



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Ki Tisa 5781

For the Love of Life

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered March 19, 1960)

One of the least understood portions of the entire Torah is that dealing with the laws of tumah and taharah, ritual impurity and the cleansing from that state of impurity. In most cases, these laws no longer apply today. An example might be that of which we read in today's Parshat Parah, concerning the purification of one who had been defiled by coming into contact with a corpse. These laws do not apply, because the principal effect of tumah is that the person who becomes tamei, unclean, may not enter the sanctuary or eat of the flesh of a Korban, a sacrifice, such as the Korban Pesach. Since today we no longer have a temple, nor do we have any sacrifices, hence most forms of tumah are in longer effect, except for the one kind where the law deals with that sort of tumah which has consequences for domestic life as well.

These laws of tumah are sorely misunderstood. Some people who read the Bible only superficially have come to the conclusion that they are merely guides to hygiene, and that hence they have no deeper spiritual meaning and are totally irrelevant in this age of scientific prophylaxis. Others have imagined that they are a form of Jewish magical taboo.

What does our tradition teach us about the meaning of the laws of tumah and taharah? Generally, Judaism discourages probing too deeply into the meaning or reason for these commandments. Especially with regard to the laws of Parah Adumah which we read of in today's Parshat Parah, our tradition teaches us that this ritual must forever remain a mystery, and the secret of the red heifer must for all eternity remain concealed from the inquisitive eyes of human reason. Nevertheless, while we shall not presume to discover Divine intention, I do want to share with you what I recently heard in the name of a great rabbi of our century, the Kovna Rav, an explanation which makes the laws of tumah and taharah more meaningful and more relevant to us so that at the very least we might better appreciate the

Divine wisdom which inheres in every word of Torah.

Our Torah is a Torah of life. It teaches us to love life, to cherish it, to enhance it. It is called Torat chayyim, the law of life, and is referred to as *Etz chayyim hi la-machazikim bah*, a tree of life to those who support it. It's purpose is *ve'chai ba-hem*--that we attain life through the commandments written therein. G-d's greatest gift to man above all is: life.

And in order to ensure this emphasis in life, in order to secure this affirmation of the principle of life, the Torah negatively bids us to keep away from death. Thus while the religions of the ancient world had their priests spend most of their time in the ministrations to the dead, our Torah gave our priests, our Kohanim, instructions to do the exact reverse: *Le-nefesh lo yitama b'amav*, he may not defile himself by contact with any dead, except for certain very close relatives. Thus too, G-d originally forbade man to destroy animal life even for the purpose of food. Few of us may realize that by Divine decree Adam was a vegetarian, for only later, to the children of Noah, did G-d grant the concession allowing them to partake of animal flesh. Thus too, the principal of pikuach nefesh takes precedence over all commandments save three, and whenever there is danger to life all commandments except hees three are ignored.

In order to express powerfully this love of life, this abhorrence of death, we have the laws of tumah. Almost all these laws, in all their various forms and in all their ramifications, remind us of this principle of love of life. Our portion deals with the defilement that comes from direct contact with a dead body or a dead organ. Such a person is declared tamei--unclean. There is the tumat tzaraat, the state of uncleanness of the leper. For the leper is one on whom patch of skin, a part of his body, has died. Hence--tumah. There is tumat zav and tamat niddah: In certain cases, the

one natural and other pathological, when certain issues flow from the human body, then too, the Torah declares a state of tumah, for here there is a loss by the human body, in one case the female and in one case the male, of the potential for a life, of that physiological substance from which life, under other circumstances, could have been created. When this vital matter is lost, when the potential for life is wasted--there is a state of tumah.

So that the major guiding principle of the laws of tumah is: the love for life, negatively expressed as an abhorrence and detestation of death. When the Jew has contact with death in any of the ways discussed, he is tamei, and as such he may neither enter the temple nor eat of the sacrificial flesh until the state of tumah has been replaced by taharah--a state of purity and ritual cleanliness.

How does one achieve this taharah? There are different details for each case. Thus in the case of tumat met, defilement by direct contact with death as we read of it in today's Parshat Parah, there is required the ritual of the red heifer, the Parah Adumah. In the case of tumat tzaraat, the uncleanness that inheres in leprosy, there is another set of regulations. The other forms of tumah have additional requirements in order to achieve taharah. But common to every one of them, integral in the very heart of the process of taharah, is tevillah be'mayim--the immersion of one's self in water. Any man and any woman who is tamei, achieves taharah through water.

