



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

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Hidden Expenses

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

This week's parsha begins with God telling Moshe to command Aharon and his sons regarding the laws of sacrifices that they are obligated to carry out. God tells Moshe, "Command (tzav) Aharon and his sons, saying, 'This is the law of the olah offering...' (Vayikra 6:1). Rashi, quoting the midrash, comments that the word 'tzav' is an expression of urging on, for the immediate moment, and for future generations. The midrash, as cited by Rashi, continues, and mentions Rabbi Shimon, who says that it is especially necessary to use this kind of expression in regard to a mitzvoh that involves loss of money. Many commentaries are bothered by the obvious question, exactly what loss of money is involved here? As Ramban points out, the sacrifice referred to in this verse is the daily olah sacrifice, which was paid for from communal funds, not from the pocket of the kohanim specifically. Some commentators on Rashi, including Rabbi Dovid Ha-Levi Segel in his *Divrei Dovid*, explain that since the flesh of this sacrifice is completely burned on the altar, and the kohanim derive no benefit from it other than its skin, it is considered as the equivalent of a loss situation. This explanation is problematic, because the kohanim are not actually losing something in this situation, but merely not gaining much from their labors - perhaps a kind of cost efficiency question, when one considers the amount of work they must put into bringing the olah sacrifice. Ramban himself writes that the midrash is referring here, not to the olah sacrifice, but to the twice daily meal offering, the *minchas chavitin*, that the *kohein gadol* was obligated to bring from his own funds. Rabbi Avrohom Binyomin Sofer, known as the *Ksav Sofer*, writes in his commentary that this explanation is plausible because Aharon is singled out in this verse for the first time, whereas until now, in the book of Vayikra, the Torah

spoke of "the kohanim, the sons of Aharon." Therefore, he says it is reasonable to assume that a mitzvoh specifically incumbent upon Aharon to perform is being alluded to in the verse. Still, this explanation involves a difficulty, because there is a gap between the first verse, in which the expression 'tzav' is used, and the verses referring to Aharon's daily *mincha* offering.

Rav Shlomo Goren, in his *Toras HaMikra*, writes that the term 'tzav' does, indeed refer to the command to bring the daily olah. Although the cost of that olah was not really very great, he writes, still, situations would arise in Jewish history in which there was great expense and self-sacrifice involved in bringing it, and that is what the midrash is alluding to when it speaks of 'loss of money' involved in this process. The expense was not that of the kohanim per se, but that of the nation as a whole, which had to provide for the sacrifices. Rabbi Yitzchok Horowitz, however, in his commentary to Rashi, *Be'er Yitzchok*, points out, in his own explanation of Rabbi Shimon's statement, that the Torah was concerned for the money of Yisroel (see *Yoma 39a*, and *Netvort to parshas Vayakheil, 5765*, available at Torah heights.com). We can add that the kohanim, too, as representatives of the people, were sensitive to the financial burden placed on them on various occasions. Rabbi Goren refers to three specific cases mentioned in the Talmud in which the Jews were besieged by their enemies - in two cases internal enemies, and in the last case, external enemies - and had to pay a great deal of money to clandestinely bring the animals necessary for the daily sacrifice. This explanation is, on its face, also problematic, because it seems unlikely that the Torah would use the expression of *tzav* in this verse simply to allude to events that would occur so many years in the future, and which does not seem to be related to the immediate obligation to

bring these offerings. However, I believe that we can accept Rabbi Goren's explanation, with a slight twist, and show how it is relevant to the immediately mentioned Torah obligation to bring the daily olah.

Making a commitment to do a certain practice on a regular basis, and especially on a twice-daily basis, is not an easy thing to do. Although, under usual circumstances, a person may feel that no difficulty is involved in fulfilling his commitment, it is the element of constancy that complicates matters. A person can never know what kind of burdens he will be faced with in the future, and whether he will always have the luxury of time and means that he now has that allow him to fulfill his commitment when he initially undertakes it. To commit to follow up on a regular basis opens him up to situations in which fulfilling the commitment will be quite difficult, and, still, because of his commitment, he must not shirk his duty, but must, rather, continue to carry out his commitment, to maintain his good reputation and good name. It is this factor, I believe that the midrash is referring to when it says that the korban olah requires a special degree of commitment necessary for success. It is in this context that we can understand Rav Goren's explanation, which sees the verse as an allusion to those times in Jewish history when the olah did, in fact, constitute a great expense. The idea is, not that the verse actually directly refers to these three instances, but, rather, indirectly, it is telling us that by making a daily commitment to bring that sacrifice, the kohanim were leaving themselves open to the eventuality that they would, in fact, have to undergo great expense in bringing that

offering.

