

TO LIVE AS A JEW

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Shemini

To Live As A Jew

A significant part of this week's parashah is devoted to listing or describing the animals, birds and fish which are or are not kosher. The parashah concludes: "To distinguish between the contaminated and the pure, and between the living thing that may be consumed and the living thing that may not be consumed." R' Moshe Yehoshua Hager z"l (1916-2012; Vizhnitzer Rebbe) asks: For the sake of parallelism, shouldn't the second half of the verse have been reversed--"the living thing that may not be consumed" paralleling "contaminated" and "the living thing that may be consumed" paralleling "pure"? [As written, the pasuk seems to have the pattern A-B-B-A instead of A-B-A-B.]

R' Hager explains: In addition to its literal, halachic meaning, the verse may be interpreted as follows [giving it an A-B-A-B pattern]: Who is contaminated? One whose life force is derived from consumable belongings. Who is pure? One whose life force is not derived from consumable belongings, but rather from spiritual acquisitions.

In this light, he continues, we can understand the mishnah (Avot, ch. 4): "Against your will, you are alive." Who is truly alive? One who approaches material pleasures unwillingly.

R' Hager adds (in the name of R' Mordechai Chune Fuchs, a famous chassid of R' Hager's grandfather): Some people are alive, while other seemingly living people merely exist. An example of the latter is one who is most alert when sitting in front food, but who consistently nods off during prayers. A truly living person is one who has his priorities in order. (Kuntreis Sichot U'maamarei Kodesh 5732-5734, p.64)

"Moshe said to Aharon: Of this did Hashem speak, saying, 'I will be sanctified through those who are nearest Me, thus I will be honored before the entire people'." (10:3)

R' Yaakov Kranz z"l (1741-1804; the Dubno Maggid) explains that this verse contrasts Hashem's

expectations of the righteous with His expectations of the "ordinary" Jew. Those closest to Hashem are held to a standard that measures whether they sanctify Him through every deed; if they do not, they are judged harshly, as Aharon's sons Nadav and Avihu were. In contrast, "ordinary" Jews are measured by whether they honor Hashem by adhering, at a minimum, to the letter of the law.

R' Kranz explains further that there are three reasons for why G-d holds the righteous to exacting standards. The first may be understood by means of a parable: Two subjects of a king committed the same offense against their ruler. One offender was a peasant while the other was one of the king's advisors. Wouldn't we expect the king to judge his advisor more harshly, because the advisor should have had a greater reverence for the king after being granted access to the throne? Similarly, one who has been blessed with closeness to Hashem is held to a higher standard than is one who is distant from Hashem.

Second, one who is close to Hashem is viewed by others as a role model. When he sins, he not only violates the law, he causes others to do so. This is not true when an "ordinary" Jew sins.

Third, R' Kranz writes, not all neshamot / souls originate from the same "level." Those that come from a higher source are more delicate, so-to-speak. Therefore, they are more prone to being damaged by even minor sins, just as a delicate piece of equipment is more susceptible to damage from minute dust particles and just as a white garment is more susceptible to permanent damage from small stains. This is alluded to by the verse (Kohelet 1:18), "For with much wisdom comes much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases pain." (Sefer Ha'middot: Sha'ar Ha'yirah chapter 12)

Also from the Dubno Maggid:

"Do not drink intoxicating wine, you and your sons with you, when you come to the Ohel Mo'ed / Tent of Meeting . . ." (10:9)

The Bet Hamikdash was the paragon of beauty, a joy to the whole world (paraphrasing Eichah 2:15). A kohen who drinks wine before entering the Temple acts as if he needs an external stimulus - a foreign fire - to kindle joy in his heart when performing the sacred service. According to the Talmudic sage Rabbi Yishmael, this was the sin of Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu. (Kol Rinah Vy'shuah to Esther 1:10-12)

Pesach

The following is a letter written by R' Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler z"l (1892-1953; rosh kollel in Gateshead, England, and mashgiach ruchani in the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak) to an unidentified recipient. It is printed in Michtav M'Eliyahu: Kovetz Igrot, p.129.

I received your precious letter with your invitation to come visit you and to participate in the Pesach Seder with you. Thank you very much for your invitation. However, I am unable to accept it. With G-d's help, I will celebrate the holy festival and arrange the Seder where I live.

