachter | April 06, 2017

What a statistic! The current issue of the Orthodox Union's Jewish Action reports (https://www.ou.org/jewish_action/03/2017/data-divorce-q-dr-yitzchak-schechter) a study by Dr. Yitzchak Schechter (a clinical psychologist and director of the Center for Applied Psychology at Bikur Cholim in Monsey, New York) that reveals that the overall divorce rate in the American Orthodox community appears to be around 10 percent. Dr. Schechter notes that there is some variation, that the percentage is slightly higher for the non-Chasidic Orthodox population, slightly lower for the Chasidic population.

Dr. Schechter observes:

"We sometimes need to step back and see the big picture. Out of our zeal to solve all of the problems, we forget to put them in the proper perspective: A 10 percent divorce rate is amazing! (For the sake of comparison, the divorce rate in the general population is about 48 percent.) Also, because so many people get married in the Orthodox community—we have a very high marriage rate (between 80 and 85 percent of Orthodox American Jews are married)—the 10 percent statistic is even more meaningful. In other words, because the marriage rate is so high and the divorce rate is so low, marriages among the Orthodox population are, generally speaking, lasting."

Most rabbanim would agree that a 10 percent divorce rate in our community is too high, and that significant and varied effort should be made to reduce this percentage. Moreover, it is beyond a doubt that further steps are needed to boost the percentage of marriage in our community to an even higher level. Nonetheless, the comparison to the broader community is nothing short of breathtaking. Please permit me to suggest some reasons for this statistic.

The observance of taharat hamishpacha obviously plays a significant role in strengthening and stabilizing Orthodox couples. Rabi Meir (as presented in Niddah 31b) already taught that unrestricted access leads to boredom and that restraint recreates the fresh experience of the wedding night every month.

But there is more to it than taharat hamishpacha. Shabbat and Yom Tov compel couples to take a break from the workplace and to focus on family. Moreover, the focus on family and marriage as a central pillar of the Jewish community and life makes it as a higher priority in Orthodox life than in other communities. The sheer and incomparable joy experienced at an Orthodox wedding testifies eloquently to this very healthy attitude.

While these are contributing factors, it seems that there is one factor that is more fundamental and influential than all the others. This factor is none other than the Kabbalistic concept of tzimtzum.

In order for any relationship to flourish, each party must submit to certain limitations on their behavior. In a successful marriage, one spouse does not unilaterally decide where to go and what to do during a vacation. Decisions are made collaboratively, with each spouse compromising their desires for the sake of the other. Practically, making concessions to one another is not burdensome, since the benefit derived from the relationship far outweighs any personal frustration caused by the need to compromise.

Hashem, surprisingly, also limits Himself for the benefit of others. The masters of Kabbalah teach that Hashem contracted Himself—in order for the world to exist—in a phenomenon known as tzimtzum. Because Hashem is infinite, He must minimize Himself in order for anything else to exist. He must also engage in tzimtzum in order for human beings to have free will. Thus, Hashem places limitations on Himself to afford us the opportunity to live and thrive in His world.

Accordingly, it is reasonable for us to reciprocate this gesture, to accept limitations on our behavior and lifestyle in order to create a space for Hashem in our lives. Just as both members of a loving couple must accept restrictions in order to create a healthy relationship, the same expectations apply to our bond with Hashem. The result is a satisfying, mutual exchange. We both engage in tzimtzum in order to create space for each other. Thus, Torah restrictions should not be viewed as a nuisance, but rather a wonderful opportunity to help us cultivate a relationship with our Creator and Father in heaven.

In other words, Orthodox Judaism is geared to fostering a healthy relationship with Hashem, a relationship compared in Tanach and Chazal to a marital relationship. Orthodox Jewish life is thus permeated with relationship-building activities and boundaries. One who develops a healthy relationship with Hashem is well-trained on the basic building blocks of a relationship of a spouse. He or she experiences the benefits accrued from exercising restraint and creating space for and being sensitive to the other.

Ashreinu ma tov chelkeinu, what a wonderful lot is ours to observe the Torah. So much of the joy in life derives from a satisfying relationship with one's spouse. Although it does not guarantee marital bliss, an Orthodox lifestyle dramatically tilts the odds in one's favor. The dramatically lower divorce rate is yet another confirmation that Orthodox Judaism is the Rolls Royce of lifestyles, the best possible way to live one's life.

Rabbi Haim Jachter is the spiritual leader of Congregation Shaarei Orah, the Sephardic Congregation of Teaneck. He also serves as a Rebbe at Torah Academy of Bergen County and a Dayan on the Beth Din of Elizabeth.

