

Parshas Acharei-Mos

LOVE IS NOT A VOLUNTEER THING – IT'S A COMMITMENT

Ahron's two eldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, were great men who might one day have led the Jewish people. But we find that they were consumed by their fervour for the Temple service:

ויקחו בני-אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחֶתֶתוֹ, וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ, וַיִּשְׂמוּ עָלֶיהָ, קֶטֶרֶת; וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה', אֵשׁ זָרָה—אֲשֶׁר לֹא צֻוָּה, אֹתָם. Nadav and Avihu took pans of fire, in which they placed the spices, and presented it before God; this alien fire which they were not commanded. A great fire emerged, and consumed them. (10: 1,2)

The stated reason for their death is that they were not commanded. What is so wrong with their voluntary service?

The introduction to the laws prohibiting certain sexual relationships, the arayos, is lengthy, but encoded in it is something very powerful:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה', אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם: אֲנִי, ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. כְּמַעֲשֵׂה אֲרָץ-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבְּתֶם-בָּהּ, לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ; וְכַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֲרָץ-כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אָנִי מְבִיא אֲתֶכֶם שָׁמָּה, לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ, וּבְחַקְתִּיהֶם, לֹא תִלְכוּ. אֶת-מִשְׁפָּטֵי תַעֲשׂוּ וְאֶת-חֻקֹּתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ, לְלַכֵּת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. וְשִׁמְרַתֶם אֶת-חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי, אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֲתֶם הָאָדָם וְחֵי בָהֶם: אֲנִי, ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. Hashem said to Moshe... Speak to the Jews and say that I am Hashem their God. Do not act like the Egyptians amongst whom you once lived; do not act like the Canaanites where you will one day live. Do not follow their customs; for it is My laws you should observe, My rules and justice which a man should do, and in so doing, he will live... (18: 1-5)

Rashi notes that אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם echoes what was said at Sinai – אנכי ה' אלוקיך. This statement appears throughout the Torah, and the construction is taken to mean that if Sinai was the acceptance of God as a king, then these are the laws of the kingdom. Sinai is woven into the fabric of the mitzvos, and the mitzvos into Sinai.

The Sfas Emes understands this seemingly ordinary introductory statement to be a prism through which to perceive and understand the nature of mitzvos.

Mitzvos can have a practical function. Mitzvos bein Adam l'chavero, the social, inter-personal mitzvos, by their nature build and develop a cohesive society whether intentionally performed as mitzvos or not. But entirely beyond from the practical function, there is a framework for doing mitzvos that brings God into our lives.

Volunteering in an unprescribed manner can work bein Adam l'chavero because the guidelines are straightforward – humans can learn and understand how best to relate to each other. Giving charity adds positivity, goodwill and

brotherhood to the world, whether intended as the mitzva of tzedaka or not. But when it comes to the divine, volunteering can be very dangerous and destructive. An extreme example is the story of Lot and his daughters – the best intentions can twist and warp something beautiful into something gruesome.

A superficial analogy; imagine a newlywed man whose wife's birthday approaches. He desires to give her an extravagant bouquet of flowers to show her a glimmer how special and important she is to him. Her favourite flowers are white tulips, which was why she had chosen them for their wedding. On her birthday, he surprises her with an ornate arrangement of red roses. How she responds is irrelevant, although parenthetically, one would hope she may appreciate them. The salient point is that although he certainly means well; and they may be beautiful; and they may express his feelings better; but a relationship is inherently mutual, and the type flower that she likes best is not a secret.

This may be the reason the lesson is taught by the laws of forbidden relationships – love and passion may seem so real, that they gloss over a fatal flaw. We cannot do what we feel like when we feel like – this is the ultimate form of narcissism and self-worship. Love is not a volunteer thing; it is a commitment. We are beseeched to not be like everyone else; we have very specific duties and instructions. An employee will work rain or shine; a volunteer can simply quit and it doesn't matter!

The stated reason that Nadav and Avihu died takes on a very literal meaning in this context:

אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֱתָם – Alien fire they were not commanded...

The Torah allows people to volunteer sacrifices in the name of different things, but their type and class of offering was not one of them. This represents something foreign, sinister, and זָרָה – alien.

We cannot presume to know the workings of the metaphysical. Hashem is beyond our existence, and beyond our understanding; we cannot unilaterally reach out. But through the Torah, mitzvos and Halacha, we can earn the gift of a relationship with the Creator. All we know, and all we can know, about God, is what He tells us, because once, He reached in; so everything must fit into that framework. It is delusional to think that we can make God happy; we cannot change Him in any way. The small wisp of insight into how to relate to God is through Torah – literally, “The Instructions”.