It would seem that, just as it is impossible to invite a ben Torah [loosely translated: "one whose values are derived from the Torah"] to visit a friend for the Ne'ilah prayer on Yom Kippur, so, it seems to me, it is impossible to make a "visit" out of the holy Seder. [The Seder is an occasion to internalize, not a time to be outward-looking.] Fortunate is one who focuses and arranges the Seder within his heart. The Exodus is the source of the Jewishness within us. The Seder must make a convert of our inner selves, which have left their original domain and become animal-like, grossly material. More than that, our inner selves have ceased being Jewish. Woe to our hearts that are lost within our inner selves.

A related thought:

R' Shalom Noach Berezovsky z"l (1911-1980; Slonimer Rebbe in Yerushalayim) writes: As applied to some people, the title "Jew" is no more than an accident of birth. Such a person's Jewishness is not part of his essence; though he fulfills all of the mitzvot, he is doing nothing more than "acting" Jewish. To really be a Jew means that one's Jewishness is embedded in the essence of his being, in his innards, his mind, his heart, and all his limbs. We read in Megillat Esther [about Mordechai], "There was a Jewish man . . ." [instead of, "There was a Jew"]. His whole personality was Jewish--his beliefs and his outlooks were Jewish, his feelings and aspirations were Jewish; even his physical desires were Jewish, i.e., they were under his control. We read (Vayikra 18:3), "Like the deed of the land of Egypt in which you dwelled--you shall not do, and like the deed of the land of Canaan to which I bring you--you shall not do, and do not follow their traditions." This means that those things which you are permitted to do, you should not do the way an Egyptian or Canaanite would do them.

A true expression of these feelings can be found in the journal entry that the Piaseczna Rebbe Hy"d [R' Klonimus Kalman Shapira z"l; 1889-1943] wrote upon turning 40: "What can I accept upon myself? To study more? I believe that I don't waste any time currently. To distance myself from physical desires? Thank G-d, I'm not subjugated to them, G-d forbid. What is lacking in me? Simply to be Jewish. I appear to myself to be a perfectly painted picture of a human being, which lacks only a soul." [The Slonimer Rebbe continues:] Tzaddikim say that when one recites the blessing, "He did not make me a gentile," he must examine himself to see whether any part of himself is in fact gentile-like. (Netivot Shalom, Vol. I p.18)

Memoirs

R' Yaakov Emden (1697-1776) is well-known for his notes on the Talmud, his halachic writings,

and his siddur commentary. One of R' Emden's lesser known works is his autobiography, Megilat Sefer. In this selection, R' Emden explains what compelled him to write an autobiography.

Before I begin to tell the story of what happened to me, I will declare truthfully that I have not done this to publicize myself and my praises, for I know that I am lacking good deeds--devoid of Torah, devoid of wisdom, devoid of greatness with which to glorify myself. Would that my writing not reveal my shortcomings! However, those who know me know that I have chosen the path of humility for, since the day that I have attained understanding, I have recognized my own worth and blemishes. Therefore, it doesn't matter to me [if my writing reveals my shortcomings], for I love only the truth.

There are three reasons why I have arrived at this point, i.e., to write an autobiography. [First,] I don't want to refrain from informing my descendants all of my affairs to the extent possible (and, if I can't tell all, then at least what I remember at the moment). [Second,] the strongest reason that led me to this is to reveal Hashem's kindness to me since my youth. Though many have persecuted me, they have been unable to defeat me. If it could all be described, it would not be believed that a person could suffer one-thousandth of what I have undergone . . . From all of them, Hashem saved me . . . The numerous wonders that He did for me, the lowly among the thousands of Israel, I wish to reveal to later generations.

Third, [my intention is] so that the light of my guiltlessness will shine like the sun and I will not remain under a cloud [in the face of] "the lawless who have robbed me; they now surround me as my enemies in their very souls" [paraphrasing Tehilim 17:9], slandering me to humiliate me in the eyes of the inhabitants of the land. They wish to destroy me with the curses in their hands, with their lies that have been disseminated in every corner. There is no doubt that the publications containing their attacks will remain in the world for some time. [Ed. note: Such pamphlets still exist.] Therefore, of necessity, I must clarify my deeds before G-d and man.

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](https://torah.org) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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