

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

Short Divrei Torah on Parshas Acharei Mos

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לע"נ פעסל בת ישראל מנחם / לזכות חילינו

STAY THE COURSE

Rabbi Aryeh Dachs

"Hashem spoke to Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons, when they approached before Hashem..." (16:1)

My brother-in-law recently made an interesting observation. He is in his mid-thirties and had studied in advanced *yeshivos* through most of his twenties. He pointed out that of his peers, the ones that were ultimately most successful in Torah study were not necessarily the ones that were the most clever and passionate or, for lack of a better term, *geshmak*. Rather, he found that the consistent young men who focused on simply understanding the Torah, over time developed into the most accomplished, erudite Torah scholars.

He is not wrong. Sticking with a regular program of learning the Torah to understand it is the best tried-and-true recipe for success. Not only that, too much passion and fire can lead to spiritual devastation.

At the inauguration of the *Mishkan*, the Jewish People witnessed a Heavenly fire miraculously descend and ignite the sacrifices and wood on the Altar. The Midrash teaches that upon experiencing this spectacle, Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, were overwhelmed by joy. They felt a strong, burning love for Hashem. The passionate love they felt ultimately cost them their lives. They brought a "strange" fire, attempting to add what the Midrash calls "love to love." The strange fire was inappropriate, and these two great *tzaddikim* were instantly killed.

Parshas Acharei Mos begins by reiterating the death of the holy sons of Aharon. The language used is interesting. The Torah tells us that they died "*b'karvasam lifnei Hashem*" - when they drew near before Hashem." Rabbi Moshe Feinstein points out that the language of the Torah here emphasizes an important lesson gleaned from their deaths. Although they attained an extraordinarily high level of spirituality and connection to Hashem, they craved a deeper connection; more than what was appropriate.

We all have a very lofty Jewish soul, a *neshamah*, which craves connection to Hashem. There is a risk that this craving will move us to try to connect in ways that are inappropriate. Rabbi Moshe teaches that part of our spiritual mission demands that we learn to satisfy our passionate spiritual ambitions with the "regular" *mitzvos* of the Torah.

The path to spiritual perfection, *sheleimus*, is only by way of the Torah and *mitzvos*. An alternative path that veers from normative Torah standards, even when guided by an honest ambition to connect to Hashem, can lead to a disastrous spiritual undoing.

WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT

Reb Noson of Breslov

"And Hashem said to Moshe, 'Speak to Aharon your brother – he must not enter at all times the Sanctuary, inside the Curtain, in front of the Cover that is upon the Ark, and he will not die...' (16:2)

He must not enter at all times the Holy so that Aharon should not die as his sons did. (Rashi)

During the year, the *Kohen Gadol* served in the Temple wearing eight gilded garments. But on Yom Kippur, he donned four white garments whenever he entered the Holy of Holies.

Entering and exiting the Holy of Holies represents an individual's service of G-d, and the garments represent different situations in which a person finds himself. One should constantly strive to ascend to greater spiritual heights, yet know when to "pull back" if he steps into areas that are beyond his abilities. He must know how to go forward dressed in certain "garments" (i.e., certain situations), and how to hold back when dressed in different "garments."

Aharon's sons Nadav and Avihu were able to ascend, but they did not know how to "pull back." Thus, they perished when they brought their unauthorized incense-offering (see Vayikra 10:1-2). (Likutey Halakhos III, p. 84)

ALWAYS RELEVANT

Rabbi Jeremy Finn

“And Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Speak to Aharon your brother – he must not enter at all times the Sanctuary, inside the Curtain, in front of the Cover that is upon the Ark, and he will not die...” (16:2)

The Panim Yafos, Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz, writes that this *pasuk* is to be read literally and that it is an instruction for all generations.

The Torah is *kadosh*, Judaism is *kadosh*, and *halachah* is *kadosh*. All the principles by which a Jew lives his life are *kadosh*.

Do not measure that which is *kadosh* against *בכל עת* - that which is popular.

Therefore, *ואל יבא בכל עת אל הקודש* - do not approach that which is *kadosh* with the fads and fashions of the times in which you live.

Do not hold up everything that we hold dear, everything that is *kadosh*, and ask if it is in keeping with the times, but hold up the times, the morals, the lifestyles of the present and see if they are in keeping with everything *kadosh*. (Otzar Chaim, p. 100)

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch echoes this idea when he explains the Gemara (Shabbos 31a) that says that when we stand before the Heavenly Court after 120 years, one of the questions that we will be asked is *קבעת עיתים לתורה*?

The standard explanation of the question is whether we allotted a fixed time for Torah study; was our relationship with *limud Torah* haphazard, or were we dedicated enough to engage in Torah learning on a fixed basis?

Rav Hirsch explains that the question can also be interpreted to mean whether we showed that the Torah is alive, vibrant, and relevant to the times in which we lived. *“קבעת עיתים”* - Did you fix the times in which you lived; *“לתורה”* - to show how everything the Torah stands for is relevant and applicable?

We must not fall into the trap of adjusting the Torah to meet the demands of the times, but we must adapt the requirements, fads, fashions, and behaviors of the time to align with the Torah.

DELIGHTING IN HUMILITY

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, ‘Speak to your brother Aharon that he not come at all times into the Holy.” (17:2)

The unmistakable humility of Moshe Rabbeinu is once again displayed in its full glory.

In Parshas Shemini, immediately after the tragic death of the two sons of Aharon, Hashem spoke directly to Aharon and warned him to be careful not to enter into the *Ohel Moed* in an intoxicated state.

Here, however, Hashem speaks to Moshe and tells him to caution Aharon not to enter the *Ohel Moed* indiscriminately. Moshe's job was to rouse his brother into proper performance of his priestly duties, and although Moshe Rabbeinu was the leader of the people, the *Rabban shel Yisrael*, it was not beneath him to serve his brother, while Aharon carried out the *avodah* on Yom Kippur before the entire assemblage of *Klal Yisrael*.

The two holy brothers, R' Elimelech of Lizhensk zt'l and R' Zusia of Anipoli zt'l, maintained a low profile in their early years and traveled around from place to place incognito, so as not to be accorded honor by the villagers. Eventually, R' Elimelech was revealed as a *tzaddik* and hundreds of *chassidim* flocked to him to learn from his wellspring of Torah and *Chassidus*, and to bask in his otherworldly glow of spiritual elevation.

Far from being upset or even jealous of his righteous brother, R' Zusia went out of his way to tend to his brother's needs and serve him as a *shamash*. R' Elimelech was disturbed by this honor but R' Zusia countered with a convincing argument: “My holy brother, we find that even Moshe Rabbeinu served his brother Aharon and the *kohanim* in the *Mishkan*. He washed their hands and feet, and dressed them in the priestly garments.” R' Zusia smiled demurely. “And even if you'll say Moshe was the king and a king may not renounce his honor, we still find that he served his brother like I serve you!”

R' Elimelech's face shone with holiness. “True, true. But Moshe had a specific commandment from Hashem to serve his brother - you have no such commandment!”

HOLY HUMILITY

Reb Dovid of Tolna

“With this shall Aharon enter the Sanctuary...” (16:3)

The word *b'zos* (“with this”) is numerically equivalent to *shafal*, meaning “humble.” One must come to *kedushah* (holiness) with humility.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Reb Noson of Breslov

“He must wear a sacred linen Tunic and linen pants on his body. He must belt himself with a linen Sash and cover his head with a linen Turban...” (16:4)

Although the gilded garments worn by the *Kohen Gadol* throughout the year effected many rectifications, on Yom Kippur he could enter the Holy of Holies only while wearing white garments.

It is possible to serve G-d with literally anything, but when one is trying to enter the highest levels, he should simplify his approach with the most basic articles of clothing and wealth. By shedding all ostentation, he will be able to effect the deepest rectifications on those levels. (Likutey Halachot V, p. 179a)

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"And Aharon shall bring his own sin-offering and atone for himself and for his household." (16:6)

Rav Yisrael Meir Druck (Esh Tomid) suggests a powerful, homiletic interpretation of this *pasuk*. He explains that Aharon's family observed him bring his *korban* and beg for forgiveness for himself. When Aharon's family would watch his genuine *tefillah* and *teshuvah*, they too would follow suit and do the same.

