

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

Short Divrei Torah on Parshas Emor

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רפואה שלמה פעסל בת גאלדא / לזכות חילינו

PREREQUISITE TO REBUKE

Reb Asher Horowitz of Rimanov

"G-d told Moshe, 'Speak to the kohanim, the sons of Aharon, and say to them...'" (21:1)

The order of the parshios are Acharei ("after"), Kedoshim ("holy"), Emor ("say"). This is to teach us that only "after" one has reached the level of "holiness" can one teach others with "words" of reproof.

SPARKLE AND SHINE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"G-d told Moshe, 'Speak to the kohanim, the sons of Aharon, and say to them...'" (21:1)

The sages teach us that the verb "to say," is repeated in this verse in order to indicate that it is the priests' duty to "caution" their children regarding their priestly duties. The Hebrew word for "to caution" (להזהיר) also means "to make shine" (Likutey Torah 2:35b), implying that we should not be content with training our youth to observe G-d's commandments minimally and perfunctorily. Rather, we should teach them to perform the commandments in the best way possible, even going beyond the letter of the law. By imparting this enthusiasm to our children, we will enable them - and the commandments they perform - to sparkle and "shine."

This lesson is emphasized by the fact that the Torah conveys it in the context of its instruction to the priests. The priests' task is to help others rise spiritually and become close to G-d. So too, we should strive to educate our youth not merely to be well-versed in the Torah and punctilious in observing its commandments, but to see their study and observance as ways to draw close to G-d. (Sefer HaMa'amarim 5743, pp. 85-87) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

NEVER GIVE UP

Sanzer Rebbe

"He [the kohen] shall not defile himself for any [dead] person among his kin." (21:1)

When the body becomes impure, one should not say that he is evil. He should not become depressed and lose all hope of improving. One should follow the dictum from the Ethics of Our Fathers: "Do not consider yourself wicked." That is, do not feel as if all roads to improvement are closed; seek the correct road and Hashem will assist.

PREEMINENCE OF SPEECH

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"G-d told Moshe, 'Speak to the kohanim, the sons of Aharon, and say to them...'" (21:1)

There are four spiritual worlds: Atzilus, Beriah, Yetzirah, and Asiyah (see Zohar Chadash, Yisro 34a). Each of these worlds has aspects of life and, G-d forbid, the opposite.

In the physical aspect of the world of Asiyah, we see empirically that there is life and, G-d forbid, the opposite. Asiyah proper is a spiritual world; its lowest aspect is this physical world. Similarly, this is true in the world of Yetzirah, which corresponds to the faculty of speech. [Asiyah corresponds to action, Yetzirah to speech, and Beriah to thought.]

One kind of speech is frivolous; this is the opposite of life. In contrast to this type of speech, there is speech used for commendable purposes - for learning Torah, for talking about mitzvos, and for the service of G-d (i.e., prayer). This latter kind of speech is called "life," as alluded to in the verse (Mishlei 18:21) "Life and death are in the power of the tongue..." Guarding one's speech is of pivotal importance in the service of G-d.

Similarly, in the world of Beriah, which corresponds to the faculty of thought, there is also life, such as when a person continually thinks about Divine service. This aspect is called "life," but, Heaven forbid, the opposite also exists.

There is yet another world beyond these - Atzilus, which is the world of awe, characterized by self-abnegation. There, too, the aspects of life and, G-d forbid, the opposite exist.

Of all these faculties, the most crucial is that of speech. A person must be careful how he talks, as everything depends upon a person's speech.

This is the deeper meaning alluded to in the verse "Speak to the Kohanim... and say to them: 'Let none of you defile himself...'" - for everything depends upon speech.

The phrase "and say to them" is seemingly superfluous, since the Torah already stated, "Speak to the Kohanim." However, the verse seeks to impart that it is precisely the faculty of speech - speaking to them about the faculty of "saying" and speech - that is of greatest import. Examine this well and you will find it straightforward.

HUMBLE LINEAGE

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"G-d told Moshe, 'Speak to the kohanim, the sons of Aharon, and say to them...'" (21:1)

Why state the obvious? Everyone already knows that the Kohanim were the sons of Aharon...

If G-d had simply commanded Moshe to tell the Kohanim that they should sanctify themselves without mentioning that they were the sons of Aharon, then perhaps the Kohanim would have become haughty, thinking to themselves, "Who can be compared to us, whom G-d has chosen among all the Jewish people to sanctify with such holiness? He gives us sanctified portions of the offerings to eat, food that is prohibited to non-Kohanim. Certainly, we Kohanim are important in G-d's eyes and are more beloved to Him than the rest of the Jewish people." Thinking this, the Kohen may become condescending toward other Jews.

In order to forestall this possibility, G-d commanded that before giving the instructions to the Kohanim to sanctify themselves, Moshe should tell them something that would inspire them not to become haughty, and only afterward would Moshe tell them G-d's directives. What should Moshe tell them? He should tell them that, in truth, there is no reason for a person to be proud of his status unless he himself toiled and labored to achieve it on his own. This is not the case with something that he did not struggle to attain - for example, distinguished lineage. How can a person be conceited about his lineage, since it cannot be counted among his own achievements?

This is the deeper meaning of the phrase "Speak to the Kohanim, the sons of Aharon." Before Moshe was to convey G-d's command to them, he was to first explain that what G-d expected from them was not a result of

their own virtues, but because they were the sons of Aharon. Aharon was so holy that he instilled his holiness in his offspring; they themselves had not accomplished any of this on their own. Consequently, the Kohanim had nothing to be proud of.

Only after this preface does Moshe tell them, "Let none of you defile himself among his people" - a command regarding the holiness with which G-d had sanctified them. Had Moshe delivered this instruction to the Kohanim at the very outset, they may have become arrogant toward their brethren. Consequently, G-d issued the command in this way in order to instill in them the attribute of humility, to prevent them from becoming haughty.

KNOW YOUR STRENGTH

Chernovitz Rebbe

"A husband (baal) among his people shall not make himself impure to defile him." (21:4)

The word baal as can be understood as "master" - i.e., one who is master over his behavior. If one becomes the master of his actions, he will not become impure among his people. On the contrary, he would believe that he is a righteous individual with strong spiritual abilities, able to master his behavior for the benefit of his people. Therefore, he should always be aware of his behavior.

HEIGHTENED RESPONSIBILITY

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"They shall be holy to their G-d, and they shall not desecrate their G-d's Name..." (21:6)

This verse gives a specific instruction to the Kohanim - who represent the Jewish People in their service of Hashem to be holy and not to desecrate Hashem's Name. The Sforno writes that it is not for the Kohen's sake that he is instructed to act this way, it is because he stands for Hashem's honor, and therefore is not permitted to allow himself to be dishonored, for he will in turn cause Hashem's Name to be dishonored.

Rav Aharon Kotler would say that just as the Kohanim represent the Jewish People in their service of Hashem, so too, Torah scholars play a similar role among the Jewish People. As such, explained Rav Aharon, those who learn Torah must always behave with a higher ethical and moral standard than those around them.

This call to duty was to become the guiding principle in the life of Rav Avraham Shmuel Finkel, son of the Alter of Slobodka in his early years of marriage. Rav Avraham Shmuel was given a sizeable dowry much of which he invested in buying bulk foods. Soon afterwards, the First World War broke out and food became very scarce. His friends encouraged him to make a lot of money by selling the food at high rates, but Rav Avraham Shmuel would not hear of it.

Not only did he not sell it for its regular price, he gave the food away free to Rabbonim and other Torah scholars. And not only that, but he also gave away the rest of his dowry to widows and orphans - and at one point, even gave away his own Yom Tov clothes!

Rav Avraham Shmuel's example shows just how much a Torah scholar should view himself as a representative of the Jewish People in his service of Hashem. He went above and beyond what any "average" person would do in a very trying situation. Perhaps this great level of self-sacrifice is too lofty for us to live up to, but if we at least take this message to heart and accept responsibility for our specific role in life, then the next time we are in a situation where we can help others or benefit ourselves, perhaps we will take a moment to ask ourselves - "Am I serving Hashem or am I serving myself?"

NOT JUST HOLY

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"They shall be holy to their G-d, and they shall not desecrate their G-d's Name..." (21:6)

This verse initially speaks of the obligation to "be holy"; then it instructs the Kohanim not to "desecrate their G-d's name." Surely, once they are told to be holy, it is obvious that they are forbidden to desecrate Hashem's name! If so, why did Hashem give this additional and seemingly superfluous command?

Rav Moshe Sternbuch answered that both instructions are necessary, for it is quite possible to be holy yet desecrate Hashem's name. Indeed, the more righteous one is, the more potential there is to tarnish the name of Hashem. This is even codified into law by the Rambam who writes that despite acting completely in accordance with the Torah's laws, a great person, who, in the eyes of others, acts beneath his stature - even while staying far away from sin - is nevertheless guilty of desecrating Hashem's name.

This frightening responsibility should not prevent us from wanting to be holy. On the contrary, it should encourage us to go above and beyond the letter of the law, knowing that the opposite is also true. For, as ambassadors of Hashem, we have the opportunity to constantly glorify His image in the eyes of others by simply acting in a pleasant and considerate way. Certainly, the thought that we can have such a dramatic effect in Heaven, even from seemingly mundane actions, should provide us much encouragement in our everyday life.

Someone who understood this message, and undoubtedly sanctified Hashem's name to a huge degree, was the venerated Rosh Yeshivah, Rav Michel Yehudah Lefkowitz.

One Shabbos afternoon, a young man caught sight of Rav Michel Yehudah walking toward him and wished him "good Shabbos." The Rosh Yeshivah stopped, responded to the greeting, and then asked how the man was and

how his learning was going. The young man was taken aback by the warmth and interest that he was shown, as he had no personal connection to the Rosh Yeshivah. He concluded that he must have been mistaken for someone else. But his interest was piqued when he saw the same scene repeat itself over and over as the Rosh Yeshivah continued on his walk. He could no longer contain his curiosity and inquired into the Rosh Yeshiva's behavior. Rav Michel Yehudah's grandson explained that his grandfather had recently had a cataract surgery, and his eyesight was severely impaired. He could see but not enough to make out the faces of those in front of him. As such, he feared that one of his students would greet him but not receive the warm response that he would usually get. Perhaps he would be offended or worry that he had done something wrong. Therefore, Rav Michel Yehudah took upon himself to greet everyone he met as if they were his closest students, in case they really were!