Thanks to hamelaket@gmail.com for collecting the following items:

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from: Destiny Foundation/Rabbi Berel Wein <info@jewishdestiny.com>
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subject: Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

SHMINI

This week's Torah reading contains both narrative history and dogmatic Jewish halacha. It relates to us the tragic story of the deaths of the two older sons of Aharon, when they apparently willfully mishandled the obligatory incense offering in the Mishkan/Tabernacle. The Torah reading also details

for us the list of animals, birds and fish that may be consumed by Jews in accordance with the laws of dietary kashrut.

At first glance, there seems to be no connection between these two disparate subjects. Yet, we are certainly aware that Torah has to be understood and studied on many different levels and that the Torah is not subject to a completely haphazard arrangement of its prose and content. So, at some deeper, below the surface level, there may be a connection between these two matters that find themselves lumped together in one section of the Torah.

Without stretching our curiosity too far, I think that such a connection can be made regarding the death of the two sons of Aharon and the laws of kashrut, to justify their proximity in this week's Torah reading. And that connection is that obeying or disobeying God's instructions in matters of Jewish ritual holiness carries unforeseen consequences.

Just as is the case in the physical world, touching a live electric wire no matter how noble one's intentions may be for so doing will produce injury and even death, so too in the spiritual world of holiness and sanctification, there are lethal consequences to behavior that deviates from the express statements of the Torah. And all of Jewish history bears out the truth of this simple statement.

The Talmud states that consuming non-kosher food stops up the hearts of otherwise good Jews. Non-kosher food apparently is a spiritual form of bad cholesterol. It hardens one's heart and makes one less charitable or forgiving. This is a consequence of disobeying God's commandment to Israel to be a holy nation, separate from all others.

Just as there were terrible consequences for the sons of Aharon for substituting their judgment over God's commandment, so too is this the case in all other matters of Torah law as well. There are really no rationally accurate reasons that can be advanced for the dietary laws of the Jews. It is all involved in a purely unseen spiritual realm. But that does not in any way minimize the real effects and consequences that observance or non-observance of these laws carry with them.

All of Jewish history testifies to the corollary effects of kashrut observance on all facets of Jewish life and survival. Essentially put, the Torah tells us that the Jewish people are what they eat. Medical science has proven this to be true physically. The Torah comes to add to this the spiritual element, which is certainly no less important and vital for Jewish life to survive and prosper.

Shabbat shalom Rabbi Berel Wein

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from: Shabbat Shalom <shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org>
date: Thu, Apr 20, 2017 at 6:06 PM

The Light We Make (Shemini 5777)
Covenant & Conversation
Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

The great moment has come. For seven days – beginning on the 23rd Adar – Moses had consecrated Aaron and the priests. Now, on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, the time has arrived for Aaron to begin his service, ministering to the people on behalf of God:

It came to pass on the eighth day, that Moses called to Aaron and his sons, and the elders of Israel, and he said to Aaron, take a young bull for a sin offering, and a ram for a burnt offering, without blemish, and offer them before the Lord.

What is the significance of the "eighth day," the phrase that gives our sedra its name? To understand the profound symbolism of the number eight, we have to go back to creation itself.

In the beginning, when all was "waste and void," God created the universe. Day by day, the world unfolded. First, there were the domains: light and dark, the upper and lower waters, sea and dry land. Then there were the objects that filled the domains: the sun, moon and stars, then the fish and birds, and finally the land animals, culminating in mankind. Then came Shabbat, the seventh day, the day of limits and of holiness, on which first God, then His covenantal people, rested in order to show that there are boundaries to creation. There is an integrity to nature. Everything has its proper place, its ecological niche, its function and dignity in the totality of being. Holiness consists in respecting boundaries and honouring the natural order.

Thus, the seven days. But what of the eighth day – the day after creation? For this, we have to turn to Torah she-be'al peh, the oral tradition.

On the sixth day, God made His most fateful decision: to create a being who, like Himself, had the capacity to create. Admittedly, there is a fundamental distinction between human creativity ("something from something") and Divine creativity ("something from nothing"). That is why human beings are "the image of God" but not – as Nietzsche argued – gods themselves.

Yet the ability to create goes hand in hand with the ability to destroy. There cannot be one without the other. Every new technology can be used to heal or harm. Every power can be turned to good or evil.

The danger immediately becomes clear. God tells the first man not to eat of the fruit of one tree. What kind of tree it was is irrelevant; what mattered was its symbolic function. It represents the fact that creation has boundaries – the most important being the boundary between the permitted and forbidden. That is why there had to be, even in paradise, something that was forbidden.