This is what the Torah means when it says *v'chipeir b'ado u'viad beiso*. When he, Aharon, would atone for himself and model properly, his family would do *teshuvah* on behalf of themselves in the right way as well.

If we want our children to follow in the path of Torah and *mitzvos*, we can't just instruct them to do so. The most powerful and influential way to set the tone in our homes, where Hashem is the focus, is through modeling.

As the saying goes, "Actions speak louder than words." We have to be cognizant and realize that our children observe every move we make, and we need to make sure to demonstrate a commitment to Hashem and the Torah for our children to follow. In this way, we can ensure that the Torah will successfully be transmitted to the next generation.

PRAYING FOR TRUTH

Reb Noson of Breslov

"He should take the two he-goats and stand them before G-d at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." (16:7)

Se'irim (שעירים, goats) represent *Se'ar* (שער, hair). A hairbreadth is all that separates between holiness and its opposite. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 194)

The *mitzvah* is to take two goats that are similar in age, height and appearance. (Yoma 62a)

Notwithstanding the fact that they are identical, one goat is dedicated to G-d and one is dispatched to *Azazel*. In the same way, falsehood can make itself look like truth, and one might not be able to differentiate between them. Therefore, the goats were drawn by lots: the Jews relied upon G-d to reveal which goat was for holiness and which was for the Other Side. We, too, must rely upon G-d to show us the difference between falsehood and truth. (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 416)

UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

Rabbi Avi Wiesenfeld

"Aharon should place lots upon the two goats; one lot 'to Hashem' and one lot 'to Azazel.'" (16:8)

There is a story told about the war that broke out between the Kingdom of Evil and the Kingdom of Good.

It was a horrific war, and in short time the Kingdom of Good found itself losing the battle since, being the good guys as they were known to be, they were unaccustomed to fighting. They had been forced to go to war when the Kingdom of Evil had threatened to take over the world.

The general of the Kingdom of Good stood up and announced that they lacked a strategy and saw no hope for victory.

A simple foot soldier decided to take matters into his own hands and sprang into action. Having previously been a citizen of the Kingdom of Evil, he was still in possession of his uniform from his former kingdom, and he decided that he would disguise himself by wearing his old Kingdom of Evil uniform. He courageously infiltrated the fortress of the enemy side and tactfully made his way to the castle of the king himself.

The castle was not heavily guarded since most of the guards had been called up to serve on the front for the war effort. He managed to reach the king's private chamber, where he quickly shot the king in the head, killing him instantly, thereby ensuring immediate victory for the Kingdom of Good.

News of the king's death spread quickly and the war ended. An insignificant foot soldier had saved an entire kingdom, indeed, the whole world.

In this week's Parshah we are told of the *Seir laAzazel*, the scapegoat which is given over to a representative of the Jewish people who is to perform a specific ritual through which all of *Klal Yisrael's aveiros* will be forgiven. It is an amazing phenomenon to behold - all of *Klal Yisrael's aveiros* are on the line, and one man takes upon himself the responsibility to atone for them all. Who is this courageous individual who is willing to undertake such an awesome task?

This man is called *איש עיטי* - "a designated man" - a simple man who did not even have to be a *Kohen*, but nevertheless took upon himself this great responsibility.

Rebbi Nachman of Breslov teaches that often we think of ourselves as insignificant individuals with nothing major to contribute to the world. In truth, however, we are able to do so much for ourselves and for those around us. Each individual has the potential to change the world, in his own way, should he be willing to try.

IMPACTFUL ACTIONS

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Aharon should place lots upon the two goats; one lot 'to Hashem' and one lot 'to Azazel.'" (16:8)

The *mitzvah* is to take two goats that are similar in age, height and appearance. (Yoma 62a)

One goat was selected to be sacrificed in the Inner Sanctuary of the Temple in order to effect forgiveness for sin. The other goat was thrown down to *Azazel*, also to effect forgiveness for sin.

The human mind cannot comprehend how these identical sacrifices, offered to opposing forces, can generate the same results. We must have faith that our deeds bring about these rectifications.

So too, we must believe that whenever we choose to do good over bad, we bring about great rectifications, filtering the good from the bad of the Tree of Knowledge and drawing down forgiveness for our sins. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 182)

SACRED ROOTS

HaDerash VeHalyun

"He shall place the incense upon the fire before Hashem – so that the cloud of the incense shall blanket the Ark-cover...." (16:13)

This means that he shouldn't prepare it outside (the Holy of Holies) and then bring it in. This is to refute the Sadducees' view who say that he must prepare it outside and then bring it in. (Yoma 53)

It has been the way of the "Sadducees" of every generation to try and make changes and reforms in religious observance following patterns prevailing in the outside world. They take ordinances from the outside world and bring them into the Sanctuary of Judaism.

The Sages have always bitterly fought these reformers who seek to graft alien ways onto Judaism. By contrast, the ordinances set forth by our Sages come from within, from the Torah's sacred roots.

AVOIDING ARROGANCE

Baal Shem Tov

"Thus shall he bring atonement upon the Sanctuary... and so shall he do for the Tent of Meeting that dwells with them amid their impurity." (16:16)

This *pasuk* implies that arrogance is a much more serious sin than any other transgression. For we are told here concerning sinners that the Tent of Meeting "dwells with them in the midst of their impurity," meaning that even when Jews have been defiled by sin, G-d is still in their midst.

There is, however, one exception to this rule: namely, when the sin is arrogance. For we are explicitly told elsewhere (Tehillim 101:5) that "who is haughty of eye and proud of heart, he I will not suffer" and the Sages say: "I (G-d) and he (the haughty man) cannot dwell together in this world."

[Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman comments: The Rabbi of Lublin used to say: "I prefer the wicked man who knows he is wicked to the righteous man who knows he is righteous."

When Reb Simchah Bunim of Pshischa asked him to explain this statement, he replied:

"A wicked man who knows he is wicked still has some truth in his heart and hence has retained a link with G-d. But the righteous man who considers himself righteous is not truthful because he is guilty of a sin - the sin of pride, for 'there is no righteous man in the world who always does good and never sins.' And since he is guilty of arrogance, he has cut himself off from G-d because G-d and a haughty man cannot dwell together in this world."]

UNBREAKABLE BOND

Rebbe Nachman

"Thus shall he bring atonement upon the Sanctuary... and so shall he do for the Tent of Meeting that dwells with them amid their impurity." (16:16)

The *Shekhinah* remains with the Jews even when they are impure. (Rashi)

Just as a mother always stays with her child and never forgets him, the Divine Presence stays with Her people.

The Divine Presence corresponds to the *sefirah* of *Malkhut* and to speech. When a person verbally expresses his connection to the Divine, he forms a bond with G-d that can never be severed. The words of holiness that he has spoken remain with him to remind him of his Source and inspire him to return to G-d.

Even if he will later fall and sin, these words of holiness will help draw him out of his state of impurity. (See Likutey Moharan I, 78)

CLOSE TO THE HUMBLE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Thus shall he bring atonement upon the Sanctuary... and so shall he do for the Tent of Meeting that dwells with them amid their impurity." (16:16)

Mashal: A *misnaged* (opponent of the *chassidic* movement) once encountered an old friend who had become a disciple of one of the great *chassidic* leaders of the time.

"Tell me," asked the *misnaged*, "what is so great about your rebbe?"

"My rebbe is so spiritually elevated," said the *chassid*, "that his mind probes the very thoughts of his disciples."

"Oh, come now," said the *misnaged*. "You want me to believe that? He knows what you are thinking?"

"Sure, try it out. Here, I'll be the rebbe and tell you exactly what you are thinking about."

"Okay," said the *misnaged* with a smirk. "I'll play along. So... tell me what I'm thinking."

"You're thinking..." said the *chassid*, "that the Almighty surrounds and permeates all worlds. That His awesome presence is the only force in your life and that His loving hand never stops guiding you."

"Ha!" laughed his friend. "I was thinking no such thing!"

