**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT SHEMINI**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Shemini begins with the description of the events of the first day Aharon and his sons officiated as *kohanim* in the *Mishkan*. When the time came for Aharon to slaughter and tend to the special sacrifices offered on that day, Moshe instructed him, “Approach the altar and perform your sin-offering and your burnt-offering…” (9:7).

Rashi, citing *Torat Kohanim*, famously explains that Aharon needed “prodding” because he was hesitant to approach the altar and assume the lofty role of *kohein gadol*: “For Aharon was ashamed and afraid to approach. Moshe said to him: Why are you ashamed? You were chosen for this [role].” It is commonly understood (as the Ramban explains) that Aharon is described as being “ashamed” and reluctant to assume this role because of the sin of the golden calf, which he had facilitated. He feared that this grave sin rendered him unworthy of the role of *kohein gadol*.

Rav Simcha Bunim Sofer, in his *Sha’arei Simcha*, suggests explaining Moshe’s response to Aharon in light of the *Shulchan Arukh*’s ruling concerning the role of *sheli’ach tzibur* – leading the prayer service in the synagogue (O.C. 53:15-16). The *Shulchan Arukh* draws a distinction between an officially appointed *shali’ach tzibur*, who should approach the lectern to perform his duty without any hesitation, and one who does not have a set position, but is asked to lead the service on a given occasion. In the latter case, the one asked to serve as *shel’iach tzibur* should at first hesitate as an expression of humility. Instant consent would bespeak an element of arrogance and overconfidence, and thus one is required to first hesitate before accepting the invitation to lead, unless he serves as the permanent *sheliach tzibur* in the synagogue.

Accordingly, Rav Sofer suggests that Aharon hesitated as an expression of humility, but Moshe reminded him that “*lekhakh nivcharta*” – Aharon was appointed to this role. His status was not that of somebody who happened to be invited to lead on one occasion, but rather that of a permanent *sheli’ach tzibur*, as he received the formal appointment as *kohein gadol*, a post he would hold forever. As such, there was no need for him to hesitate.

Moshe’s response to Aharon’s hesitation assumes special significance in light of the common understanding, that Aharon felt ashamed and unworthy because of his having made the golden calf. Moshe did not reassure Aharon by insisting that God had forgiven him for this mistake, or that Aharon’s sincere intentions – hoping to stall until Moshe arrived – significantly mitigated the severity of his failure. Rather, he simply stated, “You were chosen for this role.” All Aharon needed to hear was that “*lekhakh nivcharta*,” that he was the chosen *sheli’ach tzibur*. The fact that he was designated for this role made his prior mistakes and failings immaterial. Once he was named as the *kohein gadol*, he was to accept and fill the position with confidence and conviction.

Moshe’s response to Aharon, from this perspective, is directly relevant to each and every one of us, as well. We must realize that “*lekhakh nivcharta*,” that we have been chosen for a unique role in this world. The fact that God created us and has kept us alive to this day proves that we have something unique to accomplish today. And once we realize that we have been formally “appointed,” that we are each a “*sheli’ach tzibur*” in some way, our past mistakes and failures will no longer hinder us. We will approach our day the way an officially appointed *sheli’ach tzibur* approaches the lectern in the synagogue, confident and composed. Moshe did not tell Aharon that he should not feel shame or remorse over his past mistake – and neither should we ignore our failures. It is expected, and appropriate, to experience remorse for our mistakes. However, this remorse should not undermine our confidence and conviction as we approach the unique role for which we have been chosen, our joy and enthusiasm as we recognize that God has assigned us a special task which only we are capable of filling, and our fervor and determination as we wholeheartedly embrace our individual mission.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Shemini of Moshe’s angry reaction upon seeing that one of the sacrifices offered on the day of the *Mishkan*’s inauguration – the goat offered as a sin-offering – was not eaten as required (10:16). Moshe scolded Aharon and his two sons for neglecting to eat the sacrificial meat, and Aharon then explained that he and his sons were unable to eat this meat because of the tragic death of his two older sons that day. Rashi, based on the Gemara (Zevachim 101a), explains that the meat of this sacrifice (as opposed to other sacrifices offered that day) was forbidden to be eaten in a state of *aninut* (mourning on the day of a family member’s passing). Therefore, Aharon and his two younger sons, who had just suffered the shocking, tragic death of the two older sons, where not permitted to partake of this sacrifice. The Torah concludes this story by relating, “Moshe heard, and was pleased” (10:20). Rashi, citing again from the Gemara (there in Zevachim), comments, “He confessed and was not ashamed to say, ‘I did not hear [the law]’.”