When the first two human beings ate of the forbidden fruit, the essential harmony between man and nature was broken. Humanity lost its innocence. For the first time, nature (the world we find) and culture (the world we make) came into conflict. The result was paradise lost.

According to the sages, this entire drama took place on the sixth day. On that day, they were made, they were commanded about the tree, they transgressed the command and were sentenced to exile.

But in compassion, God allowed them a stay of sentence. They were given an extra day in Eden – namely Shabbat. For the whole of that day, the sun did not set. As it too came to a close, God showed the first human beings how to make light:

With the going out of the Sabbath, the celestial light began to fade. Adam was afraid that the serpent would attack him in the dark. Therefore God illuminated his understanding, and he learned to rub two stones against each other and produce light for his needs.

This, according to the sages, is the reason we light a havdalah candle at the end of Shabbat to inaugurate the new week.

There is, in other words, a fundamental difference between the light of the first day ("And God said, Let there be light . . .") and that of the eighth day. The light of the first day was created by God. The light of the eighth day is what God taught us to create. It symbolizes our "partnership with God in the work of creation." There is no more beautiful image than this of how God empowers us to join Him in bringing light to the world. On Shabbat we remember God's creation. On the eighth day (motsei Shabbat) we celebrate our creativity as the image and partner of God.

To understand the full significance of this story, we have to go back to one of the great myths of the ancient world: the myth of Prometheus. To the Greeks, the gods were essentially hostile to mankind. Zeus wanted to keep the art of making fire secret, but Prometheus stole a spark and taught men how to make it. Once the theft was discovered, Zeus punished him by having him chained to a rock, with an eagle pecking at his liver.

Against this background can we see the revolutionary character of Jewish faith. We believe that God wants human beings to exercise power: responsibly, creatively, and within limits set by the integrity of nature. The rabbinic account of how God taught Adam and Eve the secret of making fire is the precise opposite of the story of Prometheus. God seeks to confer dignity on the beings He made in His image as an act of love. He does not hide the secrets of the universe from us. He does not seek to keep mankind in a state of ignorance or dependence. The creative God empowers us to be creative and begins by teaching us how. He wants us to be guardians of the world He has entrusted to our care. That is the significance of the eighth day. It is the human counterpart of the first day of creation.

We now understand the symbolic significance of the eighth day in relation to the Tabernacle. As we have noted elsewhere, the linguistic parallels in the Torah show that the construction of the mishkan in the wilderness mirrors the Divine creation of the world. The Tabernacle was intended to be a miniature universe, a symbolic microcosmos, constructed by human beings. Just as God made the earth as a home for mankind, so the Israelites in the wilderness built the Tabernacle as a symbolic home for God. It was their act of creation.

So it had to begin on the eighth day, just as Adam and Eve began their creative endeavour on the eighth day. Just as God showed them how to make light so, many centuries later, He taught the Israelites how to make a space for the Divine presence so that they too would be accompanied by light – God's light, in the form of the fire that consumed the sacrifices, and the light of the menorah. If the first day represents Divine creation, the eighth day signifies human creation under the tutelage and sovereignty of God.

We now see the extraordinary and intimate connection between four themes: (1) the creation of the universe; (2) the building of the sanctuary; (3) the Havdalah ceremony at the end of Shabbat; and (4) the number eight.

The story of creation tells us that nature is not a blind struggle between contending forces, in which the strongest wins and power is the most important gift. To the contrary: the universe is fundamentally good. It is a place of ordered harmony, the intelligible design of a single creator.

That harmony is constantly threatened by humankind. In the covenant with Noah, God establishes a minimum threshold for human civilisation. In the covenant with Israel, he establishes a higher code of holiness. Just as the universe is the home God makes for us, so the holy is the home we make for God, symbolized first by the mishkan, the Tabernacle, then the Temple, and now the synagogue.

And it begins by the creation of light. Just as God began by making light on the first day, so in the ceremony of havdalah we make light on the eighth day, the start of human creativity, and in so doing we become God's partners in the work of creation. Like Him, we begin by creating light and proceed to make distinctions ("Blessed are you . . . who makes a distinction between sacred and profane, light and darkness . . ."). The eighth day thus becomes the great moment at which God entrusts His creative work to the people He has taken as His covenantal partners. So it was with the Tabernacle, and so it is with us.

