**SALT | Behaalotekha 5783 – 2023**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Behaalotekha tells of the procedure that was performed to formally consecrate the *Leviyim* for their special role to serve in the *Mishkan*. This procedure included the removal of all their hair (“*ve-he’eviru ta’ar al kol besaram*” – 8:7).

Rashi, citing Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan, draws an association between this process and the purification process required of a *metzora* after he is cured of his ailment. A *metzora*, too, is required to remove all his hair in order to regain his status of purity, as we read in Sefer Vayikra (14:9). To explain why the *Leviyim* needed to remove their hair like a *metzora*, Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan suggests a seemingly far-fetched connection between the designation of the *Leviyim* and a *metzora*. The *Leviyim* were selected for their role in place of the firstborn, who were to have served in the *Mishkan*, but forfeited this privilege by worshipping the golden calf. Idol worship is referred to in Tehillim (106:28) as “*zivchei meitim*” – “the sacrifices of the dead,” and a person stricken with *tzara’at* is likened to a deceased person (as Moshe says about his sister, after she was stricken with *tzara’at*: “*Al na tehi ka-meit*” – Bamidbar 12:12). Herein, Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan explains, lies the connection between the *Leviyim*’s purification and that of a *metzora*.

Rav Moshe Sternbuch, in *Chokhma Va-da’at* (Parashat Noach), offers a different explanation for why the *Leviyim* were required to shave their hair like a *metzora*. The *tzara’at* infection is commonly seen as a punishment for the particular sin of *lashon ha-ra* – gossip and talebearing, disseminating negative information about people. The *metzora* is required to live in isolation (Vayikra 13:46), because he misused his social interactions as opportunities for sowing divisiveness and hate, instead of contributing to society. Rav Sternbuch writes that although solitude is a punishment in the case of a *metzora*, and certainly not something the Torah encourages, isolation has the advantage of freeing a person from societal influences and peer pressure. This notion is expressed in the Midrash’s remark (*Bereishit Rabba* 31) that Noach experienced a process of purification in the ark during the flood, similar to the purification of a *metzora*. Rav Sternbuch explains that the ark symbolizes Noach’s success in avoiding the sinful influences of his contemporaries, his ability to isolate himself like a *metzora*, in the sense that he did what he felt was right without worrying about how the people around him would perceive him or talk about him. Noach resembled a *metzora* in that he disregarded the way he was seen by other people, living righteously despite the ridicule and contempt this invited.

As the *Leviyim* were designated for the special role of serving in the *Mikdash*, a position which denied them a portion of agricultural lands, and made them reliant on the support of the nation, they were likely to endure a degree of scorn and disdain. Public positions bring prestige, but also subject one to relentless scrutiny and criticism. The *Leviyim* were told right from the start that they would need to resemble a *metzora*, living in “isolation” without worrying about what people say to or about them. They had to be prepared to experience a degree of solitude, ignoring the cynicism and resentment as they devote themselves to God’s service.

In order to succeed in the pursuit of our goals and in following our beliefs and ideals, we cannot expect to earn everyone’s respect and admiration. If we want to achieve to our fullest potential, and remain faithful to our faith and our values, we need to accept some degree of “isolation,” remaining indifferent to what people think and say about us. Serving God often requires the strength and resolve to live “alone,” as though there is nobody around us, doing what we know we must do even if this exposes us to ridicule and scorn.

Sunday

Yesterday, we discussed the procedure which the *Leviyim* were required to undergo at Mount Sinai for their formal consecration as ministers in the *Mishkan*, a procedure which included the removal of their hair (“*ve-he’eviru ta’ar al kol besaram*” – 8:7). We saw that Rashi, citing Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan, associates this requirement with the purification process required of a recovered *metzora* in order to divest himself of his status of impurity, a process which likewise included shaving all of one’s hair (Vayikra 14:9). Rashi explains that both idolatry and *tzara’at* are linked to death, and since the consecration of the *Leviyim* were replacing the firstborn, who forfeited the role of ministering in the *Mishkan* by worshipping the golden calf, their purification process resembled that of a *metzora*.

