REMAINDING SONS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d spoke to Moshe [immediately] after the death of Aharon's two sons, who brought an [unauthorized] offering before G-d and died. (Vayikra 16:1)

Even though almost three parshios have transpired since Nadav and Avihu were killed for offering their Incense-Offering, the Torah returns back to that episode as an introduction to the laws of Yom Kippur. We have discussed the connection between the deaths of Aharon's sons and the laws of Yom Kippur in the past. However, this year we can ask a different question, by being precise in the wording of the verse itself.

The deaths of Nadav and Avihu are referred to a few times throughout the Torah, but usually their names are mentioned. Here, however, their names are not recalled--why? Furthermore, why must the posuk mention that "two" of Aharon's sons died, as opposed to just "Aharon's sons"? Is our memory so short that we would remember otherwise?

The answer to these questions can be found in the following:

"Remaining ones ... From death. We learn that [G-d] was angry even at them [Elazar and Itamar--Aharon's other two sons], as it says, 'And with Aharon G-d was angry enough to destroy him,' (Devarim 9:20); the expression 'destroy' usually means complete destruction of one's offspring, as it says, 'And I destroyed its fruit above ...' (Amos 2:9). Moshe's prayer, however, nullified half of the decree, as it says, 'I prayed on behalf of Aharon at that time ...' (Devarim 9:20)." (Rashi, Devarim 10:12)

In other words, says Rashi, the verse from Parashas Shemini is emphasizing that Aharon's two "remaining" sons were just that: remainders of the decree. Had Moshe not interceded on behalf of Aharon and his family, all four sons would have died because their father's involvement in the golden calf. Moshe's plea for mercy mitigated the Divine response, and only Nadav and Avihu died, because they were the ones who brought the unauthorized Incense-Offering.

Based upon this Rashi, we can conclude that the posuk in this week's parshah is not coming to tell us about the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, and why they died. Instead, the posuk is coming to tell us that only two out of the four sons--all of which had been condemned to die--had in fact suffered the fate of their judgment. In other words, the posuk is phrased as it is, not to focus on the judgment-

aspect of what occurred, but on the mercy-aspect of what occurred.

If so, then this verse is a wonderful introduction to the laws of Yom Kippur. After all, though we enter the Ten Days of Repentance with awe and trepidation (... Who will die and who will live ... who by fire and who by water ...), the truth is, if any day of the year represented the extent of G-d's mercy, it is Yom Kippur. As one rabbi has said, "If I were G-d, and I had to judge myself for the mistakes I personally have made throughout my lifetime, I wouldn't be here today." Fortunately, G-d is more merciful than man.

In fact, at the end of the Yom Kippur service (at the end of the Ne'ilah Shemonah Esrai), we mention how G-d does not desire the destruction of the evil, but that they repent and live meaningful lives--and He gives them a long time to come to that decision. How much more so does G-d have patience with us, who are not evil, waiting for us to return to Him. Suffering is only the Divine response when all other forms of "communication" have failed and been exhausted.

However, to start the process of return, we must initiate and make a move back in the direction of G-d. This means more Torah-learning, improvement in mitzvah-performance, better manners and more concern for others, and above all, tefillah. For, as we learn from Moshe, Aharon, and his two "remaining sons," prayer is a powerful way to avert the "evil decree."

Shabbos Day:

G-d told Moshe, "Tell the Children of Israel, 'I am Hashem, your G-d. Do not follow the ways of Egypt where you once lived, nor of Canaan to where I am bringing you. Do not follow their customs. (Vayikra 18:1-3)

According to many, this verse is the source of the specific mitzvah not to behave like the non-Jewish nations (Avodah Zarah 11a; Rashi; Rambam: Avodas Cochavim 11:1); according to the Sefer HaMitzvos (Negative Mitzvah 30), the source for this mitzvah is in the next parshah, Kedoshim (20:23). However, according to everyone, there is a mitzvah incumbent upon every Jew to not take on the customs of the non-Jews.

This does not mean, the Talmud makes perfectly clear, that a Jew is allowed to disobey the laws of a foreign country, especially when living within that country. If the non-Jewish country is law-abiding and fulfills certain halachic requirements, then another principle--dinei d'malchusa dinei--applies (literally, the law of the government is in fact law, if it is civil law and does not contradict the Torah).

