**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT SHEMINI**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Shemini begins with Moshe’s instructions to Aharon and his sons, and to the nation’s elders on the eighth and final day on the *Mishkan*’s inauguration. This was the day when Aharon and his sons began serving as *kohanim* for the first time, and when the *Shekhina* took residence in the *Mishkan*. After the preparations for this event were made, the nation assembled by the entrance to the *Mishkan*, whereupon Moshe announced, “This is the thing that the Lord commanded that you do, so that the glory of the Lord shall appear to you” (9:6).

Moshe does not speak to the nation any further, but merely proceeds to tell Aharon to approach the altar and serve as *kohen gadol* for the first time, offering that day’s sacrifices. Seemingly, then, the announcement “This is the thing that the Lord commanded that you do” was made as an introduction to these rituals, informing the people that everything they would now observe – Aharon and his sons’ offering of sacrifices in the *Mishkan* – was all commanded by God.

*Chazal* however, in *Torat Kohanim*, interpret this verse differently, explaining that Moshe here was telling the people, “This is the thing that you shall do: eliminate the evil inclination from your heart, and the glory of the divine presence will immediately be revealed to you.” Moshe was admonishing the people that beyond complying with the particular commands relevant to the sacrifices in the *Mishkan*, they needed to more generally “eliminate the evil inclination from your heart.”

Numerous different approaches have been taken to explain *Torat Kohanim*’s intent. Netziv, in *Ha’ameik Davar*, suggests that according to *Torat Kohanim*, Moshe’s announcement in a sense foreshadowed the tragedy that would befall Nadav and Avihu, Aharon’s two older sons who, on that very day, brought an unwarranted incense offering and were killed. Moshe was warning the people to “eliminate” from within themselves the natural tendency to innovate new modes of worship, to decide on one’s own how religion should be practiced. Others explain that Moshe refers here to the “evil inclination” of arrogance, to which all people are susceptible after completing a major undertaking. With the completion of the *Mishkan*, Moshe urged the people not to excessively pride themselves on their great achievement, and to remember that as much as they’ve accomplished, there is always room for further growth and improvement. Yet another explanation is that Moshe refers to the “evil inclination” of envy and competition. When a group of people assemble together to work towards a lofty, idealistic goal, they are prone to end up fighting, with each insisting on taking center stage or having his precise vision followed even when others disagree.

A more general insight into *Chazal*’s remark was offered by Rav Yisrael Alter of Ger, the *Beit Yisrael*, who found it significant that *Chazal* speak here in such broad terms. As mentioned, numerous different possible explanations have been suggested to identify the precise “*yetzer ha-ra*” (“evil inclination”) to which Moshe was referring according to *Torat Kohanim*. Yet, *Torat Kohanim* itself chose to remain vague, and to use the very broad term “evil inclination,” without specifying which particular human vice Moshe warned the people to overcome at this critical moment. This ambiguity, the *Beit Yisrael* suggests, was intentional, as *Torat Kohanim* seeks to apply Moshe’s announcement to all of us, at all times, under all circumstances. Whenever we attempt to build a *Mishkan*, to bring God into our midst, to live meaningful lives of devoted service of the Almighty, there will be a “*yetzer ha-ra*” of one sort or another for us to overcome. *Torat Kohanim* specifically chose to speak in broad, general terms because in every era and in every circumstance, a different “*yetzer ha-ra*” confronts us. The spiritual challenges of one generation differ drastically from those of other generations; the spiritual challenges of one person differ drastically from those of other people; the spiritual challenges of one stage of life differ drastically from those of other stages of life. There is no single “*yetzer ha-ra*” that presents itself when a “*Mishkan*” is built, when people seek to serve God. Spiritual challenges come in countless different forms, and we must be prepared to successfully meet and overcome each one to the best of our ability.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Shemini of the events that transpired on the final day of Aharon and his sons’ consecration as *kohanim*, when they officiated in the *Mishkan* for the first time. When the time came for Aharon, the *kohen gadol*, to begin serving his role, Moshe turned to him and said, “Approach the altar and perform your sin-offering and your burnt-offering…” (9:7). This refers to the two sacrifices which Aharon was required to bring on this special occasion – a calf as a sin-offering, and a ram as a burnt-offering.

