



PARSHAS SHEMINI

SHALOSH SEUDOS TORAH
5772

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Humility is a Prerequisite for Receiving the Torah

A Mysterious Midrash

Aharon was silent when he heard about the death of his two sons, Nadav and Avihu. The Midrash¹ asks, "What could he have said?" He could have quoted a verse in Parshas Tazria - "וביום השמיני ימול בשר ערלתו"², 'On the eighth day his foreskin shall be circumcised.'

We need to understand why this would have been an appropriate response of Aharon upon the death of his sons.

The context of the verse "וביום השמיני וכו'" is also puzzling. It is inserted into the paragraph which discusses the purification process of a postpartum woman. According to Torah law, a woman is impure for seven days after having given birth to a son, and fourteen days after the birth of a daughter. After stating that she is impure for seven days after the birth of a son, the Torah inserts this verse.

What is the connection between circumcising a baby boy when he is eight days old and the fact that the mother remains impure for seven days after his birth?

Why the Bris Milah Takes Place on the Eighth Day

One explanation for the requirement to wait until the eighth day for the Bris Milah is so that the baby should become strong enough to withstand the procedure. Another reason is so that the baby should live through one Shabbos and imbue its holiness before entering into a covenant with Hashem.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai³ stated that the delay of the Bris is so that there be no incongruence between the state of the participants in the celebration and that of the parents. The guests will be joyous because of the simcha, but the parents will be depressed because of the mother's impure state. Therefore, the Torah commanded us to wait until the eighth day, when she will be pure, in order that the parents of the baby should be as happy as everyone else.

However, although the mother has no biblical impurity after the eighth day, she is still rabbinically impure until much later. Every theory the Gemara quotes is eternally meaningful and applies for all times. How then does the explanation of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai for the delay of the Bris apply in our times as well?

Sin Begets Depression

Tzaddikim have said that the melancholy which follows after a sin is worse than the actual sin. Sin brings about impurity, and impurity causes sadness.

Purity, on the other hand, begets joy. This is what King David stated in Tehillim⁴, "תגלנה, עצמות דכית" 'The bones you have purified should rejoice.' After being purified from the effects of sin, a person is joyous.

The Gemara⁵ interprets the curse received for Chavah's role in the eating of the forbidden fruits - "הרבה ארבה עצבונך"⁶, 'I will greatly increase your sadness' – to mean that she will become impure. Becoming impure is the catalyst for melancholy.

From here we can understand why Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai equated the pure state of the new mother on the eighth day with her happiness. The father is also unhappy in the seven

days of the mother's impurity because, due to his close relationship with her, he is affected by her spiritual and emotional state.

This point holds true even nowadays although she is still rabbinically impure, this does not bring about depression. This is because even though the rabbanim declared her still impure, it does not affect her actual state of being. She as a person is essentially pure now, and is merely obligated to conduct herself in accordance with the laws of impurity⁷.

Eliyahu Hanavi is a Soul from a Utopian Era

When Eliyahu Hanavi (Elijah the prophet) had to hide from King Achav⁸ who wished to kill him, Hashem sustained him in a miraculous manner: by sending ravens to bring him bread and meat from Achav's kitchen⁹.

The question arises, Achav and his household were idol worshippers and their slaughtered meat is legally non-kosher, so how could Eliyahu eat it? The answer is that a prophet can, upon the command of Hashem, temporarily violate a mitzvah. Since Hashem commanded Eliyahu Hanavi to eat the meat, he was permitted to do so.

However, when the Prophet Yechezkel was commanded by Hashem to eat food which was revolting¹⁰ - and thereby violate the mitzvah of "בל תשקצו", eating something repulsive - he begged Hashem to rescind His decree, saying, 'My entire life I never ate anything impure or forbidden¹¹.' Hashem indeed mitigated the decree so that the prophet should not have to violate a mitzvah.

Why didn't Eliyahu Hanavi also request of Hashem not to obligate him to eat non-kosher food?

When Adam ate of the forbidden fruits, all souls – who were incorporated in him – became contaminated, and a world in which impurity exists came to be. However, there were some souls who did not join in the eating of the forbidden fruits and did not derive any pleasure from them. One of these souls is Eliyahu Hanavi.

Eliyahu Hanavi is a completely pure being, from the era of absolute purity. Therefore, he did not die – as do all those who ate from the forbidden fruits - and ascended to heaven with his body intact. He is a man from an era where death is nonexistent and nothing is impure and thereby forbidden. Even forbidden foods would technically be permitted to him.

However, because he lived among regular people living in an era where impurity exists and therefore there are foods which are non-kosher, Eliyahu Hanavi was obligated, too, to refrain from eating non-kosher in order not to deviate from the norm and thereby confuse people.

However, when he was isolated from people, and there was no issue of deviation from the norm, there was no need for him to be absolved from eating forbidden foods. Upon the command of Hashem, Eliyahu Hanavi can eat forbidden food and it will not spiritually contaminate him, because he is a person of the Era of Mashiach when impurity will exist no more.