What makes the first law so difficult to obey is that there is a very large "gray" area between keeping the non-Jewish customs out of Jewish society, and obeying their laws of civility; it is a gray area that has trapped many a Jewish family. Rashi sheds light by saying that what is meant by the verse is to

avoid the social customs of the non-Jews, such as visiting theaters and race-tracks. The Rambam is even more specific:

"One must not go in the statutes of the non-Jews, not in clothing, not in hair-style, nor in similar things ... it is all one matter and a warning not to be similar to them. Rather, a Jew should be separate from them, and be recognizable by his clothing, his actions, and by his ideas, as it says, 'I will separate you from the nations ...' (Vayikra 20:26) ..." (Yad Chazakah, Hilchos Avodas Cochavim 11:1)

The Rambam is even more specific in the rest of the halachah, but the basic message has already come through loud and clear: Jews are different, and must maintain this difference. It is not merely a "Jewish thing" to do--it is a Torah mitzvah, and a negative one at that.

This does not mean that this difference should create a false sense of pride, and allow the Jew to lord himself over non-Jews. This does not give a Jew license to be disrespectful to those not of his faith. This difference advocated by the Torah is, by no means, a cause of chauvinism. What it does mean is that, whereas the non-Jew does not have a mitzvah to focus on living a holy existence, a Jew does, as we are told directly at the beginning of Parashas Kedoshim:

G-d told Moshe, "Speak to the entire congregation of the Children of Israel and tell them, 'Be holy, for I, your G-d, am holy.' " (Vayikra 19:1-2)

As history has proven, this is not an easy mitzvah to keep. It is very hard, living amongst other peoples for long periods of time, working side-by-side with them, interacting with them, to not want to "fit" in ... to not want to bury the difference. In fact, I remember reading in a college campus Jewish weekly one Jewish girl's response to anti-Semitism: drop everything Jewish, including the word Jew itself. She seemed to think it was an original idea.

However, as many a ba'al teshuvah has found out, when the emphasis is only on being "different," a Jew often rebels and fights to fit in. He feels estranged from the world around him, and yearns to be the same as everyone else. However, when one increases his learning of Torah, and thereby his appreciation of Torah and mitzvos, and from there, he learns what holiness is about and pursues a holy lifestyle, then the changes seem to come quite "naturally."

This is because certain clothing, and certain appearances support a holy existence more than others. Fashion becomes less important, and flashiness tends to become part of the past. Where there is holiness, there is modesty, and this too changes the attitude of the pursuer of a holy lifestyle. It is not a forced change, but a desired one--"clothing" that envelopes a desire to become close to G-d. And it is THIS, ultimately, that the verse comes to encourage.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Parashas Kedoshim: Holy, Old, and Wise *Rise up before one with a white beard; honor the old, and*

fear your G-d; I am G-d. (Vayikra 19:32)

Simply put, this is a mitzvah to show sincere respect to the elderly. However, there is respect, and then there is respect. The first kind is an external form of respect, where, inside we don't consider the elderly useful or that important. However, our love for them, and just a little sensitivity tells us to give them the impression that they are important to us and useful in our eyes.

The second form of respect is an internal one, one that grows from knowing that the elderly ARE important to society--perhaps the most important of all. But, many may wonder today, how can that be when their bodies no longer function well and they can't physically "contribute" to society? The answer to this age-old question about the age-old is obvious: wisdom.

I remember once being in a city, and on one particular Shabbos walking many miles to shul from where I was staying. Along the way, I had to pass a home for the elderly. It happened to be a cool but pleasant day, and as I passed the home and peered past the protective fence, I saw an elderly man sitting on a bench, with a blanket over his legs. As I walked by, I noticed that he was not only completely alone, but lonely as well, which I felt from fifty feet away. It was that pervasive.

I felt drawn to the man in sadness, though I did not go in. However, as I walked on I thought to myself, "How different is this society from the one that I am walking towards. I am walking to a shul in which a rabbi, who must at least be in his seventies, is going to deliver a shiur to anxious listeners, many of whom are younger by him by several decades. Young and old alike will make this man the center of their attention. As many others like him, he will probably never be alone, and never need to suffer from loneliness. Why? Because he belongs to a society of which wisdom, not technical ability or financial prowess, is the highest value."