Rashi, citing *Torat Kohanim*, famously comments that Moshe needed to instruct Aharon, “*Kerav el ha-mizbei’ach*” (“Approach the altar”) because Aharon was afraid to proceed to the altar to assume his position of *kohen*. Other sources point to Aharon’s role in the sin of the golden calf as the source of his fear. He felt unworthy of this lofty position due to the grave sin in which he had participated, and thus he was hesitant to assume the role of high priest. Moshe therefore urged Aharon to proceed, assuring him, in Rashi’s words, “For this you were chosen” – that irrespective of his past, Aharon was chosen by the Almighty to serve as the *kohen gadol*.

Rav Eliezer of Tarnograd, in *Noam Megadim*, suggests that an additional element of Moshe’s response to Aharon is alluded to in the next phrase – in the instruction, “perform your sin-offering and your burnt-offering.” Aharon’s burden of guilt and shame held him back from accepting his role as *kohen*, and so Moshe urged him to consider both “*chatatekha*” and “*olatekha*” – his mistakes, and his virtues. (The word “*ola*” relates to the word for “height,” and thus connotes greatness and achievement.) True, Aharon’s past included a “*chatat*” – a grave mistake, but the awareness of this failure should not diminish from his recognition of his “*ola*,” his outstanding qualities and achievements. In order to achieve to our full potential, we must remain keenly aware of both our “*chatat*” and our “*ola*” – both our failures and our successes; our faults and our virtues. If we are mindful of both our negative and positive traits, of what we do poorly and what we do well, we will be able to maintain the delicate balance between humility and ambition, between timidity and confidence, and we will set and pursue bold aspirations while humbly recognizing our limits.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Shemini presents the basic guidelines regarding the permissibility of different species of creatures for consumption, famously establishing the properties required of a species of animal for it to be permissible. Specifically, a species may be eaten if it chews its cud and has split hooves (11:3). When it comes to fowl, however, the Torah does not specify any particular properties that render a species permissible or forbidden, and instead simply lists twenty-four forbidden species of birds (11:13-19), clearly indicating that all other species are permissible. However, due to the uncertainty surrounding the identity of these species, the Gemara (citing Rabbi Yitzchak) states that we may only eat a bird regarding which there is an oral tradition affirming its permissible status. The various details relevant to this law are discussed by the *Shulchan Arukh* (Y.D. 82:1-3), though the Rama (82:3) notes the accepted practice not to partake of any bird unless there is a tradition to permit it.

Amidst its discussion of the permissibility of birds, the *Shulchan Arukh* (Y.D. 82:4) addresses the case of a bird regarding which one community has a tradition affirming its permissibility, but other communities do not. If one community has a tradition permitting a certain bird, does this tradition suffice for other communities to partake of that species? Or, must each community follow its time-honored practice, irrespective of the traditions of other communities? The *Shulchan Arukh* writes that different views exist on this issue, and it is proper to be stringent in deference to the stringent position, and not to eat a species of fowl based on a different community’s custom.

The *Shakh* (82:10-11) presents the background to this issue, and boldly contends that the *Shulchan Arukh* erred in discerning a halakhic debate surrounding this question. The source of what the *Shulchan Arukh* understood as a stringent ruling is the Rashba’s discussion in *Torat Ha-bayit*, where the Rashba writes that each community should follow its practice. Communities that are accustomed to eating a certain species of fowl may continue doing so, the Rashba rules, as they may assume that this custom arose out of an authentic tradition received from previous generations that this species is permissible. The Rashba then adds that other communities, which are accustomed not to eat this species, should continue this practice, as it is possible that a conscious decision was made in an earlier generation to forbid this species, perhaps due to its resemblance to a different, non-kosher species. On this basis, it appears, the *Shulchan Arukh* noted that according to one view, a tradition to allow a species in one locale does not suffice for other locales. However, the *Shakh* noted that the Rashba ruled stringently only in the case of a community with a tradition specifically forbidding the species in question. The Rashba did not address the case of a community that had no tradition one way or another regarding a certain species of fowl. In such a case, the *Shakh* contends, communities may rely on the tradition received by a different community. The Rashba writes explicitly that a tradition to permit a certain species may be presumed authentic, and adds simply that a tradition to forbid a certain species must also be presumed authentic, as reflecting a conscious decision to abstain from that species for what is likely a valid reason. This has no bearing on the case of a community that did not have any specific custom regarding a species of fowl – such as in geographic regions where that species was not found. Such a community, the *Shakh* contends, can certainly partake of the species in question, on the presumption that the tradition received by the other community is indeed authentic.

