YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Parashat SHemini**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**“For On This Day the Lord Will Be Revealed to You”**

Summarized by Mordechai Sambol

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

*Parashat Shemini* describes the end of the period of the consecration of the *Mishkan*, which includes an especially exciting moment: "For on this day the Lord will be revealed to you" (*Vayikra* 9:4). The revelation of God, especially before the entire nation, is an event that does not take place every day – not even during the period of the wilderness.

Of course, this is not entirely a one-of-a-kind event, as God reveals Himself to the people on more than one occasion. Nevertheless, the encounter in *Parashat Shemini* is particularly intense because it follows the sin of the golden calf and is part of the process of atonement for it.[[1]](#footnote-1) Aharon's part in it is especially fraught, for he was a partner in the sin – in one way or another – and now it falls upon him to lead the service in the *Mishkan.*

**Despite the Sin of the Golden Calf**

The last point is well emphasized by the Ramban. Commenting on Moshe’s instruction to Aharon, “Draw near to the altar and offer your sin-offering and your burnt-offering…” (9:7), the Ramban cites a parable from *Torat Kohanim*:

To what can this be compared? To a human king who married a woman, and she was embarrassed [to enter] before him. Her sister came to her and said to her: "My sister, why did you enter this matter? Was it not in order that you serve the king? Embolden yourself and come serve the king!" Similarly did Moshe say to Aharon: "My brother! Why were you chosen to be the High Priest? Was it not so that you minister before God? Embolden yourself and come and perform your [priestly] service!"

This midrash can be understood through the analogy to marriage. A bride and the groom unite to become "one entity" – which is not at all simple. In order for the union to be successful, they must reveal their inner worlds to each other, even things that a person is used to keeping to himself. A person is not embarrassed of himself. He is shy of other people. Sharing one’s entire inner world with someone else, giving another person the keys to the innermost aspects of oneself – with the possibility of even changing and influencing them – is not easy at all.

The challenge is even greater when it comes to a king, as the status of the king is greater than that of his wife; they do not enter the relationship on an equal standing, as do normal spouses. So, what happens? Basically, the woman has to cancel herself and her own opinions before the king, allowing him to be the one who shapes her whole personality – and this is even more difficult.

Thus, it may be suggested that this is what lies at the root of Aharon's fear of approaching the altar: he is afraid of giving his entire self and all control over his personality into the hands of God. Just as every person is afraid of losing control over himself by allowing another to shape his personality, so Aharon is afraid of approaching God and serving Him. The fear is perfectly understandable, yet Moshe replies that Aharon was chosen to serve God, and therefore he *must* draw near and respond to the call. Indeed, such a call is addressed to us all: each of us must cancel himself before the will of God; we must mold our personalities according to His will.

The Ramban continues to cite the midrash:

And some say that Aharon saw the [horned] altar in the form of a bull [reminiscent of the golden calf] and was afraid of it. Then Moshe came to him and said, “Aharon, my brother! Don’t fear what you fear! Embolden yourself and draw near to the altar. And he drew near to the altar” – with zeal. (Ramban, *Vayikra* 9:7, quoting *Sifra Shemini mekhilta de-milu'im* 8)

The Ramban offers two explanations of this *midrash:*

The reason for this was that since Aharon was “the holy one of the Lord” [*Tehillim* 106:16], and there was no sin in his soul except the incident of the golden calf, therefore that sin was firmly fixed in his mind – like that which is said: "And my sin is ever before me" [ibid.51:5]. It thus appeared to him as if the form of the calf was there [in the altar], preventing his atonement [through the offerings he was to bring]. That is why [Moshe] said to him: "Embolden yourself!” – so that he should not be of such low spirit, “for God had already accepted his deeds” [see *Kohelet* 9:7].

And others explain that it was Satan who showed him this, as they said there [*Torat Kohanim* ibid. 3]: "Aharon, my brother, even though God has agreed to grant atonement for your sin, you must nonetheless close the mouth of Satan [through your offerings], lest he accuse you when you enter the Sanctuary, etc." (Ramban, ibid.)

The first explanation focuses on Aharon's fear that the sin of the calf "was preventing his atonement," which caused him to shy away from the role assigned to him. The Ramban is not satisfied with the first explanation, so he also suggests that Aharon's weakness of mind following the sin of the golden calf was due to the fact that "it was Satan who showed him this apparition." Aharon had only one sin – the sin of the golden calf. It is very possible that following the sin of the calf, he developed an obsession and saw the calf everywhere. Every time he tried to get closer to God, he felt the calf jump in front of him and block him. When he prayed, the image of the calf was before him, and when he looked at the altar, he saw the calf.

Indeed, idolatry is the most serious betrayal of God, and it is not for naught that *Chazal* said about the sin of the calf, "shameless is the bride who plays the harlot within her bridal canopy" (*Shabbat* 88b). After such a crisis, even if the husband forgives his wife, the relationship will never be the same as it was (if it even manages to recover at all). This is what Aharon feels: he does not know if it is possible to restore his relationship with God.