Therefore, this mitzvah to honor the elderly is also a mitzvah to cherish wisdom above and beyond all other values. We have other mitzvos, including "love your neighbor as yourself" (also in this week's parshah; 19:18) that instruct us to value all people, and to treat them as special and important, as we ourselves would like to be treated by others. However, such mitzvos do not directly focus us on the centrality of wisdom to a moral society, as does the mitzvah to honor the elderly--people who symbolize learning and "earned" wisdom.

The following quote from Rabbi Chaim Vital substantiates this idea:

"We have a tradition that the resurrection of the dead will take place in Eretz Yisroel forty years earlier than it will outside of Israel. However, anyone who died [and was buried] outside of Israel but who has a relative in Israel, who, halachically, would be obligated to mourn for him, that relative will have the ability to revive the one outside of Israel [at the same time as those in Eretz Yisroel]. This mystery is alluded to in Tractate Pesachim (of the Talmud Bavli) in the chapter, 'Tamid Nishchat,' where it says, 'In the future the righteous will revive the dead ...' (Pesachim 68a). This is also what is written, 'So says G-d, "There still dwells elderly men and women in the streets of Jerusalem, each with his staff in his hand..."' (Zechariah 8:4), and it is written, '... Place my staff on the lad's face.' (II

Melachim 4:29; i.e., we see from this verse that 'staff' alludes to the ability to revive the dead). Why does resurrection of the dead depend upon the elderly and the righteous? Because, all those who live in Eretz Yisroel are called 'righteous,' as it says, 'All your people are righteous; they shall inherit the land forever ...' (Yeshayahu 60:21). But, at the time of the redemption of the resurrection, they will also need to be B'nei Torah (those who learn and live by Torah), who are called 'zekeinim' (i.e., 'elderly'), as it says, 'Honor the old' (Hebrew: zakein--zayin-kuf-nun). And, as the rabbis teach, ['zakein' stands for] 'zeh sh'kanah chochmah'--this one who acquired wisdom." (Yalkut Reuveini, Kedoshim 64)

And lest we forget, we too, with G-d's help and as a fact of nature, will become elderly one day. But, it is now, during our youth, that we ought to spend much time acquiring our wisdom (read: Torah).

Melave Malkah:

You must not emulate the customs of the nations which I will throw out before you. They did all these things, and therefore I was disgusted with them. I have told you that you will possess their land; I will give it to you as a possession. [It is] a land flowing with milk and honey. I am G-d, your G-d, who has separated you from the [other] peoples. (Vayikra 20:23-24)

The truth is, this d'var Torah could have been given over on the previous parshah as well, because it says in Acharei Mos:

"Do not defile yourself with any of these things, because these things defiled the nations which I am sending out before you. The land is defiled, and therefore I visited her sin upon her and the land spit out its inhabitants. Be careful with My statutes and My judgments and do not do any of these revolting things, neither the native nor the stranger that lives among you. All of these abominations the men of the land before you did, and the land is defiled; that the land not spit you out also from your defiling it, as it spit the nations out before you ..." (Vayikra 18:24)

However, it is in this week's parshah, on the following verse:

"I have separated you from the peoples that you should be Mine ..." (Vayikra 20:26)

--that Rashi comments:

"If you hold yourselves apart from them, then you will be Mine, but if not, you will become subject to Nebuchadnetzar and others like him ..." (Rashi)

What is the vort? It goes something like this:

After discussing the merit of living in Eretz Yisroel even (read: especially) in our generations on many an occasion, I have often later received the following response:

"Oh no, I wouldn't want to live in Eretz Yisroel, at least not now ..."

ME: Is it that you are worried about earning a living? Let me explain ...

THEM: No, it's not that, though it is a concern ...

ME: Oh, you mean you're worried about the security problem there, terrorism and ...

THEM: Well, that is definitely something to be nervous about. But, I have enough trust in G-d to know that when my number is up, it doesn't make a difference where I will be or what I'll be doing.

ME: I don't get it. If you're not worried about making a living there, or about Middle-East dangers, then what is holding you back from moving to Eretz Yisroel?

THEM: Living in Israel is spiritually "dangerous."