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz noted the significance of the Gemara’s observation, that Moshe readily admitted his error. Certainly, we would not have expected Moshe to allow his ego to stand in the way of honesty, and to prevent him from conceding that his criticism was misplaced, and Aharon and his sons acted correctly. However, Moshe may have thought it proper to stand his ground and refuse to admit his mistake in order not to undermine his status of authority as the communicator of the divine law. He might have feared that his confession of error in a halakhic matter could lead the people to question the accuracy of all the information he conveyed to them in God’s Name. But Moshe understood that this fear did not justify dishonesty, and so he humbly and honestly confessed his mistake, and acknowledged that he was in error.

Rav Shmuelevitz added that not only did this confession not undermine Moshe’s authority as communicator of God’s law, but it bolstered his stature in the people’s eyes. The people saw Moshe’s impeccable honesty and pristine humility, how ego played no role in his handling his role as leader, halakhic authority and teacher. This example of integrity raised the people’s esteem and admiration for Moshe, and reinforced their trust in the truthfulness of everything he taught them. Humbly acknowledging mistakes earns greater respect, not less. When people see that one is honest and real, that his intentions are sincere, and not aimed at self-promotion or building some kind of reputation, they are more likely to give him their trust and take his words of guidance and instruction seriously.

Monday

The opening section of Parashat Shemini describes the special sacrifices that were offered on the day of the *Mishkan*’s inauguration, when Aharon and his sons officiated as *kohanim* for the first time. In honor of the event, Aharon tended to a number of special sacrifices – three sacrifices which were brought by the nation, as well as a sin-offering and burnt-offering for himself. This day followed the seven-day “*miluim*” period, during which Aharon and his sons were formally consecrated as *kohanim*. On each of those seven days, they brought three sacrifices – a sin-offering, a burnt-offering and a *shelamim* sacrifice.

Rav Shmuel Borenstein of Sochatchov, in *Sheim Mi-Shmuel*, finds it significant that Aharon required a *chatat* (sin-offering) on the day he began officiating as *kohein gadol*, even after bringing a *chatat* for atonement on each of the seven preceding days. We may reasonably assume that over the course of the seven-day *miluim* process, after bringing seven sin-offerings, Aharon had achieved complete atonement for all his misdeeds. What was left for him to atone for on the eighth day?

The *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* answers that as a person rises to greater heights, flaws and imperfections which had previously seemed trivial now assume significance. Slight mistakes which were overshadowed by more serious indiscretions in the past become more discernible, and more urgent, once a person grows and raises his standards. And so even after Aharon rose to considerable heights over the course of the seven-day *miluim* process, he still required atonement – because on the level of purity he had now reached, slight flaws which were previously deemed insignificant needed now to be addressed, and to be atoned for.

The *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* here conveys the simply but important lesson that personal growth never ends. Even after we succeed in erasing the large stains on our characters, we must then get to work removing the smaller stains which had previously been indiscernible. We can and should take pride in our accomplishments and in the progress we’ve made, but these feelings of gratification must propel us further, and encourage us to keep getting better. Just as Aharon still needed to move forward even after the seven-day *miluim* period, we, too, must continue working to grow and improve despite our accomplishments, and must always search for ways to make ourselves better, each day of our lives.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Shemini lists the species of birds which are considered “unclean” – that is, forbidden for consumption. This list includes a bird called the *aya* (11:14).

The Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (63b) comments that this species is the same species that is identified later in the Torah (Devarim 14:13) by the name “*ra’a*.” The species’ real name, the Gemara establishes, is “*aya*,” but it received the moniker “*ra’a*” – which means “sees” – because of its exceptional vision. As an example of this bird’s vision, the Gemara states, “It stands in Babylonia and sees a carcass in the Land of Israel.”

Rav Meir Shapiro of Lublin (cited by Rav Matis Blum in his *Torah La-da’at*) offered a symbolic explanation of this image – the image of a bird situated far from the Land of Israel seeing a carcass lying on the ground in the land. This image, Rav Shapiro suggested, represents the unfortunate phenomenon of people looking to find fault in “*Eretz Yisrael*” – in matters of sanctity and religious significance. This bird is considered “impure,” Rav Shapiro explained, specifically because when it looks to the Holy Land, it sees the “carcasses” – the flaws and imperfections. There is so much beauty – both physical and spiritual – in *Eretz Yisrael*, yet the *aya*, as depicted by *Chazal*, chooses to see only the “carcass,” the unseemly, odious elements. Rather than appreciate the special qualities of the land, its unique status of sanctity and the outstanding achievements of the people who inhabit it, the *aya* singles out the fetid “carcass,” the land’s defects and shortcomings. This misdirected focus on the Holy Land’s flaws makes this bird “impure” and unworthy of human consumption.