PRIVILEGED TO GIVE

Kesav Sofer

"He offers the food of your G-d; he shall remain holy to you, for I, Hashem, Who sanctifies you, am holy." (21:8)

Although the kohen depends for his living on the "Priestly Gifts" that you give him, you are not permitted to treat him with disrespect or contempt. Instead, you are required to sanctify him, because "he offers the food of your G-d." The meal of a righteous person or a scholar has the same sanctified character as a sacrifice. Accordingly, the gifts that we give the kohen are equal in value to the offerings that serve to atone for our sins.

Moreover, the kohen, in his turn, sanctifies the people of Israel with his study and worship. For all these reasons, the kohen "shall remain holy to you, for I, Hashem, Who sanctifies you, am holy." I, G-d, have sanctified you through the kohen who sanctifies you with his study and worship. Hence, you must honor and sanctify him even though he is dependent on your gifts for his living.

FIERY DEVOTION

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"If a Kohen's daughter becomes desecrated through adultery, she desecrates her father; she shall be burned in fire." (21:9)

As is known, when a person sins, G-d forbid, he creates a blemish Above and energizes the kelipos (Zohar 3:122a). The remedy for this is to burn away the external forces (the kelipos) by fiery devotion to G-d. This fiery devotion results from the person having sinned and having had dark thoughts.

[When he realizes the error of his ways and repents, the memory of his sins fires the flames of renewed, passionate devotion to G-d, and "fire consumes fire" (Yoma 21b), the fire of holiness consumes the fire of the external forces created through a person's sins.]

This then is the deeper meaning of the verse “If a Kohen’s daughter...” - alluding to the soul, as stated in the Zohar (2:95a; 3:7a) - “...becomes desecrated through adultery, she desecrates her father.” She creates a blemish Above, further empowering the external forces. The remedy is to set her, i.e., the soul, on fire, by serving G-d with fiery enthusiasm. Since this fiery enthusiasm is due to one’s previous sins, it has the power to burn away all the kelipos. Amen.

OUR INNER KOHEN GADOL

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“The priest who has been elevated above his brothers, upon whose head the anointment oil has been poured or who has been installed by wearing the garments, must not leave his hair uncut nor rend his garments.” (21:10)

Having already established the priesthood - a subset of society devoted to holiness - the Torah further establishes the high priesthood - an individual representing absolute holiness, holiness itself. Just as the priests inspire the people to sanctify their lives, the high priest inspires the priests to maintain the purity of their holiness.

Similarly, we all possess an inner priesthood - the part of our lives that we devote to our own spiritual growth and the spiritual advancement of those around us. But in addition, we each have our inner “high priest,” the innermost point of our Divine soul, which is our point of absolute connection to G-d. We must recognize the preeminence of this inner point, re-experiencing it periodically. Doing so ensures that our spiritual pursuits do not become tainted with ulterior motives. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 10, pp. 295-296; Igrot Kodesh, vol. 2, pp. 11-12, 277-278) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

THE IMAGE OF G-D WITHIN

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

“He may not ritually defile himself by touching a corpse [unless there is no one else to bury it].” (21:11)

Parshas Emor begins with the command of טומאת בהנים - the prohibition for kohanim to come in contact with a מת, a human corpse. The Torah makes an exception in the case of a deceased family member: if a kohen’s wife, parent, child, brother or unmarried sister dies, then he is permitted - and in fact required - to attend the burial out of respect for the family member.

The kohen gadol, however, is held to a stricter standard, and is not permitted to expose himself to טומאת מת, the impurity resulting from contact with a corpse, even in the case of a deceased family member. This is true also of a nazir, somebody who takes the nazirite vow, which forbids him from haircutting, drinking wine, and coming in contact with a human corpse. Like a kohen gadol, a nazir is not permitted to expose himself to טומאת מת even if an immediate family member passes away.

Significantly, however, this prohibition is suspended in the case of a מת מצוה, a dead body which is left without anyone to bury it. If a kohen comes across a body that requires burial, the prohibition of טומאת בהנים is suspended, and he is required to bury the body. This exception applies even to a kohen, and even to a nazir; even they are required to expose themselves to impurity for the sake of tending to a מת מצוה. In fact, even if a kohen or kohen gadol is on his way to the Beis HaMikdash to perform the avodah, to offer sacrifices, when he comes across a מת מצוה, he must bury the body even though this will defile him and disqualify him from performing the service in the Mikdash. Moreover, if any Jew is on his way on Erev Pesach to bring the korban pesach, and he sees a מת מצוה, he must tend to the body, even though this will result in his forfeiting the opportunity to bring the korban pesach, as he will now be tamei and thus invalid for bringing the sacrifice.

This exception is made because of the great importance of protecting the dignity of this deceased individual. No matter who he or she is, the Torah demands that everything be done for the sake of respecting the צלם אלוקים, the divine image, within this person. This need overrides even the sanctity of the kohen gadol, the spiritual ambitions of the nazir, and the korban pesach.

Rav Eliyahu Lopian cites the Chafetz Chaim as observing that if this is how far the Torah goes in demanding that we show respect to the deceased, then how much more so must we ensure to preserve the dignity of the living. The Torah affords great importance to the burial of a מת מצוה because the body had housed a sacred soul, and must therefore be treated with respect. Certainly, then, a living person, whose soul is still within the body, must be treated with respect and dignity. The unique importance of burying a מת מצוה reminds us that every human being deserves to be respected by virtue of the צלם אלוקים with which he is endowed. We must be very careful in our dealings with other people to speak to them and treat them with the dignity that they deserve, recognizing the divine spark within them.

TENDING TO OTHERS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“He [the kohen gadol] may not ritually defile himself by touching a corpse [unless there is no one else to bury it].” (21:11)

The high priest’s obligation to ritually defile himself in order to bury an unattended corpse applies even in the unlikely event that such a situation presents itself while he is performing the sacrificial rites of Yom Kippur in the Holy of Holies. If there is no one else who can bury this corpse, the high priest must leave the most sacred part of the Tabernacle on the holiest day of the year in order to do so. This teaches us, firstly, that taking care of our fellow Jews’ crucial needs takes precedence over tending to our own spiritual tasks.

Secondly, we sometimes encounter people who may be considered, figuratively speaking, “unattended, lifeless bodies” - i.e., people who pay no attention to the spiritual side of life and who have no one else to guide them in this regard. In such cases, we must seize the opportunity to assist them, reminding ourselves that even the high priest is required to disregard his most exalted responsibilities on the holy day of Yom Kippur in order to bury an unattended corpse. We, in contrast, have both the obligation and privilege of not merely attending to a “lifeless” person - but of reviving him! (Hitva’aduyot 5744, vol. 3, pp. 1844-1845; Hitva’aduyot 5745, vol. 2, p. 1201) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

SPEAKING GENTLY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“G-d spoke to Moshe, saying, ‘Speak to Aharon..’” (21:16-17)

The Torah mainly uses two Hebrew words for “speaking.” The first (dibur) is reserved for “hard speech,” the straightforward, accurate delivery of the message. The second (amirah) is “soft speech,” i.e., tailoring the message to its intended recipient in order to ensure that it is indeed received and clearly understood.

The first part of this section of the Torah, which contains the laws regarding the priests’ duty to educate their children in the responsibilities of the priesthood, is couched exclusively in “soft speech.” It is only when G-d returns to the other laws concerning the priests that He once again uses “hard speech.”

This teaches us that we must educate primarily with “soft speech.” In order to be effective, educators must relate fully to their students and tailor their style of delivery accordingly.

G-d’s imperative regarding how the priests educate their youth applies to us all. Whenever we see in someone a behavior or attitude that is in need of inspiration or correction, we are immediately cast by Divine providence in the role of educator. In all such cases, we must remember G-d’s instruction to make exclusive use of “soft speech.” (Likutei Sichot, vol. 27, pp. 158-159) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

This section of the Torah discusses our responsibility to educate others. Since we are all responsible to educate those who need our edification or correction, the lessons in this section are relevant to all of us - not only to professional educators.

Throughout this section, the Torah uses the idiom of “soft speech” (אמירה) more than that of “hard speech” (דיבור). Educating through “soft speech” means praising the student. Praising the good in others draws out their infinite, latent positive qualities, allowing them to actualize their potential to a far greater extent than they could have on their own.

Of course, we must also assess other people’s failings honestly. But G-d only places people in difficult situations if He has given them the strength necessary to overcome such situations. If they fail to do so, it is because their strengths have not been allowed to become manifest - and that is because we, who are responsible for educating them, have not praised them enough! Had we used our “soft speech” as much as we should have, we would have elicited our charges latent potential and inner strengths.

Thus, we should all assume personal responsibility for the moral success of all those over whom we have influence. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 27, pp. 158; Hitva’aduyot 5742, p. 1421) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

SPIRITUAL WHOLENESS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Speak to Aharon, saying, ‘Any man among your descendants, throughout their generations, who has a defect, may not approach to offer up the bread of his G-d.’” (21:17)

The pain, discomfort, or inconvenience that bodily defects caused those priests who possessed them disqualified them from serving in the Temple, since the Temple service must be performed in unmitigated joy and good cheer. However, these priests were not barred from partaking of sacrificial or consecrated food (Vayikra 21:22). Their condition was only external; their inner essence was as pure as that of any other priest.

In the Messianic future, bodily defects will disappear. At that time, those who suffered from bodily defects until then will have the advantage of appreciating and enjoying their improved health to a greater extent than those who did not experience such suffering. Since they are destined to have this privilege, we should consider it an honor and a blessing to associate with them. (Derech Mitzvotecha 31a-33a; Sichot Kodesh 5736, vol. 2, pp. 648-650) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

UNBLEMISHED PRAYERS

Rebbe Nachman

“For any man who has a blemish should not offer a sacrifice, including one who is blind or lame or broken-nosed, or one who has a misshapen limb.” (21:18)

Korban (sacrifice) is similar to Karev (close). The purpose of the daily sacrifices was to bring all of the worlds closer to their perfection.

