

POWER TO TRANSITION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and placed incense on it, and offered an unauthorized fire before God, which He had not commanded them. (Vayikra 10:1)

MOOO. Okay, that isn't the most intelligent way to start off a parshah sheet, but it does get things going in the right direction. This week is Parashas Parah, the third of four special Maftirs read before and after Purim, to focus us on the opportunities of the moment. This one is about the mitzvah of Parah Adumah—the Red Heifer—used to spiritually purify a Jew who has come in contact with a dead body and the like.

Holy cow! Is it that time of year again?!

Apparently, yes. And being so, it affords me an opportunity to talk about what I will call "Chok and Chistory," or rather, 'History.' And, as you will see towards the end, b"H, even though this week's special Maftir is from another part of the Torah, all the way from Parashas Chukas past the middle of Sefer Bamidbar, and this week's parshah is Parashas Shemini, one theme connects both sections, and this time of year.

Last night I had trouble falling asleep, something that for me, thank God, is not usually an issue. It was Motzei Shabbos, and I had had a significant nap Shabbos afternoon, so I thought that maybe I just wasn't tired yet. But I was, since it was relatively late already.

Was it the cup of coffee I had several hours earlier? Not likely, since it was already four hours later, and that much coffee that early doesn't usually affect me like that. And, part of me really wanted to sleep, seemingly unaffected by the coffee, so I just turned over and tried again to fall asleep.

Then I realized what was keeping me up. It was like an annoying sound in the background that you don't become conscious of until you focus on it, but which you hear anyhow and irritates you nonetheless. Something, indeed a number of things, had gotten under my skin, and they bothered me more than I had thought.

Just before going to bed, I was shown a picture of the baby that had been murdered with his parents and two siblings by the Arab terrorist who had broken into the community of Itamar that Shabbos. All of a sudden, what had happened became more real as my imagination played out what must have

taken place Shabbos night.

Without knowing it, I had gone to bed confused and angry. What had happened in Japan since that Friday was also overwhelming, but it had been a natural disaster. This murder was a brutally cowardly act of seemingly such innocent people, and though we are expected to accept God's judgment as to why such things can happen, that is not always so easy to do emotionally, and it kept me up for a while.

I eventually fell asleep, but had nightmares. I woke early the next morning, as usual, but I woke up sad and disturbed. It is still gnawing away at me hours later, as it should. You don't just move on from tragedies such as this one, or what is happening in Japan, or what is happening in so many places around the world where tragedy is occurring. Life must go on, but not as if everything is fine and dandy.

Like in this week's parshah, for example. Aharon HaKohen was the Kohen Gadol, the spiritual representative of the entire Jewish people, and for that matter, the entire universe. On the other hand, he just lost his two oldest sons, his primary heirs, and in a most tragic way. And yet, he was expected to move on, to continue with his duties as if everything was as it should be.

Then Moshe said unto Aharon, "This is what God said, saying, 'Through those close to Me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified'." Vayidom Aharon—And Aharon remained silent. (Vayikra 10:3)

Moshe Rabbeinu obviously said this to console his mourning brother. But, it could have had the reverse effect. "You mean there was a warning? God told you that someone was going to die sanctifying His Name, implying that, perhaps, it might have been avoidable? Does that not make my pain even worse?"

Not in the case of Aharon ben Amram. Indeed, what does it mean that Aharon remained silent? What else was he going to do? Scream out? Rebel against God? Quit his job? Not likely. Mourn the loss of his sons? For sure. But beyond that, what else was there for him to do?

The answer is a discussion in the Talmud between the great and righteous king Chizkiah, and the prophet Yeshayahu:

What did The Holy One, Blessed is He, do? He brought suffering to Chizkiah, and then told Yeshayahu, "Go and visit the sick," as it says, "In those days Chizkiah became ill to the point of death; and Yeshayahu son of Amotz, the prophet came and said to him, 'So says God, Lord of Hosts: Command your house for you shall die and not live.' " (Yeshayahu 38:1)

What is meant by "you shall die and not live"? You will die in this world, and you will not live in the World-to-Come.

"Why do I deserve such a severe punishment?" asked Chizkiah.

"Because," answered Yeshayahu, "you have not had children."

"But I saw through Ruach Hakodesh—Holy Spirit—that I would have evil children."