The idea of making a regular commitment to carry out an obligation also plays a central role in the entire drama of Purim. The rabbis tell us that, at Mt. Sinai, even though the Jews did say, "we will do and we will listen," there was an element of duress involved in their acceptance, and it wasn't until Purim that they finally took it upon themselves, willingly, to perform all of the mitzvos of the Torah as we read in the Megillah (9:27), "The Jews confirmed and took upon themselves," meaning, that they re-affirmed their commitment to the Torah. However we understand this, the fact is that the Jews, at that time, made a commitment to God and His Torah. Perhaps because this commitment came at a time when the future of the Jewish people was in danger, it had added meaning, because it was a commitment that was made in the face of difficulties, and reflected an understanding that commitment can involve sacrifice, but is meaningless without the willingness to make those sacrifices. A tragic case, unfolding before our eyes, brings the nature of true commitment, and the chilling results of a lack of it, into stark relief. A woman in Florida is literally being starved to death through the efforts of her husband, who has failed to take seriously the commitment he made when he married her, to care for her in sickness and in health. It was this kind of commitment, a dedication to bring the olah sacrifice twice a day, no matter what the difficulties involved, that was demanded of the Kohanim, and which required an expression of command and of urging on, to extend to all future generations, that parshas Tzav begins with.

Daily Miracles

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from a shiur given in the Gruss Kollel)

In this week's Parsha, we have the rules that govern various kinds of korbanos, including the korban Shlamim. They come in two types: a regular Shlamim and korban Todah—which you bring for experiencing a miraculous Divine intervention that saved you from a potential tragedy. One of the differences between the Todah and a regular Shlamim is *u-b'sar zevach Todas Shlamav be-yom korbano yei'ochel, lo yaniach mimenu ad boker*—a Todah can only be eaten that day. As opposed to the regular Shlamim—*be-yom ha-krivo es zivcho yei'ochel, u-mi-macharas ve-ha-nosar mimenu yei'ochel*. A Regular Shlamim is eaten for two days, which fits its status as Kodshim

Kalim—the lower level of Kodshim, most of which can be eaten for two days. But the Todah, for some reason, is restricted to be eaten only that day. It's not because the Todah has more kedusha than Shlamim. They both share the same level of kedusha. So why does the Torah require us to eat it on the same day it was brought? The Abarbanel, and later the Netziv, give one explanation. They say that the point of korban Todah is to thank Hashem for a miracle—you don't just do that privately. *Persumei Nisa* is the phrase that is relevant to this time of the year. You publicize what Hashem did. To thank Hashem, you make *seudas hodah*, and you invite everyone, in order to

broadcast the miracle to as many people as possible. The proper reaction to the neis that Hashem did for you is to praise Hashem be-rabim. And therefore, they explain two things. The Korban Todah is eaten only for one day, and you bring a lot of bread with it. Who can eat this big animal and all this bread in one day? You will have to invite a lot of people. Because you only have one chance to have all this food be eaten—and without any leftovers, of course. So more people participate, and there is more *persumei nisa*. That is one beautiful *hesber* with a real *nafka mina* for our lives. If Hashem saves you, if Hashem does a neis for you, you should invite as many people as you can—and have a *seudas mitzva* to publicize the neis.

However, Chidushei Ha-Rim has a more existential explanation—*al derech ha-drush*. And he says: Why *davka* korban Todah, brought to thank Hashem for a neis, do you only eat for one day? He says: Because a neis can only last one day. If you want to thank Hashem, you can only do it that day and not tomorrow. Why not? You would think you should thank Hashem forever. No. We say *al nisecha she-be-chol yom imanu*. Why? Because Hashem's

providence doesn't just happen once, and then you sit and contemplate it. Obviously, very miraculous events, crazy coincidences, and salvation from terrible tragedies don't happen every day. But every day Hashem does a neis for us. And you can't say: Let me talk about yesterday's neis today. Because that would distract you from looking for today's neis—from seeing all the miracles that Hashem is doing for you today and His providence and involvement with you today. Therefore, says Chidushei Ha-Rim, the Todah to thank Hashem can only be that day. Because tomorrow you will have to find new things to thank Hashem for. And the Mussar is obvious. As much as we thank Hashem for all the extraordinary things He does for us, if one day there is no clearly miraculous occurrence, you should look for everyday *nisim*—small and ostensibly natural. Because every day—whether it's obvious, or not, whether it's a big deal or not, whether you are saved from great danger or just walking down the street normally—Hashem does so many miracles for us. And every day, we can find—*nisecha she-be-chol yom imanu*—a new reason to thank Hashem. Shabbat Shalom.