"Well, in that case," said the *chassid*, "you certainly need my rebbe! He will teach you how crucial it is for a Jew to constantly have such thoughts!"

Nimshal: The Baal Shem Tov *zt'l* comments that a person who stumbles and sins but is aware of Hashem and knows that he has fallen and wishes to repent, is an *anav* - a humble person. Hashem remains "close" to such a person, as we see from the above *pasuk*: "He abides with them in the midst of their uncleanness." However, a person who is arrogant and haughty of spirit, even if he is not an outright sinner, alienates the Almighty, and about such a person, Hashem declares, "He and I cannot live together in the same world" (Sotah 5a).

ALWAYS BY OUR SIDE

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Thus shall he bring atonement upon the Sanctuary... and so shall he do for the Tent of Meeting that dwells with them amid their impurity." (16:16)

The *Shekhinah* remains with the Jews even when they are impure. (Rashi)

The most minor *mitzvah* performed by even the most sinful Jew has great value in G-d's eyes, transcending all worldly pleasures, wealth and joy. For He dwells with them, even in their impurities! (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 158a)

ONE ON ONE

Rabbi Aryeh Dachs

"No man shall be in the Tent of Meeting when he comes to provide atonement in the Sanctuary until his departure; he shall provide atonement for himself, for his household, and for the entire congregation of Israel." (16:17)

I once heard a Rabbi explain his understanding as to why we whisper during the *Shemoneh Esrei* rather than pray out loud. He pointed out that there is something intimate when a conversation is held in whispers. We engender this intimate feeling when we whisper prayers to Hashem. At those private moments when I am whispering my *tefillos*, it is just me sharing my innermost thoughts with G-d. Like a hushed conversation between two people, I have His exclusive, undivided attention.

A similar idea is developed in the Sefer Recanati. The Torah, in Parashas Acharei Mos, forbids anyone from entering the Holy of Holies along with the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur, "*v'chol adam lo yihiyeh b'Ohel Moed...*" The Talmud Yerushalmi (Yoma 1:5) teaches that even the Heavenly beings, the *malachim*, were forbidden from entering on this holy day. The Recanati explains that this was to ensure that when the *Kohen Gadol* did his service, he was entirely alone. It was just him approaching G-d by himself, "*echad b'echad yigashu*."

Connection with our families and our Jewish community is of course essential for our religious experience. The lesson here is that there is another very important way to engage with Hashem. At times, like the *Kohen Gadol* on the holiest day of the year, we need to feel as if it is just us and Him, engaging one-on-one, with nothing in between.

BEGIN FROM WITHIN

Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman

"He shall provide atonement for himself, for his household, and for the entire congregation of Israel." (16:17)

How foolish are communal leaders who try to reform their community but fail to effect the same improvement in themselves or in their own families! Their leadership cannot expect good results.

Before leaders can make atonement "for all the assembly of Israel," they must first make atonement "for himself and for his household." If they do not do so, their home will be a blemish in the community and whatever measures they may take in an effort to improve their community will be of no avail.

LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"He shall provide atonement for himself, for his household, and for the entire congregation of Israel." (16:17)

If the *Kohen Gadol* is atoning for "the entire congregation of Israel," then why would he need to atone separately for "himself," surely he is included among "the entire congregation of Israel"?

Perhaps we may answer based on the Gemara which says that before one looks at the faults of others, he must first ensure that he is free of them. In fact, we see from the order of the atonement brought that the *Kohen Gadol* did indeed repent for his own sins before turning his attention to those of the rest of the Nation.

We are often bothered by the character failings or insensitivity of those around us. Our first response in battling these negative feelings is to consider whether we, ourselves, are perfect in that area. All too often, a moment of honest self-reflection will be enough to quell our negative thoughts about others and hopefully even encourage us to improve our ways.

Rav Ben Tzion Abba Shaul was an individual who took this message very seriously. Despite having vast Torah knowledge and an impeccable character, he still demurred when asked by a *Rosh Yeshivah* to address a group of yeshivah students who were struggling in a certain area. When he was informed that no one would have the impact on them that he could have, he agreed on condition that he be allowed three days to prepare.

"The Rav has Torah at his fingertips, why does he need three days to prepare? I doubt the Rav even needs three minutes!" questioned the *Rosh Yeshivah*. Rav Ben Tzion answered that it is true that he did not need any time to prepare the content of the class, but he needed three days to prepare himself! He felt that such a class required him to spend the next three days taking stock of his own individual standing and ridding himself of any negative traits before he felt that he could speak to others about theirs.

DO IT FOR YOURSELF

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"No man shall be in the Tent of Meeting when he comes to provide atonement in the Sanctuary until his departure; he shall provide atonement for himself, for his household, and for the entire congregation of Israel." (16:17)

The *kohen gadol* performs a special service in the Tent of Meeting on Yom Kippur. Only he is permitted to perform this service and he does it alone. Why does the Torah emphasize, "No man shall be present" when he does the service?

R' Moshe Chaim of Sedlikov zt'l, the Degel Machaneh Ephraim, points out that the *kohen gadol* might feel conceited being the only one chosen from the entire nation to perform the sacred service on the most holy day of the year. He might focus on the honor he was receiving from others and how other people would be thinking of him with respect and even awe.

Therefore, the Torah tells him that he should mentally view the world as if there is no other man in existence. This must be on his mind as he enters the *Ohel Moed* to secure atonement in the "Holy of Holies." By having this mental attitude, he frees himself from any thoughts of seeking honor and approval.

We can learn an important and practical lesson from here. Many times, people become consumed with what others think about them. However, if no one else exists, then one need not worry about such things.

In truth, people do not think about others as much as we think they do. And if they do think about what another person does, it makes little practical difference, especially if one were to use this technique to free oneself from the unnecessary pain caused by this illusion.

SEND IT AWAY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"The he-goat will bear upon itself all their iniquities to a cut land, and he should send away the he-goat to the desert." (16:22)

There are aspects of our behavior and our personalities that we rightly feel ashamed of. Nevertheless, we should not ignore these parts of ourselves, pretending that they will go away by themselves. Rather, we take measures to identify them, isolate them, and send them away.

This is an essential aspect of spiritual growth, just as sending the scapegoat away on Yom Kippur was an essential component of the Divine service of that most holy day. (Sefer HaSichot 5688-5691, pp. 61-62; HaYom Yom, 24 Nisan) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

NOTHING TRIVIAL

Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman

"Aharon shall come to the Tent of Meeting - he shall remove the linen garments that he had worn when he entered the Sanctuary, and he shall leave them there." (16:23)

Only then did he come into the Tent of Meeting in order to bring out the ladle and the shovel in which he had burned the incense in the Holy of Holies. (Rashi)

Even such seemingly menial functions as removing the ladle and the shovel had to be performed by no less a person than the *Kohen Gadol*.

The Baal Shem Tov notes that from this we learn that in ministering to a scholar, the clearing away of the utensils with which the scholar ate is also a *mitzvah* just as the removal of the ladle and the shovel after the burning of the incense in the Holy of Holies was part of the Temple service

SURPASSING ANGELS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Aharon shall come to the Tent of Meeting - he shall remove the linen garments that he had worn when he entered the Sanctuary..." (16:23)

According to the Talmud (Yerushalmi, Yoma 1:5), even angels are not allowed to be present in the Holy of Holies when the *Kohen Gadol* offers up the incense.

Inasmuch as angels are personifications of Divine energies, their identities are fixed and unchangeable. Repentance, in contrast, is change; it involves a reversal of the supposedly fixed laws of nature, including the laws normally governing spirituality.

Thus, it is possible through repentance for a person to ascend - instantaneously! - from the lowest spiritual depths to the most exalted spiritual heights. Therefore, angels have no right to be present when the *Kohen Gadol* is enabling the Jewish people to overcome nature through repentance.

Thus, although on Yom Kippur we are in many ways like angels (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 610:4; Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Orach Chayim 18:3, 610:9, 619:9), this is true only with regard to our ascent beyond our physical natures (in particular, the need to eat).