Why water? Because water above all is the symbol of life. It is the most universal substance without which life is impossible. An ancient Greek pagan philosopher, Thales, was led by his observations to maintain that water is the primordial substance from which all else was created. Earlier than him, and with greater scientific accuracy, our Torah declared that in the beginning G-d created heaven and earth and the earth was filled with water. Contemporary astronomers gazing through their telescopes at some distant planet or other celestial body, when they want to know if one that planet or body life is possible, will first investigate the content of water in the atmosphere. The greatest part of our own bodies is made up of water. And when we pray for water in our Shemoneh Esrei, we do so in connection with life: the prayer *Mashiv ha-ruach u-morid ha-geshem*, asking G-d for water from the heavens, or rain, is recited in the middle of the blessing of *techiyat ha-metim*, the blessing of life and the resurgence of life. And after the Jew drinks water he recites the blessing of *Borei Nefashot*, in which we praise G-d for creating many

souls and for their needs providing a world, *le'hachayot bahem nefesh kol chai*, with which to keep alive the soul of every human being. Water, thus, is the symbol of life.

Tevillah be'mayim, therefore, represents the love of life. It is a rededication to life. The most appropriate way of ridding oneself of tumah, of the state of having been too close to death, is that of immersion in water. Taharah is the process that reverses tumah. We triumph over death by a greater tumat tzaraat, or tumat niddah, or tumat zav; the way of taharah is by washing one's self with the very symbol of life itself, with water. Therefore, too, the Gentile who wishes to become a Jew, a Ger, is also required to perform tevillah be'mayim: this symbolizes his rebirth as a Jew, he begins life all over again as he emerges from the waters of proselytization.

It is interesting to point out that in prescribing water as a form of taharah, the Halakhah specify that not all kinds of water are valid for this purpose. Only the waters of a well or naturally gathered pool, a ma'ayan or mikvah, are sufficient for the purpose of the process of taharah. But water that is artificially gathered into one place, called mayim she'uvim, is not valid for taharah. What is the reason for this? When a person is tamei, he or she must achieve purification or taharah only in a natural stream or pool, because that water symbolizes life, and only G-d, the Creator of Nature, is the Author of life. Man, despite his conquest over nature, is not the author of life. When we eschew mayim she'uvim, and insist upon ma'ayan or mikvah, we reaffirm not only for our love of life, but our belief that only G-d is the master over life, and that man cannot be trusted with control over this most precious gift of G-d to man.

We do not need a Schweitzer, noble a person as he is, to teach us reverence for life. Our Torah taught the love for life 3000 years earlier. And where Jews have practiced these laws in the days of the temple, and those laws which remain which are applicable today, they have known and practiced this love for life.

What a pity that there are those of our fellow Jews whose only connection with the synagogue is: Yizkor or Kaddish, those mitzvot which are related to death and mourning. What a pity that they have such a distorted view of Judaism, that they probably are led to believe that Judaism's face is one of mourning and a somber mask that reminds one of death. How terrible that they never come to the understanding that Judaism is a religion of life, and that the observant Jew is one filled with the love of life.

For our Torah is based on life, not only in the physical

sense as we have outlined above, but also in the ethical sense. Our tradition has declared that the righteous even after they are dead, are called alive. And the wicked even whilst they walk--or better stalk--the earth, are called dead. For life or death is not so much a matter of biology, as a matter of how close or how distant one is from the Source of all life.

And tumah and taharah, purity and impurity are to be understood not only in a physical and ethical sense, but even in the moral and national sense. The prophet Ezekiel in our Haftorah of this morning is the only who sees exile as a state of being enclosed, metaphorically speaking, in a giant tomb. Exile is therefore impurity itself. And redemption is a process of purification. To be redeemed means to emerge from the tomb of impurity into the pure sunlight of G-d's favor. Even in this metaphorical sense, Ezekiel pictures the process of purification as one of cleansing by living wates

Breaking Up Is Hard To Do

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

This week's parsha presents an account of the tragic incident of the eigel, or the golden calf. This account is immediately preceded by a statement that Moshe received the Luchos, the tablets of the Torah, which are described as being written by the finger of God (Shemos 31:18). Immediately preceding that verse there is a section commanding the Jews to observe the Shabbos (Shemos 31:12-17). Reb Nachman of Breslov, apparently understood that the verse describing Moshe's receiving of the Luchos is part of the account of the incident of the eigel. Since the people demanded the eigel at the very time that Moshe received these Luchos, he derived a message from the juxtaposition of the eigel with Shabbos. He said that this teaches us that no matter how serious the sin a person commits, even if it is idolatry, in the merit of observing Shabbos he will merit to repent and attain forgiveness (Likutei Halachos 3 pg. 38a). I would like to suggest, however that the statement about the Luchos should be seen as an independent verse, and that this verse taken together with the section on Shabbos teaches us an important message about the incident of the eigel.

The Torah tells us that "Ach es Shabsosai tishmoru" -- "only" keep my Shabbos. The word "ach", "only," serves to limit what follows, and Rashi says that "ach" as used here teaches us that the work of the Mishkan does not override the rules of Shabbos, in cases of a clash. The Ramban however, feels that "ach," as used here, implies a

(Ezekiel XXXVI:25-29): "For I will take you from among the nations and gather you out of all the countries and will bring you into your own land. And will sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean; from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; And I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh."