"What business have you with kavshei Rachmanah—God's hidden plans?" (Brochos 10a)

Since Chizkiah, with the help of prophecy, was able to see the evilness of his potential progeny, he took the safe route and avoided marriage and having children. However, as the Talmud points out elsewhere:

The world is made for procreation. (Arachin 2b)

and Chizkiah was taken to task for second-guessing the Almighty. God's response to Chizkiah: Your job is to have the children and to raise them the best you can. What they end up being, however, will be a function of Divine Providence.

Aharon HaKohen, on the other hand, unlike his two sons, did not second-guess God, not in action and not in thought. Remaining silent did not only mean keeping his feelings and doubts to himself, it meant not having them at all. He obviously mourned the loss of his two beloved sons, and but accepted it as if they had died from natural causes, and in their time.

It is not an easy level to reach. You have to feel the loss, and especially that of others. You have to perceive the injustice, and be driven to avenge it and set matters right as the Torah prescribes. But, underneath it all has to be an intellectual and emotional acceptance of what has happened, knowing that even the darkest moments of history belong to God's master plan. It is an extremely delicate balance to create and maintain.

For you will find that most people get either too emotional or remain too detached when it comes to historical moments that do not fit our paradigm of what is just and fair. There are people who, in the face of tragedy, become so emotional that they just can't stay with God, and some who stay with God because they are too stoic to the tragedy. That's not balance.

Then there are the people who allow themselves to feel the full emotional brunt of a difficult situation, but act towards God as if everything makes sense and fits nicely into the master plan for Creation. For, even though their heart screams out "Foul!" their mind whispers, "Fair." They have the wherewithal to stand there, like Aharon HaKohen before them, and present a face of calm though a whirlpool of emotion may churn inside of them.

Some time ago I received a manuscript from someone I had never met. He had been in the camps as a young child, and wrote about his memories as an old man, about how he had miraculously

survived and what he saw around him during those torturous years. Seeing that I published books, he wanted my opinion about what he had written.

There was much to read and absorb. However, one particular story has stayed with until this day as if I read it yesterday, though I had about 10 years ago.

One day in a death camp, a Nazi commandant came out to see the prisoners that had lined up for roll call. Clearly the man enjoyed himself, seeing Jews being treated so lowly, and he strutted over to an elderly rabbi who was standing in line. Addressing the rabbi, the Nazi said, obviously in German, sarcastically and with a big smile on his face:

"Well Heir Rabbi, where is your God now?!"

It was clear to all who could hear that the commandant was making fun of the Jewish people and their belief in the God of the Torah. After all, if He truly was God, how could He allow His people to be so mistreated and His Torah so disgraced? Surely even the rabbi, the commandant must have reasoned, must submit to the idea that the Aryan race was indeed the chosen one, not the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov.

But not this Jew. As the author described, without fear or intimidation, the rabbi simply and calmly pointed Heavenward, as if to say, "Where He has always been, and will always remain."

The Nazi, ysv"z, like so many others before and after him who tried the same tactic to break Jews but met with the same psychological resistance instead, was taken aback. As he processed that he had become the loser in the battle of psychological warfare he did what Nazis did best: he became extremely incensed and began to kick and beat the rabbi to death in front horrified onlookers.

Now, I never saw a picture of the rabbi nor do I know much about the camp in which he was brutally murdered. But, I imagine that the rabbi, well aware of the consequences for besting a Nazi officer, calmly, bravely, and heroically stood up for God, Torah, and His people, in the true tradition of "vayidom Aharon," at a time that most others would have capitulated.

To quote the words of Rebi Yossi ben Kisma to his student, the destined-to-be-martyred Rebi Chanina ben Teradyon, "My portion should be like your portion!" (Avodah Zarah 18a). Who knows how much reward the rabbi, and all those like him throughout Jewish history, received for sticking with God at times that it looked as if God did not stick with the Jewish people?

When history functions in a mishpat-mode, that is, in ways that the events of history make sense to us as well, then we are obligated to speak out and use them to emphasize the involvement of God in history. When it functions in a chok-mode, and the events not only do not make sense to us, but they push the envelope as far as trust and faith in God go, then we are obligated to hold our peace and wait until they transition from chok to mishpat.

The reward for doing so in the World-to-Come is beyond grasp. But even in this world, there is

compensation, as Dovid HaMelech foretold:

Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing; then the nations said, "God has done great things with these." God has done great things with us; we are rejoiced ... (Tehillim 126:2-3)

May we have the intellectual and emotional strength to transition through these final birth pangs of Moshiach's arrival, and live to have the above words apply to our generation.

Text

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