Today, the daily prayers take the place of the sacrifices. Therefore we must see to it that our prayers are without blemish just as the sacrifices were to be brought from unblemished animals and by a person without a blemish. The Zohar (I, 79a) teaches that where there is fear of G-d, there are no blemishes. When we enhance our fear of G-d, we attain unblemished prayer. (See Likutey Moharan I, 14:8)

WE'RE ALL HOLY

Apter Rav

"Speak to Aharon and to his sons, that they shall withdraw from that which is holy of the Children of Israel - that which they consecrate to Me - so as not to defile My Holy Name." (22:2)

Aharon was commanded to tell his children that though they are of "holy seed," they should not consider themselves greater than the people and not defile themselves by thinking that they are "Holy only unto Me," for all the people are "Holy unto Me."

IT'S A NEW DAY

Reb Noson of Breslov

"When the sun has set, he shall become purified; afterwards he may eat of the holy things." (22:7)

The Torah laws of ritual purity and impurity allude to the phenomenon of renewal in creation. Whatever degree of impurity a person has - whether he has to wait one day or seven days - when night falls at the end of his waiting period and a new day arrives, he will attain purity. No matter how long it takes, one must be patient and wait. Eventually, the time for purity will come, for each day is a new creation. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 254)

FRESH START

Eglei Tal

"When the sun has set, he shall become purified; afterwards he may eat of the holy things." (22:7)

At the outset of Tractate Berachos, the Mishnah specifies that the time limit for the reading of the Shema is identical with the time when kohanim who had become defiled might partake of their offering. Compare with "When is the Shema to be read in the evening service? When the priests go in to eat of their offering." Why are these two time limits related to one another?

At nightfall, it becomes permissible for the kohanim to eat of their offering, even if they had been unpurified all day. They were not permitted to partake of it even after their immersion, but had to wait until the evening. This teaches us that the appearance of the first stars in the evening sky ushers in an entirely new period that has no connection with the day just ended. From this we infer that when evening comes the Shema we recited that morning no longer has any effect and we must renew our acceptance of the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Heaven with a new reading of the Shema.

SOUL FOOD

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Do not offer anything that has a blemish, because it will not gain favor for you." (22:20)

A person's table effects forgiveness in the same way as a sacrifice upon the Altar. (Berakhot 55a)

A Jew's eating is compared to eating from the sacrifices. Therefore the slaughtering knife must be perfect, without blemish, in order that one's food be prepared properly. Conceptually, this refers to cultivating fear of G-d, as the Zohar (11, 79) teaches: "Wherever you find fear [of G-d], there you find perfection." And when one attains fear of G-d, he will lack nothing, for "Those who fear G-d will not want" (Tehillim 34:11). (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 4a)

STAY IN YOUR LANE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Do not offer anything that has a blemish, because it will not gain favor for you." (22:20)

Mashal: There was once a young, newly married couple who moved into a new neighborhood. The first morning, as the two were eating breakfast, the young woman noticed her neighbor hanging the wash outside.

Without thinking, she commented, "That laundry is not very clean. Why would she hang dirty laundry outside for all to see?" Her husband looked on but remained silent.

The next morning, she once again noticed the neighbor's dirty laundry. "She really doesn't know how to wash correctly. Perhaps she needs better laundry soap." Her husband again remained silent. This went on, day after day, for quite some time.

About one month later, when the young couple sat down for their morning meal, the woman was surprised to see a nice clean wash on their neighbor's line. Excitedly, she told her husband, "Look, she has finally learned to wash her laundry correctly. I wonder who taught her this?"

With a sigh, her husband responded, "Who taught her? Nobody taught her! I got up early this morning and cleaned our windows!"

Nimshal: Just as a kohen who has a blemish becomes invalidated from performing the avodah in the Mishkan, so too, any person with a flaw in his character, his attitude or the manner which he interacts with others is viewed negatively in the eyes of the Almighty. Chazal teach us that one should focus on his own defects before lambasting others. What he finds when he "opens his eyes" just might surprise him.

IT'S ALL GOOD

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"When you sacrifice a thanksgiving-offering to Hashem, sacrifice it so that it may be acceptable in your favor." (22:29)

The Torah describes the Todah (thanksgiving) offering, explaining that it is brought as an expression of the donor's will.

Since, by definition, this offering is voluntary, what does the pasuk tell us by adding that it's an expression of the donor's will?

The Kesav Sofer suggests that people who find themselves in a precarious situation and still survive may have preferred not to be placed in the situation in the first place. The pasuk highlights that this Todah offering is an expression of deep acceptance and the understanding that what happens to us is ultimately for our own benefit. Gam zu l'tovah, "this too is for the good," is a way of life - acknowledging our situation and being grateful for all that we have.

REDEMPTION MINDSET

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You shall not profane My holy Name; but I will be sanctified among Bnei Yisrael. I am Hashem Who makes you holy." (22:32)

The most flagrant desecration of G-d's Name is the Jewish people's exile. The true meaning of exile is the condition in which G-d's presence is hidden behind the facade of nature - the laws of mindless cause and effect. Exile thus gives the world the impression that G-d is powerless to overcome the forces of nature and history. In this context, the grandest sanctification of G-d's Name will be the miraculous advent of the Messianic Era (Yechezkel 36:23). This is why the Torah obligates us to do our utmost to bring the exile to a quick and final end.

We must therefore constantly urge G-d to redeem us immediately, and, in addition, reorient our own consciousness away from the mentality of exile and toward the mentality of redemption. By cultivating our awareness of G-d's presently hidden miracles, we hasten the time when His miracles will become openly revealed to all. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 27, p. 175) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

CLOSING THE GAP

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You shall not profane My holy Name; but I will be sanctified among Bnei Yisrael. I am Hashem Who makes you holy." (22:32)

The words for "you must not desecrate" (ולא תחללו) also mean "you must not make a gap." By virtue of our Divine souls, we are all innately and continuously united with G-d. However, the materiality of life in the physical world can at times make us apathetic or antagonistic to this connection, causing us to feel estranged from G-d. We must therefore make efforts not to allow such a gap to develop. Time taken to foster and maintain our connection to G-d is indeed time well spent, from which we reap the continuous benefits of feeling energized and living an inspired life, motivated by devotion to our Divine mission to transform the world into G-d's true home. - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

GLORIFYING HASHEM

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"You shall not profane My holy Name; but I will be sanctified among Bnei Yisrael. I am Hashem Who makes you holy." (22:32)

A famous question is asked on this pasuk: what is the need for the double imperative - "You shall not desecrate... you shall sanctify me"? Doesn't the prohibition to desecrate G-d's name imply that we must sanctify it, and vice versa?

An incisive response is given by R' Shmuel Yaakov Rubinstein zt'l in his sefer Shears Menachem. It is quite possible to sanctify and desecrate Hashem's name at the same time, he says. The image of religion can easily be tarnished by some who act detrimentally in the name of religion. Thus, the Torah here instructs us: Through your pursuit of holy tasks and G-dliness, do not cause a desecration of the very ideals you seek to uphold.

This idea is further elucidated in the parshah of Shema. The command, "You shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might," is troubling. The ability to "love" is the culmination of knowledge and experience; loving cannot be imposed on a person, for it must come naturally. Therefore, Chazal explain the word "v'ahavta" in the causative sense, i.e. you must cause Hashem to be loved, with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might! Let people say: "He studies Torah and speaks kindly to others, is honest and honorable." This will cause G-d to be beloved in the eyes of the world. But if one studies Torah and is dishonest and unkind, he will profane Hashem's name and alienate others from Torah.

SPIRITUAL AGRICULTURE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"The following are My appointed days..." (23:2)

The three pilgrim festivals mark the key points of the agricultural cycle: Passover occurs when barley is harvested, Shavuot when wheat is harvested, and Sukkot when the produce is gathered in from the fields (Rabbeinu Bachye on Exodus 13:4).

Allegorically, G-d refers to the Jewish people as His produce (see Yirmiyahu 2:3; Hoshea 2:25). Just as a farmer sows grain in the earth in order to reap a much greater return, G-d "sows" Jewish souls in the physical world in order to enable them to accomplish much more than they can in their spiritual abode.

Furthermore, just as a seed's outer coating must disintegrate before the seed can grow, our coarse, outer husk - our ego - must be negated in order for us to grow spiritually.

Thus, in this context, the three pilgrim festivals celebrate our ongoing spiritual growth and the spiritual effect on the world (the "produce") that this growth yields. - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

INTRINSIC HOLINESS

Chiddushei HaRim

"...but I will be sanctified among Bnei Yisrael. I am Hashem Who makes you holy." (22:32)

This statement is followed by the commandments pertaining to the observance of the holidays, which sanctify the Jewish people and "which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations" (23:2).

It is because the Jewish nation is holy by nature that G-d endowed them with holiness, that in turn enables us to proclaim as holy the days that the Court of Law sanctifies as festivals.

PROCLAIM THE HOLY

Rebbe Nachman

"Speak to the Jewish people and say to them, 'There are appointed times that you should proclaim as holy festivals. These are My appointed times.'" (23:2)

Mikra'ei kodesh (holy festivals) literally means "proclaiming the holy." For the Festivals are associated with miracles that reveal Divine Will. Pesach recalls the miracles of the Ten Plagues, the Exodus from Egypt and the Splitting of the Red Sea. Shavuot recalls the Revelation at Sinai, with its accompanying miracles of thunder and lightning. Sukkot recalls the miraculous Clouds of Glory. Each Festival proclaims and announces Divine Will. When we observe the Festivals, we "proclaim the holy," revealing G-d's Providence and sovereignty. (see Likutey Moharan II, 4:6)

TRUST IN THE TZADDIK

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Speak to the Jewish people and say to them, 'There are appointed times that you should proclaim as holy festivals. These are My appointed times.'" (23:2)

Do not read Otam (אֹתָם, them), but Atem (you). "You" refers to the Sanhedrin. Even if the Sanhedrin errs in its calculations and declares the New Moon, or even if it declares the New Moon intentionally (at a wrong moment), its declaration stands (Rosh HaShanah 25a).