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted the *halakha* requiring a tradition affirming the permissibility of a species of bird to allow its consumption. As the Torah does not identify physical properties that render a given species of bird permissible or forbidden, we ascertain a species’ status only on the basis of an accepted tradition.

Some halakhic authorities, interestingly enough, apply this *halakha* also to animal species. The Torah in Parashat Shemini famously establishes that a species of animal is permissible for consumption if it both chews it cud and has split hooves (11:2-3). Seemingly, the specification of these two qualities makes it fairly simply to determine an animal’s status. Nevertheless, some halakhic authorities require a tradition to permit a species for consumption, on the basis of a comment made by the *Shakh* (Y.D. 80:1) in regard to the prohibition of *cheilev* – eating the forbidden fats of animals. This prohibition is limited to *beheimot* – domesticated animals – as opposed to *chayot* – non-domesticated animals. Meaning, the *cheilev* of a *beheima* whose meat is permissible for consumption is forbidden, whereas the *cheilev* of a *chaya* whose meat is permissible for consumption is permissible. The *Shulchan Arukh* (Y.D. 80:1) presents the guidelines for distinguishing between a *chaya* and a *beheima* in order to determine the status of an animal’s *cheilev*. The *Shakh*, commenting to this passage in the *Shulchan Arukh*, writes that he refrained from explaining and discussing this law because “now all we have is that which we have accepted via tradition.”

The plain understanding of the *Shakh*’s comments, as explained by the *Peri Megadim*, is that we do not eat the *cheilev* of a kosher species of animal without a tradition that this fat is permissible. Given the uncertainty surrounding the precise application of the halakhic guidelines for distinguishing between a *chaya* and a *beheima*, we rely only on tradition to determine a creature’s status as a *chaya* such that we may partake of its *cheilev*. This is also how the *Kaf Ha-chayim* (Y.D. 80:5) understood the *Shakh*’s remark.

Surprisingly, however, Rav Avraham Danzig, in *Chokhmat Adam* (36), explains the *Shakh* as referring to a tradition for the permissible status of even the meat of animals. According to this reading, although the Torah provided us with relatively clear guidelines for distinguishing between a permissible and forbidden animal, nevertheless, the *Shakh* maintained that we should partake of only meat from animals whose permissibility has been affirmed by tradition. This position was accepted by the *Chazon Ish* (Y.D. 11).

The *Chazon Ish*’s ruling was cited by some as a reason to forbid the meat of the zebu, which is imported to Israel from South America. Although the zebu resembles a cow, it is a separate species, and thus would, according to the *Chazon Ish*, require a tradition affirming its permissibility. Therefore, since no such tradition exists with regard to the zebu, its meat should seemingly be impermissible according to the view of the *Chokhmat Adam*, which is accepted by the *Chazon Ish*.

Rav Asher Weiss devotes a chapter to this subject in *Minchat Asher – Vayikra*, and dismisses this conclusion. He notes, for one thing, that observant Jewish communities in South America indeed had a time-honored tradition to permit the meat of the zebu, and their tradition is sufficient for other communities to rely upon, as well. When it comes to species of fowl, which require a tradition to be accepted as permissible, the *Shakh* (82:11) writes (as we mentioned yesterday) that if one community has received a tradition permitting a species, other communities may rely on this tradition unless they had a custom to specifically forbid that species. If they had no tradition regarding this species, such as if they were simply unfamiliar with it, then they may rely on the tradition of one Jewish community, and trust that it is authentic. This would certainly apply in the case of zebu, and thus, since the source for requiring a tradition to permit a species of animal is the *Shakh*, it follows that we may rely on the *Shakh*’s other ruling to permit the meat of the zebu based on the tradition of South American communities.

