

SPEAKING REVEALS ALL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d told to Moshe, "Speak (Emor) to the kohanim, the sons of Aharon ... (Vayikra 21:1)

This week's parshah opens with laws of the priesthood, that is, service in the Mishkan and the Temple. Many of the laws are not applicable today in practice, but there are some kohanim who learn them today anyhow in preparation for the time that Moshiach will come and return the Temple service.

However, as always, the Midrash sees past the simple understanding of the words in the above verse, and finds something deeper to which the Torah alludes:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, showed Moshe how Shaul and his sons would fall by the sword (I Shmuel 31:1). Moshe said to G-d, "The first king will be pierced by a sword?" G-d answered him, "You're asking me? "Speak (Emor) to the kohanim." Moshe prayed, "But the death of Shaul will be a profanation of the Name before the nations," and Moshe begged, "Please (Hebrew: na; nun-aleph) let me cross ... (Devarim 3:25) and rectify him so that he won't sin through the killing [of the priests] in Nov (I Shmuel 22:6) [and] Achimelech [Kohen Gadol in Nov]--the first letters [of "na"] are "nun-aleph" ... (Yalkut Reuveini, Emor 2)

There is a lot of history in this midrash. However, what we must ask first is, what connection is there between this week's parshah and the gruesome death of the first king of Israel? What do the laws of being a priest have to do with a personal battle between two kings of Israel?

According to the Midrash, it is the fact that Shaul HaMelech ordered the destruction of the priestly city of Nov for complicity with the fleeing future king David, that is the connection. According to the Midrash, this terrible tragedy perpetrated against G-d's holy people, of whom this parshah speaks, was reason enough to kill the first king of Israel, even though it would result in a profanation of G-d's Name, as Moshe warned.

But why here? Why would the Midrash make such a connection here, in a parshah that seems to have little to do with Shaul HaMelech's hideous crime? Are there not other references to kohanim and the Temple service in the Torah that might also serve to allude to the destruction of Nov and Shaul's death?

The answer to this question is found in the Ohr HaChaim HaKodesh in several places (Bereishis 14:4; Shemos 19:3, etc.), and is alluded to by Rashi as well (Shemos 19:3). According to tradition, the usage of the word "emor" (as opposed to "dibur") implies a gentler form of communication, one that encourages love more than fear. Hence, this week's parshah begins with Moshe being told to "gently" tell the Kohanim about the special laws that govern their daily lifestyle.

Why? Because it is somewhat risky being a kohen. First of all, there is the service in the Temple, and its demanding lifestyle--for which mistakes can result in death from Heaven. As well, Kohanim are limited in to whom they can marry, and the Kohen Gadol, even more so. As well, they were not allowed to get involved in everyday-life like the rest of the Jewish people, since they had to protect their spiritual purity and remain in a state of readiness for the Temple service.

And, as the tragedy in Nov proved, being a priest could put one in the middle of a deadly battle between two kingly enemies, Shaul HaMelech, and Dovid HaMelech.

For, as we learn from Sefer Shmuel, Dovid fled to Nov from before Shaul to learn from the Urim v'Tumim (the miraculous breastplate of the High Priest used to communicate with G-d) as to what to do next. In a very real sense, Dovid was a political prisoner on the run, an outlaw as far as Shaul was concerned, and Dovid needed Divine counsel as to a plan of action. It was for providing this counsel, and for feeding and arming Dovid that Achimelech and the entire city of Nov was killed.

Hence, Moshe was told to approach the kohanim with tremendous love and respect, in order to tell them about the risks of being a kohen. However, as Rashi explains elsewhere, a large part of the "gentleness" was informing them of the tremendous reward they would merit for bearing that risk. For, as we learn in Pirkei Avos: According to the "effort" is the reward. To "effort" we can add, especially when discussing the kohanim, self-sacrifice on behalf of G-d. And to "reward," we can add the justice G-d will perform on behalf of those who serve Him.

Shabbos Day:

Speak to the kohanim, the sons of Aharon that they not become defiled by the dead, except in the case when it is a relative such as his mother, his father ... (Vayikra 21:1-2)

The Shem M'Shmuel wants to know: Why were the laws of spiritual defilement given specifically to the priests? His answer is not what one would expect. According to the Shem M'Shmuel (Emor, 5670), the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was the result of a lack of temimos, which, in this context, means a contentment with the present situation. It is a religious simplicity that is born out of a belief that G-d is our Father in Heaven, well aware of what is good or bad for us, and is only concerned about our well-being--regardless of any appearance to the contrary.

