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

Take Courage!

Adapted by Binyamin Fraenkel

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“Draw close to the altar”

At the beginning of *parashat Shemini* we read:

“And it came to pass on the eighth day, that Moshe called Aharon and his sons, and the elders of Israel, and he said to Aharon, Take yourself a young calf for a sin offering, and a ram for a burnt offering, without blemish, and offer them before the Lord. And to Bnei Yisrael you shall speak, saying, Take a kid of the goats for a sin offering, and a calf and a lamb, both of the first year, without blemish, for a burnt offering; also a bullock and a ram for peace offerings, to sacrifice before the Lord, and meal offering mingled with oil, for today the Lord will appear to you.

And they brought that which Moshe commanded before the Tent of Meeting, and all the congregation drew near and stood before the Lord. And Moshe said, This is the matter which the Lord commanded you to do, and the glory of the Lord shall appear to you. And Moshe said to Aharon, Draw near to the altar, and offer your sin offering, and your burnt offering, and make atonement for yourself and for the people, and offer the offering of the people, and make atonement for them, as the Lord commanded. So Aharon drew near to the altar, and slaughtered the calf of the sin offering, which was for himself…” (*Vayikra* 9:1-8)

Why must Moshe command Aharon to “draw near to the altar” in order to offer his sin offering and burnt offering? Why is Aharon hesitating? Ramban offers two explanations.

Entering at ease

One explanation is based on a *midrash*:

“In *Torat Kohanim* (*Shemini*, *Miluim* 8) our Sages note this and offer a parable, comparing the situation to one of a mortal king who married a woman, and she was timid in his presence. Her sister came to her and said, My sister, Why did you enter into this [marriage]? Was it not that you might serve the king? Take courage and come and serve the king!

Likewise Moshe said to Aharon, My brother, why were you chosen to be the *Kohen Gadol*? Was it not so that you would serve God? Take courage and come and perform your service.” (Ramban, *Vayikra* 9:7-8)

This parable suggests that Aharon was hesitant to enter the Holy of holies. God was about to bring His Presence to rest amongst *Am Yisrael* – “for today the Lord will appear to you!” This was going to be a wondrous and unforgettable event, but it contained an element that was frightening and threatening. The simple woman in the story who married the important, powerful king was fearful of entering and serving him lest she lose herself entirely in the power and majesty of his presence. A person might well fear losing his own essence and personality as part of the experience of God making His Presence felt in the world.

Moshe therefore commands Aharon, “Take courage!” He instructs him to direct himself towards God with inner peace and tranquility.

Aharon is prepared to perform the special service in the *Kodesh Kodashim*, but he is afraid to lose himself in this service; he is afraid that he will become wholly a “representative of God” (*shluchei de-rachmana*). Moshe assures him that he will still also be a “representative of man” (*shluchei didan*), an individual with free will and not just a servant of God.

When a person is faced with choices and decisions, he will sometimes feel resistance and doubts with regard to a certain direction or action – not because of the nature of the action itself, but rather because of the social image or stereotype associated with it. For instance, a person who is considering becoming active in some sphere within his community might feel quite comfortable with the activity that he would be undertaking, but hesitate for fear of being viewed in a certain way.

Similarly, a young man who comes to study at yeshiva after high school is at the peak of his physical strength; his self-image might center around sports and the special unit in which he hopes to serve in the army, and he fears the change of image that yeshiva study may entail. He does not want to find himself, sometime in the future, wearing a kapote and streimel and hunched over books all day. A person who decides to become an educator or rabbi may likewise dislike the idea that people will stand when he enters the room and will no longer share jokes with him. In these and other similar instances, it is important to separate one’s hesitations and doubts concerning the action, its importance, and the chances of its success, from the fear that one’s personality will somehow be forced into a different mold.

“My brother – take courage!” Torah study itself is not frightening; it fills a person with joy and pleasure, and we must approach our study with inner peace and calm. Even after we have embarked on yeshiva study, we must maintain our warmth, our sense of humor, our smile. Yeshiva study must not diminish a person in any way; it must broaden his personality and his horizons, not narrow and restrict them. We might compare the entry into the world of yeshiva study to a person getting into a pool to swim: it makes no sense to remain outside the water and just dip his finger in, nor to fall in all at once without looking where he is going. He descends step by step, confidently, calmly, and without fear. That way the encounter with the environment flows from his free will and his desire to connect, with no fear of being swallowed up and obliterated.

The trauma of sin

The second explanation that Ramban offers is this:

“But some say that Aharon perceived the altar in the form of an ox, and he was afraid of it. Moshe came to him and said, Aharon, my brother, do not be afraid; take courage and approach it. For this reason he said, ‘Draw near to the altar….’

‘And he drew near to the altar’ – with caution. The reason for this is that since Aharon was holy unto God, and his soul held no sin except for the golden calf, that sin was fixed in his thoughts, as it is written (*Tehillim* 51:5), ‘And my sin is before me always.’ It appeared to him that the form of the calf was holding back his atonement. For this reason [Moshe] told him, ‘Take courage’ – so that he would not be so despondent, since God desired his actions.”

Aharon, “holy unto God,” who has never sinned except in the incident of the golden calf, sees the calf before him at all times. He approaches the altar to offer up the sacrifices – and perceives the altar in the form of a calf, recalling his sin.

King David is conscious of his sin at all times – “My sin is before me always” (and indeed the verses reveal completely different behavior on his part before and after his sin). Aharon experiences a similarly profound trauma concerning the golden calf, and the episode remains indelibly engraved upon his consciousness; it is “fixed in his thoughts.”

There are various Hassidic teachings directing person to forget his past sins, put them out of his mind, and start every day as a new beginning. Moshe does not take this approach, but at the same time he takes pains to prevent the opposite extreme: he exhorts Aharon not to dwell in his trauma, and leaves him room for renewal. If a person has sinned, he must make atonement through a significant inner process of repentance, confession, and a firm resolution for the future – but under no circumstances should he allow the sin to define him or his personality.

There is a Hassidic saying: ‘A Jew must never despair, and one must never despair of a Jew.’ This message resounds in Ramban’s commentary here. A Jew must never despair of his ability to effect repair and change, even though he is in need of repair and change. And we must never despair of a fellow Jew, believing that he is so deeply immersed in sin that he is incapable of change and repair.

Sin dare not paralyze a person, because this would be the greatest victory for the *yetzer ha-ra*. The Ramban goes on to explain that Aharon was struggling not with an inner psychological trauma, but with Satan himself:

“Others explain that it was Satan himself who showed [the altar] to him thus, as they taught: [Moshe said,] ‘Aharon, my brother, although God has agreed to grant atonement for your sin, you have to “place it in Satan’s mouth,” lest he cause you to stumble when you come to the Sanctuary…’ – in *Torat Kohanim* (*Shemini*, *miluim* 3).”

Satan seeks to cause a person to despair of his ability and his potential for repentance and repair; he seeks to “fix the sin in his thoughts.” One overcomes Satan by daring to draw close to God despite one’s doubts and fears. If a child violates his parents’ values by committing some grave behavior, he may feel that the task of reconnecting and rebuilding is beyond his ability. But parents await a child’s return, despite his past behavior. There is a price that must be paid for betrayal and sin, but severance is an even heavier price, and one that we dare not pay.

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