Moreover, Rav Weiss notes, the basis for this stringency is the *Chokhmat Adam*’s interpretation of the *Shakh*’s comments, and a careful reading of the *Chokhmat Adam* indicates that he speaks specifically of *chayot* – non-domesticated animals. The *Chokhmat Adam* wrote that *chayot* require a tradition to be permitted for consumption, but did not make this comment regard domesticated animals. Rav Weiss suggests several reasons for this distinction, including the fact that according to one view (cited in the *Pitchei Teshuva*, 89:1), a *chaya* requires an additional feature to be considered a kosher species (relating to the position of its horns), beyond merely split hooves and chewing its cud. As this could create confusion, the custom developed (according to the *Chokhmat Adam*) not to permit a non-domesticated animal for consumption without an accepted tradition. As a zebu clearly falls under the category of *beheima* (domesticated animals), it is permissible for consumption even according to the *Chokhmat Adam*.

Wednesday

Parashat Shemini tells of the heavenly fire that descended into the courtyard outside the *Mishkan* on the first day Aharon and his sons served as *kohanim*, after they completed offering the special sacrifices that God commanded to bring on that day. The Torah relates that the fire, signaling the descent of the *Shekhina* (divine presence) into the *Mishkan*, consumed the sacrifices that had been placed on the altar, whereupon the entire nation – who had assembled around the outside of the *Mishkan* to observe the day’s events – prostrated: “The entire nation saw…and fell on their faces” (9:24).

Rashi (9:23), citing the Midrash, relates that the people had been anxious, uncertain whether the *Shekhina* would take residence in the *Mishkan*. Throughout the seven-day *miluim* process, during which Moshe offered special sacrifices in preparing the *Mishkan* and the *kohanim* for their role, the people wondered whether perhaps all their donations for the *Mishkan* and all their effort may have been for naught. After all, the *Mishkan* was erected precisely the way God had commanded, sacrifices were being offered every day, and yet, there was no sign of the divine presence. The people were eager to see the *Shekhina* so they would know for certain that God had forgiven them for the sin of the golden calf. When this did not happen, day after day, they felt ashamed, figuring that they would never be worthy of God’s presence among them due to the sin of the golden calf.

On the basis of the Midrash’s account, Rav Shmuel of Slonim, in his *Divrei Shmuel*, suggests a creative explanation of the Torah’s description of the people “falling on their faces” upon beholding the sight of the *Shekhina*’s descent into the *Mishkan*. The simple understanding, of course, is that the people “fell on their faces” as an expression of respect and reverence. However, the *Divrei Shmuel* explains that they covered their faces in shame, embarrassed over having questioned whether the *Shekhina* would arrive. After seeing the heavenly fire, the people realized that their concerns were unfounded, that they were foolish to doubt whether they would be worthy of the divine presence simply because it had not arrived when they had expected it.

The *Divrei Shmuel* here is teaching us about the dangers of impatience and unrealistic expectations in religious growth. When we find that our efforts to bring the “*Shekhina*” into our lives are not succeeding, we might begin to feel despair. In our impatience, we often feel that our initial failure means permanent failure, that just as our efforts have not brought the desired results until now, they never will. The *Divrei Shmuel* urges us not to feel anxious if we struggle to reach the level we seek to achieve, or if our efforts to change and grow do not immediately succeed, because the process of growth is not meant to unfold rapidly. We must expect change to occur slowly and gradually, and to entail many setbacks and challenges.

The Midrash cited by Rashi relates that each day during the *miluim*, Moshe assembled and then disassembled the *Mishkan*, likely signifying the phenomenon of repeated unsuccessful efforts – and this is precisely what discouraged the people. We are taught not to feel discouraged when our work to “build” a “*Mishkan*” does not immediately succeed, or does not proceed smoothly. We must continue “building” with faith in our ability to succeed and in God’s loving acceptance of our efforts, and His desire to reside among us as long as we try to be worthy of His presence.

