**SALT – PARASHAT SHEMINI**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Shemini tells of the special sacrifices that were offered on the day when Aharon and his four sons functioned as *kohanim* for the first time. We read that Aharon slaughtered the animal sacrifices, and his sons collected the blood and brought it to him so he could sprinkle it on the altar, as required.

A number of commentators noted that the Torah uses two different verbs in telling of Aharon’s sons bringing him the sacrifices’ blood. After he slaughtered his sin-offering, the Torah relates, “***va-yakrivu*** *benei Aharon et ha-dam eilav*” – literally, “Aharon’s sons brought the blood close to him” (9:9). Later, however, in reference to Aharon’s *ola* (burnt-offering), the Torah uses the verb “*va-yamtzi’u*” – literally, “they made accessible” (9:12). This verb is used also later, in reference to the *shelamim* sacrifice offered on behalf of the nation (9:18).

Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*, cites an explanation for this transition in the name of Rav Naftali Hertz Wessely, noting a difference between the way the blood of different sacrifices was sprinkled on the altar. The blood of the *ola* and *shelamim* was thrown onto the altar directly from the basin in which it was collected, whereas the blood of the *chatat* was sprinkled with the *kohen*’s finger. Accordingly, in reference to Aharon’s sin-offering, the Torah uses the word “*va-yakrivu*” – indicating that Aharon’s sons brought the basin close to Aharon, so he could dip his finger into it and sprinkle the blood. When it came to the *ola* and *shelamim*, however, Aharon’s sons had to actually hand him the basin so he could then throw the blood onto the altar. The Torah therefore uses the word “*va-yamtzi’u*,” which has the connotation of placing something in another person’s hand. The Gemara in Masekhet Bava Metzia (27a) understands the word “*u-metzatah*” used by the Torah in reference to one who finds another person’s lost item (Devarim 22:3) to mean that the object had “come to his hand.” Thus, here in Parashat Shemini, too, the verb “*va-yamtzi’u*” means that Aharon’s sons handed him the basin of collected blood so he could throw it on the altar.

Rav Pinchas Horowitz (the “*Ba’al Hafla’a*”), in his *Panim Yafot* commentary, also cites this explanation, but then proceeds to suggest an alternative approach. He writes that although all these sacrifices were slaughtered on the northern side of the altar, the sprinkling of their blood took place in different locations. The sprinkling of the blood of the *chatat* began in the southwestern corner of the altar, whereas the sprinkling of the *ola* and *shelamim* began at the northeastern corner. Accordingly, after Aharon slaughtered the *chatat*, he went from the northern side of the altar to the southwestern corner, and his sons had to bring the basin of blood to that corner. The Torah therefore uses in this context the verb “*va-yakrivu*,” implying that the blood had to be transported. After the slaughtering of the other sacrifices, however, the blood did not need to be transported to a different area of the altar, and Aharon’s sons merely needed to make it more accessible to Aharon, as implied by the word “*va-yamtzi’u*.”

Sunday

We read in Parashat Shemini that after Aharon completed offering the special sacrifices on the first day he and his sons served as *kohanim*, he raised his hands towards the nation and blessed them (9:22). The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (38a) establishes on the basis of this verse that the *kohanim* raise their hands when proclaiming *birkat kohanim* (the “priestly blessing”).

Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary, explains that the raising of the hands serves to indicate that the source of the blessing is God in the heavens. In Rav Hirsch’s words: “There is no power of blessing innate in the hands of our priests… The hands of the priest can only direct upwards towards the One who has promised blessing.” The *kohanim* lift their hands to make it clear that they do not bless the people with any magical powers that they possess, but rather express their wish that God, the source of all blessing, shall shower His goodness upon the people. Rav Hirsch parenthetically adds that in describing Aharon lifting his hands, the Torah spells the word “*yadav*” (“his hands”) without the letter *vav*, perhaps to emphasize that his hands possessed no innate power.

The Maggid of Kozhnitz, in *Avodat Yisrael*, suggests a different perspective on the significance of Aharon’s raising his hands toward the people. He writes that Aharon, in his great humility, attributed his spiritual achievements to the nation. In his mind, it was the people’s righteous influence that motivated him and enabled him to attain the stature he reached. The Maggid writes that a truly righteous person acknowledges his great piety, but he “lowers himself in his heart, and says, ‘Who am I that I have been privileged to receive all this? Undoubtedly, this is not in my merit, but rather in the merit of the sacred Jews who, through their piety, bring clarity to me, as well.’” Thus, the Maggid explains, Aharon outstretched his hands towards the people, expressing his profound, humble gratitude to them for enabling him to achieve his status of greatness. Overcome by these feelings of appreciation and love, Aharon granted the people his heartfelt blessing.