Evolution or Apocalypse

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

What is the primary function of *korbanot* and *mikdash* sacrifices? The Ramban asserts that a *chatat* or sin-offering substitutes for the punishment we deserve in the wake of our religious failure. The animal's death replaces our own potential punishment. Beyond the acquittal effect of a sin-offering the broader set of *korbanot* serve a higher mystical purpose, impacting upper realms which lie far beyond human reach and understanding.

By contrast, the Rambam (in his *Guide to the Perplexed*) proposed a “cultural” role for *korbanot*: ancient pagan cultures routinely slaughtered animals to their pagan deities. It would have been impossible to abruptly sever the Jewish people from these established cultural and religious norms. Instead of banning sacrifices Hashem redirected them. By sacrificing *korbanot* to Hashem we slowly ‘wean away’ from pagan rituals. Hashem adopted contemporary customs to help transition the people from paganism to monotheism.

The Rambam's view of *korbanot* raises an intriguing and controversial question: will sacrifices be restored during

the Messianic era? After all, the world has veered away from paganism and from animal slaughter. Moreover, when *Moshiach* arrives, the entire world will appreciate Hashem and reject all religious corruptions. Under those ideal conditions *korbanot* will no longer be necessary to stem paganism. Perhaps *korbanot* will not be restored! Perhaps their function has already been served!

This scenario has been roundly rejected by our *masorah*. We regularly daven for the restoration of the *mikdash* and the resumption of *korbanot*. Every *tefilah* is strewn with multiple references about the restoration of *korbanot*. Even the Rambam himself (*Hilchot Melachim* 11; 11) details the offering of sacrifices as an event which succeeds the arrival of *Moshiach*. The *Guide to the Perplexed* is a philosophical treatise but not a regularly cited *halachik* source. Jewish tradition has firmly concluded that *korbanot* will one day be restored.

In addition the Rambam's provocative comments, many cite several veiled references in Rav Kook's writings (*Otzarot Re'eyah* 2-3, and *Olat Re'eyah* 1:292) in which he vaguely portrays a future of expanded religious

consciousness which has no need for ritual sacrifices. However, it is unclear whether he refers to a Messianic future or to the next world of Olam Habah which will introduce an entirely different reality. Even if Rav Kook intended the Messianic era, his position suggesting the fading of korbanot remains a minority opinion.

Beyond the special question of korbanot during mashiach, this question raises a broader issue: how do we view the Messianic era? Will it be an extension of our current state of affairs improving the world we know? Will the Messianic era be based upon current conventions, and existing cultural norms? Or will Moshaich inaugurate a complete overhaul of human consciousness and transition humanity into an entirely different reality. Perhaps the human mind of the 21st century finds animal sacrifice abhorrent, but the Messianic mind will not. Will ימות המשיח be evolutionary or apocalyptic?

This question stems from a veiled statement of the amora Shmuel (Shabbat 63) which claims that the “only” novelty of the Messianic era will be the elimination of “שעבוד מלכיות” or shibud malchiyut – which translates literally into the suppression and tyranny. In its limited form, this ambiguous phrase could refer to the eradication of totalitarian dictators. It can also refer to a broader elimination of wars and strife. It probably also portrays the restoration of Jewish sovereignty and the abolition of antisemitism. However, one thing seems clear from Shmuel’s statement- the Messianic era will not entail a complete apocalypse. Rather, it will be an evolution and a perfection of our current reality.

This “evolutionary” view of Moshiach contradicts Yeshayahu’s prophecy (chapter 11) about a lamb and a wolf reposing peacefully “side-by-side”, as human weapons of war are reconfigured into ploughshares. This dramatic scene clearly indicates the entire world order- including the natural order will be reconstituted. Those who take Shmuel’s statement literally (such as the Rambam), interpret Yeshayahu as mere metaphor. Yeshayahu doesn’t refer to actual wolves and sheep. Instead, he describes a world of violence turned peaceful by using a metaphor of sheep and wolves reconciling.