This is a vision of great beauty. It sees the world as a place of order in which everything has its place and dignity within the richly differentiated tapestry of creation. To be holy is to be a guardian of that order, a task delegated to us by God. That is both an intellectual and ethical challenge: intellectually to recognise the boundaries and limits of nature, ethically to have the humility to preserve and conserve the world for the sake of generations yet to come. In the midst of what can sometimes seem to be the dark and chaos of the human world, our task is to create order and light.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

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from TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org>
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Appropriate Religious Innovation

Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger

The fact that there was meaningful conversation between Moshe and Aharon while they were undoubtedly gripped by unspeakable pain over the shocking loss of Aharon's two sons speaks to the Grand Canyon between our spiritual plane and the lofty souls of Moshe and his brother. It therefore should not surprise us that Aharon actually found comfort in hearing (10:3), "This is what Hashem had said, 'b'krovai ekadesh... - Through those that are close to me I will become sanctified and I will be revered by the entire nation'". Yet the enigmatic substance of Moshe's remarks and the reference to an obscure pre-existing predictive teaching of Hashem has inspired many an interpretation.

According to Rashi, Moshe shares with Aharon that he had been taught that bringing Hashem's presence into a confined and defined physical space, an event so contrary to any natural event, demanded the sacrifice of our best. Perhaps these sacrifices were to forever teach the absolutely singular and imposing privilege of housing the Divine presence. With that in mind the enormous spirit of Aharon could indeed took solace and strength in the achievements and recognition of his two children and in the awareness that their sacrifice somehow was a necessary component of the realization of our national dream. Learning that this event, with all its mammoth pain and trauma, brought to life the words of Hashem, may have been uplifting as well, at least in retrospect.

Yet Ramban explains that there was no previous conversation to which Moshe seems to be alluding. With the support of numerous similar texts throughout Tanach, Ramban explains that Moshe says, "this is what Hashem wishes to communicate, that the manner in which He is approached is sanctified - i.e. determined solely by Hashem". Referencing the rulings that restrained Jews from ascending Har Sinai, all of whom were apparently drawn to revel in the greater sanctity of the closeness of Hashem, Ramban accords the highest motives to Nodav and Avihu. More importantly, we now understand that the emphasis on the boundaries of Har Sinai and its repeated teaching were all to curb and direct the powerful drive within an inspired person to gain closeness to Hashem. The practical realization of that lofty drive, when not part of Hashem's protocols and design, is censured, first in preparation for Sinai and now while initiating the service of the Mishkan.

Now let's paint the picture of our parsha according to Ramban. The moment of Hashem coming to dwell with His children had come. It had been anticipated by the collection of materials several months earlier and had been on hold mysteriously since Kislev. It was the climax of a seven day communal roller coaster of building the Mishkan, bringing scores of sacrifices, initiating the kohanim into service, waiting for the physical signs of Hashem's shechina, all to crash into the emptiness of the daily disappointing dismantling of the Mishkan. Most importantly, the forgiveness of the eigel sin, anticipated for over a half year - done!

The joy of that moment was unprecedented. Where else do we see the Jews dancing and prostrating all at once? Religious fervor and meaningfulness was at an apex. Nodov and Avihu "needed" to express their religious devotion in some fashion that speaks to their souls in a way that had not happened before, but was not so different at all - the same fire and the same pans and the same ketores. However, Hashem did not ask for this one.

At this moment we learned the lessons of the Sinai boundaries again and one that we would have to relearn over the centuries so many times: "bikrovai akodesh" - Hashem will be sanctified only in the manner that He ordains. Evidently, truly meaningful expressions of our innate spirituality all have to be found in our generous and existing corpus that relays to us Hashem's will.

The rabbinic explanations (see Kli Yakar who collects them) of the sin of Nodov and Avihu are many and varied including paskening in front of Moshe, drinking wine before the service, being unmarried and undesirous of children, and simply wanting to take over the reins of the generation. It is conceivable to me that these are all metaphors directing us to establish the tests of appropriate religious innovation.

Indeed, it is the converse of all these explanations of their sin - i.e. genuine concern and faith in seasoned and faithful leadership, responsibility to future generations, deeply anchored and cogently reasoned spiritual quests, and the direction of the Moshe Rabbeinu of the generation - that have enriched our legacy with chasidus, Bais Yaakov, mussar, religious Zionism and so many magnificent minhagim.