The Maggid here teaches us of the need to acknowledge the role that the people and society around us have played in our achievements. While we of course can take pride in all that we accomplish, we must also recognize that we cannot accomplish anything alone. We are the products of, first and foremost, our own decisions and hard work, but also of our surroundings, our community, and our world. When we recognize and appreciate the goodness we have received from the people around us, we will be driven to “bless” them, to look upon others with admiration and gratitude, and we will then, in turn, be motivated to give back and make as significant a contribution as we can.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Shemini tells of the tragic death of Nadav and Avihu, two of Aharon’s four sons, on the day they began serving as *kohanim*. After a miraculous fire consumed the sacrifices on the altar, signifying God’s taking residence in the *Mishkan*, Nadav and Avihu proceeded to bring an unwarranted incense offering – “they offered a foreign fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them” (10:1). God had earlier prohibited unwarranted incense offerings (Shemot 30:9), and He punished Nadav and Avihu by sending a fire to consume them.

*Chazal*, in several contexts, note other misdeeds of which Nadav and Avihu had been guilty, and for which they were deemed liable to such a severe punishment. One especially jarring comment appears in the Gemara, in Masekhet Sanhedrin (52a): “Moshe and Aharon were walking along and Nadav and Avihu were walking behind them, with all Israel behind them. Nadav said to Avihu, ‘When will these two elderly men die and you and I can lead the generation?’” According to this passage, Nadav and Avihu eagerly anticipated the death of their father and uncle, the leaders of *Benei Yisrael*, so they could assume the reins of leadership in their place, and for this they were worthy of severe punishment.

Rav Nachum Mordechai of Novominsk, in his *Pe’er Nachum*, suggests connecting this account in the Gemara with the sin mentioned in the Torah – an unwarranted incense offering. The fragrant scent of the *ketoret* (incense) spread far and wide, and thus symbolizes fame and prestige, the spreading of one’s name and reputation. We are encouraged to offer “incense,” to broadcast and publicize ourselves, only for the sake of God, in the interest of disseminating Torah knowledge and Torah values. The Torah strictly forbids offering a “*ketoret zara*” – building fame in the vain pursuit of glory; “incense” is allowed only for the sake of bringing glory to God. Thus, Nadav and Avihu’s unwarranted *ketoret* offering reflects the fact that they sought leadership for less than pristinely altruistic purposes. Their desire to lead was a “*ketoret zara*,” driven, if only in part, by personal motives.

The Rebbe of Novominsk discusses in this context the disturbing story told in the Gemara (Shabbat 26a) of a cruel woman who knowingly caused her daughter-in-law’s death by instructing her to apply a certain fragrant oil on her skin, and then light a candle. This oil was particularly flammable, and the daughter-in-law caught fire and was burned alive. The Rebbe suggests an allegorical reading of this incident, explaining that the Gemara here warns of the self-destructive effects of preoccupation with “fragrance,” the pursuit of fame and popularity. When we apply “fragrant oil,” when we seek to draw attention to ourselves, we may likely end up “consuming” our core essence. We forfeit our true character, our unique skills, and even our values and ideals, for the vain thrill of prestige. The Torah commands us to offer “*ketoret*,” to create a pleasing “fragrance,” a noble reputation, but only when this is driven by the pure desire to bring glory to God, and not to bring glory to ourselves.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Shemini presents the basic guidelines outlining which creatures are permissible and forbidden for consumption. Among the birds which the Torah identifies as forbidden is the “*chasida*” (commonly translated as “stork”; 11:19). Rashi, citing the Gemara (Chulin 63a), comments that the bird is so named because “*osa chasidut im chavroteha bi-mezonot*” – “it acts kindly with its peers with regard to food.” This species of bird was known to be generous with its food, sharing it with its fellow bird.

A number of writers raised the question of why, in light of the Gemara’s comment, the Torah lists this species among those forbidden for consumption. If this bird is known for its magnanimity, then why does the Torah regard it as an “impure” creature, from which we must refrain?

One well-known answer, which many have suggested, is that the “*chasida*” is forbidden because it acts kindly “*im chavroteha*” – “with its peers,” but not with others. The Gemara here specifically seeks to warn against extending graciousness only to our “*chaveirim*,” to those whom we like and whom we consider our friends. We are to show kindness and generosity to all who need help, and not only to those closest to us.