ME: Spiritually dangerous? What does that mean?

THEM: Well, if you do a sin there, it counts for a lot more against you. It is better to live outside of Israel where sins count for less ... at least until Moshiach comes and our yetzer haros are reduced.

ME: (Incredulously) You're kidding, aren't you?

THEM: No, I'm a hundred percent serious.

After recovering from this conversation, I gave it some more thought, and you know what, maybe it is not so far from the truth. In fact, the above possukim (not to mention all the many, many midrashim--in the Talmud and Zohar alike) illustrate the spiritual superiority of Eretz Yisroel over all other lands in the world. If so, then one can assume that the moral expectations of Heaven of one living in Eretz Yisroel are greater than of those not living in the "King's Palace."

Typically, the answer to this question is a definitive yes, and no. Living within the borders of Eretz Yisroel does carry added responsibilities for the Jew--as does wearing tefillin, or any other mitzvah. And what if a Jewish male says, "I don't know if I can stop my mind from wandering today while I'm wearing tefillin, and who knows where it will end up!" Do we answer such a person,

"Really? Then don't wear your tefillin today!"

No, that is not the answer we tell the person. Instead, we answer him, "Well, do the best you can to keep your mind on what you're doing, and when it wanders, bring it back to wear it belongs."

So, the person answered me,

"But tefillin is a once-a-day-mitzvah (barring Shabbos and Yom Tov), that may last an hour or even less. Living in Eretz Yisroel is a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week mitzvah! At some point in time, you can just take off your tefillin if you can't control your thoughts. However, you can't simply go to Egypt every time your mind and yetzer hara wander to places they don't belong!"

Well, that is what, according to Torah, spiritual growth is all about. One is expected to take on new mitzvos, and then work hard to live up to their spiritual demands and to grow into them. In the words of Rav Dessler, zt"l, "If you don't shoot for the stars, then how can you pull yourself out of the mud?"

However, there is an added dimension to this idea that seems to go unnoticed, even though it is a crucial factor in this entire discussion. What is it? It is that there is a special Divine Providence for those who live in Eretz Yisroel--or at least yearn to--and it is to this which the following alludes:

One who lives in Eretz Yisroel lives without transgression. (Kesuvos 111a)

What does this mean? To whom does this refer? If it refers to a righteous person, then no matter where he lives, he lives without transgression. And if it does not refer to completely righteous people, then it must refer to people who do transgress, in which case, what does the Talmud mean?

The answer to this question was already mentioned in the previous d'var Torah, though it was not brought out. It says:

"... Because, all those who live in Eretz Yisroel are called 'righteous,' as it says, 'All your people are righteous; they shall inherit the land forever ...' (Yeshayahu 60:21) ..." (Yalkut Reuveini, Kedoshim 64)

In other words (and to make a long d'var Torah shorter), living in Eretz Yisroel is a special merit. It is such a special merit that it acts as "purifying" agent for those who live there. Well, not exactly for everyone who lives there, as last week's and this week's parshah warns.

Then for whom is Eretz Yisroel a miniature Yom Kippur?

For those who choose to live there for Torah ideological reasons, and try to fulfill the Torah according to the best of their ability. For such people, who are bound to err and transgress, the merit of Eretz Yisroel atones for them--automatically--something that does not happen for those who live outside the land.

There are many Kabbalistic sources to support this idea, such as:

"240 years before the seventh millennium (i.e., the year 6000 from creation), the lower waters will rise and cover the entire world, and only Eretz Yisroel will remain, which will float on the surface of the water like Noach's Ark; they will approach Gan Aiden, the place from which the four rivers leave. The people who survive will be completely righteous, and there they will be whitened, purified, and made spiritual." (Yalkut Reuveini, Shichechus Leket, "Eretz Yisroel v'Chutz L'Aretz," 6; in the name of the Rokeach--Gali Razyah)

This is something to keep in mind at this time of year (it says that the Final Redemption will begin in Nissan and end on Shavuos), and at this critical point in history. As we have mentioned on numerous occasions, moving to Eretz Yisroel is a major decision that must be made and carried out with wisdom and sound Torah-advice. But yearning to live there is something every Jew can do anywhere, and at any time.

Have a great, holy, and contemplative Shabbos,

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