The *Terumat Ha-deshen* (86) points to Rashi’s comments as the basis for the custom which was observed in his time that Jews who had converted out of the faith, embracing a foreign religion, but then decided to recommit themselves to Judaism, would shave their hair as part of their repentance process. Since, as Rashi writes, worshipping foreign gods resembles “death,” and is thus comparable to a *metzora*’s status of impurity, one who had embraced and followed a different religion and now returns to Jewish faith and practice undergoes a similar process, including the removal of his hair. From the *Terumat Ha-deshen*’s discussion it emerges that the individual would not be counted toward a *minyan* and participate in the public prayer service until he underwent this process.

The *Terumat Ha-deshen* goes so far as to rule that one who returned to Jewish practice after having embraced a foreign religion may cut his hair even during Chol Ha-moed. The Sages forbade haircutting and shaving during Chol Ha-moed, in order to ensure that people groom themselves before Yom Tov. However, the Mishna in Masekhet Moed Katan (13b-14a) lists a number of exceptional circumstances when one is permitted to take a haircut on Chol Ha-moed. These include situations of a *nazir* or *metzora*, who was halakhically forbidden from cutting his hair due to his nazirite vow or the restrictions of *tzara’at*, but whose status ended during the holiday. Such a person is permitted to cut his hair during Chol Ha-moed, since he did not have the opportunity to do so before Yom Tov. The Gemara (17b) extends this exception even further. A *nazir* who had mistakenly come in contact with a human corpse, and a *metzora*, must cut their hair as part of their process of purification, and they remain impure until this process is completed. Therefore, the Gemara rules, even if a *metzora* or *nazir* in this situation had the opportunity to cut his hair before Yom Tov, he is allowed to cut his hair during Chol Ha-moed so that he can complete his process of purification and bring the sacrifices required during the holiday. By the same token, the *Terumat Ha-deshen* writes, one who had returned to Judaism after having converted out of the faith may shave his hair during Chol Ha-moed so that he can participate in the public prayer service during the remainder of the holiday.

The Rama brings the *Terumat Ha-deshen*’s ruling in his glosses to the *Shulchan Arukh* (O.C. 531:7). The *Beit Yosef* writes that this custom, requiring those who returned to Judaism to remove their hair, was observed only among Ashkenazic communities, and was not accepted by Sephardic Jewry. Accordingly, the *Shulchan Arukh* does not bring the *Terumat Ha-deshen*’s ruling allowing haircutting during Chol Ha-moed in this situation.

Monday

In the opening verses of Parashat Behaalotekha, we read God’s instructions concerning the kindling of the *menorah*, which is to be performed by a *kohen* each morning in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The Torah tells, “*Va-ya’as kein Aharon*” – that Aharon complied with God’s commands regarding the kindling of the *menorah* (8:3). Rashi, citing the *Sifrei*, famously comments that this verse expresses praise for Aharon “*she-lo shina*” – for not deviating from the instructions given to him for the performance of this *mitzva*. Many different explanations have been offered for why Aharon would deserve special praise for his compliance with these laws.

Rav Yosef Sorotzkin, in *Meged Yosef*, offers an explanation based on the symbolism of the *menorah*, which is commonly viewed as representing the “light” of Torah which guides us. Particularly, the *menorah* is associated with the *Torah she-be-al peh*, the oral law, which is subject to the interpretation and analysis of the scholars, as opposed to the rigid, unchanging written text of the Torah. The *aron* (ark), which contained the original Torah scroll, remained concealed behind a curtain in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, symbolizing that the written text of the Torah is “off-limits,” dictated by God without any input from scholars. The *menorah*, by contrast, was handled and kindled by the *kohanim*, representing the process of *Torah she-be-al peh*, the code of law developed by the scholars based on the principles of halakhic analysis and decision-making. (Rav Sorotzkin further notes that whereas Moshe, who brought us the written text of the Torah, is associated with the rigid written Torah, Aharon is commonly associated with the oral tradition.) Accordingly, Rav Sorotzkin suggests, when the *Sifrei* expresses praise for Aharon “*she-lo shina*,” for not deviating, it speaks of the care and concern that is required in the process of developing the *Torah she-be-al peh*. While scholars must analyze the material and arrive at conclusions based on their own understanding and insight, utilizing their creativity and critical thinking skills, they must ensure not to “deviate” from the intent of the Torah. The creative process of “kindling” the “*menorah*,” at arriving at new insights and understandings of the Torah, must be undertaken within the limits of the principles of *Torah she-be-al peh* that have been transmitted through the ages. The *Sifrei*’s comment, then, speaks of the delicate balance that must be maintained between scholarly creativity and fealty to tradition, instructing that the “light” of Torah scholarship must be “kindled” within the boundaries of accepted Torah principles, without ever deviating from them.