And what is to be the result of this rebirth in purity?--The reappearance of that great historic drama of love between G-d and Israel: "And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be My people, and I will be your G-d."

For this, too, Ezekiel taught us: Only when there is love of life, can there be a life of love.

Read more at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

limitation on Shabbos observance. Therefore, he says, that the "ach" teaches that in some instances we suspend the laws of Shabbos for a higher purpose. The example he says is breaking the rules of Shabbos to save the life of a Jew in danger. Rav Moshe Sofer, known as the Chasam Sofer, says that if we take these two laws together, we've learnt something very important about the Jewish people. On the one hand, Shabbos is not overridden by the work of the holiest place on earth -- the Mishkan. On the other hand, saving the life of a Jew in danger does override the laws of Shabbos. We thus see how holy a Jew really is. With this comment of the Chasam Sofer we can understand how the section of Shabbos observance and a verse describing the Luchos, serve together to teach us something about the Jewish people.

The verse about the Luchos describes them as having been written by God. As such, they certainly contain a higher level of holiness. Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky comments that the name of God appears on the Luchos several times, and that Moshe, by shattering them, was in effect erasing a name of God, which is a severe prohibition, and ostensibly a literal Chilul Hashem, or desecration of the Name of God. Why, then, did Moshe break them? Rav Yaakov explains that had he not done so the Jews would have persisted in their idolatry and would then have to be destroyed. The destruction of the Jewish people, who are meant to be the representatives of God in this

world, would have been a bigger Chillul Hashem than the desecration of the Luchos. Therefore, Moshe went ahead and broke them. The section of Shabbos, as we have seen, teaches us about the holiness of the Jewish people, while the verse on the Luchos teaches us about their holiness.

We Are the Key to Our Own Ruchniyus

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from a shiur given in the Gruss Kollel on February 25, 2016)

Among the very intriguing parts of this week's Parsha is Moshe Rabeinu's decision (according to *pashut pshat*) to break the Luchos when he came down from Har Sinai and saw Chet haEigel. And that was a bold decision, as the Chumash states, *vehaLuchos maase Elokim heimah, vahaMichtav Michtav Elokim hu, charus al haLuchos*. The Chizkuni says that to show what a tremendous chiddush it was that Moshe broke these Luchos, the Torah describes how Hashem made the Luchos and how Hashem carved their text. The big question is, what were his reasons for breaking them. There are many, many, many different opinions among the Rishonim and the Acharonim. The Meshech Chochmah has a well-known and fascinating explanation. He asks: What was the core mistake that Klal Yisroel made when they built the Eigel? Did they all of a sudden, 40 days after Maamad Har Sinai, stop believing in G-d and decide to become pagans instead? That sounds somewhat unlikely. The Meshech Chochmah takes an approach that they still believed in G-d, of course. And they believed in serving Him. They just made one small mistake. They knew that in avodas Hashem there are very special, kadosh things. They were going to have a Mishkan, which is a kadosh thing. Har Sinai was a Kadosh place. Moshe Rabeinu was very kadosh. They said — It's the kadosh things that are important to us. Connecting to kadosh things is our avodas Hashem. Therefore, what was the problem? — Moshe was G-d to them. They said—*Ki zeh Moshe ha-Ish asher he'elanu me-Eretz Mitzraim...*, etc. Moshe is kadosh. How can we connect to Hashem? We can only do so through Moshe! If Moshe is gone, we don't have a religion anymore. If Moshe is gone, we need something else that is kadosh. And they made what might have been a reasonable decision, given their fundamental mistake. They said—Let's build Eigel ha-Zahav. What did they say upon completion? *Eilu Elokecha Yisroel asher he'elucha me'eretz Mitzraim*. But they knew that they cast this Golden Calf just now. How could

The juxtaposition of these two elements, to the account of the eigel teaches us, that, as holy as the Luchos are, the Jewish people are more holy and their preservation takes precedence over the preservation of the Luchos.

that say that it took them out of Mitzraim? No! They meant that Elokecha—that your G-d took you out. But for us to relate to G-d, we need some *cheftzah* of kedusha. We need something to represent G-d; we need something “holy” to connect to outside of ourselves. Since there is no Moshe, we will make an Eigel. Moshe came down from Sinai, and he realized their mistake. What did he say to himself, according to Meshech Chochmah? He said—Hold-on a second. I will come down with these two Luchos. And I will say to them—You foolish people! How can you make an Eigel? And I will destroy that Eigel and punish the people, etc. If I am going to say that these Luchos were made and inscribed by Hashem, what will these people think? They will say, Oh. You are right. The Eigel wasn't holy—that was so silly. It's the Luchos that are holy—they are *maase Elokim* and *michtav Elokim*. So, instead of making a mistake with the Eigel and with Moshe Rabeinu himself, they will make the same mistake with the Luchos, and it would not help. So, what did Moshe say to them? He said that it's more fundamental. It's neither Moshe, nor Eigel, nor Luchos, nor Mishkan, or all that, etc. It's what the locus of the *ruchnius* is. What is the *etzem* of *ruchnius*? You people think that *ruchnius* is something outside of yourself, some “thing” that is holy—that's *ruchnius*. That's a real connection to Hashem. But Moshe communicated to them that, No, everything outside of yourself only helps to educate your inner self. Real *ruchnius* is inside of yourself. Are you serving Hashem? Do you do Mitzvos? Do you learn Torah? Are you trying to connect with Hashem in your hearts? Everything outside is just a tool to teach you Torah so you can have it inside of yourself. The Mishkan is there as a tool so you can think more about Hashem. It's here to help you feel the presence of Hashem inside of yourself—as it says, “*veshochanti besocham*” (and I will dwell in you). So, he says: You see these Luchos? They are holier than me—I am just born of a man and a woman. They are holier than the Eigel, which you cast yesterday