We, as a people, live with the belief that "all that G-d does, He does for our good," whether we see it that way or not. We can seek to understand the ways of G-d to the best of our ability, but we never can question them, as if we have the ability to understand the Divine "Mind." When this belief is integrated into the psyche of the Jew, so that his daily living embodies it, then he is said to be "tamim."

This is what G-d indicated to Avraham when He told him to perform Bris Milah:

"Walk before Me and be perfect (tamim) ..." (Bereishis 17:1)

--and what He later told the entire nation through Moshe Rabbeinu:

"You must be perfect (tamim) before G-d." (Devarim 18:13)--That is, walk before Him with a complete heart, put your hope in Him and do not investigate the future; whatever it may be that comes upon you accept wholeheartedly. (Rashi)

However, when the snake approached Chava and told her that G-d was preventing her from eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil because, "He knows that when you eat, they will be like G-d knowing good and evil," still, she should have declined. Instead of falling for the words of the snake, Chava should have answered, "So what! All that G-d does He does for the good! If and when He is ready for me to eat from this tree and know good and evil, He will tell me!"

Since Chava doubted G-d's ways, the Shem M'Shmuel adds, and tried to override Divine Providence by eating from the forbidden fruit, she was condemned to die. It is this perfect acceptance of G-d's ways that keeps death away, for, as learn from the Arizal, death is the result of the powers of spiritual defilement increasing until they are capable of causing death. This is a power that was given to them when Adam and Chava abandoned their temimos and ate from the forbidden tree.

Ya'akov Avinu, on the other hand, who was called "Ish Tam"--a pure individual trusting entirely in the ways of G-d--was therefore not subject to death (Ta'anis 5b). In fact, says the Shem M'Shmuel, the word "tam" is spelt, "tav-mem," whereas the word "mais" (dead) is spelt the opposite way, "mem-tav," as if to say that one is the opposite of the other.

What does all of this have to do with the kohanim? Answers the Shem M'Shmuel:

"The chief trait of the kohen, whose role it was to join the worlds together, the Lower One with the Upper One, and to draw blessing down from the Upper World to the Lower World, was temimos."

The kohanim were people who did not work for a living, but whom had to rely entirely on the hand of G-d for sustenance. Symbols of spiritual purity, it was their role to be portrayed as people who never questioned the will of G-d. Since this trait is that of the kohanim, the laws of spiritual impurity--which stem from death, the result of Adam's and Chava's lack of temimos and trust in G-d--were given specifically to the priests.

The Shem M'Shmuel also makes a connection to the mitzvah of counting the omer (also in this

week's parshah; 23:15). With respect to the omer, it mentions that, not only must we count forty-nine days, but we must also count seven weeks-- seven "complete"(temimos) weeks.

Applying our understanding of the concept of "temimos," we can deduce that the counting of the omer is also a way to remind us not to worry about the future and to not question the ways of G-d. Counting the omer instructs us that our future is solely in the hands of G-d, and that whatever He gives us or doesn't give us, it is for our own good. Doubting the ways of G-d and second-guessing His Torah and mitzvos is how mankind went wrong in the first place. Pursuing temimos in our trust and faith in His Providence is therefore a central way to bring about rectification and the ultimate in spiritual purity.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Each year you must celebrate it [Succos] as a festival to G-d for seven days, [and this] must be a law forever for all generations. You must celebrate it in the seventh month, [by] living in temporary structures for seven days. Everyone considered part of Israel must dwell in such temporary structures, [so] that future generations may know that I caused the children of Israel to live in temporary structures when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am Hashem, your G-d. (Vayikra 23:41-43)

Within this verse is a contradiction. The Torah is commanding the Jewish people to dwell in succos for seven days, and even gives a reason for the mitzvah: that future generations may know that I caused the children of Israel to live in temporary structures when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. The only problem is, that, this occurred in the month of Nissan, when the Jews left Egypt; the Torah commands us to live in succos for seven days in the seventh month, that is, the month of Tishrei!

There are many explanations given for this discrepancy, one of the most popular being to make the point to the world that we move to our succos for the sake of the mitzvah itself, and not because it is "cottage-season." To move to the succah in the Spring could mislead one to think that it is a seasonal thing. Living in a succah for a week in the Fall makes it clear--to others and to us--that we are there only to fulfill the mitzvah of succah.

