

CREATING CHESSED

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Following the sin of the Golden Calf and the construction of the Mishkan, the Torah devotes an entire book to the laws and services of the Bais Hamikdash. Although at first glance one might think that this compendium of laws and ceremonies has no contemporary application, the truth is that Vayikra presents our most fundamental orientation for integrating sanctity into our lives.

Sanctity is the recognition and fulfillment of divine intent in all things. To the extent that we understand G-d's intent in creating all things will be the extent to which we can willfully sanctify G-d's world. If we use the world as G-d intended, and the other nations support our doing so, then all of humanity would be serving G-d. Such a utopian world would be the age of Mashiach.

If not for the sin of the Golden Calf, every Jew would have been a Kohain, and every non-Jew would have been our supportive partner in sanctifying the world. Every Jew would have been obligated to maintain the highest standards of Taharah - ritual purity, and life would have been totally devoted to serving G-d and humanity. Regarding the actual Bais Hamikdash, it is obvious that it would have been impossible for every single Jew to personally serve in the Temple. Therefore, the first born in each family would have been designated to serve as priests and represent the rest of the nation in administering the ritual functions of the Bais Hamikdash.

Following the sin of the Golden Calf, G-d reassigned the priestly functioning and obligations so that only the tribe of Layvie and the family of Aharon would serve as attendants and priests in the Bais Hamikdash. No longer was the entire nation obligated to maintain the highest standards of purity. No longer would each family send their first born to represent them in the service of the Temple. No longer would the non-Jewish world immediately appreciate the macro-intent of G-d in choosing the Jews to be His kingdom of priests and holy nation. In other words, the messianic age was pushed off to some future time when the Jews would willfully embrace their obligation to sanctify the world in the service of G-d.

The sin of the Golden Calf forced G-d to secret Himself within nature. G-d would still reveal Himself within the confines of the Mishkan and through prophecy, but He would no longer speak to the entire nation. The singular experience of Mattan Torah would never again happen. At Mattan Torah the entire nation heard the voice of G-d. After the sin of the Golden Calf, G-d spoke only to Moshe. At Mattan Torah the entire nation heard the voice of G-d in a state of total consciousness. After the Golden Calf only Moshe would ever receive the word of G-d in a full state of clarity and understanding. Yet, the mission of the Chosen People remained the same. We were still responsible

to sanctify the world and society by revealing G-d's intent in all aspects of creation.

How do we reveal G-d's intent for the universe and humanity? How do we recreate the age of Mashiach and fulfill the mandate of being the world's priests? In other words, how do we sanctify our existence?

This week we begin the study of Sefer Vayikra. The book known as "Torah Kohanim - The Way of the Priests," is far more than a manual of temple service and ceremony. It is far more than a directory of unique commandments and restrictions for the Layvie and Kohain. Vayikra is a symbolic presentation of the ideal life of the Jew as intended by G-d. It is a "how to Manual" for sanctity.

Sanctity is the recognition and fulfillment of divine intent in all things. The Mitzvos in the Torah are each a clear statement of G-d's intention. Therefore, each Mitzvah is a means toward sanctification. Those whom G-d intended to be more responsible for sanctifying His world, or teaching others how to sanctify His world, were given more commandments. The non-Jew was given seven Mitzvos. The Jew was given 613 Mitzvos. The majority of those Mitzvos apply to all Jews; however, a significant number of them only apply to Kohanim. If not for the Golden Calf, all Jews would have been equally responsible for sanctifying G-d's world. After the Golden Calf the Kohain remained more responsible for sanctity than all other Jews. Therefore, we must study Sefer Vayikra - The Way of the Priests as the most complete expression of G-d's expectations for humanity.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that all Mitzvos are both practical as well as symbolic. The practical focus is accomplished by doing exactly what G-d commanded. (In contrast with other stated ideologies that Mitzvos are only symbolic and suggestive rather than exact divine instructions.) The symbolic value is in understanding the underlying intent of each Mitzvah and how it both reveals and projects G-d within nature and society.

What general lesson can we glean from the Mitzvos detailed in this week's Parsha that will enable us to fulfill our mandate as G-d's priests? Among the offerings described in this week's Parsha is the Chatas - sin offering, and Asham - guilt offering. The belief is that every action has a profound affect upon the balance of spirituality in the universe. Therefore, the Torah had to provide the means for correcting any deficiency in the spiritual balance caused by our actions. That mechanism was the process of Korbanos - offerings. In addition to the fundamental requirement for a sinner to change his attitude and behavior, the sinner had to also bring the appropriate Korban. The bringing of Korbanos demanded the ministrations of a Kohain. As the Pasuk states (4:31), "And the Kohain shall provide him atonement for the sin that he committed, and it shall be forgiven him."

As G-d's priests, the Jews are responsible to emulate G-d's actions. We believe that all of G-d's actions are acts of goodness and kindness, regardless of whether or not we understand His methods of justice. In general, we refer to G-d's actions as "acts of Chessed." When G-d created His world He did so on a foundation of Chessed, "Olam Chessed Yibaneh - the world is built upon Chessed." Therefore, if we are going to emulate G-d, all of our actions should also be acts of Chessed.

The greatest Chessed that one can do for another is to create an environment that facilitates closeness with G-d. The greatest Chessed that one can do is to help another correct the balance of spirituality in the world. The greatest Chessed that one can do is to reveal G-d's intent in the world. The greatest Chessed that one can do is to facilitate sanctity.

The example of the Kohain in this week's Parsha teaches us that all of us can do the work of revealing G-d's intent by doing acts of Chessed. Acts of Chessed do not always demand self-sacrifice. In fact, a life of Chessed is far simpler than many would think. Treating each other with respect, not talking during davening (prayers), greeting each other pleasantly, not speaking Lashon Horah (slander etc.), and spending time with a spouse or child are all acts of Chessed. Just as the Kohain's ministrations were acts of Chessed because they facilitated our complete Teshuva (repentance, return to G-d), so too our every day interaction with each other can be acts of Chessed that facilitate sensitivity and sanctity.

Good Shabbos.

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