Tuesday

In Rashi’s opening comments to Parashat Behaalotekha, he offers an explanation, based on the Midrash, for the connection between the opening verses of this *parasha* and the concluding section of the previous *parasha*, Parashat Naso. The previous *parasha* ended with the description of the lavish gifts and sacrifices brought by the *nesi’im* (tribal leaders) to celebrate the *Mishkan*’s inauguration, and Parashat Behaalotekha begins with God’s instructions to Aharon regarding the daily kindling of the *menorah* in the *Mishkan*. Rashi explains that Aharon was distraught over having not participated in the special offerings of the *nesi’im*, and so God sought to encourage Aharon by reminding him of the great privilege he had to kindle the *menorah*. God was telling Aharon, in Rashi’s words, “Yours is greater than theirs” – meaning, he had a greater share than the *nesi’im*, as his role included the daily kindling in the *Mishkan*.

The *Midrash Tanchuma*, however, formulates God’s response differently, stating that God was telling Aharon, “The sacrifices – as long as the Temple stands, they are practiced, but the candles will always shine toward the front of the *menorah*.” According to this version, God encouraged Aharon by pointing to the fact that the *mitzva* of kindling of the *menorah* continues even after the destruction of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, whereas the sacrifices – such as those offered by the *nesi’im* – are offered only as long as the Temple stands. The question naturally arises as to how the Midrash could posit that the *mitzva* of kindling the lights of the *menorah* continued even after the destruction of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

The Ramban famously explains the Midrash’s comments as a reference to the Chanukah candle lighting, a *mitzva* which is observed even after the Temple’s destruction, and which, in a sense, reenacts the kindling of the *menorah* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The victory celebrated on Chanukah was wrought by Aharon’s descendants, the Hasmonean family of *kohanim*, and thus God encouraged Aharon by informing him that his descendants would defeat the Greeks and institute a ritual – the kindling of the Chanukah lights – which would be observed forever. The Ramban cites a Midrashic text – the *Megilat Setarim* by Rav Nissim Gaon – as stating explicitly that this was God’s response to Aharon, and the Ramban asserts that this is the intent of the *Midrash Tanchuma*, as well.

Rav Yehuda Lazarov, in *Divrei Yehuda*, offers a different explanation of the *Midrash Tanchuma*’s comments, suggesting that it symbolically refers to two different forms of contributions. Aharon’s envy of the *nesi’im*’s lavish offering represents the reaction that some people have when they see or hear of wealthy philanthropists making large charitable donations. Those who lack the means to give significant sums of money to charity may at times feel troubled by their inability to make the same impact that their wealthier peers make through their generous contributions. God’s response to these feelings of uneasiness is that the impact of the kindling of the *menorah* is even greater, as it endures forever. Even those who cannot make an impact through large charitable donations can “illuminate” the world by teaching, disseminating and modeling Torah wisdom. Financial contributions are limited to specific circumstances, as it is only when people enjoy wealth that they can donate money. But the contributions we make through the example we set, and by teaching and guiding those under our influence, are not confined to any time and place. No matter where we find ourselves, in any situation, we have the ability to “shine,” to radiate goodness and Godliness, and to illuminate the world around us. As important as it undoubtedly is to share our material blessings with those in need and financially support important causes, we must never overlook the value and importance of the other contributions that we can make at all times, irrespective of our financial standing. In all situations, we must look for the opportunities we have to “shine,” to contribute to our surroundings through our speech and conduct, by offering guidance and encouragement, and by setting an example of how God wants us to conduct our lives.

