

BE COMMITTED

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Naso

Be Committed

One of the laws in this week's parashah is that of the "Nazir." This section is introduced with the words: "Ish or ishah ki yafli" / "A man or a woman who shall disassociate himself . . ." R' Avraham ibn Ezra z"l (1089-1164) observes that the word "yafli" also can mean: "Who does wonders." He explains that a nazir, who disassociates him or herself from wine, is doing something wondrous--unlike the typical person, who is controlled by the pursuit of pleasure.

R' Simcha Bunim Alter z"l (1898-1992; fifth Gerrer Rebbe) adds that the section of nazir teaches us how G-d helps one who undertakes to improve himself. Becoming a nazir is a wondrous thing--indeed, it is nearly impossible to be around people who are enjoying normal pleasures and to refrain from partaking. Nevertheless, because the nazir undertakes sincerely to be different, Hashem helps him. The Gerrer Rebbe adds: The same thing is true of any person who wants to change himself. Once one makes a sincere commitment to change--even if change appears impossible--Hashem will help.

This week's parashah is always read on either the Shabbat before or (more commonly) the Shabbat after Shavuot. The idea that Hashem desires our sincere commitments is closely tied to the holiday of the Giving of the Torah. How so? The Tosafot to Avodah Zarah (3a) teach that, although we are taught that the heavens and earth can exist only if we study Torah, in fact it is our sincere commitment to study, rather than the actual study itself, that keeps the world going. (Pardes Yosef)

"Speak to Bnei Yisrael and say to them, 'A man or woman who shall dissociate himself by taking a Nazirite vow of abstinence for the sake of Hashem'." (6:2)

Rashi z"l writes: "Why is the section dealing with the Nazirite placed adjacent to the section dealing with the sotah? To teach that one who sees a sotah in her disgrace should abstain from wine, because wine may lead to immoral behavior."

R' Shlomo Wolbe z"l (1914-2005) writes that there is broader lesson here: Everything that we see during our lives is a mirror placed there by Divine Providence in which to see ourselves. If a person happens to be in the Bet Hamikdash at just the right moment to see a sotah's disgrace, he should know that he was sent there to witness that event as warning to him that he is at risk of behaving immorally and needs to take precautions. The same is true any time one Jew sees another Jew commit any sin. (AleI Shur I p.137)

"Speak to Aharon and his sons, saying, 'So shall you bless Bnei Yisrael, saying to them . . .'" (6:23)

What is the power of a blessing given by another person, in general, and of Birkat Kohanim, in particular? R' Menachem Mendel Schneersohn z"l (1789-1866; the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, known as the "Tzemach Tzedek") explains:

The Gemara (Beitzah 16a) teaches that a person's sustenance for the entire year is determined on Rosh Hashanah. But, another passage in the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 16b) says that humans are judged every day. Indeed, we are required to pray every day for our sustenance. Why is this so, if we were already judged on Rosh Hashanah?

The resolution to this seeming contradiction is that a human exists on many levels, Man is not just a physical body; his neshamah / soul is connected by an umbilical cord to a spiritual root in Heaven and exists in some form in each of the intermediate worlds through which that cord passes before reaching our physical world. The sustenance which is decreed on Rosh Hashanah refers not only to the physical bounty we enjoy in this world, but to all that the soul enjoys at each level of its existence. What is not determined on Rosh Hashanah is how far down the cord the sustenance that was decreed will be pass. To bring that sustenance into this world, we have to pray.

The difficulty, continues the Tzemach Tzedek, is that when man attempts to bring his sustenance down to this world through prayer, he is judged repeatedly as his sustenance passes through each successive spiritual world. Not so, when a person receives a blessing--particularly from a kohen. Aharon Ha'kohen epitomized the trait of "rav chessed" / overflowing with kindness. Like a cup overflowing its rim, a blessing from Aharon and his descendants (and to some extent, from any person) causes kindness to rain down from Heaven without having to pass through level-after-level of judgments.

This trait of Aharon is reflected in the verse (Bemidbar 17:23), "The staff of Aharon . . . had blossomed; it brought forth a blossom, sprouted a bud and almonds ripened." The interval between the appearance of the almond blossom and the fruit's ripening is very short, just as a kohen's blessing quickly bears fruits. (Derech Mitzvotcha: Mitzvat Birkat Kohanim)

"May Hashem lift His countenance to you and establish shalom / peace for you." (6:26)

R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z"l (1910-1995; rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Kol Torah in Yerushalayim and one of the leading halachic authorities of the 20th century) writes: If a person examines the Torah carefully, he can see clearly how each detail of the Torah's laws refines a person's character traits. For example, the Mishnah (end of Tractate Uktzin) states that Hashem did not find any vessel to contain a blessing for the Jewish People other than shalom, as it is written (Tehilim 29:11), "Hashem will give might [a reference to the Torah] to His people, Hashem will bless His people with shalom." This teaches that the Torah promotes shalom. And, by carefully studying the mitzvot, one can see how the Torah distances that which separates between people and promotes that which advances shalom.