Thursday

Parashat Shemini tells of the special sacrifices which Aharon offered on behalf of himself and on behalf of the nation on the day he began serving as *kohen gadol* in the *Mishkan*. Upon concluding the offering of the sacrifices, he blessed the people: “Aharon raised his hands towards the nation and blessed them, and he came down from performing the sin-offering, the burnt-offering and the *shelamim* sacrifice” (9:22).

Rav Shlomo of Radomsk, in his *Tiferet Shlomo*, finds in the phrase “*va-yeired mei-asot ha-chatat*” (“he came down from performing the sin-offering”) an allusion to Aharon’s feelings towards the people as he blessed them. After having tended to that day’s special sacrifices, which were necessary, in part, to atone for the people’s wrongdoing, Aharon “came down” from this activity, he turned his attention away from the nation’s misdeeds, and gave them a blessing.

“Blessing” people – genuinely wishing them well, and giving them encouragement – requires that we “come down” from their wrongdoing, from their faults and imperfections. As long as we focus our attention on other people’s shortcomings, we are incapable of truly and wholeheartedly “blessing” them, of expressing friendship and working towards their wellbeing. We can extend our blessing to people only if we can look away from their failings and direct our attention instead to all that is good about them.

The role of *kohen*, of a spiritual guide, entails both the “sin-offering” – working to help people grow and improve, which necessitates pointing out their mistakes and their wrongful conduct – as well as “blessings” – providing encouragement and inspiration, which necessitates “coming down from the sin-offering,” looking beyond people’s faults. As important as it is to offer constructive criticism (when appropriate) to help people improve and correct their mistakes, it is equally important to “bless” the people around us by extending friendship and expressing admiration and fondness despite their faults.

Friday

The opening verse of Parashat Shemini tells that on the day when Aharon and his sons began serving as *kohanim*, Moshe summoned them, as well as the nation’s elders, to convey to them the instructions regarding the special sacrifices that were to be offered that day. The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 11:8) cites Rabbi Akiva as finding significance in the fact that the nation’s elders were included on this occasion. Rabbi Akiva remarked, “Israel are compared to a bird: Just as a bird cannot fly without wings, similarly, Israel cannot do anything without their elders.” The Midrash proceeds to note how the elders were included also at other critical moments in *Benei Yisrael*’s early history, such as when Moshe confronted Pharaoh to demand the nation’s release (Shemot 3:16, 4:29). Our nation requires the wisdom and guidance of its elders, Rabbi Akiva taught, as a bird needs its wings.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz explained the meaning of Rabbi Akiva’s comment by noting that birds can, in fact, function without wings. All creatures besides birds survive without flying, and birds could do the same. However, without their wings, birds lose their unique feature, their defining characteristic. Birds need their wings not to survive, but to realize their purpose, to actualize their unique identity. Similarly, Rav Shmuelevitz explained, *Am Yisrael* can survive without fealty to its “elders,” to its ancient tradition and heritage, but we would lose our unique identity and fail to fulfill our mission and reach our destiny. Our purpose is not to remain “on the ground,” to live like other peoples, but rather to “soar,” to rise above the rest of the world, to live at a morally and spiritually superior standard. And this mission can be achieved only with our “wings” – our loyalty to our ancient laws and traditions as conveyed to us by the Torah scholars of each generation.

We might also suggest an additional insight into the significance of Rabbi Akiva’s analogy between the nation’s elders and birds. The elders, whose lives have spanned more than just a single generation, who have experienced and witnessed shifting trends and drastic changes, have the benefit of a broader perspective, of a “bird’s eye view” of the world and of life. The younger generation have a relatively limited range of experience and exposure, and are thus prone to failing to see the larger picture. The older generation serves as our “wings” which lift us above the here-and-now, the immediate present, our current context, giving us a clearer picture of how the world works and how we should act. As the Torah is for us to apply and observe in every generation and under all conditions, we require the perspective of the elders, an appreciation and understanding of historical and cultural changes, so we know how to best apply, practice and preserve the Torah in our generation and successfully transmit it to the next.

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