The way to engage and develop the relationship for all it can be, is וַחֲיוֹ בְהֵם – to live a life committed to and imbued with Torah, being shining ambassadors and representatives of God in this world.

When people depart from interactions with you, is that what goes through their minds?

SANCTITY OF LIFE

When God created the universe, the life it contained was not equally instructed. The amphibians and birds were told:

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱתָם אֱלֹהִים, לֵאמֹר: פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ, וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הַמַּיִם בַּיַּמִּים, וְהָעוֹף, יִרְבַּ בְּאֶרֶץ – God blessed them saying, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the waters of the seas, and multiply the land”. (1: 22)

In contrast, mankind was told:

וַיְבָרֵךְ אֹתָם, אֱלֹהִים, וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ, וּכְבֹּשְׁתֶּהּ – God blessed them; and God said to them to be fruitful and multiply; fill the land and conquer it... (1: 28)

The Netziv points out that while both are blessed to be populous, man had a personal instruction – וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם – it was said to them directly, and not just about them.

Rav Hirsch notes that nature serves God by its intrinsic existence. It cannot be otherwise because there is no deviation in how it relates to God. Mankind however, is spoken to, and must choose to listen. Free will is the צלם אלוהים that distinguishes humanity from other creatures. Allowing instinct and nature to run wild is to surrender to the animal within; the charge is to subjugate it and listen to God's instruction.

The Netziv explains that the animal instinct within us must be channeled a particular way, as evidenced by the origin of humanity:

וַיִּיצֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם, עֹפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה, וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו, נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים; וַיְהִי הָאָדָם, לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה – God formed man from the dust of the earth, and breathed into him a living soul, and the man became alive (2: 7)

Animals are simply called נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה – they are living things. But mankind is made of more – a balance of mundane matter, pumped with soul. It is with this equilibrium that man becomes truly alive. The word חַיָּה means alive, but it also means happy. The happiness is found in the balance. This is the choice on offer – וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם.

This is reflected in their respective developments too; a newborn calf can stand not long after birth, and while it will get bigger, it is born as it will always be; whereas humans are born helpless, defenceless, and pretty useless for a relatively large part of their lives. Clearly, mankind are intended for greater aspirations than cattle.

The Torah is intended as instructions on how to live. The Gemara teaches that וְחַי בָּהֶם – in most circumstances it is better to violate the Torah and live than die for its sake, with the exception of three cardinal sins: idolatry, murder, and consummating forbidden relationships. Bizarrely then, the location of the principle וְחַי בָּהֶם is exactly where it doesn't apply, in the opening portion of forbidden relationships:

כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבַתְּם-בָּהּ, לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ; וּכַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ-כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אָנִי מְבִיֵּא אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה, לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ, וּבְחֻקֹּתֵיהֶם, לֹא תִלְכוּ. אֶת-מִשְׁפָּטֵי תַעֲשׂוּ וְאֶת-חֻקֹּתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ, לְלֶכֶת בָּהֶם: אֲנִי, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי, אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם יְהוָה – As Egypt did when you lived among them; do not do. And as Canaan do, when I bring you there, do not do; do not follow their ordinances. It is My law that you should do, and My ordinance that you should observe, and follow its ways; I am The Lord. Guard My law and ordinance, that you will do them, and live by them; I am The Lord. (18: 3-5)

Literally anywhere else in the entire Torah would be appropriate to teach וְחַי בָּהֶם. Why does it appear here with respect to the section of forbidden relationships?

Arguably, it makes the most sense to include it by its exception – it serves to prove the rule itself. God grants life – but life isn't everything. What matters is the way the life is lived. The three exceptions contradict the essence of life.

The section וְחַי בָּהֶם is said of is not entirely limited forbidden relationships. Apart from incest, the end of the laws address homosexuality, bestiality, and sacrificing children to Molech, a form of idol worship.

They are not an acceptable way of life. All are squandering and snuffing out potential life for transient and

questionable gain. Perhaps it could be said that the man has embezzled a part of himself as well – that is not the person God intended to create. וַיֵּאמֶר לָהֶם – there was meant to be a balance of the mundane dust of physicality married to the spiritual soul, and that couldn't be further from these. They are the ultimate obfuscations and literal perversions; funnelled into narcissism and self pleasure. What sort of human being puts a child, his own flesh and blood, into a fire, for some sort of spiritual elevation?

וְחַי בְּהֶם is placed on these to indicate the requirement of a direction in life. Life does not trump everything. Because there is another exception to וְחַי בְּהֶם too – during Shmad, a time of persecution and genocide. Rather than violate even the smallest and most insignificant law, a Jew should sacrifice their existence. Because life has to be worth something.

And if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything.

Thank you for using gTorah.com