The sanctification of the Festivals depends on the Sages, who set the calendar according to the appearance of each New Moon. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 306)

The declaration of Rosh Chodesh (and, by extension, the dates of the Festivals) was given over to the Sages of the generation - even if they err in their calculations, and even if they intentionally schedule the Festival for a different date than seems to be the norm for that month! From here we learn the importance of having faith in the tzaddikim. Even G-d, Who is certainly aware of the true date of the New Moon, will accept as a Festival a date set by the Sages. (ibid., II, p. 115a-230)

LOVE FOR SHABBOS

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"For six days you may do work, and on the seventh day is a complete day of rest, a holy convocation. You shall not do any work." (23:3)

The Zohar writes: "The Divine Presence never leaves a Jew on Shabbos or Yom Tov, even on a weekday Shabbos." The mefarshim explain that a "weekday Shabbos" refers to a person who is undergoing extreme dire circumstances, or traveling, and loses track of time. Thus, whenever he is able to keep Shabbos, Hashem is always with him.

A Jew from Lithuania who was an expert in metalworking was enslaved in a Warsaw slave battalion during WWII. His expertise made him very valuable to the SS. He was allowed to walk around freely and was given extra food. One day he snuck into the cabin of R' Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam zt'l (Klausenberger Rebbe), and said, "Rebbe, in my line of work, I have to violate Shabbos by transgressing Torah prohibitions. I think it is better to be transferred to a group that has to carry heavy logs and boulders, which is not a Torah prohibition but a rabbinical decree."

The Rebbe asked him how he was going to pull it off. "I will burn my hands with scalding water so that I will be unable to continue my delicate work," he replied. "The Germans will then have to transfer me to another work group."

"Carrying boulders meant certain death," reflected the Rebbe later. "Many were not able to hold out for more than a few days. I tried to convince him not to put himself in such danger. But he insisted that he wanted to keep Shabbos as best as he could. Only with great difficulty did I persuade him that he was able to help the lives of many other Jews as a metalworker, and then he relented. Certainly, seeing such a Jew strengthened us all in the joy of 'asher bachar banu mi'kol ha'amim - Who has chosen us from all the other nations.'"

DOWN TO THE DETAILS

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"For six days you may do work, and on the seventh day is a complete day of rest, a holy convocation. You shall not do any work; it is a Shabbos for Hashem in all your dwelling places. These are the appointed festivals of Hashem, the holy convocations, which you shall designate in their appropriate times." (23:3-4)

The Torah juxtaposes the obligation to observe both Shabbos and Yom Tov. Rashi asks why these two mitzvos are mentioned right next to each other. He answers that one who desecrates Yom Tov is considered to have desecrated Shabbos. However, one who observes Yom Tov is considered to have observed Shabbos as well.

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Darash Moshe) states that the juxtaposition of these two mitzvos highlight their interdependence. One's belief in Shabbos is dependent on one's belief in Yom Tov, and vice versa. Both beliefs are fundamental to one's faith in Hashem.

A person who observes Shabbos, which means that he or she believes that there is a Creator of the world, but denies Yom Tov, which is the recognition of Hashem's Divine intervention, has undermined their emunah. Similarly, one who believes that Hashem is intimately involved in the world but does not also recognize that Hashem is the Creator of the world is a heretic. We must acknowledge wholeheartedly that Hashem both created the world and is actively involved in the ongoing existence of the world.

Most often we are cognizant that Hashem is the Creator of the world, but we sometimes forget that Hashem is constantly and consistently involved in our lives. We fool ourselves into thinking that we are in control and fail to realize that Hashem runs the world.

Let us remind ourselves that while we must exert maximum effort into all that we do, it is Hashem Who will ultimately decide how successful we will be.

HASHEM'S HELPING HAND

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"On the fifteenth day of the month [of Nisan] begins the Festival of Matzos..." (23:6)

Although throughout the Torah, this festival is usually referred to as "the Festival of Matzos," in common usage it is usually called "Passover." (The term "Passover" in the Torah always refers to the sacrifice associated with this holiday rather than to the holiday itself.)

According to the Chassidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, the two names reflect two different perspectives on the holiday.

G-d wishes to stress the greatness of the Jewish people; He therefore focuses on the matzah. Matzah recalls how the Jews left Egypt in such haste that they did not have time to let their dough rise, highlighting their implicit faith in G-d and their willingness to follow Him wherever He directed them to go.

We, on the other hand, relate to the holiday as an opportunity to praise G-d and thank Him; we therefore refer to it as Passover, recalling G-d's great miracles, particularly when He "passed over" the Jewish homes and brought His plagues only upon the Egyptians.

We should relate similarly to all our worldly accomplishments. Rather than focusing on our exceptional abilities, which enabled us to succeed, we should focus on how G-d's "hand" always miraculously assists us. We should leave it to G-d to focus on our merits! (Sichot Kodesh 5741, vol. 4, pp. 236-237) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Speak to the Jewish people and say to them, 'When you enter the Land that I am giving you and you reap its harvest, bring an omer of your first harvest to the Kohen.'" (23:10)

Eating can represent either the force that draws a person away from G-d or the force that draws him closer. Adam's eating from the Tree represents the opposing force, a deed that leads to death. Holy eating, on the other hand, leads to life. We are forbidden to eat from the new harvest until we bring a sacrifice, which elevates our food to the level of holiness. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 137a)

The earth has a gravitational force that draws things towards it. Harvesting represents the opposing force, pulling things away from their source. The earth, which people tread upon, represents humility. Arrogance embodies the opposing force. The earth is characterized by the tzaddik, who draws people close to G-d. Arrogance is characterized by people whose words and deeds prevent others from drawing close to the tzaddik.

Moshe warned the Jews, "Guard yourselves, lest you forget G-d" (Devarim 11:16). When someone is hungry, he will pray to G-d for food, but after he feels sated, he is likely to become haughty and forget G-d. Therefore, we do not eat from the new harvest until we bring a sacrifice to G-d, demonstrating that we wish to draw close to Him despite having to use an opposing force at times. (Likutey Halakhot VI, p. 135a)

Barley, the Omer-offering, is essentially animal feed, reminding us to sacrifice our animalistic tendencies in order to return to G-d. This offering is brought on Pesach, the holiday commemorating our birth as a nation. Just as a human being is born without knowledge and can rise above his animalistic tendencies only by developing his intellect, we as a nation must sacrifice our animalistic behavior to attain the status of humans. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 101a)

PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE

Reb Noson of Breslov

"From the day after the day of rest [Pesach]... You should not eat any bread, roasted grain or fresh grain, until the day that you bring this offering to your Lord." (23:11-14)

It is forbidden to eat from the new harvest until the sixteenth day of Nisan [the second day of Pesach] (see Menachos 65b).

Just as a person must practice patience in earning his livelihood, waiting for the time that G-d will send it to him, he should perform all his devotions in a spirit of waiting for the time when he can truly enter G-d's service.

The holiday of Pesach commemorates the beginning of the Jews' service of G-d as a nation. The offering brought on the second day of Pesach - an omer of barley - hints at the need for patience. Barley represents food for animals, which we resemble when we first begin to serve G-d and have not yet attained intellect. Through the Omer-offering, we recognize that we are distant and are willing to wait until we can draw closer to G-d. (Likutey Halakhot V, p. 141a)

SHINE BRIGHT

Rabbi Elimelech Biderman

"You shall count for yourselves, from the day after the day of rest [Pesach], from the day on which you will bring the Omer wave-offering..." (23:15)

The Ohr HaChaim (Vayikra 23:15) writes: "u'sefartem lachem (count for you) - the purpose of counting the Omer is for your own good, for your own purity. Chazal tell us that the luchos were made from Sanpirin stone [sapphire], and that the neshamos of Yidden are compared to the luchos, but due to sins and impurity, they lost their luster. The Torah says: "u'sefartem lachem - make yourselves once again like sapphire stone. Shine brightly once again." From this Ohr HaChaim we see that by simply counting the Omer, we are purifying our souls.

COUNTING OUR WORDS

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"You shall count for yourselves, from the day after the day of rest [Pesach], from the day on which you will bring the Omer wave-offering, seven complete weeks they shall be." (23:15)

The days of sefiras ha'omer are special and unique for they have an extraordinary power that can help us grow spiritually. The Mezeritcher Maggid zt'l notes that the word u'sefartem - "and you shall count" stems from the same root as sappir (sapphire), a precious and valuable stone which shines brightly and is beautiful to behold. During these awesome days of sefiras ha'omer, as the Jewish people count forty-nine days until Kabbalas HaTorah, the Torah is encouraging every Jew to work on himself and improve his inner beauty until he is bright and shiny like a sapphire.

During the seven weeks of Sefirah, 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died a horrible strangulation-type of death, and every year we mourn for them. Chazal tell us that the reason the students of Rabbi Akiva died between Pesach and Shavuos was, "Mipnei shelo nahagu kavod zeh lazeh - Because they did not treat each other with respect." Many mefarshim explain that this "lack of respect" refers to lashon hara that the students spoke against each other. (In fact, the numerical value of "Lashon hara" [661] is equal to that of "mipnei shelo nahagu kavod zeh lazeh.")

Clearly, their deaths during these weeks were not incidental; the Divine service of these weeks is to learn to care for others as the Jews did in the desert, yet the students of Rabbi Akiva failed to incorporate this lesson and were summarily punished.

R' Matisyahu Glazerson shlita points out that if the word "עומר" spelled with an "א", the meaning changes to "saying." Sefiras ha'omer can therefore be translated as "counting what is said" - counting and measuring our words. This is especially the time to guard our tongues and watch our speech.