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from: Ohr Torah Stone <ohrtorahstone@otsny.org>
date: Thu, Apr 20, 2017 at 12:38 PM

subject: Rabbi Riskin .. Parshat Shemini 5777 (2017)
Parshat Shemini (Leviticus 9:1-11:47)
Rabbi Shlomo Riskin
Efrat, Israel — "And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, placed fire on it, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire which He had not commanded them. And there came forth fire from before God, and it devoured them, so that they died before God." [Lev. 10:1–2]
The Torah's ambivalence regarding Nadav and Avihu reflects the complexity – and even tension – built into the very nature of the religious experience. Love of God engenders the desire to constantly feel the presence of the divine, to strive to become ever closer to the omniscient and compassionate Creator; fear of God engenders an awesome inadequacy, a sense of human frailty and transience, before the mysterium tremendum of the omnipotent and eternal Ruler of the universe.
Love of God inspires the individual to overcome all barriers, to push aside all veils, in a human attempt to achieve divine fellowship; fear of God fortifies the fences separating us from the Almighty, inspires us to humbly serve the author of life and death from a distance – without getting burnt by the divine fire.
From this perspective, herein lies the primary distinction between the priest [kohen] and the prophet [navi]. The priest is first and foremost the guardian of traditional laws and customs, ceremonies and prayers, which express the way in which we serve our God; these rituals are precisely defined to their every detail, have been time-honored and century-sanctified to provide historical continuity, a participation in the eternity of a rhythmic cycle which was there before I was born and will be retained after I die.
Hence the priest receives his mandate from his father – from generation to generation – and wears special and precise clothing symbolizing the external form of divine service. These rituals provide structure, but rarely allow for spontaneity; they ensure continuity but leave little room for creativity. Undoubtedly, the sacred rite passed down from generation to generation serves as our bridge to eternity, a gateway to the divine; but it also erects a certain barrier, weaves a curtain of white parchment and black letters between the individual heart and mind and the Almighty God.
The prophet, however, wears no unique clothing and need not be born into a specific family. He attempts to push aside any curtain, break through whatever barriers in order to scale the heights and achieve divine nearness. He feels God's fire as "a fire which burns within his bones." He is often impatient with the details of ritual, the means which often cause him to lose sight of the ends; for him, passion takes precedence over protocol, spontaneity over structure.
The Jewish religious experience insists on maintaining the sensitive dialectic between love and fear of God, between the prophetic and priestly personality in Divine service, despite and maybe even because of the necessary tension between them. You must cling to the Lord your God (d'vekut); but do not draw too near to the mountain of the divine revelation lest you die. Allow for religious creativity and relevance by seeking the wisdom of the judge of each generation, but retain precedent by "asking your parent and he will tell you, your grandparent and he will say to you."
The Oral Tradition understands the necessity of sometimes abrogating a traditional law when a specific necessity warrants it – "It is the time to do for God, nullify your Torah" (Ps. 119:126) – but such extreme action is rarely invoked, generally giving way to obedience and humility in divine service. Prophet without priest threatens continuity and can even lead to frenzied fanaticism; priest without prophet can produce ritual without relevance, form without fire. Love God – but don't lose your sense of awe and reverence; rejoice in God, but not without a measure of trembling; strive to get close to the divine dwelling, but do not break through the door.
Nadav and Avihu were caught up in the religious ecstasy of the moment – and wanted to get even closer to God. Their motives may well have been suffused with Divine love – but strange fires can lead to alien fanaticism; passion can breed perversion. They brought a strange fire – and God could not accept it. With all the inherent grief and tragedy, this was a time when the Divine lesson had to be taught to all generations: sometimes "by those who are nearest to Me must I be sanctified" (10:3).
Shabbat Shalom

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from: Ohr Somayach <ohr@ohr.edu>
to: weekly@ohr.edu
subject: Torah Weekly
Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Shemini
For the week ending 22 April 2017 / 26 Nisan 5777
by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com
Insights
No Partnership
"And Aharon was silent…" (10:3)
Every silence says something.
When the Torah says that "Aharon was silent" after his two sons were consumed by fire for bringing a korban that was not instructed by G-d, it implies that he had something to say, but restrained himself.
What could Aharon have said in defense of his sons' flagrant breach of the Torah?
The Midrash Pliah remarks, "What could he (Aharon) have said? 'And on the eighth day he shall circumcise the flesh of his foreskin'."
How would have brit mila been a defense?
The spiritual masters teach that Man was born uncircumcised to emphasize that just as Man must complete his body, to finish the work of Heaven and circumcise himself, so too must Man partner with G-d and use his own initiative to raise the world to perfection.
Nadav and Aviahu, Aharon's sons, thought that they should use their own input in the service of G-d, and believed that it was right to bring a human fire on the altar, even though fire descended from Heaven.
And strictly speaking they were correct, as it says: "And the sons of Aharon the priest shall put fire on the altar" (Vayikra 1:7) — even though fire descends from Heaven there is a mitzvah to bring a man-made fire." (Yoma 21b)
Thus, Aharon could have claimed that just as brit mila is given for us to partner with Heaven, so too the fire from Heaven needed a human counterpart.
In reality though, the claim does not hold water.
Even though, on a regular basis, there is a mitzvah to bring man-made fire, on this day, the day of the inauguration of the Mishkan, where the descent of Heavenly fire was to indicate the resting of the Divine Presence on the Mishkan, there was no place for man's participation. Therefore, the fire was called "a strange fire", since the resting of the Divine Presence tolerates no partnership
Sources: Yeshu'ut Malko by the Kutna Rebbe as seen in Mayana shel Torah