With regard to our spiritual growth, we surpass the capability of the angels whenever we renew ourselves, transforming ourselves into new people through repentance. (Sefer HaMa'amarim 5737, pp. 28-29) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

FRESH START

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Aharon shall come to the Tent of Meeting - he shall remove the linen garments that he had worn when he entered the Sanctuary, and he shall leave them there." (16:23)

The linen garments worn by the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur must never be worn again. The reason for this rule is that when a person repents sincerely, he or she is transformed into a new person. Inasmuch as the essence of Yom Kippur is repentance, the garments used by the *Kohen Gadol* to perform the Yom Kippur rituals had to be new each year. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 28, pp. 224-225) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

RISING ABOVE LOGIC

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"The one who dispatched the he-goat to Azazel shall immerse his clothing and immerse himself in the water; thereafter, he may enter the camp." (16:26)

The scapegoat was selected by lot from two identical goats. The requirement to select this goat randomly, by lot, indicates that repentance itself - the essence of Yom Kippur - transcends logic.

Repentance transcends logic both from our perspective and from G-d's perspective:

- From our perspective: In order to truly repent, we must intensify our relationship with G-d beyond the extent that our logic previously decreed necessary. It is clear that our previous, logical relationship with G-d was not intense enough, for otherwise we would not have sinned.
- From G-d's perspective: In order to accept our repentance, He must override the logical system of reward and punishment according to which He designed the world.

By overriding logic from our perspective, intensifying our relationship with G-d beyond all logic, we elicit the concomitant response from G-d: He defies His own logical system of punishment, forgiving us lovingly, completely, and wholeheartedly. (Sefer HaMa'amarim Melukat, vol. 5, pp. 190-191) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

ADMITTING OUR WRONGS

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"For on this day he shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you; from all your sins before Hashem shall you be cleansed." (16:30)

The highlight of the Yom Kippur service in the *Beis HaMikdash* was the moment when the *Kohen Gadol* would hold up the scarlet red thread - which represented the Jewish People's sins - to show that it had turned snow white, symbolizing Hashem's complete forgiveness of their sins (see Yoma 67a).

The following question has been asked: Would it not make more sense for the thread which represented the Jewish People's sins to be black, the opposite color of white; why was the thread scarlet red?

The Ponavezher Rav, Rabbi Yosef Kahanaman was once visiting South Africa, as he did on many occasions, to raise much needed funds for his Yeshiva. During his stay, a public debate between the local Orthodox Rabbi and a Reform "Rabbi" took place with each side trying to impress upon the audience to affiliate with their Shul.

The Reform "Rabbi" was first to make his presentation and rather than presenting his policy towards Torah observance, he called on the President of the Orthodox Shul who was sitting in the audience to stand up and answer a question.

"Are you a fully observant Torah Jew?" he asked brazenly. The President became red-faced. He started to sweat, and looking down, he admitted that he was embarrassed to say that he was not.

The Reform "Rabbi" then asked the other Orthodox Shul officers in the audience if any of them were truly religious Jews and each of them sheepishly responded in the negative.

At this point, the Reform "Rabbi" turned to the entire audience and said "Ladies and Gentlemen. There is nothing to debate. You see, there is no difference between my officers and their officers - they are both equally non-observant."

The Ponavezher Rav could not stay quiet anymore. He raised his hand and asked for permission to speak. He mounted the platform and turned towards the President of the "Reform Synagogue" and asked him if he would mind answering a question.

"Are you a fully observant Torah Jew?" the Ponavezher Rav asked. The President of the Reform Synagogue burst out laughing and quipped back "Of course not", thinking that the aged Rabbi had made a fool of himself.

"This," exclaimed the Ponavezher Rav to the audience, "is the difference between the two Presidents. Just look at their reactions to the question. One was embarrassed, red-faced and shamed, and the other one..." The Ponavezher Rav had made his point, he returned to his seat and the debate came to an end.

Someone who is embarrassed by what they have done wrong can easily change his ways and be fully forgiven by Hashem. But someone who is not the slightest bit embarrassed to admit that he desecrates Hashem's laws will find it almost impossible to change, and the likelihood is that he will never even want to.

This is the message behind the scarlet red thread. The color red does not merely represent "sin" that is due to be forgiven; it represents the type of person who is seeking forgiveness. Namely, someone who is deeply ashamed of his sins, who wants to be forgiven, and most importantly, who wants to change.

LIMITLESS CONNECTION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"For on this day he shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you; from all your sins before Hashem shall you be cleansed." (16:30)

Rather than "surgically" removing our misdeeds from us, Yom Kippur removes us from our misdeeds, by elevating us far above them. Therefore, the focus on Yom Kippur is on our relationship with G-d rather than on our misdeeds per se. What is required of us on this day is to yearn to be reconciled with G-d in a general sense, and to express this yearning by observing Yom Kippur properly.

Yom Kippur elevates us this way because the day itself reveals the intrinsic connection that every Jew shares with G-d by virtue of his or her Divine soul. The connection between our essence and G-d's essence has existed since before Creation and is therefore not limited by time or space. For this reason, it cannot be damaged by any misdeeds we might have committed. Thus, the very day of Yom Kippur - by revealing this intrinsic connection between ourselves and G-d - wipes our slate completely clean. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 27, pp. 124-131) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

FATHERLY LOVE

Dubno Maggid

"For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you from all your sins; You shall be clean before Hashem." (16:30)

Rabbi Akiva said: "Fortunate are you, O Israel; before Whom you are purified. Who is it that purifies you? Your Father in Heaven; for it is written: 'You shall be pure before G-d.'" (Mishnah, end of Yoma)

When a physician heals a sick person, the physician typically does not stop to think whether the cure will cause the patient pain, but will do whatever is necessary to cure the patient. However, if the patient is the physician's own child, every effort will be made to find a way to cure the patient with as little pain as possible.

Being our Father, G-d, seeking a way of making atonement for our sins without causing us undue pain and suffering, gave us the holy day of Yom Kippur. "And who is it that purifies you? Your Father in Heaven."

A TIME FOR ATONEMENT

Apter Rav

"For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you from all your sins; You shall be clean before Hashem." (16:30)

It is very significant that this *pasuk* is read during the time that we count the *Omer*. We know that as we count the *Omer*, we must feel as if we were entering the portals of Holiness. This attitude is necessary to cleanse ourselves for the day of receiving the Torah.

"For on this day" - if we count each day with a sense of purity and holiness, "He shall provide atonement from all your sins."

For seven weeks, every Jew should rectify his misdeeds so that he may come in holiness and purity and "before Hashem shall you be cleansed" - you shall be pure before Hashem in the acceptance of the Torah on Shavuot.

NO ULTERIOR MOTIVES

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"And they shall slaughter them as sacrifices of peace-offerings to Hashem." (17:5)

Offering up animal sacrifices to G-d seems to go against the Torah's respect for animal life. Even with regard to non-animal sacrifices, why would G-d ask us to take valuable property and burn it up for no apparent benefit?

Furthermore, of all G-d's commandments, why does the Torah refer only to sacrifices as being "pleasing to G-d"? Surely it pleases G-d when we perform any of His commandments!

The answer is that sacrifices please G-d in the purest way precisely because the only possible reason for offering them up is in order to fulfill His will. Unlike other commandments, there is no possible "ulterior motive" for sacrifices.

Since they fly blatantly in the face of logic, no self-interest can be involved. Clearly, this is a much greater state of self-nullification than that required to fulfill any of the Torah's other commandments.

Today, our daily prayers are a reflection of the sacrifices offered up in the Tabernacle. Just as with the sacrifices, it may seem illogical to "waste" our valuable time on praying when we could be actually "doing" something - even holy deeds, such as studying the Torah or performing some "practical" commandment. Yet it is precisely by dedicating our valuable time and concentration to nothing other than getting closer to G-d that we connect to Him in the most profound, intimate way. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 32, pp. 1-5) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

FOCUSING OUR PASSION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"So they no longer slaughter their sacrifices to the demons after which they stray. This will be an eternal rule for them, for all their generations." (17:7)

The Torah instructs us to burn the fat and blood of animal sacrifices on the Altar. Since the word for "sacrifice" in Hebrew (*korban*) means "a means to draw close" this signifies that we must orient our delight (signified by the fat) and enthusiasm (signified by the blood) toward Him.