out of metal. These are *maase Elokim*. And if you don't keep what it says in them, I am smashing them like a worthless piece of pottery. Because it's not a *cheftza* which is outside of yourself that's important—that's worthless. It's only meaningful if you use it to worship Hashem in your heart. And if you don't keep what it says in the Luchos, then I am smashing them like yesterday's garbage. Because the

Free Your Mind

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Moshe descending from the mountain, clutching the Divine tablets is one of the most iconic images of the entire Torah. Finally, after close to two thousand and five hundred years, the word of G-d was written and delivered to humans; Heaven and earth merged. Sadly, the luchot would not long endure human disobedience. Witnessing the golden calf and the carnival of depravity, Moshe shattered the heavenly stones and the eternal word of G-d soared back to its Heavenly origin. It took months of uncompromising prayer to reverse this tragedy and introduce a second pair of luchot back into our world.

The word of G-d wasn't actually printed upon the stone tablets but was engraved. The Torah employs an interesting term to describe this carving into stone: "The text was 'charut' on the luchot". The word 'charut' or 'engraved' sounds very similar to the term 'cheirut' which means freedom or liberty. Noticing the similarity between the word charut and cheirut, our Chazal (in Pirkei Avot) announced: "true freedom (cheirut) is only achieved through submission to Torah law (charut)."

This association appears very enigmatic. We certainly embrace the value of religion and the importance of submission to Divine command. We are born into this world as summoned individuals, 'called upon' to fulfill the will of G-d and to live as His servants. This lifestyle can be called many things such as pious, or virtuous, but how exactly are we considered 'free' through absolute submission to a comprehensive system of Torah law? How exactly does religion liberate us and convert us into free men? How does 'charut' provide 'cheirut'?

Firstly, and most obviously, Torah frees us from the most intrinsic and basic limitation- our mortality. We all pass through this world, entering with great potential and leaving with unfulfilled accomplishments. Despite our best dreams and hopes, we all pass from this world

external object is worthless if it's not reinforcing *ruchnius* on the inside. And by smashing the Luchos, Moshe taught the nation that the real lesson that Hashem wanted to teach them at Har Sinai was that those things outside of ourselves are very valuable and very useful if we use them properly. But the real *ruchnius* needs to start inside ourselves.

unremembered and barely noticed. Man has always been frustrated by this basic condition of defeat; we appear to live freely but, in reality, are handcuffed to our own mortality. Religion emancipates us from this captivity. A religious life, is lived for something larger than ourselves; religion links us to the eternal- the word of G-d which transcends time and the eternal afterlife. We occupy a fleeting world but while we inhabit this transience we taste from eternity. The luchot brought Heaven down to Earth; by adopting the contents of the luchot we, ourselves, ascend to Heaven even while inhabiting this Earth.

However, this is only a partial answer. Judaism doesn't emphasize the afterlife while ignoring this world. We don't view Torah law as a sellout or suppression of this world just to punch our ticket to eternity. Of course, our world is an entrance to the ultimate palace, but we all realize the impact of religion upon life 'in the entranceway'. A religious life frees us from the curse of mortality but how does it liberate us while we still walk on this earth?

It all depends upon how you define freedom. We typically define freedom as lack of restraints or limitations. A free life is one which isn't curbed or coerced by external factors limiting our activity or conduct. It is this freedom which has become enshrined and protected in modern democracies. Religion respects that form of freedom or liberty, but certainly 'encroaches' upon it by dictating a life of commandment. A religious person isn't absolutely free to behave as they wish and without restraints.

However, there is a second and more significant freedom which religion actually empowers. Life is a constant search for meaning and for purpose. We have been granted life and we have been vested with great faculties, but there must be some larger purpose for our existence. We dream of being architects of something larger- families, relationships, communities, national achievements and historical impacts. We find great 'purpose' in our dreams

and great satisfaction when these dreams are even partially fulfilled. We sense deep purpose to life.