To summarize: there are two different versions of the Messianic era. One which is evolutionary and doesn’t radically alter human consciousness or the world order. The second version is more apocalyptic and entails a complete overhaul of everything we know.

Which will occur? It is impossible to say. To paraphrase the Rambam in his description of the messianic era: “we will only fully know the details of this event once it occurs”. There is no way to accurately predict when the era will begin, how it will unfold and what reality it will introduce. This information was intentionally encrypted by Hashem who doesn’t want us distracted by Messianic fever at the cost of halachik, moral and practical engagement with this world. Throughout the ages Millenarians- or those who actively labor toward a utopian apocalypse- have wreaked great havoc upon humanity.

While we can’t predict whether Moshiach will be evolutionary or apocalyptic, it is important to believe in the possibility of apocalypse. We have become too confident in, and too comfortable with modern society. As humanity has advanced and evolved, we have become duped into “generationism” or the delusion that our generation is superior to previous ones. Indeed, we have witnessed spectacular success and innovation, but in many spheres society has degenerated. We must believe that there can be a different condition introduced by Hashem to replace and radically improve our own. Despite our impressive human success, there is a divine order which far surpasses the human one.

Most moderns bristle at the prospect of animal sacrifice. People of faith conjure the vision to imagine a world relandscaped by Hashem and which accredits animal sacrifice. The ability to imagine a divinely-crafted reality is a cornerstone of faith and of our belief in higher wisdom. We don’t invest absolute belief in our own reality- as impressive and evolutionary as it feels.

The greatest fall in life, is to fall so far that you forget you are fallen. Two thousand years ago we fell. After our national betrayals we were evicted from Yerushalayim, and the world shifted. We have labored under imperfect conditions for two millennia. Despite being short-handed, we have crafted a rich Jewish experience and have thrived even as we were deficient so many vital elements of Jewish identity such as: prophecy, temple, sanhedrin, monarchy, and sovereignty. Despite our handicaps we flourished. However, this world isn’t our ideal reality. As we try to restore a perfect state we must continue to believe in the unbelievable and imagine the unimaginable. For a Jew, apocalyptic consciousness is essential to faith and to identity.

Lessons from the Small Mem

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Parshas Tzav, Hashem continues to command Moshe regarding the avodas ha'Mishkan (service performed in the Tabernacle), the korbanos (sacrificial offerings) and the appointment of Aharon and his sons as the kohanim who served in the Mishkan.

The pasuk tells us:

צו אֶת־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת־בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר זֹאת תִּזְרֹת הָעֹלָה הוּא הָעֹלָה עַל מוֹקֵדָה עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה עַד־הַבֹּקֶר וְאֵשׁ הַמִּזְבֵּחַ תִּוָּקֵד בּוֹ.

And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: Command Aharon and his sons saying: this is the law of the elevation offering; it is the elevation offering that stays on the flame (mok'dah), on the altar, all night until the morning, and the fire of the altar shall burn with it (Vayikra 6:1-2).

Tradition tells us that the first letter of the word מוֹקֵדָה (the flame), is a "mem ze'eirah - a small mem." As nothing in the Torah is happenstance, and nothing is recorded without intent, what does the small 'mem' come to teach us?

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Bregman, in his Short and Sweet on the Parsha (Feldheim), writes, "The flame on the mizbe'ach is referred to as 'mokda' in this pasuk. It's interesting to note that if you look at this word in the Sefer Torah or inside the Chumash, the letter mem at the beginning of the word 'mokda' is written smaller than the other letters of the word. Why?

"The Kotzker Rebbe zt'l (R' Menachem Mendel Kotzk, 1787-1859, Poland) says that the word mokda is referring to the fire of enthusiasm."

However - this leads to a different question: we might think that if the mem is referring to enthusiasm for Torah and mitzvos, it should be written larger than all the other letters, and not smaller! Why, then, is it diminished?

Answers the Kotzker, in his brilliant and perceptive fashion:

"The 'mem' is written small to indicate that inspiration is grossly overrated. What truly matters is not how much inspiration you feel, but rather how much of it you are able to translate into tangible accomplishment!" (Short and Sweet on the Parsha, p.256).