An Explanation of Postpartum Impurity

Why should a woman, after doing the greatest act man can possibly do – create a living human being – become impure? She was the bearer of a tremendous holiness! For nine months, she was a virtual Bais HaMedrash while the angel studied the entire Torah with the fetus and a great spiritual light shone upon its head with which it was able to see from one end of the world to the other¹².

The corpse of a non-Jew is not as impure as the corpse of a Jew. Someone merely present in the same building as a Jewish corpse becomes impure and requires the sprinkling of the waters of the 'Parah Adumah' (red heifer). This law does not apply to a non-Jewish corpse.

The Ohr Hachaim¹³ explains the reason with a parable: If a barrel of honey is emptied, swarms of flies will flock to it to derive nourishment from the leftover sweet stickiness. When an ordinary barrel is emptied, far fewer flies will be attracted to it.

The body of a Jew which was just emptied of a great and holy soul strongly attracts the impure forces who want to suck the bits of holiness left over in it in order to draw life.

The same can be said regarding a woman who had just given birth. She was also emptied of a great holiness and impure forces therefore flock to feed on the remnants.

Eliyahu Nullifies all Impurity

Following the logic of this explanation, a question arises: Why is the mother impure for only one week after a boy, and two weeks after a girl? The holiness a woman is emptied of after the birth of a boy is greater than that of after the birth of a girl because the male fetus will be obligated to fulfill more mitzvos and to learn Torah. We would expect the impurity following a boy to be as long, or even longer, than that of a girl.

The answer is that, indeed, the impurity after a boy would be longer. The reason the impurity of the mother is interrupted on the eighth day is because the baby boy is circumcised then. Eliyahu Hanavi comes to each Bris Milah. As a person from an era of no impurity, he eradicates the impurity of the mother, who is a very close relative of the baby who is undergoing the Bris.

This Torah interjects the verse that the Bris is on the eighth day after the declaration that the mother is impure for seven days. Thereby, we understand that it is the Bris - to which Eliyahu Hanavi, who banishes all impurity, comes - which accomplishes her early purification.

What Aharon Could Have Argued

The Midrash states that Aharon could have protested the demise of his two sons by quoting the verse, 'On the eighth day his foreskin shall be circumcised.' This verse - by its insertion after the verse which states that the postpartum woman remains impure for *only* seven days - brings to the fore the essence of the soul of Eliyahu Hanavi. He is a personality of a utopian era, when sin, impurity and punishment will be no more. It is him who removes the impurity of the mother of the baby boy.

After the passing of Nadav and Avihu, their souls remained on this world. When Pinchos the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon HaKohen committed his brave act of zealotry and slew Zimri during his act of promiscuity, the souls of Nadav and Avihu flew into him¹⁴. Pinchos then became Eliyahu Hanavi, because the combined souls of Nadav and Avihu are none other than Eliyahu Hanavi.

Aharon could have argued, "Why were they killed; aren't they souls of an era beyond retribution?" But he did not. (The truth is that they acquired the essence of Eliyahu Hanavi only after entering the body of Pinchos.)

The Cause of the Death of Nadav and Avihu

According to one opinion, the sin of Nadav and Avihu was that they determined a Torah law (that one is obligated to bring fire upon the altar even though a heavenly fire descends) in the presence of their rebbe, Moshe Rabbeinu.

Shmuel Hanavi also determined a law in the presence of his rebbe, Eli HaKohen. Eli wanted to punish him with the death penalty for doing so. Chana, his mother, begged Eli not to do so, saying, "This is the child you blessed me with." Eli responded, "I'll bless you with another son." Chana responded, "This is the child I prayed for," and Eli spared the life of Shmuel¹⁵.

From here we see that if a rebbe wants to, he can forego his own honor. Why did Moshe Rabbeinu not forego his own honor in order that the life of Nadav and Avihu be spared? Also, why did only the argument of "This is the child I prayed for" absolve Shmuel of the death penalty?

Submission to Torah Leaders is Crucial

The days of Sefirah are a time designated for rectifying the mistake of the students of Rabbi Akiva who were not sufficiently respectful to each other.

The basis for the general obligation of honoring and deferring to ones colleagues, and especially superiors, is in order to accustom ourselves to give honor to others and thereby be equipped to honor Hashem, the Ultimate Authority. Without constantly submitting and humbling ourselves before those greater than us, it would be impossible for us to submit and humble ourselves before Hashem.

Furthermore, as R' Baruch of Mezibezh explained, a cup can only be filled if it is positioned lower than the spout of the container that is pouring into it. One can only learn Torah from his rebbe if he subordinates himself before him. The entire chain of the transmitting of the Torah is dependent upon a student submitting to his rebbe.

Pirkei Avos opens with this important statute: Moshe received the Torah from Hashem and transmitted it to Yehoshua, who passed it on to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets and so on. In order to receive the Torah, they were required to submit to the generation before them.

Similarly, each spiritual world receives its bounty from the one above it. The angels also submit to each other and request permission from each other before proceeding to praise Hashem¹⁶.