Others suggest an explanation based on Ibn Ezra’s comments to this verse, identifying the “*chasida*” as a species “which is seen at known times during the year.” According to Ibn Ezra, this species emerges only in particular seasons. Ibn Ezra expresses skepticism about the theory associating the name “*chasida*” with kindness, dismissing it as “far-fetched” (“*be-derekh rechoka*”), but nevertheless, some have considered combining this theory with Ibn Ezra’s depiction of this bird. If, indeed, this species appears only seasonally, then perhaps the Gemara speaks of its “kindness” to discourage dealing kindly with people on only an occasional basis. We must be prepared at all times to respond generously to those in need of our assistance and support, rather than showing up “seasonally”, only on our terms, when we find it convenient to offer help.

Finally, it has been suggested that the Gemara’s description of this forbidden bird as one which dispenses kindness is meant to instruct that kindness should not be mindless and purely natural. While on the one hand, we must certainly feel a natural, intuitive drive to perform acts of kindness, on the other hand, kindness must be dispensed intelligently. The “*chasida*” is considered an impure species because its kindness is strictly intuitive; it instinctively wishes to share its food, which is admirable, but it lacks the ability to carefully discern what precisely its fellow bird requires. Wisdom and careful, patient calculation are vital components of *chesed*, for otherwise, if we act kindly purely on impulse, we may end up causing harm instead of assisting. Kindness, by definition, requires not only the instinctive desire to give to others, but also the intelligence and patience to determine what precisely is needed under the circumstances, and the willingness to give what is really needed, instead of that which one naturally feels like giving. The Gemara therefore describes one of the non-kosher birds as one which performs kindness by instinct – to instruct that we must perform kindness not merely by instinct, but after carefully considering the individual’s needs.

(Based on Rav Mordechai Koster, [*Gevurat Akiva*, Parashat Shemini, 5772](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/11_26_72.pdf))

Wednesday

As mentioned earlier this week, the Torah in Parashat Shemini tells that on the first day after Aharon served as *kohen gadol* in the *Mishkan*, after he completed offering that day’s special sacrifices, he raised his hands toward the people and blessed them (9:22). Rashi, citing *Torat Kohanim*, writes that this was *birkat kohanim* – the special blessing which the Torah later (Bamidbar 6:24-26) commands the *kohanim* to pronounce to the people. The Ramban, however, disagrees, noting that the command of *birkat kohanim* seems to have been issued later, and thus this could not have been the blessing given by Aharon. In the Ramban’s view, Aharon expressed to the people his heartfelt blessing, similar to the blessing granted to the people by King Shlomo at the conclusion of the inauguration of the first *Beit Ha-mikdash* (Melakhim I 8:54-61).

Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi questions the Ramban’s view, in light of the Gemara’s discussion in Masekhet Sota (38a-b), where *halakhot* relevant to *birkat kohanim* are derived from Aharon’s blessing. The Gemara cites Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi statement that since Aharon blessed the people after performing the *avoda* (rituals in the *Mishkan*), the *kohanim* even nowadays should ascend to the platform to bless the congregation after the section of the *Shemona Esrei* prayer in which we pray for the restoration of the *avoda*. In Masekhet Megilla (18a), the Gemara similarly comments that *birkat kohanim* takes place after the *avoda* section of the *Shemona Esrei*, just as Aharon blessed the people after performing the service. (The Gemara then proceeds to explain why the section of *modim* is first recited before *birkat kohanim*.) Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi notes that the Gemara in these contexts points to Aharon’s blessing as a precedent that should be followed for *birkat kohanim*, clearly suggesting that the blessing he gave was, indeed, *birkat kohanim*.

This question is addressed by the *Mishneh La-melekh* (*Hilkhot Tefila* 14:9), who begins his discussion by asking why Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi did not also reference the Mishna in Masekhet Sota (38a). The Mishna discusses the requirement for the *kohanim* to lift their hands over their heads while reciting *birkat kohanim* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. (Outside the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, the *kohanim* lift their hands only to shoulder level.) According to the majority opinion cited in the Mishna, there is an exception to this rule – the *kohen gadol* does not lift his hands above his head, because he wears the *tzitz* (frontlet) on his forehead bearing God’s Name, and raising his hands above the *tzitz* would be disrespectful to the divine Name. Rabbi Yehuda, however, disagrees, and proves from Aharon’s raising his hands to bless the nation that even a *kohen gadol* raises his hands above his head in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* when reciting *birkat kohanim*. This inference would certainly appear to work off the assumption that Aharon’s blessing was *birkat kohanim*.