What a piercing and important insight this is. Sure, it's necessary to feel inspired as we live our lives as Jews. It's important to be excited for the mitzvos, for Torah and for the yomim tovim. But if we only live inspired, and never

translate that fire, passion, and inspiration into concrete action, into carrying out the precepts of Torah, into sitting down and making time for Torah study, into ensuring our heart leads to action... then all that inspiration is wasted and diminished. Only if we learn in order to do, and feel the fire that leads to action, is the flame of avodas Hashem burning healthily within us.

Perhaps then, this is why 'the flame' has the diminished mem. Fire can be healing, helpful, useful and productive, and fire can be dangerous, destructive and menacing R"L. So too, our passions and emotions. If they fuel healthy avodas Hashem, they are fires of greatness and productivity. But if we never move past the passion, and do not turn our emotion into action, then the fire can be destructive and dangerous. We cannot be complacent and fool ourselves into believing enthusiasm alone is sufficient. It must be followed by doing and achieving in avodas Hashem!

Furthermore, Rabbi Bregman writes, "Ta'am V'Da'as has a different approach. He says that the mem is small in order to teach that one's fire for avodas Hashem should not be unnaturally forced or expected to come all at once. Instead, like the small mem at the beginning of the word 'mokda,' it is something that can begin small, and hopefully grow over time. If our enthusiasm is allowed to grow naturally, we will discover that its flame will never be extinguished. Instead, it will endure for a person's whole lifetime, which is what the words towards the end of our pasuk promise us: כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה עַד־הַבֹּקֶר - *all night, until the morning*" (Short and Sweet on the Parsha, p.256-257).

Here too is a most important and relevant insight. When we approach any area of avodas Hashem, particularly when it comes to a new area which we want to work on, or improve in, we must know the importance and reality of 'baby steps'. True and everlasting growth and change doesn't happen in one enormous leap, or in one proverbial 'huge flame' of passion. Small commitments over time will ultimately grow into larger, everlasting commitments through one's lifetime. If we start small, but make sure the fire keeps burning, ultimately, the fire will never be extinguished.

A certain talmid chacham came to the Chazon Ish one erev Yom Kippur (Y"K) and he said, "Every year on Y"K

I make all of the preparations to do teshuva, and I manage to think some thoughts of teshuvah. But what is all this worth if right after Y”K I revert back to my old habits?” Replied the Chazon Ish, “Thoughts of teshuva are also very precious to Hashem!”

Similarly, a certain chassid once came to R’ Shalom Noach Berezovsky of Slonim (1911-2000), the Nesivos Shalom. This chassid had enormous potential and great aspirations, but his life was one long string of disappointments. He had not managed to turn his aspirations into reality and achieve meaningful spiritual growth. “I am worried,” the chassid told the Rebbe, “that

nothing will come of any of my dreams and aspirations, and my tombstone will read, ‘Here lies a man of aspirations.’” “If I would see a grave like that,” replied the Rebbe, “I would go to pray at that grave. Do you think it’s such a simple thing to be a man of aspirations?” (Aleinu L’Shabei’ach Vayikra, p.379-380)

May we always have the enthusiasm, passion and fire of inspiration and aspirations, may we be courageous enough to turn enthusiasm into action, and may we always live our lives so that the flame within continues to burn ever brighter and for eternity.

Bad Blood

Rabbi Jared Anstandig

Not every part of a kosher animal is kosher. Despite coming from a kosher and properly slaughtered animal, various parts of a kosher animal are offlimits for our consumption. Among these forbidden portions is the animal’s blood. (Vayikra 7:2227) The prohibition against consuming blood appears more than once in the Torah (Vayikra 3:17, Vayikra 17:1014, and Devarim 12:2325) adding weight to its significance.

The power of this prohibition grows when we consider the way it is presented in other locations in the Torah. In Vayikra 17 the Torah uses rare language to describe God’s treatment of the transgressor. There, the Torah says, “I will set My face against the individual who consumes the blood.” This expression of God setting His face against a transgressor appears in only one other place in the Torah, regarding one who commits child sacrifice in the worship of the pagan god Molech. (Vayikra 20:13) Given this parallel language, we can understand that consuming blood ranks high on the list of major transgressions.