In other words, G-d knows that He created us with the powers of delight and enthusiasm; He wants us to be passionate people - not lifeless, indifferent, or boring.

But He also knows that unless we channel these energies properly, finding delight in holy pursuits and pursuing them with enthusiasm, we are apt to seek other objects for our passion - possibly harmless, but possibly harmful.

The Torah therefore insists that we not offer up sacrifices “outside the camp,” or even “inside the camp” but not at the Altar. Doing so could eventually lead us to giving ourselves to unholy pursuits and indulgences that offer false promises of joy or fulfillment.

Rather, we should find excitement and enjoyment in furthering G-d’s purpose in creation, making the world into His true home. (Sichot Kodesh 5741, vol. 3, pp. 134-137) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

POSITIVE SURROUNDINGS

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“So they no longer slaughter their sacrifices to the demons after which they stray. This will be an eternal rule for them, for all their generations.” (17:7)

After the *Mishkan* was designated as the place to which the Jewish people would bring their sacrifices, the Torah prohibited the sacrifices from being offered anywhere else. Our *parashah* indicates that one of the reasons for this prohibition was to stem the tide of idolatrous offerings (17:7). Considering the fact that bringing offerings to the *Mishkan* doesn’t eliminate the possibility of idolatrous intentions, what was the purpose of this requirement?

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky suggests that there is a great benefit to visiting a place of growth and spirituality. Whether it’s the habit of going to a physical place, as in the *Mishkan* or the *Beis HaMikdash*, or simply being around individuals, *Kohanim*, who are there to guide should one need it, being in a supportive environment is paramount to our growth as Jews and as people.

HIDDEN PURPOSES

Bikkurei Aviv

“And to them shall say, ‘Any man in the House of Israel or among the strangers who dwell among you, who offers a burnt-offering or a sacrifice and does not bring it to the door of the Tent of Meeting to sacrifice it to Hashem, that man shall be cut off from his people.’” (17:8-9)

G-d said to Moshe: To you I have revealed the reason for the prohibition against slaughtering sacrifices outside the Sanctuary (“And they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to the demons after whom they go astray” - *pasuk* 7). But you must not tell it to the Jews. If they knew the reason, some people would persuade themselves that their offering would be just as sincere if it were made outside the Sanctuary. But for every commandment there are other, hidden reasons and purposes, beyond those explicitly stated in the Torah. Therefore, it is just as well that you don’t give them any reason at all for My command.

[Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman adds: The Mishnah (Shabbos 11) states that it is forbidden to read by a light on Shabbos. The Baraisa (Shabbos 12) gives a reason for this prohibition: “Because one might then adjust the light, which is one of the activities forbidden on Shabbos.”

In this connection, the Gemara relates:

“Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha said: ‘I will read and I will not adjust the light.’ But it happened one Shabbos that he read and wanted to adjust the light, and he said: ‘How brilliant the Sages’ words are in that they said: It is forbidden to read by a light on Shabbos.’”

Are we to understand that Rabbi Ishmael was unaware of the brilliance of the Sages’ words until that time?

The Vilna Gaon said: When Rabbi Ishmael read the reason for this prohibition in the Baraisa, he said to himself: “I will read, and I will not adjust the light.” However, when he noticed that he escaped being trapped into sin by a hair’s breadth, he cried out: “How brilliant are the Sages’ words in the Mishnah in that they simply stated the law without giving any reason for it!”

Where reasons are given, we are tempted to seek dispensations and then we fall into sin. The Sages’ greatness lies in the fact that they understood this and therefore refrained from stating reasons for the law.]

POWERFUL POSITIVITY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“For the soul of the flesh is in the blood and I have assigned it for you upon the Mizbeach to provide atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that atones for the soul.” (17:11)

Part of the atonement process was placing some of the sin-offering’s blood (which signifies our vitality and enthusiasm) on the Altar (which signifies our aspiration toward holiness).

There were two Altars in the Tabernacle: one located outside, in the Courtyard, and one inside, in the Sanctuary. The blood of sin-offerings that atoned for “outer” sins - improper speech and deeds - was applied to the Outer Altar, whereas the blood of sin-offerings that atoned for “inner” sins - improper thoughts - was applied to the Inner Altar.

This dispels the misconception that it does not matter what we think as long as our words and actions are faultless.

Improper thoughts strike deeper in the soul. Therefore, in order to atone for them, we have to re-orient our innermost selves.

By the same token, we should never underestimate the great power of positive, holy thought.

Optimistic and idealistic thinking can change reality at times as effectively as positive speech or action - and sometimes even more effectively. (Reshimot 144) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

UTMOST RESPECT

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“Any man of the Children of Israel and of the proselyte who dwells among them who will trap a catch of a beast or bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth.” (17:13)

The Rambam adds a unique dimension to this complex commandment: “When one performs the *mitzvah* of covering up the blood, he should not do it with his foot, but rather with his hand or with a knife or utensil, so as not to conduct the performance of the *mitzvah* in a contemptuous manner, thus treating Hashem’s *mitzvos* with scorn. For reverence is due not to the *mitzvos* themselves, but to the One Who has issued them, blessed be He.” (Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Shechitah 14:16)

The holy Rambam is informing us about the importance of protecting the sanctity of all *mitzvos* and not allowing them to be treated with contempt.

This concept is so crucial that the Gemara makes the statement: “The father of all is blood” (Shabbos 22a). This means that the basis of all the *halachos* in the Torah is the law relating to covering the blood. The general principle that things used for *mitzvos* and religious purposes must not be treated with irreverence or in a scornful manner, which is derived from the above *halachah* concerning the covering of blood, is so important that it is called the “father” of all *mitzvos*.

Therefore, we must be very careful to treat all *mitzvos* and *halachos* with the greatest respect and reverence, no matter how unimportant or mundane they appear. (Rav S. Weiss)

WHEN TO GET EXCITED

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Any man of the Children of Israel and of the proselyte who dwells among them who will trap a catch of a beast or bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth.” (17:13)

All three types of kosher domesticated mammals can be offered up as sacrifices in the Temple. In contrast, only a minority of types of kosher birds (turtledoves and pigeons) and no types of kosher wild mammals (deer, ibex, etc.) may be offered up as sacrifices.

Blood signifies the energy and vitality that we invest in doing something. By telling us to cover up the blood of fowl and wild mammals but not to cover up the blood of domesticated mammals, the Torah is telling us that the energy and vitality that we invest in holy pursuits - as symbolized by the blood of the refined, domesticated animal - should be “uncovered,” i.e., openly expressed and articulated. In contrast, the energy and vitality that we invest in mundane pursuits - as signified by the blood of the wild, undomesticated animal - should be “covered,” i.e., muted and subdued. This ensures that our lives be properly focused and we maximize our spiritual potential. - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

SOUL AND BODY

Sochatchover Rebbe

“Any person who will eat that which died or was mauled - the native or the proselyte - he shall immerse his garments and immerse himself in the water; he shall remain impure until evening and then become pure.” (17:15)

The *pasuk* does not use the word “*ish*” for “person” but uses the word “*nefesh*,” meaning “soul.” This shows, as the Rambam declared, that when one eats forbidden food, both his body and soul - his physical and spiritual aspects - are affected.

EMBRACING THE CHALLENGE

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“Like the practice of the land of Egypt, in which you dwelled, you shall not do, and like the practice of the land of Canaan, to where I am bringing you, you shall not do, and you shall not follow in their ways.” (18:3)

Although there is a debate among the commentators as to which nation was worse - Egypt or Canaan - or whether they were equally bad, everyone agrees that no other nation matched them in wickedness. It is therefore interesting to note that these two nations appear as the pivotal nations in the Jewish People’s formation and arrival into Eretz Yisrael: essentially, escaping one evil nation only to reach another.

Perhaps this is a lesson that can be applied to us on our own personal journey to greatness. At every significant juncture in our growth, there will be challenges. On the surface, this hardly seems fair. After all, it feels like we are trying so hard and finally succeeding, only to be met with another - more difficult - challenge, seemingly stunting our development.