It is interesting to note that our goal during sefiras ha'omer is to transform our animalistic tendencies to that of refined human behavior. We see this from the fact that the Korban Omer, which consists of barley and is considered animal food, is offered on Pesach. On Shavuos, though, we bring the Korban Shte Halechem which includes wheat bread, the food of man.

When Hashem created Adam HaRishon, He blew into him a living spirit which separated him from all the animals. Rashi tells us what this spirit was thought and speech, particularly in that order! If you truly wish to grow at this time, and raise yourself from the level of an animal to a holy person worthy of receiving the Torah, you must think before you speak! It is your task to fulfill the mitzvos of ספירת העומר and "אומר" - counting your words and deciding if they are important, necessary and befitting such a great and special Jewish person as yourself!

MAKING EVERY DAY COUNT

Reb Noson of Breslov

"You shall count for yourselves, from the day after the day of rest [Pesach], from the day on which you will bring the Omer wave-offering, seven complete weeks they shall be." (23:15)

The prophet says, "Avraham was one" (Yechezkel 33:24). In other words, Avraham saw himself as an individual in his service of G-d. He ignored the obstacles put before him by family and friends, seeking only to serve G-d as best he could. The Counting of the Omer conveys the same idea. We must count for ourselves: We should make each day and every thing count, just as Avraham did. (Likutey Halakhot III, p. 326-164a)

Everything we do is confined by time and space. The more we sin and descend into materialism, the more we are attached to time and space. The Counting of the Omer begins on the day after Pesach - when we were "born" as a nation - to teach us that each day (and place) counts and is significant. We must learn to guard ourselves and "depart from Egypt" - from evil traits, evil times and evil places. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 40a)

We count the forty-nine days of the Omer in a way that always reminds us of the beginning. That is, "Today is the first day of the Omer," "Today is the second day of the Omer," and so on. The beginning imparts strength and vitality to all that follows. The Counting of the Omer teaches us that we must always draw upon the strength of the beginning so that our continued efforts imbibe our initial enthusiasm. (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 70)

THE OMER

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Until the end of the seventh week, you shall count fifty days..." (23:16)

The Counting of the Omer helps us prepare for Shavuot, as we count each day leading up to that holiday with longing and desire to receive the Torah. From this, we learn that the desire to do a mitzvah is as important as the mitzvah itself. (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 76)

The Counting of the Omer alludes to the obstacles that challenge us as we aspire to receive the Torah on Shavuot. Each day, we must strengthen ourselves and remain steadfast in order to overcome the obstacles to receiving the Torah. (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 138a)

Count fifty days Sefirah (ספירה, counting) is similar to Sefer (ספר, book). The Ari writes that the days of the Counting of the Omer in general represent constricted intellect. Each day corresponds to a different intellect, and these intellects all add up to help a person attain the higher intellect of Shavuot, when the Torah (great intellect) was given. One who grows spiritually each day adds more knowledge of Torah to his constricted intellect, as if he is increasing the "sefer" of the Torah.

Counting the days enables us to attain purity before Shavuot. What is the connection between counting the days and purity? Prior to Creation, all was One - the Unity of G-d. When Creation took place, purity came into being, enabling a person to either merge with G-d and become holy, or to descend into impurity. Impurity is synonymous with falsehood, which is based on multiplicity and diverse possibilities (as opposed to truth, which is one). Falsehood can take hold where more than one exists, just as impurity can take hold from the state of purity.

To ascend from impurity to purity, we must rid ourselves of falsehood. Having merited to the Exodus, when we left falsehood and impurity behind in Egypt, we ascend to purity specifically through the Counting of the Omer. That is, we return to the root of falsehood - to the number 1 - and begin counting. We connect each number to the number 1, to the One G-d. Thus, counting the days leads to purity. (Likutey Halakhot V, p. 192)

The Counting of the Omer teaches us that our days are numbered and we will eventually have to give a full accounting for each day of our lives. Not one day is meant to go to waste, G-d forbid, as implied by the verse "complete weeks" (Vayikra 23:15).

The Counting of the Omer also prepares us for Shavuot, the Festival commemorating the Giving of the Torah.

Torah is acquired by "counting each day" - that is, making each day count by filling it with good deeds which testify to our attempts to serve G-d.

The Torah calls this process "counting the Omer," since an omer is a measure - alluding back to the idea that our days are numbered and we should "measure up" to our abilities and responsibilities. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 126b-127a)

RENEWED EXCITEMENT

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"Until the end of the seventh week, you shall count fifty days, and you shall bring a new meal offering to Hashem." (23:16)

The Kli Yakar points out that the word chadasha - "new" which is used regarding the korban that is brought on Shavuot, is an allusion to the approach that we should have towards the Torah. He explains that we should feel as though the Torah is new to us, as if it were given to us today.

In fact, he points out that Shavuot is one of two Yamim Tovim that the Torah does not explicitly link to what we are commemorating. We are able to figure out that Shavuot, which is seven weeks after the second day of Pesach, is the holiday that celebrates our receiving of the Torah. However, the Torah does not specifically connect the two events.

The Kli Yakar explains that Hashem doesn't want us to celebrate and learn the Torah only once a year like we commemorate Sukkos once a year by sitting in a sukkah or celebrate Pesach annually by eating matzah. Instead, we should approach the learning and observing of Torah each day as a new opportunity to re-accept the Torah.

It is for this reason that the Torah leaves the connection ambiguous; Hashem wants us to treat each day as a new kabbalas haTorah.

Throughout the journey of our lives, we can find ourselves in a rut, feeling stagnant and stale in our avodas Hashem. The Kli Yakar's insight should serve to reinvigorate us and help us realize that each day we have the chance to start fresh, as if the Torah was given to us today.

With this in mind, we can rejuvenate ourselves and our families with renewed excitement, which will help us get inspired and connect us in a deeper way with Hashem.

LEADING WITH COMPASSION

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“Until the end of the seventh week, you shall count fifty days...” (23:16)

In the city of Vilna, about 80 years ago, lived the recognized posek hador, the preeminent halachic authority of his generation, R' Chaim Ozer Grodzensky zt'l. People came from near and far to seek out his rulings and advice. Once, R' Meir Yechiel of Ostrovitz zt'l, an exceptionally humble and brilliant rebbe, came to Vilna and met with R' Chaim Ozer. The Vilna Rav asked his guest to relate over an original Torah thought. At first he declined, but at R' Chaim Ozer's urging, the Ostrovitzer Rebbe relented and related a brilliant Torah insight. R' Chaim Ozer excitedly exclaimed, “You are truly a great rav!”

R' Meir Yechiel looked at him, puzzled. “Simply relaying a Torah thought does not qualify a person as a great rav,” he responded in a meek tone of voice.

“Well, what in your opinion does it take to be considered a ‘great rav?’” R' Chaim Ozer asked with surprise.

“Easing the burden of the Jewish people,” R' Meir Yechiel immediately answered. “And I can even prove it. The Gemara (Makkos 22) states: ‘People are foolish. They rise in the presence of a sefer Torah, but they do not rise before a rabbi.’ For in the Torah it is clearly written that for certain sins, a man is to receive forty lashes; however, the rabbis defined this to mean thirty-nine lashes. In a sense, Chazal were able to ‘overrule’ the words of the Torah. As a result, they should be accorded more honor than even a sefer Torah.” R' Chaim Ozer nodded.

“But look,” continued the Ostrovitzer Rebbe, his voice rising with emotion. “There is yet another example in the Torah where we find that Chazal ‘overruled’ the written word of the Torah, and that is regarding the counting of the Omer. The pasuk states - ‘You shall count fifty days.’ But as we know, the rabbis understand the mitzvah of sefiras ha’omer to be only forty-nine days, and not fifty. Why does the Gemara cite the example of the thirty-nine lashes rather than the case of counting forty-nine days?”

R' Meir Yechiel lowered his voice back to his customary meek tone. “It is because sefiras ha’omer has no effect on the next person. On the other hand, to receive thirty-nine lashes instead of forty would save another Jew a great deal of pain. We see from here, that when the Gemara wants to prove the greatness of a rabbi, it cites the case of the thirty-nine lashes, which highlights the sensitivity and compassion of our leaders.”

UNITY THROUGH TORAH

Reb Noson of Breslov

“From your dwelling places, you should bring two loaves of bread as a wave-offering. The bread should be prepared from two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour and baked leavened. These are First-offerings to G-d.” (23:17)

Shavuot is called Atzeret (עצרת, assembly), from the word Atzor (עצור, gather, assemble), since the Torah, which was given on Shavuot, has the power to unite souls. Thus, Scripture states: “They encamped in the desert; he encamped there” (Shemos 19:2) - implying that the Torah united the people. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 171a)

BECAUSE HASHEM SAID SO

Meshech Chochmah

And you shall make a proclamation on this very day; there shall be a holy convocation for yourselves... when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not completely reap the corner of your field.. (23:21-22)

You are to observe Shavuot, the festival commemorating the Giving of the Torah, not only for the sake of the statutes for which we would never have felt a need if they had not been set down in the Torah, but also in thanksgiving for the laws that readily make sense to us, such as the laws pertaining to compassion on the unfortunate and charity for the poor. For experience has shown that without faith in G-d, humans can become like wild animals with not even a spark of compassion, making them capable of committing the basest crimes in order to satisfy their selfish desires.

Only because “I am Hashem your G-d” do you observe also the commandments that are “for the poor man and the stranger.” Therefore, you are to proclaim Shavuot as “a holy convocation” to give thanks even for such readily understandable commandments of charity and compassion as these, for had the Torah not been given, you may never have come to observe them.

MAINTAIN THEIR DIGNITY

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“And you shall not gather up the gleanings of your harvest; for the poor and the convert you shall leave them.” (23:22)

This verse concerns the laws of Peah and Leket the obligation to leave certain parts of one's field and crop for the poor to come and collect freely. Rashi notes that the words “you shall leave them” are written to instruct the landowner not to assist the receiver of the crop in any way; rather the poor person must collect everything by himself.