The Baal Shem Tov greatly stressed the importance of nullifying oneself in the face of Hashem as the basis for being a servant of Hashem. The ultimate greatness, he taught, is complete nullification before Hashem and acceptance of everything Hashem sends ones way. The greatest Jew is the one most totally humble before his Creator, teachers, fellow man and every creature of G-d.

It is imperative to respect one's contemporaries because they teach us much Torah. King David who only learned from Achitofel one thing, referred to him as, 'My master and my teacher¹⁷.' In the Gemara¹⁸, we find that friends would stand up for each other because they learned Torah from each other. After a person's demise, his soul is questioned, "Did you make your friend king over you?"

Of utmost gravity is to respect the great Torah leaders of each generation. The opposite of deference and submission is to be so bold as to voice an opinion regarding which leader is greater than the other. Who are we to evaluate those of whom we have no understanding?

When Hashem commanded the first mitzvah, Moshe and Aharon honored each other to be the one to relate it to the Jewish people, until the word of Hashem emanated from between them¹⁹. With the giving over of the first mitzvah we already see that the approach of the Torah is one of respect and deference.

Because it is so important that a student humble himself before his rebbe, it is imperative that a teacher not be lenient in this regard. Therefore Moshe and Eli did not forgo their due honor and release Nadav and Avihu and Shmuel from their due punishment for determining the law in their presence.

Tefilah is the Utmost of Self-Submission

The Maharal teaches that the sacrifices are an exercise in submission to Hashem. A person would take the best of his possessions and set it aside for Hashem, in order to show that everything he has is from Hashem. The attitude reinforced with a sacrifice is - "Everything I have, Hashem gave me; everything I am, Hashem made me."

Today, when sacrifices cannot be brought, prayer takes its place. Even one who is not praising Hashem, but is requesting of Him to fulfill his needs, is exercising humility. He is recognizing that everything he has came from Hashem, and anything he wants, Hashem needs to give him; he is not self-sufficient.

Therefore, eating is prohibited before praying, because it is not submissive to engage in the need of one's body before presenting oneself to one's Creator.

The reason why Chana's argument of, "I prayed for this child," was accepted by Eli, is now understood.

Shmuel committed an act which would seem to be brazen. Chana argued, "I prayed for this child!" He came about through the power of prayer.

Furthermore, this prayer of Chana that begot the Prophet Shmuel was the ultimate prayer – from it, all laws of prayer are derived. The one who prayed this prayer had to be the most humble person.

Eli was willing to forego his honor upon hearing Chana's argument. Indeed, a child born to such a humble woman could not intentionally act disrespectfully to his rebbe, and it was acceptable for Eli to make an exception and let him live.

This may be another intention of the Midrash quoted above that Aharon could have argued "וביום השמיני וכו'", stressing the greatness of the soul of Eliyahu who comes to the Bris.

Eliyahu (who contains the soul of Nadav and Avihu) zealously protested for the honor of Hashem, as seen in Melachim and as is stated in the Motzei Shabbos zemiros, "A man [Eliyahu] who was zealous for the sake of Hashem."

Aharon could have argued that it is unfair that one who will stand up for the honor of Hashem should die for having breeched the honor of a teacher of Hashem's word.

Sefirah is a Time to Rectify One's Character Traits

Good character is a prerequisite to receiving the Torah²⁰. Therefore, in the weeks prior to the acceptance of the Torah, focus is placed on improving one's character.

For this reason, it was precisely now that Divine judgment was passed upon the students of Rabbi Akiva and they died out in a plague for not respecting each other sufficiently. They had not adequately respected each other a whole year, but when the time of Sefirah arrived, they were punished for it. This is because character is now most important and Heaven was much more stringent with them.

Now is the time for us to inspect ourselves to see if we are sufficiently respectful of our friends and teachers. It is also the time to examine our other character traits.

The Rebbe of Koritz stated that these days are greater days of judgment than that of Tishrei – they affect the outcome of the year more. However, we do not engage in intense supplications and fasting because the judgment is with Chesed (loving-kindness).

The parshios at this time of the year discuss the laws of purity and impurity; it is a time when we can greatly purify ourselves.

May we merit

להתקדש ולהיטהר בקדושה של מעלה
To be sanctified and purified with a heavenly holiness

¹ מדרש פליאה

² ויקרא יב:ג

³ נדה לא ע"ב

⁴ נא:י

⁵ עירובין ק ע"ב

⁶ בראשית ג:טז

⁷ עי' נתיבות המשפט חו"מ סי' רל"ד סק"ג

⁸ מלכים א' ריש פרק י"ז

⁹ חולין ה ע"א

¹⁰ יחזקאל פרק ד'

¹¹ חולין דף ל"ז ע"ב ומ"ד ע"ב

¹² נדה ל ע"ב

¹³ ריש פרשת חקת

¹⁴ זוהר

¹⁵ ברכות לא:ב

¹⁶ ישעי' ו:ג התרגום שם

¹⁷ אבות פרק ו' משנה ג'

¹⁸ בבא מציעא ל"ג ע"א

¹⁹ רש"י פ' בא

²⁰ ר' חיים ויטאל, שער הקדושה