The answer, though, is that we should not view challenges as walls which block our route. Rather we should consider them as doors which are meant to be opened and obstacles which are meant to be overcome.

If a runner in a hurdle-race sprints past the hurdles, he will reach the finish line far quicker, but he has missed the point of the race.

Similarly, in life, Hashem specifically places challenges in front of us that He knows we can overcome.

In fact, it is only because Hashem loves us so much that He ensures that we encounter opportunities to challenge our negative traits.

In this vein, someone who is prone to anger will get caught up with those who irritate him, and one who is jealous by nature will have other people’s successes paraded before him. Why? So that we are forced to face our negative traits, challenge them, and ultimately triumph over them.

Effortless success is not a status of greatness; trying to succeed is where greatness is born!

(As the Mishnah [Pirkei Avos 5:23] explains, reward comes according to one's effort, not results.)

This, essentially, was Rav Elyashiv's message to a young man who complained that his entire life consisted of test after test - most of which he failed, despite his great desire to become a bigger and better person.

"I am convinced that on my gravestone, all that will be said is, 'Here lies someone who tried,'" he said miserably.

Upon hearing the young man's lament, Rav Elyashiv responded that if he were walking in a cemetery and saw a tombstone with such an inscription, he would immediately stop and pray by the grave of such a righteous individual!

SETTING SAFEGUARDS

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein

"Like the practice of the land of Egypt, in which you dwelled, you shall not do, and like the practice of the land of Canaan, to where I am bringing you, you shall not do, and you shall not follow in their ways." (18:3)

Rashi comments that this verse tells us that the practices of the Egyptians and the Canaanites were the most corrupt of all the nations, and those who lived where the Israelites lived were the most corrupt of all.

This is puzzling, because we are prohibited from imitating the practices of any gentile nation, even the best of them. What is the significance of the fact that the Egyptians and the Canaanites were the worst? (See Kli Yakar, who addresses this question.)

Perhaps the answer is as follows:

The Torah commands us not to emulate any nation, even the best. One can see what resulted from the practices of the nations who did not refrain from engaging in activities that would ultimately lead to abominable acts. Those nations did prohibit the abominable acts themselves, but did not enact any safeguards to prevent them.

The result was that they ultimately acted in abominable fashion themselves. This verse teaches us that being careful not to commit abominable acts is of no avail, unless we are careful not to do anything that can lead to them.

The Talmud (Berachos 32a) gives as an example the father who brings his son to the entrance of a brothel and trusts that he will not sin. Chazal comment, "What shall the son do that he should not sin?" Surely he will be drawn to sin. In order to prevent sin, safeguards are imperative.

We must beware of imitating any gentile practices, because they will ultimately lead us to commit acts like the Egyptians and the Canaanites, who were the most corrupt of all.

FORGING A PATH

Rabbi Aryeh Dachs

"And you shall not follow in their ways." (18:3)

A family in Jerusalem brought their son to the *tzaddik* Rav Shlomo ("Shlomke") Goldman, the Zhviller Rebbe. The young man was struggling spiritually and was no longer Torah observant. Rabbi Shlomke sat and spoke with the young man. He told him, "When your inclination demands that you partake in something forbidden, just know that you are not required to listen to him right away... he is not your boss, he is not your rebbe. He can wait." In other words, he works for you, and you don't work for him.

In a similar message, the verse in Parashas Acharei Mos warns us to avoid "the practices of the land of Egypt" and "the practices of the land of Canaan." The verse continues "*U'chukoseihem lo seileichu*," which literally translates as "do not walk in the path of their customs." The 11th-century commentator, the Ibn Ezra, clarifies the intent of this phrase as follows: As Jews, we must take heed not to "forge a path using the customs of the non-Jews and making those customs into a *chok* [a law] for ourselves." One must avoid following the practices of non-Jews to the extent that those practices become so ingrained in our psyche that they are like a *chok*, a law that one keeps without understanding. Our default behaviors and our personal sensibilities can and will follow the path we forge just like wagon wheels can fall in line with deep grooves in a well-worn path.

There are two elements in our observance. One is our actual observance. The second is the path we forge for ourselves with our observance. Rabbi Shlomke was telling the young man that although our paths, our default behaviors and personal sensibilities, usually follow our observance, they don't have to. Even when our behavior and our practices are less than ideal, we must avoid allowing our behavior and lifestyle to define us and the path we take in our life.

On the flipside, we can take advantage of the paths we create. The Ibn Ezra makes this point on the verse (Tehillim 23:6) "I am pursued by good and kindness." He explains that this refers to holy people who become so accustomed to doing good for themselves (spiritually) and kindness to others that they actively forge a beneficial path for themselves. The path of the righteous does indeed become a *chok*. This righteous path is so well worn that even if one were to want to deviate from his spiritual pursuits, he would be unsuccessful.

Forging a path works both ways. The Ibn Ezra teaches us that we are charged with not only observing the Torah, but we are also charged with becoming people on a well grooved path of Torah. Conversely, even when there are lapses in our observance of the Torah, it is our responsibility to ensure those lapses do not hew our path forward.

FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

Kesav Sofer

"Carry out My judgements and observe My decrees to follow them; I am Hashem, your G-d." (18:4)

You shall keep My commandments not for the sake of receiving a reward but only because you will grow and advance in holiness "to follow them." Your reward for observing one commandment shall be the commandment that it brings in its wake.

On the other hand, you must not be under the impression - as were Zadok and Boethus, the disciples of Antigonus of Socho - that there is no reward at all for observing My commandments. For "I am Hashem your G-d," faithful to keep My promise to reward those who fulfill My commandments. All I ask of you is that when you perform them, you will not do it solely for the sake of that reward.

INHERENT KINDNESS

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Carry out My judgements and observe My decrees to follow them; I am Hashem, your G-d." (18:4)

Mashal: Over a half-century ago, when an ice cream sundae cost a lot less than it does today, a ten-year-old boy entered a coffee shop and sat at a table. The waitress sauntered over, put a glass of water in front of him and waited for his order.

"How much is an ice cream sundae?" he asked eagerly.

"Fifty cents," she replied.

The little boy stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out a number of coins. Looking at his outstretched palm, he studied the coins in it. Then, he looked at her and asked, "Well, how much is a plain dish of ice cream?"

People began looking over at them, and the waitress was growing impatient. "Thirty-five cents," she replied brusquely.

The little boy again counted his coins. "I guess ... I'll have the plain ice cream," he said finally.

She brought the ice cream, put the bill on the table, and walked away. The boy finished the ice cream, paid the cashier and left. When the waitress came back, she looked down and began to cry as she wiped down the table. There, placed neatly beside the empty dish, were two nickels and five pennies. The ten year old boy would not have the sundae, because he had to have enough money to leave her a tip.

Nimshal: The Torah teaches that *mitzvos* and good deeds are not concepts that are fulfilled involuntarily. They become a way of life, something that a Jew feels instinctively and fulfills with their entire being, because their heart knows that it is the correct way to act. Every Jew, from a small child to an older person, embodies the middah of kindness and it's expressed in our daily interactions with people.

STAYING MINDFUL

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"Carry out My judgements and observe My decrees to follow them; I am Hashem, your G-d." (18:4)

Parashas Acharei Mos contains the broad instructions to "keep My laws and rules [those that can be understood along with those that cannot] that we should perform and live by them..." (18:5). Rashi explains that living with the laws and rules brings eternal reward, and the Mishnah (Makkos 23:2) adds that "performing" includes performing positive ones in addition to avoiding negative actions. In one *pasuk* we are asked to (1) keep, (2) perform, and (3) live by the laws of the Torah, but how are we to understand these three different directives?

The Lekach Tov offers a unique reading of the *pasuk*. Performing the laws and rules is a level of observance that is required to maintain our relationship with G-d. However, to gain eternal benefit from those laws and rules requires that we not only perform them but also keep them safe. What does it mean to keep laws and rules safe, and how do we do it? One answer lies not only in adhering to Rabbinic restrictions designed to prevent missteps but by also increasing mindfulness with respect to our actions.