Looking critically at people and their undertakings, and focusing specifically on their faults and inadequacies, is always discouraged. But there is something particularly detestable about finding fault in “*Eretz Yisrael*” – in that which is sacred, noble and precious. Certainly, there are “carcasses” even in “the Land of Israel.” Even the most righteous figures have faults and are guilty of failures and indiscretions, and even the noblest of projects are deficient in some way. If we look hard enough, and scrutinize thoroughly enough, we will find what to criticize in virtually anything. In their depiction of the *aya*, *Chazal* warn against this tendency, and urge us to appreciate and admire the greatness of great people and great things, notwithstanding their imperfections.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Shemini of the tragic death of Aharon’s two older sons, Nadav and Avihu, on the day they began serving as *kohanim*. After a fire descended from the heavens to consume the sacrifices on the altar, signaling the arrival of God’s presence in the *Mishkan*, Nadav and Avihu brought an unauthorized incense offering, and they were immediately consumed by fire. The Torah famously describes Aharon’s surprisingly composed reaction to this personal tragedy, stating succinctly, “*Va-yidom Aharon*” – “Aharon was silent” (10:3).

A number of works (such as *Divrei Shaul* and *Sheim Mi-Shmuel*) cite an obscure and enigmatic Midrashic passage which asks, “What could he have said” – meaning, what could Aharon had said in response to his sons’ death, such that the Torah found it significant that he remained silent and held his tongue? The Midrash answers, puzzlingly, that Aharon could have cited the verse, “On the eighth day [after a boy’s birth], the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised” (Vayikra 12:3). Many writers endeavored to explain this mysterious remark, and uncover the connection between the obligation of *berit mila* and the tragedy of Nadav and Avihu’s death.

It appears that the Midrash here draws an association between the eight-day process of the *kohanim*’s consecration, and the requirement to circumcise an infant on his eighth day of life. The day Aharon and his sons began serving as *kohanim* was preceded by the seven-day *miluim* period, during which they were formally consecrated for this role by bringing sacrifices which Moshe offered on their behalf. When Aharon brought his sons to begin serving as *kohanim* on the eighth day, he resembled – in the eyes of the Midrash – a father bringing his son for a *berit mila* on his eighth day of life.

Developing this parallel further, it is unnatural for the father of a newborn infant to inflict pain in his son. Parents of a newborn child instinctively shower the child with love, and are naturally driven to care for him and protect him from harm to the very best of their ability. However, the Torah commands parents to circumcise their newborn child as a sign of the child’s “consecration” as a servant of the Almighty. The message, perhaps, is that parents are to educate and train their children to observe God’s laws, which includes having the children make certain sacrifices, and denying them some of what they want. The symbolism of *berit mila* might be that parents occasionally need to restrain their natural instinct to satisfy their child’s wishes and desires, for the sake of accustoming them to a life of disciplined Torah observance.

Somewhat similarly, Aharon was told to bring his sons to serve as *kohanim*, a position that – as he learned in the most painful way imaginable – entailed a great deal of responsibility and was fraught with danger. The priesthood is a great privilege, but the delicate nature of the service in the Temple places the *kohanim* at risk. By comparing the *kehuna* (priesthood) to *berit mila*, the Midrash perhaps points to the fact that just as Aharon was called upon to bring his beloved children into the service in the *Mikdash* despite the challenges and sacrifices entailed, so are all parents called upon to bring their children into the service of God, despite the challenges and sacrifices that are involved.

Of course, the decision of whether to meet these challenges lies entirely with the children themselves. Aharon, as depicted by the Midrash, might have thought to protest his misfortune, claiming that he brought his sons to the *kehuna* just as a father circumcises his child, and it is thus unjust that tragedy should befall them as a result. But Aharon did not protest, likely because the tragic fate resulted from his sons’ grave failure. Leaving aside the precise nature of Nadav and Avihu’s sin – a topic discussed at length by numerous commentators – they were punished for inappropriately handling their role, failing to adhere to the laws and restrictions that govern the service in the *Mishkan*. Parents bear the responsibility of bringing their children to the “*Mishkan*,” to train them, educate them, and prepare them for a life of commitment to God, but ultimately, it is only the children who, when they reach adulthood, decide whether or not to follow the path they have been taught and live in compliance with God’s laws.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Shemini begins by describing the special sacrifices offered by Aharon on the first day he officiated as *kohein gadol* in the newly-consecrated *Mishkan*. We read that upon completing all the required rituals, Aharon lifted his hands and blessed the people. The Mishna in Masekhet Sota (38a) understood that this refers to *birkat kohanim* – the “priestly blessing” with which *kohanim* have ever since blessed the people, the text of which is presented by the Torah later, in Sefer Bamidbar (6:24-26). The fact that Aharon lifted his hands when pronouncing this blessing, the Mishna states, demonstrates that *kohanim* are to recite *birkat kohanim* with their hands raised.

