

DO WHAT'S RIGHT

by Shlomo Katz

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Shemini: Do What's Right

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Today's Learning:

Eduyot 2:2-3

Orach Chaim 621:5-622:1

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Batra 17

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Ma'asrot 13

In this parashah, we read how two of Aharon's sons died during the dedication of the mishkan. Aharon concluded that his family members' status as onenim (mourners before the burial of the deceased) precluded them from eating one of the sacrifices of the day. Aharon finished his argument with the rhetorical question (10:19): "*Hayitav be'ainai Hashem*" / "Would it be right in G-d's eyes [to eat of the sacrifice]?"

R' Shalom Noach Brazovsky z"l (the Slonimer Rebbe; died 2000) notes that Aharon did not say, "Would it be right in the eyes of the Torah?" or "Would it be right in the eyes of halachah?" Besides keeping the letter of the law - even about something that is not explicitly prohibited by the Torah - a person must ask himself: Would it be right?

And what is "right"? It is that which brings man closer to Hashem. [Of course, only something that is permitted by the Torah can bring one closer to G-d.] There is a well-known story of the convert who

wanted to learn the entire Torah while standing on one foot. The sage Hillel told him, "That which is hateful to you do not do to your friend." Is this the "whole" Torah? many ask. It is, says R' Brazovsky. "Your friend" means Hashem, and the purpose of the whole Torah is to bring man closer to Him. That which is not "hateful," i.e., destructive, to your relationship with Hashem is "right." (Netivot Shalom: Introduction to Breishit)

"The sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, they put fire in them and placed incense upon it; and they brought before Hashem an alien fire that He had not commanded them. A fire came forth from before Hashem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem." (10:2-3)

Rashi quotes the Midrash: "Rabbi Yishmael said, 'They died because they entered the Sanctuary intoxicated by wine'."

This requires explanation on several levels. Firstly, the Torah tells us why Nadav and Avihu died - they entered the mishkan with "an alien fire that He had not commanded them"! Why does Rabbi Yishmael offer a different reason? Secondly, how is it possible that these great tzaddikim entered the mishkan drunk? Indeed, why would they have been drunk at this time?

R' Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter z"l (1847-1905; the Gerrer Rebbe) explains as follows: Nadav and Avihu were not drunk, but they had imbibed some alcohol. They did this because a small amount of alcohol can enhance a person's feelings, and they wanted to enhance their closeness to Hashem on this holy day of the dedication of the mishkan. They erred, however, for a kohen who serves in the mishkan before G-d should not enhance his experience with outside influences. Rather, his "spiritual high" and his closeness to Hashem should come from the Divine service itself.

This is what the verse means when it says that they brought the incense with an "alien fire that He had not commanded them." The kohen should be motivated by Hashem's command and nothing else.

On another occasion, R' Alter quoted his grandfather, R' Yitzchak Meir Alter z"l (the "Chiddushei Harim"; 1799-1866) who explained that the Torah's emphasis is on the phrase "that He had not commanded them." The key to any mitzvah is the fact that it is G-d's command. Even if a person doesn't know the reason for the mitzvah, the main thing is to do Hashem's Will. The younger R' Alter added: This is the meaning of the verse (Shir Hashirim 1:2), "For Your friendship is dearer than wine." Closeness to Hashem is achieved primarily by obeying His command, not by appreciating the sweet taste (the "wine") of the mitzvot. Indeed, this is why we recite a blessing before performing a mitzvah, stating that: "He has sanctified us through His commandments, and has commanded us to [perform this mitzvah]." (Sefat Emet: Years 5648 & 5639)

"Speak to Bnei Yisrael, saying: 'These are the creatures that you may eat from among the animals that

are upon the earth'." (11:2)

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l (1903-1993) observes: The laws of the permitted and forbidden animals are chukim / decrees. The gemara (Yoma 67b) describes chukim as "commandments with which the evil inclination and heathens find fault because they seem to be beyond human comprehension." There are other laws, called mishpatim, which we would have observed even if they had not been commanded by G-d, because they conform with basic concepts of morality and justice. Examples of these are the prohibitions on bloodshed and robbery.

In reality, says R' Soloveitchik, the force of the Divine command applies to both chukim and mishpatim, demanding observance of, and unqualified commitment to, both. We can understand that a chok demands total submission without reservations. Just as a patient takes a prescription on faith, without understanding the chemical or biological processes that make the medicine effective, so must we observe the chukim. We may seek to understand and to make inquiries, but ultimately, we must accept G-d's command on faith.