The Torah is filled with laws and rules that call for sensitivities toward others, from recognizing G-d's gifts to appreciating the plight of the convert. This all-encompassing *pasuk* gives prominence to (1) being mindful of others' situations and (2) performing the commandments, both of which will lead us to (3) living a life full of purpose and perpetual giving, which is its own eternal reward.

RATIONAL VIA SUPRA-RATIONAL

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"Carry out My judgements and observe My decrees to follow them; I am Hashem, your G-d." (18:4)

"Decrees" [חֻקִּים] are *mitzvos* that have no rational explanation; "laws" [מִשְׁפָּטִים] are *mitzvos* that do have a rational explanation. In reality, when a person performs *mitzvos* that have no underlying rationale, he becomes more spiritually refined, such that he is then more capable of understanding the *mitzvos* that do have a rational explanation. But if, G-d forbid, a person fails to observe the decrees, then he will lack the insight to understand the rationale of the *mitzvos* that do have underlying reasons.

This is the deeper meaning of the phrase "observe My decrees." When you observe the *mitzvos* that are decrees, which have no rational explanation, then your mind will become refined so that you can understand the rationale behind the *mitzvos* you fulfill that do have a reason. This is what the verse alludes to when it says, "You shall fulfill My laws" (in other words, by "observing My decrees," "you will fulfill My laws" with understanding).

The following verse (Vayikra 18:5), “You shall observe My decrees and My laws, which a man shall do and by which he shall live,” also alludes to this idea - the person will come to realize that the *mitzvos* are the source of his vitality.

SPACE FOR FAITH

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

“You shall observe My decrees and My judgements, which man shall carry out and live by them – I am Hashem.” (18:5)

The concept of a *chok* tells us not to reject what we do not yet comprehend. There are aspects of life that call for faith in a wisdom greater than ours. We must strive to understand what we can, but we must also have the humility to make space in our lives for that which we cannot.

IMBUING LIFE-FORCE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“You shall observe My decrees and My judgements, which man shall carry out and live by them – I am Hashem.” (18:5)

The Hebrew phrase “to live by them” can also be read, “in order to imbue them with life-force.” This teaches us that not only do G-d’s commandments enhance our lives; by observing them, we bring them to life. For example, even the most carefully crafted *tefillin* cannot accomplish their purpose - thereby effecting a positive change in reality - until a Jewish man wears them.

Thus, we bring G-d’s plan for creation to fruition through fulfilling His commandments. Of course, in order to “enliven” G-d’s commandments, we ourselves must be “alive,” i.e., healthy, strong, happy, enthusiastic, and optimistic. (Igrot Kodesh Mehorayatz, vol. 4, p. 308; HaYom Yom, 10 Shevat; Likutei Sichot, vol. 1, p. 152) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

DRAWING LIFE

Reb Noson of Breslov

“You shall observe My decrees and My judgements, which man shall carry out and live by them – I am Hashem.” (18:5)

If a person’s life is in danger, it is permissible to desecrate Shabbat to save him. “Live by them” - not die by them. Better you should desecrate one Shabbat [to save him] so that he will keep many more Shabbosim. (Yoma 85b)

“Live by them” - for each *mitzvah* draws life. The longer a person lives and performs *mitzvos*, the more life he draws and the greater amount of good he brings into the world. (Likutei Halachot IV, p. 330)

LIFE-GIVING TORAH

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“You shall observe My decrees and My judgements, which man shall carry out and live by them – I am Hashem.” (18:5)

One Friday afternoon, a family found themselves stranded on their way home to Bnei Brak from where they had been in Yerushalayim. They had just missed the last bus out of the station. A non-religious young man was driving past on his way to Tel Aviv and kindly offered to give the family a lift.

When they arrived in Bnei Brak, it was too close to Shabbos and the young man would not have made it to Tel Aviv before nightfall. The family begged him to stay with them, and he finally consented.

They had a wonderful Shabbos together, and the young man was enthused. “You’ve been talking about *mitzvos* all day,” he said. “How about teaching me something small and unnoticeable I can do privately that my friends won’t make fun of?”

The father thought for a moment and then suggested a small *mitzvah*.

“A Jew serves Hashem in every way, even in the manner with which he puts on his shoes. Why not do this *mitzvah*? First put on your right shoe and then the left shoe. Now, tie the left shoe first and afterwards tie the right. I’m sure no one will notice.”

The young man agreed and tried as hard as he could to keep this one *mitzvah*. Even when he would forget, and it happened quite often, he would start all over and retie his shoes.

The young man was soon conscripted into the army. Even there, he struggled to remember to tie his long, laced army boots the Torah way. One time he realized that he had not tied his boots properly. He begged his Commanding Officer to allow him to return to his room to take some aspirin for a migraine headache. Once there, out of sight, he could remove his boots and put them on again - right shoe first, left lace first. The C.O. was not too happy. “There is a training helicopter due to pick up the entire unit in a few minutes. But if you’re unfit - well, go and be quick about it.”

The soldier hurried, but by the time he returned to the parade grounds, the helicopter had already left. That day, two Israeli army helicopters, with seventy-three soldiers aboard, collided in mid-air, killing all those aboard.

One young soldier, however, was not aboard that helicopter - all because of a shoelace and a determined effort to keep a small *mitzvah*. When he finally came to terms and realized what exactly saved his life, he made an about-face. Today, he is a full-fledged ba’al *teshuvah* who embodies “*v’chai bahem*.” *Mitzvos* not only are his life - but they gave him his life.

THE VACATED SPACE

Reb Noson of Breslov

"You shall observe My decrees and My judgements, which man shall carry out and live by them – I am Hashem." (18:5)

There are two types of *mitzvos*: those that can be explained rationally and those that cannot be explained rationally. Those that can be explained rationally are accepted by the nations, such as the Torah laws prohibiting murder and incest. But those that cannot be explained rationally are cause for the nations to question and torment us: Why do we follow laws that do not have a reason?

There are two types of questions: those that have answers and those that cannot be answered. The latter are rooted in the Vacated Space, the paradoxical creation from which G-d removed His Presence, although He is present there at all times. The Vacated Space cannot be understood with human reason.

Paralleling the two types of questions, we are given two types of *mitzvos*. Those *mitzvos* that can be explained rationally parallel those questions that have answers. Those *mitzvos* that cannot be explained rationally correspond to those questions that cannot be answered. The latter were given to strengthen our faith, as they are rooted in the Vacated Space, which cannot be understood. Both types of *mitzvos* were given by G-d. Not so the statutes of the nations, which are not rooted in an exalted place at all. (Likutey Halakhos IV, p. 428-215a)

[In the beginning, G-d, Who is Infinite, was everywhere. There was no empty space that could be characterized as space, emptiness or void. In order to create the world, G-d had to constrict Himself, as it were, from a specific area, which became known as the Vacated Space. Within that Space, He proceeded to create all the worlds, including our own. One cannot say that G-d is found within the Vacated Space, since He withdrew Himself from there. On the other hand, it is impossible to say that G-d is not there, because nothing can exist without His life force. This is the paradox of the Vacated Space, which is beyond human understanding. (See Likutey Moharan I, 64)]

BEYOND COMPREHENSION

Reb Noson of Breslov

"You shall observe My decrees and My judgements, which man shall carry out and live by them – I am Hashem." (18:5)

A *chok* (statute) is a law that does not have a rational explanation.