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from: Shabbat Shalom <shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org>
date: Thu, Apr 20, 2017 at 6:06 PM
OU Torah
And Aaron Was Silent
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb
He was an old man and in many ways came from a very different world than I. And yet, he taught me more than anyone else ever did. One of the things he taught me was that no one suffers as much as a parent who loses a child. He delivered this lesson to me on a wintry day more than fifty years ago. He was my grandfather, my father's father, and the family had just broken the news to him that his youngest grandchild, my baby cousin, had died. It was a sudden death, totally unexpected, and everyone was distraught. Also Grandpa took the news very hard.
He then did something which surprised everyone present. He rose to leave the room, beckoning to me – his oldest grandchild, then fourteen – to

accompany him. We both entered a small adjoining room in which there were a few sacred books, including a siddur. He opened the siddur, read from it for several moments, and then looked up to me, and tearfully whispered:

"There is nothing worse in the world than the death of one's own child. A parent never recovers from such a blow. May the merciful God protect us all from such a fate."

I will never forget those words. I remember them verbatim even today. And a lifetime of experience in the vocation of counseling has confirmed the truth of these words over and over again.

In Parashat Shemini, we read of just such a tragedy. On a bright and sunny spring day, somewhere in the Sinai wilderness, the Tabernacle is being inaugurated. It is an awesome spiritual experience in which "a divine fire descends from on high, in which all the people sing in unison, and fall upon their faces." It is the moment of a peak experience for all the people, but especially for Aaron, the High Priest.

At that very moment, his two elder sons, Nadav and Avihu, step forward and commit a sacrilegious act which dispels the mood and ruins the entire experience. Commentators differ widely as to exactly what was the sin of these two sons of Aaron. Scripture just says that "they offered God a strange fire, something He did not command of them."

God's wrath was expressed instantly. "A fire descended from before Him and consumed them, and they died in the presence of God."

A parent, a father, lost a child. Not just one, but two. Not through a long and debilitating illness, but suddenly, unexpectedly. And not in any ordinary set of circumstances, but in the context of an act of sacred worship.

What is Aaron's reaction? Does he moan and groan and rend his clothing? Does he scream out in grief? Or does he vent his anger against the God who took his boys from him?

None of the above. "Vayidom Aharon." Aaron is silent. The silence of shock? Perhaps. The silence of acceptance of fate? Perhaps. Or, perhaps, the silence which results when the range and depth of one's emotions are too overwhelming to express in words. But silence.

If the sage words that my grandfather shared with me in my early adolescence are true, and I have every reason to believe that they are, Aaron remained silent about his grief for the rest of his life. Had he used the words of his ancestor Jacob, he could have said, "I will go down to the grave in my agony."

Soon after this episode in which my grandfather shared his wisdom with me, I had the occasion to read a book which taught me a bit more about a grieving parent. It is quite possible that it was precisely during the winter of my cousin's death that I was assigned the book Death Be Not Proud by John Gunther in my English Literature class.

I somehow doubt that this book is still on the required reading lists of many tenth-graders today. But if it is not on those lists, I certainly recommend that it be read, and particularly by teenagers who are learning their first lessons about life and its tragic disappointments.

In the book, the author describes his own son, who was taken from him by a vicious disease. He describes his son positively, but realistically. And he rages against the disease, and in some way, the divine being who took his son from him. He insists to Death itself that it be not proud about its victory over its victim, his dear child.

It has been decades since I have read Gunther's book, and it could very well be that I do not remember it with complete accuracy, but I do recall the poignancy and the power with which the author conveyed the full range of his painful emotions. And I will never forget those passages in which he insists that he will never recover from his loss; that the wounds of a parent's grief for his child can never heal.

Many are the lessons which students of Bible and Talmud have derived from the sad narrative contained in our parasha. But there is at least one lesson which every empathic reader will surely learn as he or she attends to the opening verses of Leviticus 10.