When this prohibition appears in Devarim, it again has a unique formulation. There, the Torah emphasizes the need to refrain from consuming blood with the following introduction: “Be strong not to eat the blood.” (12:23) This is the only mitzvah in the Torah for which this phrase is used. The exhortation to “be strong” in the face of this prohibition again indicates that there is much to be lost by violating this mitzvah.

Yet, what could be so problematic about eating blood, so that it warrants such intense language?

1: Idolatry

Rambam (Guide for the Perplexed Part 3, Chapter 46) asserts that idolators consumed blood, and this prohibition therefore distances us from their practices. He writes, “They would eat blood because they believed it was the food of demons. And by eating it they could commune with the demons. And they would come and reveal the future, as the masses believe demons do.” According to Rambam, this mitzvah is part of the broader prohibition against sorcery and paganism. This approach is particularly attractive as it accounts for the comparison to Molech – both are abhorrent due to their association with idolatry.

2: The Essence of the Beast

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, in his biblical commentary, offers an explanation that sees blood more symbolically. When we consume an animal’s blood, we absorb the blood, its lifeforce, into our own bodies. This has the unfortunate effect of lessening our godliness and increasing our animalistic and base selves. He explains, “All the aims of man are holy unto God; man must devote himself exclusively to serving God, without any selfish motives.” (Commentary to Vayikra 7:2627) The Torah prohibits blood because of its spiritual effect on the consumer. This explanation works well with blood being called the nefesh, soul, of the animal (Vayikra 17, Devarim 12), perhaps suggesting that the prohibition has to do with the assimilation of the animal’s soul and traits into our psyche.

3: Divine Control

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in *The Emergence of*

Ethical Man (pp. 3747) takes the prohibition in yet another direction. He argues that this prohibition reveals an awareness of God's control over the world. Rabbi Soloveitchik points to the fact that God is the source and thereby owner of all life; we have no right to spill the blood of any being, human or animal, without God's express permission. Indeed, slaughtering an animal for personal consumption, as opposed to sacrifice on the altar, is only permitted as a concession to our human desires. Rabbi Soloveitchik elaborates, "But even as the Torah came to terms with the lusty sensual human being concerning the meat [and thereby permitted eating it], it retained full

possession and dominion over the blood." (pg. 44) By refraining from blood, at the very least we remember that all life is sacred.

In truth, there is no real disagreement between Rabbi Soloveitchik's suggestion and those of Rambam and Rabbi Hirsch. Ultimately, all agree that this prohibition forces us to recognize God's role over the universe. We may arrive at that by rejecting idolatry (like Rambam) or by holding fast to our personal godliness (like Rabbi Hirsch). However we interpret this mitzvah, through its observance we acknowledge God's superiority.

What We Learn from the Jewish 'Caste System

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This week's Torah portion, parashat Tzav, continues the Torah's description of the sacrificial rite, and concludes with a description of the very dramatic and moving consecration ceremony of the כֹּהֲנִים —Cohanim, the priests, authorizing their service in the Mishkan—Tabernacle.

Virtually all religions, particularly Eastern religions, have powerful caste systems in which not all people are considered equal or treated equally. There are Brahmans and untouchables, human beings regarded as higher than others, and those considered lower and defiled. All ancient civilizations, of course, had their royalty and their slaves.

Judaism, on the other hand, prides itself as being a highly enlightened faith—an equitable, fair and revolutionarily moral system. When it comes to equality, the Torah repeats the mitzvah of loving the stranger 36 times—more often than any other mitzvah in the Torah! Yet, amazingly, there seems to be a caste system in Judaism as well. After all, we have the כֹּהֲנִים —Cohanim—priests, לְוִיִּם—Leviim—Levites, and Israelites. In this week's parasha, Tzav, we learn extensively of the special position and privileges of the כֹּהֲנִים —Cohanim—the priests, all of which seem to be discriminatory, and quite dissonant with Judaism's views of universal equality before the Creator.

How is this seemingly discriminatory communal structure of Israel rationalized within Jewish law, Jewish theology, and Jewish philosophy?

There is a fundamental debate in Judaism about who is the "Ultimate Jew." Maimonides, deals with this issue in his *Moreh Nevuchim*, the *Guide to The Perplexed* (Book

2, chap. 32 ff). Strongly influenced by Greek philosophy, Maimonides, in effect, employs the Platonic model of the "Philosopher King," arguing that the "ultimate human being," the person who can come closest to G-d, must be a philosopher—by which he means, a brilliantly endowed scholar, and King—the possessor of great natural leadership abilities. Translating these terms into Jewish nomenclature, the "Ultimate Jew" must be a great חֶכֶם הַתְּלִמִיד—Talmid Chacham, a great Jewish scholar, and a brilliantly talented מְנַהִיג—manhig, leader.