A person's livelihood is also a *chok*, for we cannot explain how G-d grants livelihood to all; however, to some He grants wealth, while others have poverty. The essence of a *chok* is that we do not question G-d's intentions. (Likutey Halakhos VII, p. 266)

DON'T GO OVERBOARD

Rebbe Nachman

"You shall observe My decrees and My judgements, which man shall carry out and live by them – I am Hashem." (18:5)

"Live by them" - not die by them. (Yoma 85a)

One should live with the Torah and not feel suffocated by it. He should not seek extraneous devotions or unnecessary halakhic stringencies. Rather, he should enjoy doing the *mitzvos* as best he can, and not seek to fulfill them according to every halakhic opinion. The greatest wisdom is not to be wise at all - just to serve G-d with simplicity and straightforwardness, since what G-d really wants is the heart. (Likutey Moharan II, 44)

[Reb Noson writes: When he was young, Rebbe Nachman spent much time and effort observing the *mitzvos* according to the most stringent views. Afterwards, he realized that the proper way to serve G-d is to choose to observe one *mitzvah* with absolute stringency. As for the other *mitzvos*, one should fulfill them in accordance with the normative *halakhah* as presented in the Shulchan Arukh. (See Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #235)]

LIVELY MITZVOS

Sefas Emes

"You shall observe My decrees and My judgements, which man shall carry out and live by them – I am Hashem." (18:5)

This is to say that the performance of the *mitzvos* gives life, vigor, and vitality to the individual.

By following the laws of the Torah, a person becomes a living being, alive in all aspects beyond the ordinary pleasures usually associated with life. Actions based on Torah and the *mitzvos* commanded by the Almighty give meaning to life in this world

WITHIN REACH

Meshech Chochmah

"You shall observe My decrees and My judgements, which man shall carry out and live by them – I am Hashem." (18:5)

The statement "I am Hashem, your G-d" is placed at the opening of the list of practices that are immoral and therefore forbidden in order to tell us that we should not regard these prohibitions as running counter to human nature and therefore difficult to observe.

G-d tells us, "I am Hashem, your G-d." I created you and know your nature, and therefore I am in a position to assure you that you can refrain from these practices without bodily harm. As a matter of fact, if you will keep these statutes and ordinances, you "shall live by them."

GOING ALL IN

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"You shall observe My decrees and My judgements, which man shall carry out and live by them – I am Hashem." (18:5)

The Chiddushei HaRim explains that the words *chai ba'hem* - "and live by them," teach us that a person has to put his whole life into the performance of *mitzvos*. A person needs to observe *mitzvos* with passion and excitement, with *chiyus* and energy.

In fact, *halachah* mandates that if a person is in the middle of performing one *mitzvah*, he or she is exempt from doing another *mitzvah* at the same time. The reason for this is because one has to dedicate everything to the *mitzvah* he or she is performing and is, therefore, incapable of devoting any attention to another *mitzvah*.

The Chiddushei HaRim is sharing with us a critical ingredient regarding the performance of *mitzvos*. We cannot just check the box off and simply observe the *mitzvos* as a result of rote and routine. Instead, we must give our all to each *mitzvah* that we perform.

If we serve Hashem with enthusiasm and excitement, we will surely become more invested in our relationship with Him, which will result in our bond with Him becoming even stronger.

FUTILE FIRE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You must not give any of your offspring to pass through for Molech, and you must not profane the Name of your G-d – I am Hashem." (18:21)

Allegorically, passing our children through the fires of Molech means providing them with an education that - whether we realize it or not - will consign them to the flames of their own materialistic passions.

Some parents may mistakenly think that their primary responsibility toward their children is to provide them with an education that will enable them to earn a good living.

While there is, of course, nothing wrong with earning a good living per se, parents must know that their primary responsibility is to provide their children with a spiritually and emotionally healthy upbringing and education, which will enable them to live as G-d wants them to: devoted to the values and laws of His Torah. This is the surest way to earn G-d's material as well as spiritual blessings for a fulfilling and happy life.

When we and our children are aflame with the fire of G-d's Torah, we need not fear that either we or they will be consumed in the fires of false hopes, dreams, addictions, or passions. (Hitva'aduyot 5743, vol. 2, pp. 1079-1082; Hitva'aduyot 5747, vol. 1, pp. 504-507) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

HIGHER STANDARDS

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"You must not give any of your offspring to pass through for Molech, and you must not profane the Name of your G-d – I am Hashem." (18:21)

After detailing all the illicit relationships, the Torah concludes with a single law prohibiting one from giving of their offspring to pass through for Molech (18:21). Ibn Ezra explains that Molech was worshipped by passing children over a fire, where some lived, and some died. Why is a separate statement about handing over your child to Molech juxtaposed in our *parashah* that generally deals with inappropriate relationships?

Rav Hirsch explains that Molech represents the delusion of chance and is contra everything G-d stands for. We are not products of blind physical instincts but are born into moral freedom. We are guided by standards, rules, and a G-d that cares for us. Our actions must consistently reflect those standards and not leave our fate to chance. The placement of this obscure rule next to all the illicit relationships is to help us see that, at times, we require guidelines to help us reach moral heights.

HOT AND COLD

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Do not defile yourselves in any one of these [ways of the nations]..." (18:24)

Mashal: One wintry day, a man was walking down the street. The sun and the wind were watching him go and they decided to make a wager between themselves. Each one claimed that it had the power to make the man remove his coat. They decided to test their skills on the man as he walking down the street.

First, it was the wind's turn. The wind began blowing with gale force winds, buffeting the man from all sides, attempting to blow the coat right off him. However, rather than tear the coat off him, it just caused him to wrap it even tighter.

Then it was the sun's turn. Immediately, it emitted powerful rays of golden warmth. After a short while, the man began sweating profusely. Eventually, he couldn't bear the heat anymore. He stopped and took off his coat. The wind had to admit that his forceful tactics were no match for the warmth and heat of the powerful sun.

Nimshal: The Chasam Sofer, R' Moshe Sofer zt'l, writes that when the nations of the world oppress the Jews and buffet them from all sides with decrees, torture and isolation, rather than cause the Jews to leave the ways of their forefathers and their rock-solid belief in Hashem, it has the opposite effect; the Jews envelop themselves in the Torah and *mitzvos* more firmly than before. But when the gentiles try a different tactic by employing their warmth and charm to seduce the Jewish People, they unfortunately often succeed.

MUTUAL COMMITMENT

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"And let the land not vomit you for having defiled it, as it vomited out the nation that preceded you." (18:28)

After listing prohibited orientations, the Torah says, "And let the land not vomit you for having defiled it, as it vomited out the nation that preceded you" (18:28). What is the significance of using the word "vomit" instead of just telling us to follow the Torah's laws?

The Dubno Maggid explains that while other nations were expelled (vomited) from their land, the Jews would not suffer that fate because they are G-d's people, and G-d doesn't abandon the ones He loves. The *pasuk* becomes a commandment not to pervert G-d's love for us. The timing of this declaration after listing so many rules is beautifully telling. Following another's rules shows them how much we love them, and G-d takes the time to acknowledge our commitment to Him, and His to us.

SETTING FENCES

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You shall safeguard My charge that these abominable traditions that were done before you not be done, and not make yourselves impure through them; I am Hashem, your G-d." (18:30)

This injunction also includes the directive that each of us take our own, added precautions when we see that these are necessary in order to avoid transgressing any of the Torah's prohibitions.

The fact that the Torah encourages such "safeguards" teaches us that we should never underestimate their importance. Since we are all naturally prone to overestimating our ability to resist evil, it is necessary for us to periodically evaluate our spiritual health - preferably by consulting regularly with a qualified spiritual counselor - in order to determine when additional stringencies are necessary. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 1, pp. 253-254) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

DIVINE MORALITY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You shall safeguard My charge that these abominable traditions that were done before you not be done, and not make yourselves impure through them; I am Hashem, your G-d." (18:30)

G-d closed the laws of forbidden relationships by saying "I am Hashem, your G-d" in order to emphasize their importance. By observing these laws, we cause a triple positive spiritual reaction:

- We figuratively give G-d pleasure from seeing creation run according to His plan, thereby becoming a "home" for Him. This pleasure is alluded to by the word "I," since G-d's desire to have a "home" in the world is rooted in His very essence.
- We justify the continued existence of all creation. This is alluded to in the (first) word for "G-d" (the Name *Havayah*), which signifies the Divine power that brings creation into being and constantly re-creates it.
- We enhance the Divine power that pulsates through creation in order to enliven it. This power is alluded to in the word for "your G-d" (the Name *Elokim*), which denotes the contraction of G-d's infinite power necessary to grant vitality to each element of creation individually. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 22, pp. 101-102) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

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