

THEORY OF RELATIVITY

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

At the end of the previous Sidrah (Tzav - seems a while ago, doesn't it) Aaron and his sons were instructed to remain at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting (Ohel Moed) for seven days while Moshe performed the inauguration service for the Tabernacle (Mishkan). At the beginning of this week's Sidrah the inauguration period comes to its climax: Aaron and his sons are anointed as Kohanim - from this point onward only Kohanim are eligible to serve in the Mishkan. However, just when the joy of the inauguration ritual reached its peak, tragedy struck. Aaron's two oldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, brought an unauthorized fire before Hashem and lost their lives as a result.

"A fire went forth from before Hashem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem." (10:2)

Aaron must have been crushed. He had reached the pinnacle of his life - the day he was anointed as Kohen Gadol, High Priest - and all seemed to be going so well. Then his whole world came crashing in. Moments after the completion of the inauguration service, his two oldest sons lay dead upon the floor of the Holy of Holies.

How would we react to such a tragedy?

How did Aaron react? "Va-yidom Aaron, And Aaron was still. (10:3)" He said nothing. He did not even open his mouth. Surely there was much to say: Why? How could this be? Where is the justice?... Va-yidom Aaron, Aaron was still.

Many mefarshim (commentators) see this as proof of Aaron's unshakable faith in Hashem (G-d). By saying nothing, Aaron said everything: If this is what is meant to be - then so be it. Hashem controls the world, not me. How can I expect to understand my Creator - nothing I can say can add or detract from what has happened, so I will remain still.

Perhaps, also, Aaron's reaction can serve as an example of how to react when confronted with a situation one doesn't know how to handle. Sometimes something unexpected or unwanted happens: we are besieged by a sudden rage or confusion - we are temporarily disoriented. In the spur of such a moment, we open our mouths and say things we may later regret. Sure, we will later excuse ourselves - after all, what we said was in the heat of the moment. But what was said was said; it can't be taken back. Maybe Aaron was bewildered. He was confused and terrified. He didn't know how to react. So he didn't.

When bad things happen, or even just inconveniences, it is important that we have a mechanism in

place to control our reactions. Temper-tantrums and nervous fits are things we should all put behind ourselves.

My son's rebbe (he is in Kitah Alef, 1st Grade) has a wonderful method of putting things in perspective. Say, for instance, that a child had wanted a certain chair. He didn't get it, and now he is throwing a temper-tantrum. On his blackboard, the rebbe has a scale with numbers from one to ten. He stops the child for a moment and asks him: "Let's say this scale represents bad things - number one is a very little bad thing, like if your mother forgot to send you a snack. Number ten is a very big bad thing, like if chas ve-shalom (G-d forbid) your house burned down and all your clothing and books and toys and everything was destroyed. (There are, of course, much worse things even than this, but we are talking about grade-one.) Now where, on this scale, do you think not getting the chair you wanted belongs? Is it an eight? (No, he concedes.) Is it a six? (No, it's probably not a six.)" And so on - you get the point.

What has the rebbe done? He has taken a situation which the child, overcome by his emotions, thought was terrible and horrible, and put it into perspective. Relatively speaking, it's really not so bad. Maybe, he realizes, it's not worth throwing a fit about.

I have tried this with my children at home. It's amazing how making them do this - to "grade" what they are upset about - can calm them and force them to reflect on how badly they are overreacting.

Now grown adults don't often fly into a rage over the colour of their chair, yet if we examine our lives we're sure to find situations where we could greatly benefit by putting things into perspective. Someone cuts you off while you're driving. The old lady is taking ages to count her pennies at the front of the bakery line on a Friday afternoon. Your wife/husband/friend etc. kept you waiting for fifteen minutes, or a half an hour. The cleaners lost your daughter's favourite dress. The caterer forgot to deliver the kishke for the kiddush you're making this Shabbos. Someone - everyone forgot your birthday. The list goes on and on. All of these things can and do get us upset. Yet if we take a moment to consider, on a global scale, where "one" is a very minor disturbance and "ten" is the absolute worst thing one could ever imagine, then where - honestly - do these things belong?

A friend of mine who owns a business told me that he once lost a long-time friend because the item which his friend had given in wasn't ready on time and couldn't be used for the simcha he was planning to make. Can you imagine? Aren't there worse things that can happen?

A woman was once going on-and-on about how difficult Pesach cleaning was. Then, suddenly, a family member fell very ill. Now, as she tried to juggle Pesach cleaning with going back-and-forth from the hospital, and with her emotions, just "plain" Pesach cleaning didn't really seem so hard at all.

Recently, someone got really upset with me for something I had done. It was not something that was terribly important. Before berating me, they said, "I know that this really isn't worth getting so upset about, but..." With these few words, they put things into perspective. I saw right away that they

were able to cope with their anger, and not blow things out of proportion.

When we find ourselves losing control, we would be well-advised to remember the example of Aaron, and remain silent. By taking a moment to stop and reflect, and think about how much worse things could be, we can control our emotions and not say something we may regret later. Put things into perspective - and don't waste valuable energy and emotions on petty anger and nervousness. It doesn't take an Einstein to figure it out - it's all relative.

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