This instruction is difficult to understand. If the Torah is commanding the field owner to help the poor people of his town by leaving his gleanings, why is he prohibited from going further in his act of kindness and helping them in every possible way?

The answer is that by allowing the poor person to gather the gleanings himself, he will feel less degraded than by being handed pure “charity.” Moreover, the effort he exerted in picking the crops himself will lessen any feelings of humiliation at receiving a free hand-out.

This message was experienced very recently when a Swiss philanthropist donated new suits, shoes, shirts and ties to young married men in Jerusalem. The value of the entire set should have cost more than one thousand shekels, yet the price was set at twenty shekels for the entire outfit. When asked "For the sake of twenty shekels, why don't you just give it away for free?" The donor simply replied, "But then they will feel like they are receiving charity."

We see from here that even though we may not be in a position to leave a field for the poor, we can certainly apply this halacha to our own lives by helping others to help themselves.

A TIME FOR LOVE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Speak to the Jewish people, saying, 'The first day of the seventh month will be a day of rest for you. It is a holy festival of remembrance and shofar-blowing.'" (23:24)

Tishrei, the seventh month of the Jewish year, can be divided into two contrasting yet complementary halves: The first half, containing the holidays of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, focuses us on teshuvah ("repentance," "returning to G-d"). During this half of the month, our attention is directed inward, toward personal spiritual growth and development.

In contrast, the second half of Tishrei, containing the holidays of Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret, focuses us on bringing Divine consciousness into the world through the performance of G-d's commandments. This infusion of Divine consciousness into reality evokes the joyousness that characterizes this half of the month.

The common denominator of both halves is their emphasis on Jewish unity. It is our shared source in G-d that enables us to reroot ourselves during the first half of the month. It is our shared commonality that makes the joy we express in the second half of the month unlimited.

Thus, in order to optimally internalize the Divine revelations available to us in this month, it is important to demonstrate loving kindness throughout it. This will enable both the innerness and the joyousness of its holidays to last throughout the coming year. (Encyclical letter of 13 Tishrei 5737, printed in Likutei Sichot, vol. 14, pp. 469-472) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

THE BLAST OF REDEMPTION

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Speak to the Jewish people, saying, 'The first day of the seventh month will be a day of rest for you. It is a holy festival of remembrance and shofar-blowing.'" (23:24)

The main mitzvah of Rosh HaShanah is the blowing of the shofar. In the Future, the shofar will sound the call of redemption to return to the Holy Land. Thus, the shofar represents the Redemption, which will reveal the sanctity of the Holy Land. (Likutey Halachot II, p. 51a)

HOLY SOUNDS

Rebbe Nachman

"Speak to the Jewish people, saying, 'The first day of the seventh month will be a day of rest for you. It is a holy festival of remembrance and shofar-blowing.'" (23:24)

Shofar (שופר) is related to Shufra (שופרא, Aramaic for "choicest quality"), referring to the heart. The sounds of the shofar subdue the desires of the heart. In addition, the shofar represents and elicits prophecy, prayer and the fear of G-d. (See Likutey Moharan I, 1:14)

The shofar represents holy sounds, which have the power to subdue a person's physical desires - to circumcise his flesh, as it were - enabling him to draw closer to holiness and receive the pure light of G-dliness.

Any sound produced in the pursuit of spirituality - such as a sigh, a song, or the jingle of coins given to charity - is considered to be a sound of holiness. And the more a person listens to holy sounds, the more he subjugates his body to his soul.

BLASTS OF EMOTION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Speak to the Jewish people, saying, 'The first day of the seventh month will be a day of rest for you. It is a holy festival of remembrance and shofar-blowing.'" (23:24)

The sounding of the shofar on Rosh HaShanah embodies the process of return to G-d and spiritual renewal. Specifically, the shofar is sounded in three distinct blasts:

The first is tekiah, a long, single-toned blast, expressing the simple scream that breaks out uncontrollably when we are overcome with emotion over our deep, ineffable pain of feeling estranged from G-d.

This is followed by shevarim, a series of three medium-length sighs, and teruah, a series of at least nine staccato wails. These blasts reflect how we proceed to realize the implications of our estrangement from G-d, and are so overwhelmed that we lose our breath and try to catch it.

The final blast is an additional tekiah, reflecting how, after all our strength is spent, we cry out in yearning for relief. As opposed to the first tekiah, this hopeful cry is one of release, and has a calming effect.

Having expressed our existential shock and pain, we know that G-d will accept our desire to renew ourselves and our relationship with Him. - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

SERVING WITH SIMCHAH

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"It is a day of complete rest for you, and you shall afflict yourselves; on the ninth of the month in the evening, from evening to evening, shall you rest on your day of rest." (23:32)

The Gemara (Brachos 8b) wonders what these pesukim seem to indicate. Does one fast on the ninth of Tishrei? Doesn't one only fast on the tenth of Tishrei, which is Yom Kippur? The Gemara answers that if one eats and drinks on the ninth of Tishrei, the day prior to Yom Kippur, the Torah considers it as if one fasted on the ninth and tenth.

Rav Shimshon Dovid Pincus (Tiferes Shimshon) wonders how it could be that one who eats on the ninth of Tishrei can be equated with achieving the same level of kedushah as one who fasts on Yom Kippur.

On Yom Kippur we daven certain tefillos, such as the avodah of the Kohen Gadol and Neilah, which we don't recite the rest of the year. We attempt to connect to Hashem on a level that is unattainable at any other time of year. How could the Gemara suggest that the ninth of Tishrei is on the same spiritual level as Yom Kippur?

Rav Pincus suggests that there is something that we can accomplish on the ninth of Tishrei that we can't achieve on Yom Kippur.

On Yom Kippur, we work towards internalizing that there is no one but Hashem to rely on. The environment of Yom Kippur, where we fast and daven, facilitates introspection and reflection, which allows us to realize our reliance on Hashem. On the ninth of Tishrei, however, we eat, drink and enjoy ourselves.

It is far more challenging to recognize the role Hashem plays in our lives and our dependence on Him in this type of festive atmosphere. Therefore, if we can intensify our connection to Hashem within a context of Simchah, when we eat and drink, despite the difficulty, then we can attain lofty and spiritual heights. It is for this reason that both the ninth and tenth of Tishrei provide us with different but equivalent opportunities to connect to Hashem in commensurate ways, as the Gemara suggests.

At times, it is much easier to serve Hashem when we either put or find ourselves in situations of yiras Hashem. There is a certain intensity that exists, which is conducive to connecting to Hashem, when one is in awe of Him. Rav Pincus is teaching us, based on the Gemara in Brachos, that we must also strive to connect with Hashem through Simchah. We must see Hashem in the world of materialism, as difficult as that may be. We need to use those opportunities to enjoy Hashem's world but also to work towards developing a relationship with Him predicated on feelings of elation and joy, and not only fear. With this perspective, we will not only recognize Hashem's mastery over us, but we will draw close to Him with feelings of Simchah, which will surely serve to deepen our connection to Him.

AWE AND LOVE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Speak to the Jewish people, saying, 'On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the festival of Sukkot to G-d, lasting seven days.'" (23:34)

The fact that Sukkot is observed almost immediately after the holidays of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur naturally associates it with them, and thus, besides its historical and agricultural significance, Sukkot possesses a third level of significance, as the conclusion of the High Holiday period of the month of Tishrei.

Thus, on Sukkot, as on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, we are meant to renew and revitalize our relationship with G-d, thereby eliciting the new and enhanced influx of Divine life-force particular to the new year. The difference between the first two holidays and Sukkot is that whereas during the former, we focus on G-d in ways that engender awe of Him, during the latter, we focus on Him in ways that engender love of Him. Thus, what we accomplish on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur through earnest, extended prayer and introspective contrition is accomplished on Sukkot through joy. - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

THE SEVEN CANDLES

Rebbe Nachman

"Speak to the Jewish people, saying, 'On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the festival of Sukkot to G-d, lasting seven days.'" (23:34)

On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the festival of Sukkot. The seven days of Sukkot commemorate the Seven Clouds of Glory which surrounded the Jews in the desert. These Seven Clouds, in turn, correspond to the "seven candles" of the head - the two eyes, two ears, two nostrils and mouth (with the head itself corresponding to the Menorah; Tikkuney Zohar, Introduction, p. 13b). When a person purifies his "seven candles," he attains a holy spirit, or "transcendental consciousness." This transcendental consciousness is referred to as "clouds of glory," which surround him like clouds or like a sukkah. Thus, by sanctifying our "seven candles," we can merit to draw upon ourselves the sanctity and protection of the sukkah, even during the year.

NO TIME TO SPARE

Chasam Sofer

"...and you shall rejoice before Hashem, your G-d, seven days." (23:40)

Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Chalaftah said, "When we rejoiced on the Rejoicing of the Drawing of Waters, we did not see sleep with our eyes." (Sukkah 13)

How could they have been expected to "see sleep with our eyes"?

Rabbi Yehoshua meant that they did not have time to indulge in the kind of sleep during which the eyes are not closed; i.e., idleness that has often been likened to sleeping with one's eyes open, because they were continually busy performing rites of worship and hadn't even a moment left to waste.

READY FOR BATTLE

Reb Noson of Breslov

“On the first day, take for yourself the fruit of a citron tree, branches of date palms, myrtle branches and willows of the brook, and rejoice before G-d your Lord for seven days.” (23:40)

On Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, a battle rages between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Each claims victory, and evil claims that the sins of the Jews have caused their downfall. How do we know who is victorious? We see that whoever holds the weapons in his hands is the victor. These “weapons” are the Four Species (Zohar I, 221a).

This is difficult to understand. In any battle, we can see who is victorious. Why is the victor the one “who holds the weapons in his hands”?