In practical human terms, the Maimonidian model for the philosopher king is, of course, Moses. As the Yigdal hymn affirms: לֹא קָם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה עוֹד, no person has ever arisen in Israel as great as Moses. Unfortunately, this model leaves the majority of mortals with little hope of ever coming close to G-d. After all, who can aspire to be as great as Moses? Who is blessed with the prodigious natural endowments of Moses? Moses was singularly unique, and will remain unique. Confirming the uniqueness of Moses, is the epitaph that appears on Maimonides' tomb in Tiberius: "From Moses to Moses, no one rose like Moses."

At about the same time as Maimonides, another great Jewish philosopher and poet by the name of Rabbi Judah (Yehuda) HaLevi flourished. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi wrote a famed philosophy tract known as *The Kuzari*. The *Kuzari* was based on the historic conversion to Judaism of the king of the Kazar tribe in central Russia during the 8th century. In the philosophical discussion that takes place in the *Kuzari* (Book 1, statement 19), HaLevi raises the question of who is the "ultimate Jew." HaLevi suggests an entirely

different model from that presented by Maimonides, pronouncing the “ultimate Jew” to be the person who works up to his or her potential. One’s relationship with G-d does not depend on a person’s natural endowments, but rather on what one does with those endowments.

It is told that the Chassidic Rabbi, Rabbi Meshulam Zusha of Hanipol once dreamt that he died and came back to earth. His Chassidim asked him, “Well, Zusha, what did the Al-mighty ask you?” The rabbi responded, “The Al-mighty and his tribunal did not ask me why I was not as great as Moshe, why was I not the “sweet singer” like King David, why I was not the great thinker like Rabbi Akiva.” “They asked me,” said Zusha, “Why weren’t you Zusha?! Why didn’t you live up to your own potential?!”

The Kotzker Rebbe was once asked, “Who’s higher on the ladder, the person on top, or the one on bottom?” Recognizing that the question was a set up, he responded by stating that the answer depends upon which direction the people on the ladder are going. If the person on the bottom of the ladder is on his/or her way up, and the person on top is on his or her way down, then, theoretically, the person on the bottom may be higher than the person on top! We see, once again, through this illustration, that what counts in Judaism is constant growth and working up to one’s potential.

In life, we are all dealt a seemingly arbitrary “hand,” and are forced to deal with the hand that we’re dealt. Some people are born tall, others short, some blond, others brown-haired, some blue-eyed, others dark-eyed. Some are born in the United States, others in Israel, or South Africa, or in the Himalayas. All of us have to deal with what “fate” has meted out to us. That’s exactly what the Jewish “caste system” of Cohen, Levi, and Israelite represents. The fact that there are Cohanim, Leviim and Israelites underscores that there is an arbitrariness to life, and that a good part of life consists of confronting and dealing with the arbitrariness of our natural endowments and the environmental vicissitudes. We simply have to operate with the hand that life has dealt us.

So how are we to deal with the arbitrariness? Each person is bidden to work up to his/her fullest potential, to always be in the “growth mode,” in all aspects of life. Who is the good Jew? Despite being an Orthodox rabbi, I openly declare that a good Jew is not necessarily Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, or Reconstructionist. A good Jew is rather a person who is always in the “growth mode” with

respect to their Jewishness. Irrespective of from where a person starts, whether “privileged” Cohen, Levi, or Israelite, we each have responsibilities. Whether we possess a genius IQ, or are born mentally challenged, each of us is equal in G-d’s eyes. And working effectively with the hand that G-d has dealt us is the essential challenge of life.

Clearly, most important to bear in mind is that, notwithstanding our endowments, we must try to be as full, as complete, as good, as learned, as moral, and as accomplished as we can possibly be. Despite our limitations, if we strive to achieve our fullest potential, each of us can reach the status of being an “Ultimate Jew” in the eyes of the Al-mighty.

That is the message of the Jewish “caste system”—Cohen, Levi, and Israel. That is the Torah’s message, and G-d’s message as well.