What might be the meaning and significance of this aspect of *birkat kohanim* – the lifting of the *kohanim*’s hands?

Rav Menachem Bentzion Sacks, in his *Menachem Tziyon*, cites other verses which also mention the act of raising hands. For example, King David proclaims in Tehillim (119:48), “I raise my hands towards Your commands which I have loved, and I speak of Your statutes.” As in the Torah’s description of Aharon’s blessing, the lifting of hands is mentioned here in conjunction with speech, verbalization. King David avows that he speaks about God’s laws, devoting himself to the intensive study of Torah, and that he lifts his hands. The meaning, Rav Sacks suggests, is that King David professes to his proactive commitment to the Torah’s laws, that he does not merely pay lip service to them. Speech is important and valuable, but it must be followed up with concrete and determined action. The act of lifting hands along with verbal expression demonstrates that the words are not hollow, that the person is fully committed to act upon the beliefs and values which he expresses with words. And so when the *kohanim* pronounce their blessing to the people, they lift their hands to show that they are not merely verbalizing empty words, that they not only speak fondly and affectionately to the nation, but are prepared and determined to do what the people need them to do, to act on their behalf.

Rav Sacks also notes the verse in Tehillim (3:41), “We shall lift our hearts to our hands – to the God in the heavens.” When we pray, it is not sufficient to verbally express our wishes, or even to rouse our hearts and experience genuine feelings of love for the Almighty. We must also “lift our hands” – commit ourselves to act upon those feelings, and do the work – including the demanding and challenging work – that He commands us to do.

Returning to *birkat kohanim*, the *kohanim*’s lifting their hands during the blessing, according to this understanding, warns of the tendency to feel content with mere lip service, saying the right things to people without a commitment to act. The way we verbally communicate with one another is certainly important, but it is not sufficient. We must also “lift our hands” and be willing to perform acts of kindness, even if they are difficult or time consuming. We can accomplish a great deal by sharing kind, encouraging and uplifting words, but we must do so with our “hands lifted,” with a preparedness to invest time and effort to assist others when they require assistance.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Shemini (11:3) establishes the famous rule that animals are permitted for consumption if they feature two properties: split hooves, and chewing their cud (meaning, after the food is partially digested, it returns to the animal’s mouth to be chewed again). Both these conditions must be met for a species to be permissible for consumption, as the Torah emphasizes. It mentions that the camel, rabbit and hare chew their cud but do not have split hooves, and are therefore forbidden, and that a swine has split hooves but does not chew its cud, and therefore is similarly prohibited.

Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz, in his *Mei Ha-shilo’ach*, offers a symbolic explanation of the significance of these two particular properties. Split hooves compromise a creature’s ability to tightly grasp objects, as there is a space between the separate parts of the hoof. This feature, then, symbolizes a relaxed attitude to possessions, in contrast to the obsession and anxiety with which people often tend to relate to material objects. Likewise, the Izhbitzer Rebbe explains, chewing the cud represents a willingness to dispense some of what one has received. The return of partially digested food to an animal’s mouth, like the weak grasp of the split hoof, symbolizes a loose approach to one’s property, the readiness to part with what one has received, as opposed to the constant, frantic effort to obtain and hold onto possessions.

These properties, then, which establish an animal’s permissibility for consumption, are to inform our overall attitude towards our physical and material pursuits. The proper approach to “consumption” is one of moderation and composure. The Torah permits and expects us to enjoy the comforts and delights of this world, but warns against making physical enjoyment and luxury our highest priority, and pursuing it with the kind of passion and fervor which ought to be reserved for loftier goals. The characteristics of kosher animals, according to the *Mei Ha-shilo’ach*, are intended to combat the natural tendency to fret and agonize over our material standards, to obsess over the accumulation of wealth and one’s “quality of life.” The physical earth is for us to enjoy, but must not become a source of incessant anxiety. Like the kosher animals, we are encouraged to partake of the pleasures and delights of God’s world, but in a calm, peaceful, relaxed manner, without frantically trying to grasp and hold onto everything we can access, and without excessively worrying about the prospect of “returning” that which we’ve been blessed to receive.

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