“Holding the weapons” signifies that the bearer is willing to take charge of his life by performing mitzvot. He continually seeks spirituality, unlike the one who conquers and then casts his weapons aside. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 364)

The battle between good and evil is a continuous one. On Sukkot, when we recite the Hallel prayer and praise G-d for His help and protection, we display our faith that good has triumphed over evil. By holding the weapons of G-d’s mitzvot - the Four Species - in our hands, we show we are aware of the wiles of evil that attack us continually, and we stand ready to fight and be victorious. (ibid., III, p. 86)

The etrog should be Hadur (הדור, beautiful), which is like HaDor (הדור, the generation). For the main beauty is the revelation of G-d, which is passed down from generation to generation. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 200)

The willow, which has no smell and no taste, represents the Jew who is bereft of Torah and good deeds (Vayikra Rabbah 30:12).

Arvei nachal (ערבי נחל, willows of the brook) connotes Eiruv (ערוב, mixture). We should strive to bring all those who are distant from G-d into the fold, and let them mingle together with the rest of the nation. (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 120a-240)

The Four Species represent all types of Jews. The fact that the Four Species must be taken together to fulfill the mitzvah indicates that only when there is unity can the Jews be elevated to their proper station. Through unity, even those who are distant from G-d are still bound up with Him and have a means to draw close to Him. Similarly, the sukkah must be covered with the waste matter of bushes and plants, implying that we must include even the lowest levels of humanity (i.e., the sinners) in our devotions. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 209a)

Just by taking the Four Species in one’s hand, it is like taking G-d into one’s hands (i.e., one attains spirituality). (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 364)

HELD TOGETHER IN UNITY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“On the first day, take for yourself the fruit of a citron tree, branches of date palms, myrtle branches and willows of the brook, and rejoice before G-d your Lord for seven days.” (23:40)

Study chiefly benefits the student; it is therefore represented by a fruit’s taste, which can only be savored by the person eating it. Good deeds, in contrast, benefit the public; they are therefore represented by fragrance, which can be smelled by anyone within a reasonable distance from the fruit.

Therefore, the citron (etrog), which possesses both taste and fragrance, represents those who are rich both in knowledge of the Torah and in good deeds.

The palm stalk (lulav), whose fruit (the date) has taste but no smell, represents those who are rich in the knowledge of the Torah but deficient in good deeds.

The myrtle (hadas), which has fragrance but no taste, represents those who are rich in good deeds but deficient in the knowledge of the Torah.

The willow (aravah), which possesses neither taste nor fragrance, represents those who are deficient both in knowledge of the Torah and in good deeds. (Vayikra Rabbah 30:12)

By bringing these four plants together, we express the intrinsic unity of the Jewish people. (Likutey Sichot, vol. 4, pp. 1159-1160; ibid., vol. 29, pp. 223-224) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

SIMPLICITY AND UNITY

Reb Noson of Breslov

“You should dwell in sukkahs for seven days. All citizens of Israel should dwell in sukkahs.” (23:42)

The sukkah is made specifically from the waste matter of the harvest. This waste matter teaches us simplicity, showing us that we cannot attain the inner devotions of serving G-d unless we first build our lives with a simple approach. Then we can merit to sit in the sukkah, the “shade of faith” (cf. Zohar III, 103a), which corresponds to the sanctity of the Holy Land. (see Likutey Halakhot I, p. 484)

The lulav (date palm) also represents simplicity. Of all the Four Species, the lulav is the straightest and most simple in appearance. The lulav represents the tzaddik, who is joined with simple people and even sinners (as represented by the other Species). (see ibid., I, p. 243a)

All Jews are worthy to sit in one sukkah (Sukkah 27b).

Following the Days of Awe and Judgment (Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur), we merit to Sukkot, which represents love. Through this great love, all Jews can unite and dwell in one sukkah. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 147b)

SEASON OF KNOWLEDGE

Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman

“So that your generations may know that I caused the Children of Israel to dwell in booths.” (23:43)

This does not mean “booths” in the literal sense but is symbolic of the clouds of glory. (Rashi)

In view of Rashi’s statement, the Baal HaTurim asked why Sukkos is not observed in Nissan, the month when the Jews left Egypt protected from the blazing desert sun by the “clouds of glory.”

The Chiddushei HaRm replied: In connection with Sukkos, the Torah tells us “that your generations may know.” This implies that knowledge is one of the requirements for the observance of this festival. All year long we are full of transgressions, and since it is said that we sin only when the spirit of folly has entered us, it must be assumed that we are then lacking in knowledge and hence cannot properly fulfill the commandment to observe Sukkos.

Only in the month of Tishrei, after we have cleansed ourselves and obtained atonement on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, do we have the knowledge that qualifies us to observe Sukkos. Hence, that season, rather than the month of the Exodus, is the proper time for the celebration of Sukkos.

IT ALL ADDS UP

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“And thus Moshe declared the appointed times of Hashem to Bnei Yisrael.” (23:44)

The Gemara states: The commandment is to read (about each holiday) in its time (Megillah 32a).

The Ben Ish Chai, Chacham Rabbeinu Yosef Chaim zt’l (Ben Yehoyada), says a remarkable thing in the name of the Sefer Sha’ar Hechatzir.

The Shalosh Regalim come to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf, and when we read about each festival in its time it lends to our nation’s forgiveness. How do the festivals bring us kapparah? The Jewish people served the Egel Hazahav for a period of six hours until Moshe Rabbeinu came down from the mountain and put an end to their misplaced worship. In the same manner that a piece of non-kosher food that gets mixed in a pot needs an amount of kosher food sixty times greater for it to be nullified and for the entire pot of food to be considered kosher (batul b’shishim), so too, the six hours of sinning during the Chet Ha’egel requires sixty times that amount of time to achieve atonement.

If one were to total up the amount of hours during the (Biblically prescribed) seven days of Pesach (168), seven days of Sukkos (168) and one day of Shavuot (24), it adds up to 360 hours, which is precisely sixty times six. Thus, we see that by celebrating the Shalosh Regalim, we can expiate and nullify the sin of the Golden Calf. Furthermore, when we read about the festivals in their proper time, we are fulfilling the dictum of our Sages: One who studies the portions of the korbanos is as if he sacrificed the korbanos (Menachos 110a). By reading about the festivals, the mitzvos associated with them and their individual offerings, it is as if we actually celebrate them in their most perfect manner and offer their unique korbanos. In this way, we will have truly brought about the requisite atonement needed to cleanse the Jewish nation.

THE INTERNAL FLAME

Reb Noson of Breslov

“...bring pure, pressed olive oil for lighting, to keep a lamp burning continuously.” (24:2)

The Ner HaMa’aravi (Western Lamp, also known as the Eternal Flame) stands as testimony that the Divine Presence dwells within the Jews. (Rashi on Vayikra 24:3)

Even though “G-d your Lord is a consuming fire” (Devarim 4:24), this fire does not consume the Jews. On the contrary, this fire burns within them so they can become much more attached to G-d. (Likutey Halakhot III, p. 247a)

HOLY LEFTOVERS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“He must set up the lamps upon the pure Menorah, before G-d, regularly.” (24:4)

This verse teaches us that the lamps of the Menorah must be cleaned out before they are refilled and relit each day (Rashi). The ashes that are leftover from the previous day’s wicks are considered holy, and thus may not be used for any non-holy purposes (Mishneh Torah, Pesulei HaMukdashin 19:13).

We can learn from this the following lesson:

G-d instructs us to engage in whatever mundane pursuits are necessary for our livelihood or overall well-being. He asks that we do so, however, “for the sake of heaven,” i.e., having in mind that these mundane pursuits serve a higher purpose - that of enabling us to fulfill our Divine mission and draw closer to G-d through our explicitly holy pursuits, for which we should allot the appropriate amounts of time and resources.

It sometimes happens that we are able to tend to our holy or mundane pursuits in less time (or with less resources) than we anticipated. In such cases, these “leftovers” should themselves be used for holy purposes, rather than for mundane pursuits - just like the leftover ashes of the Menorah. - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

SYMBOL OF LOVE

Imrei Tzvi

"You shall set them upon the pure table before Hashem..." (24:6)

This teaches that they would lift it and display the show-bread to the Festival pilgrims and say to them: "Behold the love in which you are held by the Omnipresent; it is taken away as fresh as it was set down." (Chagigah 26)

Why were the pilgrims shown just this particular miracle; i.e., that the show-bread would remain fresh for eight whole days?

The Sages (Yoma 76) begin their answer with a question: "Why," they asked, "did the manna fall from Heaven every day and not just once a year? There are two reasons. One was that they could meet with their Father in Heaven each day, just as each day a king gives his son whatever he needs, so that he may visit with him at least once a day. The other reason was so that the Jews would have fresh bread to eat daily."

The miracle of the show-bread is proof that the first reason is the correct explanation. For if the show-bread could still be as fresh and warm a whole week after baking as it had been when it had first come out of the oven, the manna, too, could have remained fresh all year long. Hence, it would have been enough for G-d to have the manna come down from Heaven only once a year. But G-d chose to send down the manna each day, because like the king who loved his son, He loved the Jews so much that He wanted them to go each day to meet with them. Hence, the show-bread was shown to the festival pilgrims as a symbol of G-d's abiding love for His people.

IT WILL ALL MAKE SENSE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"The Israelite woman's son clearly pronounced the Name [of G-d] and blasphemed." (24:11)

The lechem hapanim (showbread) was put on the shulchan in the Mishkan every Shabbos, and was removed the subsequent Shabbos and eaten by the kohanim. According to the medrash, the mekallel (blasphemer) had a problem with this. He argued that a King should be served warm, fresh, bread, not week-old, stale bread. He remained steadfast in his argument, and cursed G-d as a result of his obstinacy. Why did a difficulty in understanding the parshah of lechem hapanim lead him to curse G-d?

R' Zalman Sorotzkim zt'l (Oznayim L'Tora) points out an interesting fact. What would have happened if this fellow would have waited a week? He would have seen a miracle. The bread was not hard and stale, but retained its freshness for an entire week. He would have had no questions, he wouldn't have cursed Hashem and he would not have been put to death. But he had no patience. He had to know now, and if it did not make sense to him now, the whole concept was not worthwhile.

We don't always comprehend Hashem's conduct. We don't understand sickness, why the righteous suffer; we don't understand events in Jewish history, such as the Holocaust. It makes no sense to us. But Hashem, we know, has His Master Plan. Unfortunately, time and space limit our understanding of it. In the grand scheme of things, with the passage of time, things begin to make sense.