The *Mishneh Le-melekh* explains that Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi perhaps did not reference this Mishna in challenging the Ramban’s position because Rabbi Yehuda may have proved from Aharon’s blessing only that it is acceptable for a *kohen gadol* to raise his hands above his head while wearing the *tzitz*. Regardless of which blessing Aharon pronounced on that day, he raised his hands to bless the nation – proving (in Rabbi Yehuda’s opinion) that a *kohen gadol* may raise his hands higher than the *tzitz* when declaring a blessing. Therefore, this Mishna does not disprove the Ramban’s understanding, that Aharon’s blessing was not *birkat kohanim*.

In defense of the Ramban, the *Mishneh Le-melekh* writes that to the contrary, the Gemara in Masekhet Sota (18a) may actually provide proof for the Ramban’s understanding. The Gemara there establishes that *birkat kohanim* is performed with the hands lifted, based on a *gezeira shava* – textual parallel – between *birkat kohanim* and Aharon’s blessing on the day he began serving as *kohen gadol*. Rather than simply infer from Aharon’s lifting his hands as he blessed that *birkat kohanim* must be performed in this fashion, the Gemara instead notes that the same word for “bless” is used in the context of Aharon’s blessing and in regard to *birkat kohanim*. This textual parallel suggests a kind of halakhic parity between the two contexts, on the basis of which the Gemara deduces that *birkat kohanim* is recited the way Aharon recited his blessing – with the hands raised. The Gemara also cites Rabbi Natan as disputing this inference, and pointing to a different verse (“*hu u-vanav kol ha-yamim*” –Devarim 18:5) which indicates that Aharon’s sons should follow his example, and thus raise their hands when blessing just as he did. This discussion appears to prove that Aharon’s blessing was not *birkat kohanim*, but nevertheless sets an instructive precedent relevant to *birkat kohanim* in light of a textual association between the two contexts. Accordingly, it would seem, the Ramban is quite correct in asserting that Aharon did not bless the people with *birkat kohanim*, but rather with a different blessing. (The *Mishneh Le-melekh* then proceeds to offer two explanations to reconcile Rashi’s view with the Gemara’s discussion.)

Thursday

We read in Parashat Shemini the tense exchange between Moshe and Aharon on the day Aharon and his sons began serving as *kohanim*, after the tragic death of Aharon’s two older sons, Nadav and Avihu. Moshe found that one of the sacrifices offered that day – a *chatat* (sin-offering) – had been entirely burned, and he angrily scolded the *kohanim* for burning the sacrificial meat instead of eating it. Aharon explained to Moshe that partaking of the meat would have been improper after the tragic events which befell the family that day – “…and such events happened to me; if I would eat a sin-offering today, would this be pleasing in the Lord’s eyes?” (10:19). Moshe accepted his brother’s explanation, and the conversation ended.

Rashi, based on the Gemara in Masekhet Zevachim (101a), explains that the sacrifice under discussion was the sin-offering brought every Rosh Chodesh. As Rashi writes earlier (9:1), citing the Midrash, this day was the first of Nissan. Therefore, in addition to the special sacrifices offered in honor of the inauguration of the *kohanim*, the monthly Rosh Chodesh sacrifices – which included, among other animals, a goat as a sin-offering (Bamidbar 28:15) – needed to be offered. Now generally speaking, an *onein* – somebody whose immediate family member passed away that day – is forbidden from partaking of sacrificial food. However, after the tragic death of Nadav and Avihu, Moshe informed Aharon and his surviving sons that an exception was made for the special sacrifices offered that day in honor of their inauguration, and the sacrifices should be eaten (10:12-15). Aharon noted to Moshe that this exception pertained only to the sacrifices offered in honor of this one-time event – the inauguration of the *kohanim* – but not to the Rosh Chodesh sacrifice, a standard offering brought each and every month. Therefore, although Aharon and his sons were to eat the meat of the special sacrifices brought in honor of their inauguration, they were not to eat the Rosh Chodesh sin-offering.

