

United We Stand

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Parshas Emor

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The Parsha's Paths

Emor begins with the prohibition of a kohen from ritually defiling himself through a corpse, save those of select close relatives. The second verse of our Parsha permits him to defile himself for his mother, father, son, daughter, and brother; verse three permits him for his unmarried sister. Verse four, however, is one of those instances where the straightforward reading (*peshat*) of the verse at least partially deviates from the halachic interpretation of the midrash. The verse reads: *A husband shall not defile himself among his nation, to cause himself to be profaned (Leheichalo)*, implying a husband may not defile himself for any wife. This reading follows the *peshat* interpretation of Rashbam, though he acknowledges that this reading does not reflect the *halacha*, which follows the midrashic interpretation. The midrash reads this last word to mean **to one who causes him to be profaned**, namely, to a wife he was not permitted to marry in the first place, such as a divorcee; thus, the verse implies that a kohen may defile himself to bury his wife, provided he was allowed to marry her in the first place.

The question of whether there generally exists a *peshat* independent of the halachic interpretation is a controversial one even among the Rishonim, but it is not for us to simply dismiss the school of Rashbam. The question then becomes, why would there be this gap between *peshat* and practice, and what are we supposed to learn from the *peshat*? While a comprehensive exploration of this issue is beyond the scope of this article, one answer could be that the Torah could be read in multiple ways which reflect multiple layers of truth. Thus, it is not that the *halacha* is imposing itself on the text; the text can indeed be read according to the *halacha*, but it is purposely written to also reflect other interpretations because they also contain truth.

If this is true, then, it becomes incumbent upon us to understand the *peshat*. Why would it be that a kohen could defile himself for his parents, siblings, and children, but not his wife? Is not one's

relationship with one's spouse even closer, in some ways, to any other?

To answer this we have to appreciate the basic dynamic underlying different kinds of relationships. In a parent-child relationship, the parent loves the child unconditionally; after all, the parent helped create them unconditionally. The child, in turn, is inevitably and eternally indebted to his/her parents. In a sibling-sibling relationship, each sibling remains eternally and unconditionally connected to one another by virtue of their kinship. No matter what one sibling may do to another, there is always an expectation and desire for familial love, to give and to receive. While in a parent-child relationship, the irrevocability of it stems from the parent's investment in the child, the sibling relationship, while more multi-faceted, does not stem from that same kind of investment, and is thus inferior.

Here comes the paradox of the husband-wife relationship - a dynamic so grand and holy yet so terrible; indeed, so grand because it is so terrible. Marriage is a partnership of choice; neither spouse was forced into the relationship. Because it is a choice, it demands mutual investment, and because it requires investment, it is intimate. The very definition of such commitment to another requires it to be voluntary; it is only because a spouse chooses such a commitment that makes it so real and powerful. A commitment without a choice is akin to slavery. Yet because it is voluntary it is also tragic; this holiest of covenants must forever remain fragile, forever be vulnerable to breaking. We can never "own" our relationship; we can never presume to be loved unconditionally, no matter what we do or what happens. It is dependent on our continual upholding of our end of the commitment. It is not for naught that the Rabbis spilled much ink bemoaning the dissolution of a first marriage; while there are times it may be necessary, its very possibility speaks of the tragedy of the fragility of man and his most intimate self.

This inevitable tragedy reflects itself as well in man's relationship to G-d. The most intimate form of this relationship, as visualized in Shir HaShirim, can be likened to that of a marriage, whereby G-d, as it were,

can “depend” on us as we depend on Him. Obviously, the full realization of this is impossible, and thus we can never fully “know” G-d; nevertheless, we live our whole lives knowing that to whatever degree we have gained dependability in G-d’s service in our lives, we’ve drawn closer to that ideal, and to whatever degree we have failed, we remain distant from Him. Every time we listen to the beck and call of our Evil Inclination, we commit, as it were, adultery against G-d.

In this light we can understand why, according to the strict meaning of things which the Torah represents, a kohen may not defile himself for his wife; in taking leave of this world, she effectively abandoned him, shattering her commitment and thus severing their relationship.

Yet that is not the halacha. A kohen does defile himself for his wife. While the wife can no longer contribute to their relationship, the husband retains a sense of faithfulness to his wife; death cannot break his love. Just as a bereaved parent, child, or sibling experiences a loss of self, so does a husband for his wife, and vice versa. While he may have a right to feel betrayed and renounce the bond he had in life, the kohen cannot help but return to the deep foundation he and his wife built together, continuing to draw strength from their shared identity. His relationship, while once so vulnerable and interdependent, has become so deeply ingrained as to surpass choice and become unconditional.

This is man’s great comfort. Yes, the most intimate relationships, including with G-d, definitionally require our investment. But the more we invest, the more we fuse our identities, the harder it is to pull away, until ultimately, true separation becomes impossible. This is the pinnacle of marriage we should all strive for, with our spouses but also with G-d, and by extension, the Torah and the Jewish people; this is the reward of Olam Haba, when our hard work cultivating our relationship with G-d can be fully enjoyed without any thought or temptation of violating it. So let us strive to transcend the peshat of this pasuk and achieve the lofty heights the *halacha* presents in all the marriages in our lives.

Pirkei Avos Paths

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Ben Zoma said....Who is he that is honored? He who honors his fellow human beings as it is said: “For I honor those that honor Me, but those who spurn Me shall be dishonored” (I Samuel 2:30). (Pirkei Avos 4:1)

Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua said: let the honor of your student be as dear to you as your own, and the honor of your colleague as the reverence for your teacher, and the

reverence for your teacher as the reverence of heaven. (ibid. 12)

While the sources for Lag BaOmer itself are elusive, the Gemara (Yevamos 62b) that is commonly associated with it is relevant regardless: Rabbi Akiva had 24,000 students, all of whom died of a plague between Pesach and Shavuot. The Gemara tells us that they died because they didn’t honor each other properly, and due to their high level as potentially the sole bearers of the Torah tradition into the next generation, this necessitated death.

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin points out an obvious question, articulated by the Shem MiShmuel: If there’s one thing Rabbi Akiva is famous for, it’s his emphasis of the mitzvah of VeAhavta LeReacha Kamocha - loving one’s fellow as one loves himself. How could this, of all things, be the major deficiency in Rabbi Akiva’s students?

The answer is that Rabbi Akiva’s students were not lacking in love towards each other at all. What they lacked was honor and respect. What’s the difference? This was the question someone once asked Rav Menachem Mendel Blachman. He replied, “Do you love your baby?”

“Of course.”

“Do you honor him?”

“Of course not.”

“There’s your answer.”

As the Shem MiShmuel explains, love generally flows from having a common ground with a person; this is why families have a natural tendency to love each other, and why we can love all our fellow Jews on the deepest level; because the core of all of our identities is the Torah. But respect comes not from love alone. Respect comes specifically from finding what makes another person valuable, especially when those attributes are different from our own. When we see the Torah a person has learned, the middos they exhibit, and the accomplishments they have achieved, we can respect them. We can, alternatively, ignore them or even spurn them, raising our own ego. The latter approach, which is all too common, was utilized, to some extent, by Rabbi Akiva’s students. Let us think about how we can be less jealous, negative, or apathetic and more appreciative and admiring of the value in those around us - even a baby - and learn to not only love but respect all our fellow Jews. Because honoring God’s children is honoring G-d.

Goal of the week

Reflect on a fault you have found in another Jewish community or individual and how you might be projecting your own faults and biases while not sufficiently understanding or appreciating others.

This week’s bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rochel Zlotta and Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

Have A Great Shabbos!