Wednesday

Parashat Behaalotekha begins with God’s command that when Aharon kindled the *menorah* in the *Mishkan*, he was to ensure that the lamps would shine “*el mul penei ha-menorah*,” which Rashi explains to mean toward the middle lamp. The *menorah* consisted of seven lamps – one which protruded upward from the center, and six which protruded from the ends of the six branches that extended from the center, six on each side. According to Rashi’s understanding, God here instructed that the wicks on the six lamps to the sides of the center lamp should be facing toward the center lamp.

The Torah adds, “*Va-ya’as kein Aharon*” (8:3), informing us that Aharon complied with this command, and ensured to turn the six wicks toward the middle lamp. The commentators addressed the question of why the Torah made a point of emphasizing that Aharon complied with this instruction. Rashi famously comments that the Torah here speaks in praise of Aharon for not “deviating” (“*she-lo shina*”), but it is unclear why this needed to be said, as though we might have thought that Aharon disobeyed this command. The Ramban explains that although the act of kindling the *menorah* was not reserved specifically for the *kohen gadol*, nevertheless, Aharon made a point of personally kindling the *menorah*, out of his love and affection for the *mitzva*.

The Alter of Kelm suggests that the Torah seeks to draw our attention to the fact that Aharon faithfully and devotedly performed even this seemingly simple *mitzva*. Some people, the Alter observed, are interested in performing *mitzvot* – but only *mitzvot* whose great value and significance are readily discernible, as opposed to *mitzva* acts which seem trivial. The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (2:1) instructs, “Be careful with a ‘minor’ *mitzva* just as with a ‘major’ [*mitzva*].” We are to attentively and enthusiastically perform even those *mitzvot* which strike us as “minor,” as having minimal impact on ourselves or on others, recognizing the inestimable value of each and every good deed which we perform. Therefore, the Alter explains, the Torah went out of its way to inform us that Aharon complied with the requirement to arrange the wicks of the *menorah* such that they face toward the center. Specifically because this detail might outwardly appear unimportant, the Torah emphasizes Aharon’s compliance with this requirement – to teach us to regard even simple, seemingly trivial *mitzva* acts as valuable and significant, and worthy of our attention and passionate commitment.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Behaalotekha (9:2) of God’s command to *Benei Yisrael* to offer the *pesach* sacrifice at Mount Sinai, a year after the Exodus. A group of people approached Moshe and informed him that they were *tamei* (impure), having come in contact with a human corpse. They asked if they could nevertheless participate in the *korban pesach*, despite their status of impurity. God spoke to Moshe and instructed that these *temei’im* (impure individuals) should offer the sacrifice one month later, on the 14th of Iyar. This day – commonly known as *Pesach Sheini* – was thus designated as the time when those who could not offer the sacrifice at the regular time, the 14th of Nissan, should bring the *korban pesach* and fulfill their obligation.

The Gemara in Masekhet Pesachim (6a) makes mention of this account in its discussion of when one must begin studying the laws relevant to a Yom Tov. According to the majority view, one begins one month before the Yom Tov, as evidenced by this narrative, where Moshe, on the 14th of Nissan, gave instructions to the people about *Pesach Sheni*, which would be observed one month later. *Tosafot* explain that Moshe could have simply informed the *temei’im* that they could not offer the sacrifice on that day, and then later instructed them to bring the sacrifice the next month. The fact that Moshe presented the guidelines for *Pesach Sheni* a full month beforehand demonstrates that we should begin studying in preparation for a holiday one month prior. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel disagreed, and maintained that we cannot reach any conclusions on the basis of Moshe’s instructions regarding *Pesach Sheni*, which he conveyed at that time incidentally, once he was already preparing the people for the offering of the *korban pesach* at the regular time.

