

A PARSHA THAT SPEAKS TO "PRIESTS"

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

In last week's parsha we saw the mitzvah of "Honor your father and your mother." So important is this mitzvah that it appeared on the side of the Tablets that dealt with mitzvos between man-and-G-d (the first four mitzvos concern the relationship between man-and-G-d, whereas the last five of the Ten Commandments, beginning with murder, are of the relationship between man-and-man).

The mitzvah to honor one's mother and father is the fifth mitzvah of the first five commandments, though it seems to be a mitzvah between man-and-his-fellow. This prompted the rabbis to teach that it is really a mitzvah between man-and-G-d, since it teaches respect and appreciation for a higher authority. It is the child-parent relationship that is supposed to prepare the child for a relationship with G-d once he becomes an adult and capable of an abstract relationship.

Hence, if one doesn't grow up with the proper respect for his parents, he will have difficulty developing the proper respect for G-d later as well. He will tend to look at himself as his own "boss," and have difficulty accepting a Higher Authority. Perhaps this is at the root of why so many young adults today do not revere G-d as they ought to, and why for many a ba'al tshuva (one who lived a secular life and then returned to Judaism), one of the last stereotypes to break is the idea of being subservient to a Higher Influence.

Honoring one's father or mother is not a mitzvah incumbent only on young children either. It is one that is active for the duration of the parent's life. What can one's child think about his own parent when he watches the latter treat his own father or mother with a lack of respect? So often, a child's feelings of respect for his parent later in life is based upon the respect shown to his parent's parent in earlier years.

If so, then it comes as a surprise to read in this week's parsha the following:

The Kohen Gadol (High Priest) of his fellow kohanim, upon whose head the oil of anointment was poured and who was consecrated to wear the [holy] clothing, [the hair] of his head should not be in disorder, nor shall he tear his garments. Neither shall he go in to any dead body, nor defile himself for his father or his mother; nor shall he leave the Temple or profane the Temple of G-d ... (VaYikrah 21:10)

... This means that he must not follow the bier (i.e., attend the funeral of his father or mother).
(Sanhedrin 18a)

Now it is true that, technically, the mitzvah of honoring one's father and mother ends with the parent's death, and it is a mitzvah of honoring the dead that replaces it. Still, the line between the two is somewhat gray, and, at the very least, there is the appearance of a lack of respect for one's parent should a child's final respects not be paid properly.

When two mitzvos "collide" like this (being the Kohen Gadol and properly honoring one's deceased parent), it is an indication that a more sophisticated understanding of each mitzvah is necessary.

It is explained that the essence of the mitzvah of honoring one's father and mother is the concept of "hakores hatov" (appreciating the good). Parents give life to a child, and whether or not they properly sustain that life, still, the gift of life is still the gift of life. In appreciation of that gift, a child is supposed to maximize the opportunity of life, which is the greatest honor the child can accord the parent. This too is going to become the basis of one's relationship to G-d once the child matures into an adult.

One of the most important roles the Kohen Gadol played was to be a constant reminder of the source of good in life, and to enhance the appreciation of the entire Jewish nation of the gift of life, and the gift of Torah and mitzvos. He did this in many ways, but primarily, it was his singular devotion to G-d and spiritual perfection to the "nth degree" that best transmitted this message to the Jewish people in the Temple and beyond.

Hence, though normally one's respect for his parent achieves the same goal, in the case of the Kohen Gadol, to leave his place of holiness and to break with his service of G-d would have accomplished just the opposite, since as the Kohen Gadol, he already symbolized the goal of showing such respect.

We find a similar idea with respect to the laws of Shabbos and the building of the Mishkan.

We learn which creative activities are forbidden to perform on Shabbos from the cessation on Shabbos of the building of the Mishkan. However, why should the Mishkan not be completed on Shabbos, when it is meant to be a dwelling place for the Divine Presence? Even after the Mishkan was completed, some of the services performed therein did in fact override Shabbos!

An answer is: Shabbos is an experience of G-d's Presence (as would the Mishkan eventually be); however, building the Mishkan was only a "process" to get to that experience. Hence, to build the Mishkan on Shabbos was to deny ourselves a ready-made experience of G-d, which we were building the Mishkan to have.

With respect to the Kohen Gadol, he already exhibited the relationship one must have with G-d that honoring one's father or mother was meant to create. Therefore, in his case, to become spiritually defiled and to leave his role as Kohen Gadol even for the sake of honoring a deceased parent, was to undermine that very process.

This is, as the Talmud states, why the mitzvah to honor one's parents concludes with the mitzvah to keep Shabbos (Yevamos 6a). For, one must honor his parents up until the point that it means breaking Shabbos (or any other mitzvah for that matter), up until the point that the process becomes the replacement for the goal itself.