However, we are also subject to urges, desires, pettiness, pressures and weaknesses which threaten these achievements. We are trapped in a battle between two versions of ourselves: the better version of yourself, which hopes to lead a meaningful life, and the lesser version of yourself which can suffocate those achievements. We believe that Torah unlocks and empowers that better version and allows it to author and control our lives. Torah teaches us how to calibrate the swirling forces in our world and the powerful desires in our hearts while leading a lifestyle of purpose and meaning. This is a higher and more elusive form of freedom – one which submission to G-d's word provides. We may be restrained by halacha and its mandates, but our better self becomes liberated in ways that we may not always fully even comprehend.

This 'corona-year' has certainly forced us to reimagine much of our lives and, in particular, how we view our freedom. We have forfeited much of the first form of freedom; we have suffered necessary, but restrictive limitations upon our lifestyles. Our freedom of movement

and social freedom have each been severely obstructed. For many, economic hardship has further restricted our lifestyles. How the pandemic has affected the second variety of freedom is a more nuanced issue. A year in to this pandemic, do we feel greater purpose and meaning to our lives or less purpose and meaning? The pandemic has made us all more grateful for the simpler aspects of our lives which may have been previously underappreciated. We have greater appreciation for life itself, for our families and for our most immediate communities. Sometimes the struggle to reach our dreams provides a sharper sense of what those aspirations are, and how they define us.

Everything in this world can be taken from us except our relationship with G-d. For many, this year of 'loss' has sharpened that relationship. As the surrounding noise in our lives has been muted have we felt closer to G-d or more distant? If we have felt G-d more deeply, and sensed our core dreams more acutely, this has been a year of freedom. We may have traveled less, and shopped less but may be more aware of how religion is meant to amplify purpose to life. Ironically, in many ways, we may be closer to freedom than in past years.

The Art of Compromise

Rabbi Alex Hecht

Does G-d want us to compromise with each other, reaching a settlement rather than pursue justice? The Talmud (Sanhedrin 6b-7a) records a debate about whether, in a civil dispute, it is ideal for the judges to offer the litigants the option to settle (pesharah), or to judge the case according to the strict letter of the law. The argument for each approach is as follows:

- The Torah is a "Torah of truth" (Malachi 2:16); it is our mandate to judge truthfully and impartially according to the laws of the Torah, with the understanding that G-d will ensure ultimate justice. (Devarim 1:17)
- Alternatively, there is great value in pursuing peace, which is frequently achieved through compromise. Indeed, sensitive compromise can achieve greater justice than application of a uniform law.

In practice, the Shulchan Aruch rules that a court should provide litigants with the opportunity to settle at the outset, in order to promote peace between people. (Yoreh Deah 12:1)

Proponents of each perspective point to Aharon: On one

hand, Aharon is praised as "a lover of peace and a pursuer of peace" (Avot 1:12); on the other hand, his willingness to compromise led to the construction of the Golden Calf! (Shemot 32:2) Apparently, while compromise is noble in principle, one must exercise caution about when and how to do so; indeed, some of the talmudic sages criticized Aharon's compromise. (Sanhedrin 6b-7a, as we will see below) In his judgment surrounding the incident of the Golden Calf, why did Aharon feel that it was appropriate to yield to the demands of those who doubted Moshe's return (ibid. 32:1), and why was compromise in this situation deemed inappropriate by our sages?

Rabbi Binyamin bar Yefet defended Aharon's intentions by noting that Aharon wanted to prevent the agitators from committing an even greater sin. The Talmud tells us that the mob had already killed Aharon's nephew, Chur, who had protested their uprising; had Aharon not found a way to compromise, they would have killed him as well. Aharon knew that if he, as a Kohen and prophet, were to be killed, it would serve as an indictment of the nation in the future. [See Eichah 2:20.] In his estimation, making the Golden

Calf would be the lesser of two evils, as the people could more easily repent for this sin, than for Aharon's murder. Nevertheless, Rabbi Tanchum bar Chanilai argued that one may not commit or sanction a minor transgression in order to prevent a greater one. Therefore, it is inappropriate to praise Aharon's willingness to compromise in this situation, despite his noble intentions.

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin ("Netziv") also viewed Aharon's involvement with the Golden Calf as an effort to reduce harm – specifically, to prevent actual idolatry. (Ha'ameik Davar to Shemot 32:1-5) The Netziv contended that Aharon had not yet heard Shemot 20:20, which prohibits making silver

and gold intermediaries. Consequently, Aharon sought to compromise with the rabble-rousers, and helped them fashion an intermediary through which they could connect with G-d, in order to prevent them from worshiping a foreign deity altogether. Unfortunately, the nuance with

which Aharon understood the distinction between serving G-d with a graven image functioning as an intermediary, and worshipping the object as a god, was lost on many of the people, who exclaimed that it actually was, "your G-d, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." (ibid. 32:4)

These two explanations of Aharon's error may help us understand the art of proper compromise. Both Rabbi Tanchum bar Chanilai and the Netziv contended that Aharon did not understand the position of one of the "litigants" – G-d. According to Rabbi Tanchum bar Chanilai, Aharon did not understand that G-d rejects substituting one party's lesser sin for another party's greater sin. According to the Netziv, Aharon did not understand that the Divine position prohibited creating intermediaries. Both views highlight an important point: Creating peace between parties is admirable, but we cannot impose it based on our perspective on a situation. The necessary first step is to understand the positions of both sides.