It is the lesson contained in the mystery of Aaron's reaction when his sons are consumed by a heavenly fire. For within the deafening silence of "Vayidom Aharon" are the depths of the terror which every parent dreads and some parents have suffered; the dread of bereavement, of the loss of one's child.

As always, in contemplating darkness, light stands out in contrast. Reflection upon death leads to an appreciation of life. The story of the death of Aaron's children should, if nothing else, enable us to appreciate all the more those of our children who are alive and well.

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from: Chanan Morrison <ravkooklist@gmail.com>
to Rav Kook List <Rav-Kook-List@googlegroups.com>
date: Wed, Apr 19, 2017 at 4:23 AM
subject: [Rav Kook Torah] The Proper Dose of Deference

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Rav Kook Torah

The Proper Dose of Deference

The focus of the Amidah, the core prayer of the daily liturgy, is inwards. It is recited quietly, with minimal physical movement. As its name suggests, we stand during the Amidah, our legs placed together to emulate the angels. Even bowing is limited to two of its nineteen blessings:

"One bows when reciting these blessings: the beginning and end of Avot [the blessing of the Patriarchs] and the beginning and end of Hoda'ah [the blessing for giving thanks].

If a person should want to bow at the end of all of the blessings, or at their beginning, he is advised not to do so." (Berachot 34a)

What is special about these two blessings that they were designated for bowing? Why do we bow both at their beginning and end? Any why not bow for the other blessings of the Amidah prayer?

Emulating the Avot

First we must clarify: what does it mean when we bow our heads? This physical gesture signals an attitude of deference and humility. This is especially appropriate when we compare ourselves to those who are far greater than us.

The Amidah prayer opens with the Avot blessing. We begin our prayer by connecting to God as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." It is logical that we should wish to follow in the spiritual path of our illustrious forefathers. It should be clear, however, that there is no comparison between our feeble grasp of God's infinite greatness and the far more profound understanding attained by those spiritual giants. Therefore, as we recall our forefathers' unique relationship of with God, it is proper that we indicate our comparatively humble abilities.

In fact, we bow twice. We acknowledge our relative inferiority in two respects. First in terms of their natural receptiveness to holiness, the remarkable purity of their hearts and lofty emotions. We recognize their innate gifts by bowing at the start of the blessing. This corresponds to the natural spiritual awakening which commences one's connection to God.

We are also fall short of our forefathers in terms of intellectual ability. We demonstrate this shortcoming when we bow at the end of the blessing, since intellectual examination follows the initial emotive awakening.

In short: the key message of the Avot blessing is an attempt to approach God by emulating the lofty service of the Patriarchs. But this necessitates a demonstration of humility at the beginning and the end of the blessing, as we acknowledge our comparatively meager spiritual and intellectual gifts.

Insufficient Thanks

The Sages taught that we should also bow during the penultimate blessing, the berachah of Hoda'ah, as we express our gratitude and thanks to God. Why is this blessing also suitable for bowing?

In Hoda'ah, we reflect on God's constant kindnesses to us - "for our lives that are in Your charge, for our souls that are in Your care, for Your miracles that are with us daily, and for Your continual wonders and favors." We must

recognize, however, that no matter how much we try to envision our indebtedness to God, it will be incomplete. Both in terms of our feelings of gratitude as well as our intellectual grasp of our debt to God, we cannot express nor do we even have the ability to grasp the full extent of thanksgiving that is appropriate. Therefore, we bow at the beginning and the end of the blessing of Hoda'ah, a gesture which acknowledges the inadequacy of our gratitude, both emotionally and intellectually.

The Goal of Humility

And finally: why did the Sages restrict our bowing to these two blessings? Why not bow during other segments of the Amidah prayer?

We do not bow our heads to resign ourselves to failure. Humility is a beautiful trait, but we must be careful not to become mired in a debilitating morass of apathy and negativity. On the contrary, the true goal of humility is to inspire us to strive for greater spiritual attainments. An accurate assessment of our current state prevents complacency. It should stimulate us to uncover our soul's true potential and strive for those lofty levels that are suitable for it.

In order to avoid the pitfalls of excessive meekness, the Sages cautioned against bowing during every blessing of the Amidah. We must recognize our true spiritual potential. We need to feel not only a sense of humility, but the entire gamut of feelings emanating from the light of truth.

(Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. I, pp. 163-164; Olat Re'iyah vol. I, p. 266)

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http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/headlines-breaking-stories/1258070/schlissel-challah-the-whys.html

Thursday, April 20th, 2017 09:03 AM

Schlissel Challah – The Whys

By Rabbi Yair Hoffman for the Five Towns Jewish Times

"Yes, Mommy, but what does the key mean? Why do we put it in the Challah dough?"