Shabbos Day:

After a brief discussion about blemishes that make a kohen unfit for service in the Temple, and a similar discussion about what makes an animal unfit to be offered up on the altar, the Torah turns toward a discussion of the holidays that make up the Jewish yearly cycle. And although Shabbos is included in the list, halachically, we know there is a major difference between Shabbos and the rest of the Yom Tovim (with the exception of Yom Kippur):

There is no difference between Yom and Shabbos except for "ochel nefesh" (literally, "food of the soul"). (Megillah 7b)

As Rashi points out, this statement is not absolutely true. However, it does point out the fundamental difference between Yom and Shabbos, and that is, with respect to Shabbos, if you don't prepare your cooked food in advance of Shabbos, then you cannot do so on Shabbos itself. However, if you didn't do so in advance of Yom Tov (for the right reasons), then, for the sake of enjoyment on Yom Tov, you can even cook!

This not a carte blanche to treat Yom Tov like a regular weekday. The Talmud already warned:

Anyone who disgraces the holidays is like one who worships idols. (Pesachim 118a)

In fact, one is even told to borrow money in order to properly celebrate the holiday, and to put the "tab" on G-d's account (Beitzah 15b; see the Mishnah Brurah, 242:1:4)!

If so, then why the difference between Shabbos and Yom Tov?

It is not a new idea to say that G-d created the world and man with a purpose in mind. It is not even a novel idea to say that man was put here to bring creation to perfection, in partnership with G-d, and in doing so, earn eternal reward (Derech Hashem, 1:2:1). However, what might be new for many people is just how we're supposed to go about doing that, specifically.

In general, we perfect creation by learning Torah and performing mitzvos. We know that this is what G-d wants, and that this way of life is what creates the appropriate spiritual environment within which G-d can dwell. Very few people will argue that G-d is most comfortable and that His Presence can best be felt on the stock exchange floor on Wall Street. Yet, even the marginally spiritually sensitive person speaks of a "holy" experience upon visiting the Kosel (Western Wall).

This is because, as we learned in last week's parsha, G-d is holy and likes to be around holy people, and in holy places. To the believer and non-believer alike, if there is such a thing as a holy way of life, the Torah-lifestyle accomplishes it better than does any campus program at any leading college. Therefore, since G-d created this world to dwell in it (after being "invited" down by man), learning Torah and doing mitzvos become the prime way to best fulfill the mandate of creation.

However, more specifically, there is something called "Holy Sparks." It is these very Holy Sparks that supply the true "energy" for creation, having come directly from G-d Himself, and being entirely spiritual. To live at all, and then to be able to move about and accomplish anything, be it good or evil, one must draw on these sparks and use them.

There is not an infinite amount of these sparks; G-d predetermined just how many sparks it would take to bring creation to fruition over the course of six thousand years of history, the passing of which is measured by the pace at which these sparks are "consumed."

When a person learns Torah or performs a mitzvah, then these spark(s) provide the requisite energy and opportunity to do so, after which they return to their Holy Source forever, making creation that much more complete.

If, G-d forbid, a person transgresses, then Holy Sparks are used for the sin as well. However, after the transgression has ended, the sparks can't simply return to their Holy Source. They must first undergo a spiritual cleansing, which can come in the form of punishment for the transgressor, or through sincere repentance (if it comes in time!).

This is a very deep and fundamental discussion in need of elaboration, but the main point here is that we are expected, for the duration of our lives, to use creation by extracting these Holy Sparks and expending them in holy ways. In doing so, we fulfill ourselves and ultimately, the purpose of creation.

The fact that our manipulation of creation is extremely limited on Shabbos means that our role in perfecting creation on that holy day is also limited. This is because Shabbos is of another dimension, being 1/60th of the World-to-Come. This is the day that we cease our physical partnership with G-d to focus on effecting creation only through spiritual means.

However, when it comes to Yom Tov, since we can still use the physical world somewhat, albeit for a non-mundane purpose, we see that Yom Tov is still a day to extract and elevate Holy Sparks, from an even more elevated position in life. The added holiness of the day itself better equips us to more efficiently use the potential of creation.

This may all be very abstract. However, it does provide for a better appreciation of just how holy creation is, our role within it, and how the Yom Tovim play an important role in bring creation to fulfillment.

Seudos Shlishi:

It is interesting that of the Shalosh Regalim (literally, the "Three Legs" referring to Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot), both Pesach and Sukkot are seven days long, whereas Shavuot is but one day. What makes this even more difficult to understand is that Shavuot is "Zman Toraseinu," the holiday that celebrates the reception of Torah.

True, the Jewish people only completed the process of gaining freedom from Egyptian slavery upon the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, seven days after their departure from Egypt (the first day of Pesach). It is only natural that the first and seventh days of the exodus be connected with intermediate days of Chol HaMoed.