Achieving Forgiveness with an Optimistic Outlook

Rabbi Dr. David Shabtai

Famously, after Moshe intercedes on Bnei Yisrael's behalf as a result of the sin of the golden calf, Hashem teaches him the *יג מדות הרחמים*—the 13 attributes of mercy. The Gemara describes how Hashem Himself appeared to Moshe as a Hazzan wrapped in a tallit and solemnly recited the well known formula, *ה' קל רחום, ה' קל רחום, ה' קל רחום* ... Hashem then promised Moshe that whenever Bnei Yisrael should sin, they should recite these pesukim to achieve forgiveness.

What's perhaps most interesting about these pesukim is that there isn't actually any request involved. Because they are one of the most repeated sections of the Yom Kippur liturgy, they seem to be one of the most famous tefilot. And yet, they don't include an admission of guilt, a sense of contrition, or a future acceptance to strive for a greater life. There isn't even a request that Hashem actually forgive us. Instead, they are solely descriptions of Hashem's essential characteristics — focusing on those of mercy and forgiveness.

The idea seems to be that even the simple acknowledgement of Hashem's greatness and graciousness is enough to effect forgiveness. It's not just a recognition of Hashem, but meant to be a re-enactment of that very interaction between Hashem and Moshe. We not only follow the same script but try to mimic the imagery as

well. When we recite these words, we aren't just describing Hashem's glory, but trying to create and engender a feeling that we are in His presence. Increasing our own awareness of His presence and specifically in invoking His willingness and openness to forgiveness, should invoke a change in ourselves for the better.

Indeed, in a number of instances, Hazal insinuate that these aren't simply attributes to be recited about Hashem, but models for us to emulate. Perhaps one of the lessons is that we can achieve the ultimate forgiveness but adopting and internalizing these very same characteristics. But there isn't even overall agreement as to what exactly are the thirteen attributes. Because they open with "Hashem, Hashem" — it's somewhat unclear whether those are to be counted among the thirteen at all, and even if so, should they be counted as one or two attributes. Considering that it's Hashem Himself who is teaching Moshe, it's hard to imagine that they are some type of invocation, but nonetheless, Maharal argues quite persuasively that they are actually an introduction to all the rest.

Commenting on the repetition of the name Hashem, Rashi comments that one represents Hashem's mercy before a person sins and one represents Hashem's mercy after a person has sinned. The Rosh wonders why mercy is necessary before a person has even sinned; he hasn't

done anything wrong yet! He explains that since Hashem knows that a person will sin—because His knowledge is fundamentally different than ours—He may have otherwise held it against the person in anticipation of what he will soon do. And yet, Hashem chooses not to do so. He judges us, באשר הוא שם—in our current situation, because we Humans can only live and work in the here and now.

The Rav Hida points out however, that there are a number of instances where Hazal explain that Hashem forgives based on the future knowledge of teshuvah. Meaning, even when a person or a people don't necessarily deserve it at this moment, Hashem looks for a future potential of teshuvah and accordingly acts mercifully.

And perhaps this difference is one of the keys to why these two names of “Hashem, Hashem” are the introduction to the מדות הרחמים י. The future is only relevant to the issue of forgiveness when it's positive (when a person or

people will do teshuvah) but not when it's negative (when Hashem knows ahead of time that a person will sin). When we look to the future, what do we see? We can never be sure, but we do come with different attitudes and perspectives? Will it always be rosy and positive? Almost certainly not. Life is complicated and there will be bumps in the road. But how do we look at that very same path? Do we focus on the bumps, the trials, tribulations, and all the negative that it entails? Or do we view that path as part of a larger journey to a more positive and spiritual life?

When we come to do teshuvah through the יג מדות הרחמים and create for ourselves an intimate encounter with Hashem, we first need to adjust our perspectives and set our sights to the future—if we can see for ourselves an upcoming journey to a higher spiritual plane, we are then ready for Hashem's forgiveness.

The Importance of Preparation

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Parshas Ki Sisa, G-d continues to instruct Moshe regarding the construction of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle. In this week's parsha we learn of the Kiyvor, the copper laver that stood outside of the Mishkan proper, in the courtyard. The purpose of the Kiyvor was for washing.

