

NOT SO HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Not So Humble Beginnings ¹

In two consecutive verses about *korbanos*,² the Torah first lays down a number of proscriptions.

Neither *chametz/se'or*³ nor honey are to be added to a *mincha*. Immediately, the Torah describes the few circumstances in which these ingredients do play a role. They may be brought as first (i.e. first-fruit) offerings. (Indeed, the two loaves of Shavuot are made of *chametz*, and *Bikurim* include dates plump with their date-honey.)

The symbolism of *chametz* and honey is well established in the *seforim ha-kedoshim* - *chametz* stands for prideful self-importance, while honey and its sweetness convey the notion of the specious and tempting allure of human desires and lusts. The Torah admonishes us to take pains to leave these failings behind when we turn to our service of Hashem. But why, then, should there be any exception for the first-fruit offering? When we find an answer to this, we will hardly have made sense of the *parshah*, because the phrase that follows the command to bring them cautions that despite the need to offer them, they simply will not provide any *nachas ruach*, or satisfying aroma to Hashem, as it were! If they won't please Hashem the way other *korbanos* do, why does He ask us to bring them in the first place?

Toldos Yaakov Yosef offers an approach to the proscriptions and their exception. We need to eliminate pride and lust. Of this there is no question. The *korban reishis*, the first attempts of a person to draw near to His Creator, can still accommodate them. To arrive at the perfect *avodah*, a person often needs to first attempt an imperfect one. Many of us can only get to an *avodah lishmah*, performing our mitzvos purely for the sake of proper service, by first serving Him in a not-so-perfect way. At the beginning of our service we must often serve Hashem with complex and mixed intentions, including baser motives that serve our own egos and desires.

For many, this is an entirely necessary stepping-stone on the path to greater spiritual achievement. The Torah cautions us, however, not to lull ourselves into a self-satisfied stupor. Serving Hashem this way is not true service. It is a training exercise, meant to bring us closer to the real thing. It will not, as the *pasuk* continues, bring *nachas ruach* to Him. We dare not find a comfortable position to kick back and rest when we become proficient at performing at this level. In climbing the ladder of spiritual advancement, we must step on this rung - but it is not a place to linger and tarry.

This approach is not entirely satisfying. If performing mitzvos in a non- *lishmah* manner is but a way-station on the path to the true service of Hashem, why would the Torah call this *reishis*, this beginning of service, anything but an exercise? The Torah actually commands us to "offer" this *reishis* to Hashem. Somehow, it rises to the bar of a genuine offering, not just a dress rehearsal.

To answer this question, we must first consider the precarious position we inevitably find ourselves when we perform mitzvos that provide us some benefit or some joy. How do we find elevation in those activities, when the material pleasure they bring us inevitably coddles the baser part of ourselves, the part that has little use for high-minded principle but revels in the ephemeral joy of the moment? How do we insure that the benefit or joy in the mitzvah not mask the more profound part, or worse yet, pull is in the very opposite direction of where we want to go?

The Torah offers us a magic bullet to escape the downward tug of sensory pleasure. We must turn the *reishis*, the beginning of the leaven and honey that we encounter, into a *korban* to Hashem. We must fix it in our minds as done only for His sake; were it not for His instruction, we would forego it entirely. When we eat of a *korban Pesach* for example, we must pause and tell ourselves that we have no abiding interest in the pleasure and benefit that the meat brings us. Were it not for His instruction to partake of it, we could well pass it up. We can do the same in the case of every mitzvah that is linked and bound up with some pleasurable experience or sensation. By focusing on and elevating the beginning of our encounter with such pleasure, we neutralize the potential ill effect of the rest of the pleasure that follows. This action plan is not pie-in-the-sky; it is within our ability to do.

When we consider it, this approach now seems so intuitive that we fail to understand why the Torah must dampen our enthusiasm by stressing that such a service does not make the cut, does not win Divine favor. We can understand only by referring to a distinction made by *Mesilas Yesharim*⁴ between *taharah* and *kedushah*. *Taharah*, says the Ramchal, is the complete absence of the *tumah* that is associated with any kind of material pursuit. Any material involvement, even when devoid of any *aveirah*, must wedge itself between ourselves and the complete spirituality of Hashem. We achieve the level of *taharah* when we spurn every bit of material encounter other than what is absolutely commanded by G-d.

Kedushah, however, is quite different. On this level, our very beings become sanctuaries and altars to G-d. Permissible sensory pleasures are experienced in the way that flesh is consumed upon the altar, where the consumption itself elevates the materials of this world to a higher place.

Realistically, *kedushah* is not within our grasp. It is not part of human capability. We enter into it only by making a beginning, by bringing ourselves to its doorstep, from where Hashem lovingly takes us inside to complete the journey. We make a *korban* of the *reishis* - we rivet our attention upon what we are going to do, and fully dedicate it to Hashem, telling ourselves that the pleasure it will bring is of no importance to us. This much we are capable of. We have to realize that this does not constitute

"going up on the altar as a satisfying aroma." We cannot fully turn ourselves into altars that change all material into pure spirituality. That is not of our own doing, but is gifted to us by Hashem Himself.

Regarding Pesach the Torah instructs us, "Do not eat any leavening. In all of your dwellings you shall eat matzah."⁵ The *seforim ha-kedoshim* tell us that there is but one experience left to us after the destruction of the Temple that is part and parcel of the experience of eating of a *korban*, of *kodesh kodashim*. We no longer have the wherewithal to partake of the *korban Pesach*, but we can eat the matzah on the equivalent level of *kedushah*. The Torah warns us not to sully this experience, not to contaminate it by mixing in any leaven, any lesser intentions.

Eating matzah on the night of Pesach is a unique experience, the last vestige of an entire lifestyle that was available to us when the Temple stood. The Torah guarantees that in all our dwellings, meaning in all places and at all times, we can eat the matzah on the same level as we used to eat the *korban Pesach*.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom pgs. 19-21

² Vayikra 2:11-12

³ Leaven and leavening agent or sourdough

⁴ Chapter 26

⁵ Shemos 12:20