

## Parshas Shmini

### 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-אֶהָרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחֶתֶתוֹ, וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ, וַיִּשְׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ, קִטְרֹת; וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה', אֵשׁ זָרָה—אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה, 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 אָנֹכִי מְבִיא אֲתֶכֶם שָׁמָּה, לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ, וּבְחַקְתִּיהֶם, לֹא תִלְכוּ. אֶת-מִשְׁפָּטֵי תַעֲשׂוּ וְאֶת-חֻקֹּתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ, לְלֶכֶת ה' אֲנִי, ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. וְשִׁמְרֶתֶם אֶת-חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי, אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם 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 – אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. 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 אֹתָם – 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 וַחֲבִיבָהֶם – 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?

## THINK IT THROUGH

At the inauguration of the Mishkan, there was a handover process where Moshe gave the post he had filled for 7 days to Ahron, where Ahron offered sacrifices as part of his new role:

וַיִּשָׂא אַהֲרֹן אֶת יָדָיו [ידו] אֶל הָעָם וַיְבָרְכֵם וַיֵּרֶד מֵעֲשֵׂת הַחֲטָאֹת וְהֵעֲלָה וְהִשְׁלֵמִים. וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּצְאוּ וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת כָּל הָעָם – אֶת הָעָם וַיִּרְא כְבוֹד ה' – Ahron raised his hands towards the people and blessed them. He then descended from preparing the offerings. Moshe and Ahron then went into the Tent of Meeting; they came out and blessed the people, and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. (9: 22,23)

There are two distinct blessings; one before and one after going into the Mishkan. Rashi explains that the first blessing was Birchas Kohanim, and the second was *וַיְהִי נֶעַם אֲדָנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ עָלֵינוּ וּמַעֲשֵׂה דְיָנוּ כּוֹנְנָה עָלֵינוּ וּמַעֲשֵׂה דְיָנוּ* – that our handiwork is an expression of godliness.

There is a difficulty with the word *וַיֵּרַד* – that Ahron “descended”. The Torah does not emphasise “descent” from the Mizbeach anywhere else – so what does it mean here?

Perhaps Ahron experienced an emotional descent – his joy fell into sadness.

There is a tradition that some words are pronounced differently to how they are spelt; we read *דְּיָו* – his hands, plural, but the word is spelt *יָדוּ* – his hand, singular. Ahron’s first offering was not accepted in Heaven, as he felt proud that he earned his office by his own hand (*יָדוּ*). He lost sight of the fact that his hands were for the service of the people (*דְּיָו*).

When he saw his offering rejected, *וַיֵּרַד* – he literally “became down”, i.e. miserable, at which point Moshe, who had already performed the duties for 7 days, took him aside to explain him how to perform the service properly. When they came out again, they blessed the people again – *וּמַעֲשֵׂה דְיָנוּ כּוֹנְנָה עָלֵינוּ וּמַעֲשֵׂה דְיָנוּ כּוֹנְנָהוּ* – that we can only work properly when we clearly understand that our hands work exclusively to serve G-d; precisely what Ahron had just learned.

It is worth noting that even performing the actions correctly was not enough for the service to be accepted; even the intentions had to be perfect too.

My grandfather says that each day, we say *הַלְלוּהוּ בַנְּבֵל וּבַכִּנּוֹר* – they praise Him with a guitar and harp. A harp is called *נְבֵל* – from the same root as the word “corpse”. My grandfather explains that the words are related in that a harp makes such a beautiful sound it makes other instruments sound bad in comparison. Chazal teach that someone who gains honour at someone else’s expense is a disgrace.

To engaged in public service, it is imperative not just to do the right thing, but to do it in the right way.

**Thank you for using gTorah.com**