And G-d spoke to Moshe saying: וְעָשִׂיתָ כִּיּוֹר נְחֹשֶׁת, וְכָנּוּ נְחֹשֶׁת--לְרִחְצָה; וְנָתַתָּ אֹתוֹ, בֵּין-אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּבֵין הַמִּזְבֵּחַ, וְנָתַתָּ שָׁמָּה מַיִם, *and you shall make a copper laver and its pedestal of copper, for washing; place it between the Tent of Meeting and the Altar, and put water there;* וְרָחֲצוּ אֶהְרֹן וּבָנָיו מִמֵּנוּ אֶת-יְדֵיהֶם, וְאֶת-רַגְלֵיהֶם, *and Aharon and his sons shall wash from it their hands and their feet; When they come to the Tent of Meeting, they shall wash with water that they not die...* (Shemos 30:17-20).

Rashi (to v.20) teaches that the washing of the hands and the feet of the kohanim prior to conducting the priestly service was so fundamental that failure to do so rendered the kohen chayav misah - liable for death.

What was it about the kiyvor - the laver constructed from the copper mirrors of the women (Shemos 38:8 with Rashi) - that was so fundamental to the priestly service? Furthermore, what lesson does it contain for us today, in the absence of the Mishkan and Beis Ha'Mikdash?

Rabbi Shalom Rosner writes, “Interestingly, the placement of the Kiyvor is not where we would expect.

It was placed out of the way of the kohanim, far from where they entered the Mishkan. Additionally, the Torah prescribes the death penalty for failing to wash before engaging in the avoda. What is the importance of their washing their hands and feet even if they know they were clean?”

Rabbi Rosner explains “that this washing was not about becoming pure, because even kohanim who were completely pure had to wash” with water from the kiyvor prior to conducting the priestly service. Rather, there is a deeper message. Although we are involved in a life of constant asi'at ha'mitzvot and striving to perform good deeds to the best of our abilities, we often forget that the purpose of all that we do is not just about getting things done and performing mitzvot by rote. Rather, we need to focus and realize what we are about to do, and that is what sanctifying oneself is about.

If we would take a few moments to prepare for the mitzvah before performing the mitzvah, and to prepare for the act of kindness before carrying it out, so many of our daily activities would be so much more meaningful. “If we take a moment, so to speak, to wash our hands and feet first, to sanctify ourselves before performing a mitzvah, our mitzvot would have so much more depth. We have to make sure our external actions and our internal thoughts are aligned” (Shalom Rav, p.445-446).

It is not enough for us to perform the actions of the mitzvos as commanded by G-d. We must be thoughtful in their performance, pay attention to the actions we are carrying out, and put our minds, thoughts and hearts into all that we do. And one way to achieve this goal is through preparation for the mitzvah.

The *kiyyor*, used for washing prior to the priestly service, teaches us this fundamental lesson. It is not enough to rush into our *avodas Hashem*; we must be ever-mindful of before Whom we stand and Whom we serve. Taking the (proverbial) time to “wash our hands and feet” reminds us to prepare to serve G-d and fellow man.

In regard to preparation for the mitzvah of prayer, the Sages teach: *הַסִּידִים הָרִאשׁוֹנִים הָיוּ שׁוֹהֵינ׳ שְׁעָה אַחַת, וּמִתְפַּלְלִין, - The early generations of pious men would wait one hour, in order to reach the solemn frame of mind appropriate for prayer, and then pray, so that they would focus their hearts toward their Father in Heaven (Mishnah, Brachos 30b).*

In fact, preparation in *avodas Hashem* is so important, that it is an integral part of our Shabbos observance.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l teaches, *וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי, וְהָכִינוּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר-יָבִיאוּ* “*And it shall be on the sixth day that when they prepare what they will bring (Shemos 16:5) ...* Shabbos is related to man’s preparation during the week. This preparation solidifies its holiness. The essence of

Shabbos is based on these verses. It is a day for which we must prepare.

“The prohibition of *muktzeh* is centered on the need for preparation. Among the prohibitions of *muktzeh* is food that was not prepared prior to Shabbos. One does not merit, nor is one worthy of, celebrating Shabbos unless one prepares for it. Rambam states: It is a mitzvah to wash one’s face, hands and feet in hot water on *erev Shabbos* due to the honor of Shabbos. He wraps himself in a *tallis* and sits with his head covered, anxiously awaiting the reception of Shabbos as if he were going to greet a king (Hilchos Shabbos 30:2). Proper preparation is a necessary condition for any encounter with holiness” (Chumash Masores HaRav, Shemos, p.129-131).

And so, of all the *keilim* (implements) of the *Mishkan* the copper *kiyyor* reminds us not only to wash before serving G-d, but to take the time to prepare to serve G-d!

Rabbi Rosner’s conclusion is most apt. “Perhaps this is why the *kiyyor* was built from mirrors. Every time the *kohanim* went to wash themselves, they saw their reflection, a reminder to look inside themselves to make sure they were focused on the *avoda* they were about to perform” (Shalom Rav, p.446).”

May all our mitzvos be imbued with the holiness of both preparation and action, as we lead meaningful lives of Divine service.