Thus, Moshe comes to him and pushes aside the fear: "You were chosen to serve before God, and you *can* restore your relationship with God. It is something that can be done, so approach and do it!"[[2]](#footnote-2)

In any case, the focus of the *midrash* is on pointing out that despite Aharon's role in the sin of the calf, it is precisely he who was chosen to serve before God.

**The Sin of Nadav and Avihu vs. the Golden Calf**

The festive and impressive picture that we encounter at the beginning of the *parasha –* including Aharon leading the service despite his role in the sin of the golden calf – quickly shatters when the tension built up in the event erupts: Nadav and Avihu sin, offering an unauthorized fire before God, and die.

In order to understand Nadav and Avihu's sin, we must first characterize the great national sin that had been committed earlier. The sin of the golden calf was not a matter of outright idolatry. It did not involve the worship of goats dancing in the wilderness.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Israelites had internalized that there is something beyond nature, which should be worshipped. We see this in the fact that they created the calf out of jewelry, something that is outside the organic world and fashioned by mankind. Their jewels were perhaps the most manufactured items they had in their possession, and that is what they used. Moreover, they chose the form of a calf – the most domesticated animal. The Israelites correctly understood that there is something beyond nature; they erred only because of their panic that "the wilderness was closing in on them" (as Pharaoh had declared, in *Shemot* 14:3).

Compared to the sin of the calf, it seems that the sin of Nadav and Avihu expresses the opposite problem: Nadav and Avihu did not try to rise above nature and "only" end up making an idol. On the contrary – they tried to worship God, "only" from nature; they were absorbed by what they felt was true and natural, without restraints or limitations. *Chazal* interpret their sin in different ways – that they were intoxicated, or that they offered an unauthorized fire, or that they issued a halakhic ruling in the presence of their teacher. What is common to all these explanations is that they ignored boundaries and acted impulsively based on what they felt inside themselves.

In other words, Nadav and Avihu did in fact have good intentions, but the path they took was not good. They essentially used the service of God to express themselves, instead of changing their will to conform to the will of God. They set themselves at the center, instead of putting God and His will there. As stated, this sin is completely different from the sin of the golden calf.

**The Golden Path: David**

Nadav and Avihu's basic intention was favorable, and the problem was in placing their personal expression at the center. What, then, can be done instead? How can one channel the desire to worship God specifically from one’s own internal drives?

This is where the *haftara* (II *Shmuel* 6:1-7:17)comes into the picture, searching for the golden path of balance. In the *haftara* for *Parashat Shemini*, David leaps and dances with joy at the return of the Ark to Jerusalem – but he does so within limits, and he knows how to stop when necessary; everything is for the sake of Heaven.

The emphasis on doing everything for the sake of Heaven is especially prominent in David's conversation with Michal after the fact, when in response to her assertion, "How dignified the king of Israel was today, exposing himself before all the eyes of his servants' slave girls, just as one of the rabble might expose himself" (II *Shmuel* 6:20), he answers: "I danced before the Lord. And I would have lowered myself even further and been humiliated in my own eyes – but to the slave girls you speak of, I would still be dignified" (ibid.). How much humility lies in these words! David says that he does nothing for himself, but only according to God's will: If it is God's will for him to leap and dance – then he will do so, and if it is God's will that he not do so – he will refrain from it.

Somewhat counterintuitively, surrendering to God's will is not always self-evident even when it comes to matters that are part of God's service. For example, often when doctors tell a person that he must eat on Yom Kippur, the person feels his whole world is falling apart and finds it extremely difficult to refrain from fasting. On the other hand, however, there are also people who relate to the situation by saying: "In normal years God wants me to fast on Yom Kippur and so I do; this year, God wants me not to fast on Yom Kippur, and that's what I will do." This is the message we learn from the *haftara* of *Parashat* *Shemini*, from the actions of King David. There is much greatness in knowing how to act according to God's will and not according to one's own will, even in matters of God's service.

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Shemini* 5781.]

1. The Ramban (*Vayikra* 1:3) notes that mention is made here of sacrifices that did not appear in the original commandment regarding the consecration of the *Mishkan*. He suggests – among other things – that these sacrifices come to atone for the sin of the golden calf and were therefore not included in the original commandment, which was given before the sin. Ramban also notes the similarity between the sacrifices offered by Aharon on the eighth day of the consecration (a bull calf for a sin-offering and a ram for a burnt-offering) and those he brings on Yom Kippur (a bull for a sin-offering and a ram for a burnt-offering). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This explanation intensifies the trial that Aharon faced afer the death of his sons, Nadav and Avihu. Aharon accepted the words of Moshe, overcame his fear that something bad would happen, and drew near to the altar. But immediately, the worst happened. A moment after Aharon succeeded in believing that it would be possible to improve his relationship with God, two of his sons died! This context increased the intense difficulty of the moment for Aharon and sheds light on his silence. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Rashi (*Vayikra* 17:7): "'To the goat demons' – this is similar to ‘and demons shall dance there’ (*Yeshayahu* 13:21)." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)