Last Shabbos, we read a fascinating Pasuk in Shir HaShirim – the standard reading for Chol HaMoed Pesach. The verse (Shir HaShirim 5:2) states, ""I was asleep but my heart was awake. A voice! My beloved was knocking: 'Open to me, my sister, my darling, My dove, my perfect one!..'" In this verse, Hashem is talking to Klal Yisroel.

Chazal darshen this pasuk in Yalkut Shimoni (Shir HaShirim 988), "You have become My sister with the observance of the two Mitzvos in Mitzrayim the blood of the Korban Pesach and the blood of Bris Milah..Open for Me an opening like the eye of the needle and I (Hashem) shall open for you like the opening of a wide hall."

THE GATES HAVE CLOSED

Rav Avraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apt zt"l, known as the Apter Rebbe or Apter Rav (1748-1825) is the author of the Ohaiv Yisroel. In his Likkutim al HaTorah (Pesach) he explains that during the entire Yom Tov of Pesach, the Tefilos of Klal Yisroel achieved entry into the gates of Heaven. But slowly, they closed. It is now time to re-open them.

HOW TO RE-OPEN?

But how? How do we re-open the gates of Shmayaim so that our prayers can once again receive entry? What is the key?

He answers that the key is through the merit of Shabbos observance. This, according to the Apter Rav is the reason for Schlissel Challah – baking a key inside the Shabbos Challah.

It brings home the fact that it is the merit of Shabbos observance, and honoring it, that will re-open the gates of Shamayaim and bring us bracha – in all areas. Parnassah, Torah, Nachas and all matters.

Anyone who has ever truly experienced Shabbos, knows the following truth: Shabbos is very special. Perhaps the prayer of Lecha Dodi recited every Friday evening captures it best: Ki hi m'keor habracha – Shabbos is the source of all blessing.

Shabbos has always been viewed as the symbol or flag of the Jewish nation. Just as patriots look at their flag as more than a mere dyed cloth with fancy designs, so too is Shabbos viewed in the eyes of the Jewish people. It is a sign of our deep belief in G-d – that it was He who Created the world. But it is more than this too.

Our belief in G-d is not just limited to the notion that an omnipotent entity created the world. No. An integral aspect of Torah theology is that this omnipotent entity is the source of all good.

He rewards good and punishes evil. The Jewish understanding of G-d and His unique Oneness is that ethics and monotheism are intrinsically interwoven with each other.

In other theologies they may be two separate concepts.

Not so in Judaism.

A belief in the Oneness of G-d perforce also includes the notion that He defines what goodness is. Altruism, goodness, and ethical behavior are not the results of evolutionary biology – no, they are part and parcel of the Creator Himself.

Indeed, this is the raison d'être of Creation itself – so that Hashem – G-d can reward those who do good and follow His will .

If, in the path of life, we successfully attempt to emulate G-d – then we will be rewarded. The Observance of Shabbos is thus the flag of the Jewish people – the idea and notion that represents all this.

The Apter Rav's explanation highlights this remarkable flag of the Torah nation.

The custom of Schlissel Challah has become very widespread, not only in the Chassidish world but in many other communities as well.

There are also other reasons to this custom in Klal Yisroel. Most of the reasons have to do with the Kabbalistic notion of "Tirayin Petichin" that the gates to Heaven are opened. This concept of opened gates is found throughout the Zohar and is discussed by such authorities as the Shla (whose father was a student of the Remah).

The earliest reference is in the works of Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro of Koritz (born 1726), a descendent of the Megaleh Amukos and a student of the Baal Shem Tov. In his work called Imrei Pinchas (#298) he explains that the reason to bake Schlissel Challah on the Shabbos following Pesach is that during Pesach, the gates to Heaven were opened and remain open until Pesach Sheni. The key alludes to the fact that these gates are now open and that we should focus our prayers ever more on that account.

The Apter Rav also mentions other reasons for the Minhag -primarily that Hashem should open His "store house of plenty" for us as he did in Iyar after the exodus.

The Belzer Rebbe (Choshvei Machshavos p. 152) provided the explanation that although the Geulah may not have happened yet as it was scheduled to occur on Nissan, at least the key to Hashem's storehouse of parnassah and plenty have been opened.

The Taamei HaMinhagim (596 and 597) provides a number of reasons as well. There have been people that have questioned the origins of this beautiful minhag. However, these conjectures are filled with serious scholarly errors.

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