The word "chok" comes from the root which means "to engrave." The chok is characterized by perpetual validity and is "graven in the rock forever" (paraphrasing Iyov 19:24). G-d taught this lesson when He engraved the Ten Commandments in stone, for stone conveys the notion of stability and permanence. And, Moshe smashed the tablets when he saw that Bnei Yisrael's commitment was not permanent.

[It is noteworthy that virtually all of the so-called "Ten Commandments" are not chukim, but rather are mishpatim.] The Torah does not assign separate sections of Scripture to chukim and mishpatim. They are interspersed throughout the Torah. We make no distinctions between the two as regards the quality and totality of our commitment. Apparently, reason is not a reliable guide even with respect to mishpatim, for there are borderline situations that confuse the mind and make the application of moral norms impossible. Since our intellect must weigh pros and cons and is slow and deliberate in deciding, society starts to nibble away at the edges of marginal, borderline situations such as euthanasia and abortion, causing us to violate the mishpatim. [These are R' Soloveitchik's examples.]

In our modern world, there is hardly a misphat which has not been repudiated. Stealing and corruption are accepted norms, and even much worse behaviors are commonly found in respectable society. The Torah, therefore, insists that a mishpat be accepted as a chok. Our commitment must be unshakable, universally applicable, and upheld even when our reason is confused. Without this attitude, every social and moral law can be rationalized away. The Torah therefore enjoins (Vayikra 18:5), "You shall observe My chukim / decrees and My mishpatim / laws . . . I am Hashem." All observance of laws must be motivated by the Ratzon Elyon / Divine Will. (Reflections of the Rav pp.99-105)

Pirkei Avot

"Moshe received the Torah from Sinai, and he transmitted it to Yehoshua..." (1:1)

Why does the mishnah say "from Sinai" rather than "at Sinai"? R' Moshe Yechiel Halevi Epstein z"l (the Ozhrover Rebbe in New York and Tel Aviv; died 1971) explains that Moshe achieved greatness as a result and in the merit of his humility. Moshe learned this way of living from Sinai, for Sinai, too, is described by our Sages as "humble" - it is neither the tallest mountain nor the most verdant.

Likewise, Yehoshua merited to be Moshe's heir because of his own humility. Our Sages say, for example, that Yehoshua could be found in the study hall early in the morning and late at night arranging the benches. Such self-effacement does not go unrewarded. (Eish Dat Al Masechet Avot)

R' Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l

R' Yosef Dov (Joseph Ber) Soloveitchik was born on 12 Adar 5663 / 1903 in Pruzhana, Poland. His father, R' Moshe Soloveitchik, was a son of the famed R' Chaim "Brisker" (founder of the "Brisker" method of Talmudic analysis), and his mother, Pesia, was a daughter of the sage R' Elya Feinstein. (Pesia was a first cousin of R' Moshe Feinstein, as their mothers were sisters.) Among R' Soloveitchik's other illustrious ancestors were R' Chaim of Volozhin, R' Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (the "Netziv") and his namesake, R' Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik (the "Bet Halevi").

In R' Soloveitchik's youth, his father served as rabbi of Khaslavichy, Belarus, a town inhabited primarily by Lubavitcher chassidim. R' Soloveitchik related that his cheder teacher in Khaslavichy would secretly teach the children Tanya (the foremost work of Lubavitcher philosophy) while a lookout was posted at the door to warn the children if the elder R' Soloveitchik should pass by. This early exposure to the teachings of Chabad had a profound effect on R' Soloveitchik. Eventually, however, the boy's grandfather, R' Chaim, tested him and realized that he was not learning gemara. He proposed that R' Moshe teach his son himself, which R' Moshe did. Together, father and son studied 24 tractates. R' Chaim was overwhelmed by the Torah chiddushim / novellae that his grandson recorded during this time, and predicted that his grandson would be a major source of Torah illumination for the next generation. Similarly, the ordination certificate which R' Soloveitchik would later receive from R' Avraham Dov Ber Kahana-Shapiro, rabbi of Kovno, stated in part:

Just like his grandfather, he too is a master of the entire range of Talmudic literature . . . Happy is the country that will be privileged to be the home of this great sage. The sages have ordained him to be the true interpreter of all religious problems, and the halachah shall always be in accordance with his rulings.

Another profound influence on the young R' Soloveitchik was his mother, who exposed her children to secular studies and literature as she herself had been exposed as a child. R' Soloveitchik would later go on to study at the Free Polish University in Warsaw and at the University of Berlin, where he

earned a doctorate in 1932. To be continued...

Happy Birthday, Hamaayan!

The editors of Hamaayan express their gratitude to Hashem and to our readers and supporters on the start of our 16th year of publication.

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