Balancing Self-Esteem and Humility

Rabbi Yosef Goldin

It is amazing how the Torah sometimes subtly relays multiple messages- sometimes, even contradictory messages-at once, in order to convey a nuanced approach to crucially important issues.

At the beginning of this week’s Parsha, Hashem commands Moshe to take a census of the Jewish nation, through a half-shekel donation from each individual. Numerous questions are raised by the *meforshim* regarding the details of this directive- and many beautiful lessons are derived from various aspects of the counting.

Rashi, in *Bamidbar* 1:1, points out that this counting was obviously not done for the sake of Hashem’s knowledge (as God clearly knows the peoples’ number without actually counting them); but for the sake of the nation itself. Hashem commands the census to show His love for every member of the Jewish People. The image that is invoked is of a jeweler, who counts his jewels often because of each

jewel’s individual worth- so too, G-d periodically counts His people in order to show How much he values every member of Am Yisrael. On a fundamental level, therefore, the census was designed to instill within each and every member of the nation an inherent sense of their own self-worth; to remind them that in G-d’s eyes, every single person “counts”. In keeping with this theme, some commentaries note that the phrase used by G-d in the commandment concerning the census is “*כי תשא*” - which literally mean “when you will raise.” The act of counting each member of *klal Yisrael* was ultimately meant to raise each individual up; to highlight that individual’s uniqueness and importance within the overall Jewish nation.

At the same time, the census conveyed a different, contrasting message as well. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch comments on the particular manner in which the census was taken- through individual donations of a half shekel

towards the building of the mishkan. Why, asks Rav Hirsch, did HaShem specifically command the collection of a half shekel from each participant, as opposed to a full shekel? Rav Hirsch answers that HaShem specifically commands the collection of a half-shekel from each individual in order to subtly convey the crucial lesson that, alone, no individual is fully complete- only in partnering with others can a person truly become whole.

Among the beautiful messages emerging from this commanded census, therefore, are two lessons that converge to provide a thoughtful and nuanced approach to our place within the Jewish nation and society as a whole. On a basic level, the concept of a national census reminds each and every individual of their own importance and worth- G-d and Judaism cherish the contributions of each individual to the Jewish nation and to the world at large. And yet, embedded within that very crucial message is the added reminder that, as important as each person is; we, alone, are limited in what we can accomplish. Only when we move beyond ourselves and partner with others can we truly reach our potential.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of P'shischa is known to have said that everyone must have two pockets, each with a note inside it. On one note should be the phrase "Bishvili nivra ha-olam", "The world was created for me" (a quote from the Gemara Sanhedrin 37b), and on the other note should be written "V'anochi afar v'efer", "I am but dust and ashes" (a quote from Avraham Avinu in Bereishit 18:27). Each person is charged to recognize his/her importance and infinite value. Each of us has a unique contribution to make to the Jewish people and the world at large. At the same time, we must balance that feeling of self-worth with a healthy dose of humility, and an understanding of our limitations as individuals.

Many studies have noted a sharp rise in anxiety, depression and low self-esteem in children and teens over the past 20 years. Prominently identified among the possible sources of this unfortunate phenomenon, is the rise in use of smartphones/devices and social media. Children today are spending much more time in front of devices, and much less time interacting in person with others. This tendency inevitably leads to a greater sense of unconscious, existential loneliness. In addition, the realities of social media; the bullying, social pressure, and social comparison inherent therein; cause many children to develop issues concerning their self-esteem.

Given the challenging reality within which we are tasked to raise our children, it is imperative that we spend much time, thought, and energy cultivating within our children a deep sense of their inherent self-worth and value. From an early age, we must constantly impress upon them their importance- and how much we, and G-d, treasure their unique place within the Jewish people, and their potential contributions to the world. Much effort should be placed upon helping our children realize and internalize that their inherent value comes from within- and is not dependent upon outside approval or recognition. While the realities of social stressors and peer pressures are inevitable, and a clear part of natural maturation; the more successful we are in laying a foundation of self-esteem within our children early on, the better equipped they will be to withstand the challenges to come.

At the same time- while it is clear that our main focus should be to raise our kids with a large dose of self-confidence, we must also strive to balance that self-confidence with a healthy measure of humility. As our children grow up in the "selfie" and "I" generation, we are tasked with helping them appreciate the limitations of the individual, and how much more they can become when they partner with others.

There is no simple way to instill both of these messages simultaneously. But as a first step, we should communicate that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Our children can be taught to recognize their own inherent importance and uniqueness and, at the same time, to realize they are only truly complete when they connect with those outside of themselves, within the larger context of their community and people.

Immediately after the receiving of the Torah and becoming a nation, G-d commands the leaders of Am Yisrael to count the nation- and the details of this commandment relay a subtle and nuanced message of which we, as parents, must be constantly aware. G-d counts His people often to show the importance of each and every member of the Jewish nation. At the same time, by using a half-shekel as the method of counting, He impresses upon the people the limitation of the individual, that we are complete only when we partner with those around us.