Rav Yosef Sorotzkin, in *Meged Yosef*, suggests that this debate might relate to a dispute among the commentators as to the precise nature of the *temei’im*’s request. Rashi, based on the *Sifrei*, explains that the *temei’m* asked if the sacrifice could be offered on their behalf, and others, who were ritually pure and thus eligible to eat sacrificial meat, would partake of the meat after the animal was slaughtered and its blood sprinkled on the altar. They recognized their inability to fully participate, and so they asked to be able to fulfill their obligation by having others eat the meat of the sacrifice. The response was that the *korban pesach* cannot be offered on behalf of somebody in a state of impurity. According to this explanation, Rav Sorotzkin reasons, it seems that Moshe should have simply responded in the negative, that the sacrifice could not be offered. The additional information – that the *temei’im* should offer the sacrifice a month later – was not necessary at that point, except that the laws of a holiday should be studied and taught already thirty days before the holiday, as the majority view maintains. Seforno, however, understands the *temei’im*’s plea differently, explaining that they posed the broader question of why they should forfeit the *mitzva*. These individuals had become impure due to their involvement in the *mitzva* of tending to the dead, and they argued that their performance of one *mitzva* should not result in their exclusion from a different *mitzva*. It is inconceivable, they protested, that they should be “penalized” for burying the dead by now being barred from the offering of the *korban pesach*. According to Seforno, it would seem, Moshe needed to inform them right away of the opportunity they had to offer the sacrifice the next month, in order to address their complaint about forfeiting the *mitzva* of *korban pesach*. This line of reasoning perhaps underlies Rabban

Shimon’s contention, that we cannot conclude from Moshe’s presentation of the laws of *Pesach Sheni* that we must begin preparing thirty days before Yom Tov.

Friday

Rashi, in his opening comments to Parashat Behaalotekha, cites a Midrashic tradition that Aharon felt distraught after the leaders of the other tribes brought special gifts and sacrifices in celebration of *chanukat ha-Mishkan* – the inauguration of the *Mishkan*. It troubled him that he and his tribe – the tribe of Levi – did not participate in these offerings. In an effort to encourage Aharon, God told Moshe to present to Aharon the instructions regarding the daily kindling of the *menorah*, as we read in the opening verses of Parashat Behaalotekha. In Rashi’s words, God was telling Aharon, “Yours is greater than theirs” – that although he did not join the *nesi’im* (tribal leaders) in the offerings celebrating the *Mishkan*’s inauguration, he had the greater privilege of cleaning and kindling the lamps of the *menorah*.

Already the Ramban raised the question of why God pointed specifically to this particular ritual – the lighting of the *menorah*. Aharon performed other functions in the *Mishkan*, as well. Why would this specific job reassure Aharon that he had no reason to regret not having participated with the *nesi’im* in their celebration of *chanukat ha-Mishkan*?

The *Or Ha-chayim* offers a creative and insightful answer, noting that Rashi mentions not simply Aharon’s kindling of the lamps of the *menorah*, but also his preparing the lamps by cleaning them (“*madlik* ***u-meitiv***”). Before the kindling, the *Or Ha-chayim* writes, the *kohen* would remove the lamps from the *menorah* and clean them, before replacing them so they could be lit. In essence, then, Aharon experienced a sort of *chanukat ha-Mikdash* each and every day. As the *menorah* was partially disassembled and then reassembled on a daily basis, Aharon in a sense inaugurated the *Mishkan* every day. Thus, whereas the *nesi’im* participated in a one-time celebration of the *Mishkan*’s inauguration, Aharon experienced this event every day through the *mitzva* of kindling the *menorah*.

One of the greatest privileges we have is the opportunity to “inaugurate” ourselves anew each day. Like Aharon in the *Mishkan*, we are given the ability to “cleanse” the “residue” of the past, to correct yesterday’s mistakes and failings, and “kindle” a new “flame.” We must not make the mistake of waiting for a major, impactful moment, a life-altering experience that will uplift us. Instead, we must seize each day’s opportunities to “clean” ourselves and embark on a fresh start. According to the *Or Ha-chayim*’s reading of the Midrash, it teaches us that each day of our lives should be viewed as a precious and exciting occasion, offering us a chance to create ourselves and our lives anew, and to “inaugurate” our inner *Mishkan*, recommitting ourselves to the faithful service of the Almighty.