This is the lesson of the blasphemer and the lechem hapanim. His inability to accept and his lack of understanding was the catalyst that brought about his death. Had he had the faith to accept, to wait and to conclude, "I don't know why, but Hashem must have His ways" - his entire life would have been different.

REMAINING GROUNDED

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

"And they placed him in the confinement [in order] for them to clarify [his punishment] from Hashem." (24:12)

The final pesukim of Parshas Emor tell of the מגדף, the blasphemer, the man who became angry and publicly blasphemed G-d. Afterward, G-d instructed Moshe that this man must be put to death for this grave offense.

The Torah introduces this story by saying, ויצא בן אשה ישראלי - that this man "went out" and proceeded to blaspheme G-d (24:10). Rashi brings different opinions as to what the word ויצא means in this context. According to one opinion, the pasuk is telling us that מעולמו יצא - the מגדף "left his world."

How are we to understand this depiction of the blasphemer, his "leaving his world"?

Rav Shlomo Wolbe explains that sometimes a person can leave the world that he is supposed to create for himself. A person can lose his stability, his balance, his common sense, to the point where he destroys עולמו, the life that he is supposed to live. This מגדף allowed his anger and resentment to bring him out of his "world," to ruin his life. The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (4:21) warns us, "Jealousy, lust, and honor remove a person from the world." These three negative tendencies are so consuming that they threaten to ruin a person's life, to destroy the world that he is supposed to build for himself.

The first is קנאה, jealousy, constantly comparing oneself to others, the need to compete with other people's accomplishments, wealth, and so on. Such a person loses his "world," as his attempts to keep up with the people around him undermine his ability to live the life that he is meant to live. The same is true of תאוה, when a person is consumed by lust, by the desire for physical enjoyment. An insatiable appetite for pleasure disrupts a person's life to the point where יצא מעולמו, he is incapable of building his world and living the life that he is supposed to live. Finally, כבוד - the relentless pursuit of honor and fame, also has a tendency to consume a person, to take over his life, to the point where he loses the ability to build עולמו, preoccupied as he is seeking attention and recognition.

The tragic story of the ףגג serves as a warning to all of us about the risk of losing our “world,” the unique, beautiful life that we are meant to live. If we do not keep our emotions in check, and allow them to overtake us, they can derail us and undermine our ability to be the people whom we are meant to be.

SENSITIVITY TOWARDS ALL

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“And they placed him in the confinement [in order] for them to clarify [his punishment] from Hashem.” (24:12)

Rashi tells us that two individuals committed terrible sins around the same time: one blasphemed and the other desecrated Shabbos. In both circumstances, Hashem’s ruling was sought, and the men needed to be incarcerated while awaiting their judgment. In the case of the blasphemer, the question was whether his sin was worthy of the death penalty, whereas the Shabbos desecrator knew that he was to receive the death penalty, but it was not clear by which means.

With immense sensitivity, and despite carrying out an appalling desecration of Hashem’s name, the blasphemer was kept separate from the Shabbos desecrator in order that he not suffer any undue pain while sitting with a man about to be killed, and thus fearing that his own death sentence was guaranteed.

We see from here the immense sensitivity to others’ feelings we are required to have, even when dealing with wicked people.

Many stories are told of Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld’s distinction in this regard. One such story occurred when there were only two hospitals in Jerusalem: Shaare Zedek Hospital, a well-equipped facility run by religious Jews; and a missionary hospital which was seeking to gain a sinister foothold among the Jewish residents. To ensure that the missionary hospital did not become an alternative for the Jews who preferred a local option, the extreme measure of a cherem (ban) was publicized. This meant that someone who initially sought treatment there would be refused further treatment at the much superior hospital, Shaare Zedek.

This ban largely worked. However, there was one man who refused to listen. He was notoriously anti-religious and an outspoken critic of Rav Yosef Chaim, often mocking him in public gatherings.

This person fell ill and admitted himself to the missionary hospital. After a short time, his condition deteriorated, and it was decided to move him to Shaare Zedek. However, upon his arrival, he was refused a bed, in accordance with the ban.

The relatives of the ill man did not know where to turn. One of them raced to the home of Rav Yosef Chaim and explained the whole situation, pleading for a letter of recommendation that his relative be given special dispensation.

Instead of writing a letter, Rav Yosef Chaim, already seventy-five years old and well aware of who the patient was, grabbed his coat and ran in the pouring rain to the hospital. He reached the hospital, with the younger relative trying to catch up, and berated the hospital’s administrator, saying, “Since when do you decide matters of life and death? Admit him at once.”

The man was immediately admitted, and within two weeks he had returned to full health. The family, however, feared for a relapse if he were to find out who saved his life, and so they kept it a secret and made sure he never found out. Rav Yosef Chaim was aware of the family’s consideration, and even after the man recovered and continued his public acts of mockery and scorn against him, Rav Yosef Chaim never once revealed his role in the man’s recovery, instead, humbly accepting the man’s insults in silence.

If this is the degree of sensitivity we are required to treat our enemies, how much more consideration should we provide those with whom we are close?!

AVOID EXTREMISM

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

“And they placed him in the confinement [in order] for them to clarify [his punishment] from Hashem.” (24:12)

As mentioned, Rashi brings several opinions as to the meaning of the phrase ןאשה בן אשה ישראלי - that the blasphemer “went out” and cursed G-d’s Name.

According to one view, the ףגג “left” from the preceding section of the Torah, which discussed the לחם הפנים, the special bread which was placed on the shulchan (table) in the Mishkan. It was after he heard about this law that the ףגג proceeded to blaspheme G-d. He learned that the bread was baked only once a week, and left on the shulchan throughout the week, until Shabbos, when it is eaten by the kohanim and replaced by new, fresh bread.

The ףגג could not understand how the King of the universe could have stale bread on His table. In his mind, this was terribly disrespectful to G-d. He was so disturbed and unnerved by this mitzva that he publicly blasphemed Hashem.

We must ask, how did this fellow end up cursing G-d after standing up for His honor? His anger was aroused by a perceived slight to the honor owed to the Almighty. If he was so upset about what he saw as an affront to G-d, why would he then turn around and blaspheme G-d?!

The Yalkut Yehuda answers that this man exemplifies an extreme personality.

People who are drawn to extremism are generally not sincerely passionate about the cause they zealously champion. The extremist is not concerned about the value that he claims to uphold, but is rather looking for a cause to be zealous about. And so they can easily switch sides, from one extreme to the other.

The מגדף was not truly interested in defending G-d's honor. He was not actually disturbed by the stale bread on the shulchan. As an extremist, he was looking for a cause, for something to fight about. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that he quickly shifted to the opposite extreme. One day he is fighting for G-d's honor, and the next day he is speaking blasphemy. This is typical of extremists, of people who present themselves as sincerely championing an altruistic cause, when in truth, they are simply looking for something to be angry about.

The Rambam, in Hilchos Dei'os, famously writes about the importance of the שביל זהב, following the "golden mean," being measured, strategic and thoughtful in our conduct. A person who indulges in anger and rage is, in most instances, not purely sincere about the cause he claims to fight for. If we are sincere, then we act wisely and prudently, carefully weighing our words and our actions, without resorting to rash, extreme behavior.

DON'T CAUSE DAMAGE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"[Compensation for] the loss of an eye [in exchange] for the loss of an eye... just as he maimed the man, so shall it be done to him [monetarily]." (24:20)

Mashal: A blind woman was married to a man who was totally devoted to her well-being. He took care of her every need and would do anything for her happiness. The man put his wife's name on a list for eye transplants but was dismayed to learn that it could take up to twenty years before her name would reach the top of the list. He was heartbroken.

A month later, he came home jubilant. "It's a miracle, " he told his wife. "You're next in line! They found a donor just for you!" She was overjoyed knowing that she was finally going to be able to see. Her husband was thrilled as well.

The transplant was a success. The woman could see! The first thing she did was turn to her loving husband, only to discover that he was blind! Shocked, she tried to take care of him as best as she could, but in her eagerness to see all the things she had never seen before, she began to resent her blind husband who could not participate. Eventually, their marriage fell apart and they divorced.

The day he moved out, the man left a note on his ex-wife's bed. It read: "I still care for you, and I respect your decision to divorce me. But do me this one favor: please take good care of those eyes... because not long ago, they were mine!"

Nimshal: The Torah prohibits inflicting a blemish on another person, and one who does so must pay for the value of the injured limb. This man did the opposite and inflicted a blemish on himself for his wife, but she was unwilling to be kind and care for him in return when he was in the same position that she had been in.

One can also learn from this pasuk that if one inflicts a non-physical blemish, if he hurts another person psychologically or emotionally, he must realize that he is responsible and potentially liable for the damage. An "eye for an eye" is a premise whereby one person robs another of an ability or potential that he or she may have enjoyed. How careful must we be with the feelings of others - their future may be in our hands.

HAFTORAH

A NEW ERA

Malbim

"And on the day that he goes into the Sanctuary, into the Inner Courtyard, to minister in the Sanctuary, he shall offer his sin-offering." (Yechezkel 44:27)

According to the commentators, this means that when an ordinary kohen entered the Sanctuary to minister for the first time he had to bring a tenth of an ephah as his tribute of consecration. But this was already specified in the Torah's text. Why would Yechezkel reiterate the law?

He did this to teach his people that when the Second Beis HaMikdash would be built and the kohanim would enter it to minister there, all of them - even those who had still served in the First Beis HaMikdash - would have to bring a tribute of consecration just as if they had been newly installed into office. The destruction of the First Beis HaMikdash had marked the end of an old order, and the dedication of the Second would begin a new era.

Likewise, in days to come, when the kohanim of the Beis HaMikdash will be resurrected from the dead to serve in the Third Beis HaMikdash, they will have to offer a sacrifice of consecration just as if they had been newly installed, for Israel's long exile marks the end of one era and the dedication of the Beis HaMikdash in Mashiach's days will commence a new epoch in the history of our people.

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