Aharon begins his response to Moshe by saying, “*Hein hayom hikrivu et chatatam ve-et olatam lifnei Hashem*” (10:19). This ambiguous statement could be translated in several different ways, including, “Did they today sacrifice their sin-offering and burnt-offering before the Lord?!” This translation of the verse is followed by the Gemara (there in Masekhet Zevachim), as cited by Rashi. The Gemara explains that in this statement, Aharon responded to a question posed by Moshe which is not explicated in the text. Moshe had asked Aharon and his remaining sons if perhaps they did not eat the sin-offering because its blood had been sprinkled when they were in a state of *aninut* (bereavement), and was thus invalid. A sacrifice tended to by a *kohen* on the day of a family member’s death is disqualified, and so Moshe wondered if this might have been why this sin-offering was burned instead of eaten. Aharon replied by rhetorically asking, “Was it they who sacrificed their sin-offering?!” The service was performed that day not by Aharon’s sons, but rather by Aharon himself, and a *kohen gadol* – unlike regular *kohanim* – is permitted to perform the service in the *Mikdash* in a state of *aninut*. Hence, this is not the reason why the meat was burned.

The Ramban raises the question of why Moshe would have entertained such a possibility. After all, it is very clear from the text that Nadav and Avihu died only after the service was completed. Why would Moshe have thought that the sacrificial blood had been sprinkled when the *kohanim* were in a state of bereavement, if the tragedy struck only after the service? The Ramban suggests that perhaps Moshe did not see all the rituals performed that day, and considered the possibility that perhaps after everything else was completed, and after Nadav and Avihu’s death, the blood of this sin-offering was found, and the *kohanim* at that point proceeded to sprinkle it on the altar as required.

The *Tur*, in his Torah commentary, cites his father, the Rosh, as suggesting a simpler explanation, claiming that the Rosh Chodesh sacrifice had not been offered before Nadav and Avihu’s death. The Torah makes it clear that Nadav and Avihu perished following the offering of the special sacrifices required on that day, but it says nothing about the Rosh Chodesh sacrifice. Conceivably, then, the Gemara might have understood that the Rosh Chodesh sacrifice was offered later in the day, following the tragic death of Aharon’s older sons. Aharon thus clarified that it was he, and not his remaining sons, who tended to the Rosh Chodesh sacrifice, and it was therefore valid, as the *kohen gadol* is permitted to perform the service in a state of *aninut*.

This explanation is offered as well by Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg, in *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*. He adds that in the Torah’s description of Aharon’s offering the special sacrifices required on that day, the Torah emphasizes that these were offered “*milevad olat ha-boker*” – in addition to the daily morning *tamid* sacrifice (9:17), which is the first sacrifice offered each day. Revealingly, Rav Mecklenberg writes, the Torah does not mention in this context the Rosh Chodesh sacrifices – perhaps indicating that they were offered later, after the death of Nadav and Avihu.

Friday

The first section of Parashat Shemini tells of the events that transpired on the day Aharon served as *kohen gadol* in the *Mishkan* for the first time, a festive day that turned tragic when his two older sons perished. Their death prompted Aharon and his surviving sons to abstain from the meat of one of the sin-offerings brought that day. Moshe initially criticized Aharon and his sons for failing to eat the meat (10:16-17), but Aharon then explained the halakhic reasoning behind their decision.

The Torah relates, “Moshe heard, and it was good in his eyes” (10:20). Rashi, based on the Gemara (Zevachim 101a), explains, “He conceded, and was not embarrassed to say, ‘I did not hear.’” Moshe humbly acknowledged that his brother and nephews were correct, and he had erred in criticizing them for failing to eat the meat of the sacrifice. According to Rashi, the phrase “*va-yitav be-einav*” (“it was good in his eyes”) means that Moshe humbly accepted Aharon’s argument, finding it reasonable and convincing.

Seforno, however, explains differently, understanding “*va-yitav be-einav*” to mean that Moshe rejoiced. He did not merely accept Aharon’s rationale, but was overjoyed that his brother and nephews reached a correct halakhic conclusion based on their keen reasoning and insight. According to Seforno’s reading, Moshe’s reaction sets an example not only of intellectual integrity, the willingness to concede to the other party’s line of reasoning, but also of celebrating other people’s scholarly achievements. When we are proven wrong, we should not simply admit our mistake, but also celebrate the other person’s success in arriving at the correct position.

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Yalkut Yehuda*, adds further insight into Seforno’s interpretation of this verse. He suggests that Moshe took pride in Aharon and his sons’ ability to reach a sound conclusion even in their state of bereavement. Despite the shock and grief over the sudden loss of their beloved sons and brothers, they did not lose sight of what they needed to do, of what the situation demanded of them. Although they were emotionally broken, they were still able to think rationally and determine the appropriate course of action. They showed that even in times of great pain and distress, it is possible – and important – to think clearly and make the best decisions for how to respond to the undesirable situation, and for this, Moshe rejoiced.

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