However, Sukkot is seven days long, and the seventh day is not a Yom Tov (though Hoshanah Rabbah has some Yom Tov qualities, it is not a full Yom). Certainly the Torah could have found good reason to extend the experience of one of the most important days of the entire history of mankind, as it did in the case of Sukkot!

The truth is, according to the Vilna Gaon, the Torah found an even better reason to keep Shavuot only one day long, for, as the Gaon says, Shavuot "is in the middle [between Pesach and Sukkot] and is one day within which all is unified."

Implied from this is that, if one properly observes the holiday of Shavuot, he can, in effect, also experience all the other holidays. This is also alluded to in the Torah itself which describes the Temple service for that day:

From the land upon which you live, you shall bring two loaves of bread as a wave offering ... The priest shall make the motions prescribed for a Wave-Offering before G-d ... (VaYikrah 23:17, 20)

The bread is an allusion to Pesach, and the progression from matzah to bread, and via the Omer, from barley to wheat. Waving this offering, in a manner that is similar to the waving of the lulav and esrog during Sukkot, the Talmud teaches, is to remind us that G-d controls the entire world and all of its directions.

It is the Torah itself that binds these two concepts together and makes them one. It is Zman Toraseinu that allows us to, upon being spiritually immersed in the day, experience both simultaneously, to become the "Nation of Priests" we stood at Har Sinai to become.

Melave Malkah:

It is in this week's parsha that we actually find the commandment to count the Omer.

As mentioned last week, the numerical value of the word "omer" as found during the account of the munn (the bread that fell from Heaven; Shemos 16:32) is 310 (ayin, mem, raish = 70+40+200). If you write the number 310 in its corresponding letters, you arrive at the Hebrew word "yaish" (yud, shin = 10+300).

This might not, at first, seem significant, except that the Talmud quotes and explains:

In the future, the Holy One, Blessed is He, will give to each righteous individual 310 worlds, as it says, "...That I may cause those who love Me to inherit substance (yaish)..." (Mishlei 8:21), which numerically is equal to 310. (Sanhedrin 100a)

The Hebrew word for "substance" is "yaish," which also means "have." "Substance" and "having" may be equated because the latter implies "within one's possession," and what an individual truly possesses at any given moment in time, physically and especially spiritually, is the true and precise measure of a person's substance.

This is why one of the most unique properties of the omer of munn that fell from Heaven was that it didn't fall the same way for everyone. For the righteous, it fell by their door, already prepared and tasting like the food of their desire. For those less worthy, it fell out in the field, and required collection and preparation (Yoma 76a). In this way, the munn was a spiritual "litmus test" of sorts, revealing on the outside the true nature of the person on the inside, just as the period of the Omer is meant to do (this is Rebi Akiva's students died specifically during this period, and why Rebi Shimon bar Yochai revealed the Zohar as well).

Another property of the munn, perhaps even more out-of-the ordinary, was that no matter how much was collected, each person always ended up with precisely one omer. Regardless of how much food one normally consumed, if an individual gathered less than this amount, he would discover upon his arrival home that the munn somehow measured one full omer; those who collected more would find that the surfeit amount had rotted. When it comes to G-d, He gives each person his portion, when he needs, as he needs it.

This is what the rabbis implied when they asked:

Who is a wealthy person? One who is happy with his portion ... (Pirke Avos, 4:1)

Notice that it doesn't say "with the portion he just happens to have at that moment in time." The rabbis wrote "his portion," to indicate that the wealthy person is the one who recognizes that everything comes from G-d, and that G-d is completely fair and out for our own good, giving us our own personal portion each moment in life. Therefore, the corollary is: if we don't have "it" at this moment, then at this moment it is not part of our portion (saying, "I will be happy with my portion ...

As soon as G-d gives me my portion, I'll be happy with it!" is not quite the fulfillment of the above statement).

This message was inherent in the munn another way:

The students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked him: Why did the munn not fall once a year [as opposed to once a day]? He replied, I shall give you a parable: It can be compared to a mortal king who had a son for whom he provided food once a year; [as a result] he saw his son once a year. Thereupon he provided for his maintenance daily, so that he called on him every day. The same [is the case] with Israel. One who had four or five children would worry and say, "Perhaps no munn will come down tomorrow, and all will die of hunger." Thus they turned their faces to heaven [in prayer]. (Yoma 76a)

In conclusion, the concept of the omer alludes to the idea of wanting nothing more than what we have, and trying to be nothing more than what we are and are meant to be. The Sefiros themselves are emanations of G-d's light that become manifest during this period, indicating the ease at which the clarity to achieve all of the above can be at this time. Counting these Sefiros daily is a way to integrate all of these lessons, while shaping ourselves into the appropriate "vessel" to receive the light of the "fiftieth day" ... the light of Torah ... the light that elevates us to the level of "Mamleches Kohanim," a "Nation of Priests."

Then there are the Kabbalistic explanations as well ...

Shabbat Shalom.

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