However, the Gra (Vilna Gaon) offers a more historical reason:

"When they made the golden calf, the Clouds of Glory left them, and did not return until they began work on the Mishkan. Moshe came down on Yom Kippur, and the next day he gathered them to command them concerning the Mishkan. That had been on the eleventh day of Tishrei, and, as it says, 'They brought him more gifts each morning ...' (Shemos 36:3)--another two days until the thirteenth of Tishrei. On the fourteenth day of Tishrei, the 'wise-of-heart' took the gold that was counted and weighed, and on the fifteenth day they actually began the work, and the clouds returned. Therefore, we keep Succos on the fifteenth of Tishrei." (Kol Eliyahu, Emor, 84)

In other words, since the thatched roof of the succah is supposed to remind us of the Clouds of Glory that encompassed the Jewish camp, and protected it from the harmful elements of the desert, it makes sense that the mitzvah should be performed at the time that corresponds to when the clouds protected us. True, the clouds first accompanied us after we left Egypt, but that had been for only eighty-nine days; the next time the clouds remained with the Jewish people for forty years.

Knowing this, that the succah is connected to the second "set" of clouds, we can draw a parallel to the second set of tablets that Moshe had also descended with on Yom Kippur. If you recall, Moshe had broken the first tablets--carved out and engraved by G-d--when he had seen the golden calf. The second tablets he brought down had been carved out by Moshe, and engraved by G-d.

Perhaps, just as the tablets represented a lower level of spirituality that resulted from the incident of the golden calf, so too did the second set of clouds. And just like the broken first set of tablets were retained to inspire us to reach for higher levels of spirituality, so too can sitting in our succos, in the month of Tishrei, and looking up into the starry night sky above, act as reminder of the first set of clouds, and the high spiritual level we had enjoyed before the sin of the golden calf--and hopefully inspire us to reach for the stars.

Melave Malkah:

The son of an Jewish woman, who was the son of an Egyptian man, went out among the children of Israel. This son of the Jewish woman and a man of Israel quarreled. The Jewish woman's son blasphemed G-d's Name with a curse. They brought him to Moses. (Vayikra 24:10-11)

This somewhat unusual episode is even more unusual because of its location in the Torah, just after the mitzvos concerning the Menorah and the Showbread, and before the mitzvos of Sh'mittah in next week's parshah. Why here?

Both the Menorah and the Showbread were stationed inside the Sanctuary, opposite one another. The Showbread sat on a special table and rack in front of the north wall of the Mishkan, while the Menorah was on the south side of the Mishkan. Beyond the two of them was the Curtain and the Holy of Holies, where the miraculous Ark resided.

This was not incidental. Rather, it had to do with what each symbolized. According to Tradition, the Menorah symbolized wisdom, which, Kabbalistically, is associated with the direction of "south." The Showbread symbolized livelihood, and this is associated with the direction "north." Together, they represented the two main obstacles to complete faith in G-d, and the acceptance of His Providence in daily life, symbolized by the Ark, and the Sh'mittah year. Hence, though there may be many reasons why people feel justified in turning their backs on G-d, more than likely, the Torah is hinting,

the root of those reasons are two: distorted wisdom, or a drive for financial security, or both.

Logically-speaking, one ought to believe in G-d, just to be safe. Logically-speaking, one ought to investigate Torah--all of Torah--before giving it up as archaic, just to be sure. Illogically-speaking, people dismiss both out of hand and out of ignorance, and that is usually the tell-tale sign that a yetzer hara is at work, perhaps a sophisticated one at that. In fact, sophisticated enough to give a person confidence in a false belief, even giving the impression that agnosticism is the result of an intellectual struggle for truth.

In a heated discussion once with some skeptics, it occurred to me to ask a simple question: How many people here have learned all of Chumash, with Rashi and other commentators, the midrashim, and the Talmud as well? There was silence in the group. I kept narrowing it down until maybe two out of a good-size group said they one read the entire Torah--without commentators--many years back. The rest, it seemed, had argued in ignorance--and ceased to do so the rest of the evening.

Hence, it is a warning from the Torah that the Menorah and Showbread precede the incident of the blasphemer, and that the Sh'mittah year is taught right after it, as if to say: If you doubt or question G-d, Torah, and His Providence on any level, check it out. The problem is not with G-d and Torah, but with your own "wisdom," or drive for material comforts. Otherwise, you would pursue the truth with endless energy, and, as Shlomo HaMelech promised:

If you want it as you do silver, and search after it like buried treasures, then you will understand fear of G-d--Da'as Elokim (godly knowledge) you will find. (Mishlei 2:4)

Have a great Shabbos,

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