For instance, lighting Chanukah candles is only a mitzvah of rabbinic origin, yet it is so stringent that one is obligated to beg for charity in order to buy candles or oil for Chanukah. We do not find a similar requirement regarding lulav, sukkah or shofar. Likewise, purchasing candles or oil for Chanukah takes precedence over purchasing wine for kiddush, even though the latter is a Torah mitzvah. Why are Chanukah lights so important? Because they teach a person to show gratitude for the good things that are done for him.

Nevertheless, despite the overwhelming importance of the Chanukah lights, the halachah is that, if one has only enough money for a Chanukah candle or a Shabbat candle, the latter takes precedence. Shabbat candles are not a mitzvah per se; rather, they are a convenience that our Sages established so that people do not dwell in the dark on Shabbat, lest they trip over each other and thereby fight. In short, Shabbat candles promote shalom. And, from the fact that they supersede even the Chanukah lights, which, in turn, supersede many Torah mitzvot, we learn the high value which the Torah assigns to shalom. (Halichot Shlomo: Mo'adim p.534--"Ma'amar Halichot Olam Lo")

R' Yitzchak Isaac Chaver z"l (1789-1852; rabbi of Suvalk, Lithuania) writes: When the kohanim bless the congregation [of which the above verse is the third and final verse], their primary intention should be to bless the people with peace and unity. Just as a king gives his beloved son the key to his treasury, so Hashem gives us the key to all of His treasures, and that key is shalom. So important is shalom that our Sages say it is one of the names of G-d. Thus we read in the very next verse in our parashah (6:27), "They shall place My Name upon Bnei Yisrael, and I shall bless them." (Siach Yitzchak p.448)

Letters from our Sages

This letter was written in 1895 by R' Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor z"l (1817-1896), rabbi of Kovno, Lithuania, and one of the preeminent halachic authorities and Jewish leaders of the late 19th century. The letter is addressed to a well-connected Jewish banker who had successfully lobbied the Russian government to annul a decree prohibiting the teaching of Gemara to school-age children.

To the honored friend of the house of Yisrael, the officer, great among the Jews, crown of Yeshurun [a synonym for Yisrael] and its glory, great and many in deeds, known for his good name and glory, Yaakov Polyakov, may he live long. Peace and eternal blessings!

After inquiring after your well-being with all due respect, with the permission of the holy Torah, and in the name of our brethren Bnei Yisrael, for whom Hashem's perfect Torah is its life and soul--it is my honor to express feelings of gratitude, praise and blessing to your lofty honor, who merited and brought merit to the many, saving the treasure of Israel from the terrible prohibition that had been published, not teach it in cheder to young students.

Our Sages have said that the world exists due to the Torah study of young children for, "if there are no kids there will be no goats." If children don't learn when they are young, they can't be expected to learn when they must earn a living. That is why the prohibition on teaching Gemara in cheder meant that the Torah eventually would be forgotten from Yisrael, G-d forbid. And, the physical continuity of our nation is tied, like body and soul, to its spiritual continuity. Thus, our experience shows that every sect that has denied the Oral Law eventually has vanished, for G-d's covenant with us is based on the Oral Law. Only those of our people who sacrifice themselves for the holiness of the Oral Law have persisted until this day.

Therefore, who can express the great righteousness of his lofty honor who, in a time of trouble for Yaakov such as this, was given the merit by Hashem to be the angel of salvation, to save and redeem our holy Torah which gives both spiritual and physical life. You are fortunate that this fell to your lot. Our Sages say that a mitzvah brings a mitzvah in its wake, and your many and great charitable deeds for the good of our nation are like a river flowing with charity; it is they that stood as a merit for you to be the redeemer and savior of the Torah . . . Until the last generation, the praises of your lofty honor will be spoken among us, for all the good you have done for our Torah and our nation . . .

May the merit of the holy Torah, in which is the eternity of Yisrael, stand in good stead for yourself and your household and your descendants . . . (Igrot R' Yitzchak Elchanan, vol. 1 p.86.)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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