

THE PRICE OF BEING SPECIAL

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The Jews were chosen from among the other nations to be special. The tribe of Layvie was chosen from among the other tribes to be special. The family of Aharon was chosen from among all the other families of Layvie to be special. Aharon was chosen from among all the other Kohanim to be special. What price do we pay for being special?

The price of being special is the obligations that come with the title. Whether we are called, "The Chosen People," "A Layvie," "a Kohain," or "the Kohain Gadol," it comes with specific responsibilities, expectations, and restrictions. These additional responsibilities, expectations, and restrictions are in regards to our relationship with G-d as well as the other nations. In regards to G-d it is expected that we will be more aware of His presence and act in accordance with His 613 commandments. In regards to the other nations it is expected that we will behave in a manner that reflects our closeness with G-d. Mostly, it should be obvious in the respect we have for human beings and the integrity of our interactions with them.

However, being designated as special is far more profound than our performance of the Mitzvos or the manner with which we relate to others. Being special also demands a singular way of thinking and feeling. How often do we hear, "So long as I don't do anything wrong, what difference does it make what I think?" "Why are you concerned about how I feel? So long as I don't act on those feelings why should you care?" The concept of sinning in our hearts and minds is foreign to western logical or legal philosophy. As a society we can only mandate behavior, we have no right to demand a certain way of thinking or feeling.

Basically, the same is true in Torah thought as well. The Torah never demands an emotion; it only demands behavior. For example, "And you must love G-d with all your heart, all your soul, and all your belongings." This verse that we say in the Shema three times daily does not demand emotion. The Talmud explains that loving G-d with all our soul means, even if we have to give up our lives in order not to deny Him; and loving G-d with all our belongings means recognizing that all our possessions were given to us in order to serve G-d. All three expectations are for action, not emotion. Of course, the Torah is not discouraging emotion - just the opposite! The truly integrated personality observes the commandments with passion and feeling. However, the demand is for performance, not emotion.

Logically speaking, society should not really care about emotions and feelings. In order to survive, society must demand from its government structure and fairness, and from its citizens, obedience to

the law. Society does not have the time or the right to concern itself with how the citizens feel. Their focus must be on how the population behaves.

Where else do we find an indication of the Torah's position on emotions and thoughts vs. behavior?

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch's analysis of the Ten Commandments suggests a moral code with stated expectations for our behavior, emotions, and thoughts.

"If we consider the order in which these basic principles were set forth, it would seem to us to express yet another truth that seems to be of no small significance for the fundamental concepts of G-d's law.

The first Half of the Ten Commandments begins with, "I shall be your G-d," and ends with, "Honor your father and mother". The second half begins with, "You shall not murder," and ends with, "You shall not covet." Thus the demand that we acknowledge G-d opens with a demand imposed upon the intellect: "I shall be your G-d" and "You shall not have another god." However, it is not enough to acknowledge G-d in theory; we must express our acknowledgment of G-d also in practice by exerting control over our words ("Do not take the name of G-d in vain"), our actions ("Remember the Sabbath day"), and our family lives ("Honor your father and mother").

The social legislation begins with demands upon both our actions and our words ("You shall not murder, commit adultery, kidnap, or testify as a false witness"). However, it is not enough to control our words and deeds; the Law demands that we exercise control also over our spirits and our attitudes ("You shall not covet"). (Rav S.R. Hirsch Shemos 20:14)

Judaism begins with a belief in G-d and then translates that belief into action and thought. The truly religious personality not only directs his actions in accordance with G-d's wishes, but also controls his thoughts and emotions as well. That is why the Ten Commandments start with an intellectual belief that is applied to our religious, familial, and social lives, and culminates in G-d's expectation that we will also control our thoughts and feelings.

In this week's Parsha, 7:18, the Torah presents the law of Pigul. Pigul is the disqualification of a Korban - offering due to the Kohain's wrong intentions. If during the offering of a Korban the officiating Kohain had improper intentions regarding its consumption or service, the offering was disqualified. This was regardless of whether or not the Kohain would have acted on his intentions.

Considering the importance of the Kohain as a teacher, the law of Pigul is extremely significant. The Kohain was intended to model for the general population what it was like to live an ideal religious life. "The truly religious personality not only directs his actions in accordance with G-d's wishes, but also controls his thoughts and emotions as well." Therefore, if during the offering ceremony the Kohain should have improper intentions, the offering must be disqualified!

As the teacher and role model, the Kohain must display the ideal integration of G-d into our lives. True, the most important expectation is for action and behavior, but G-d is supposed to play a

directing role in all aspects of our lives, even our thoughts and emotions.

Another significant source regarding the Torah's expectations for our thoughts and emotions is the story of Kayin and Hevel. Prior to Kayin murdering his brother, G-d confronted Kayin and questioned his negative feelings. (Ber. 4:5-7) "Why are angry? Why are you depressed? Sin lusts after you, but you can dominate it."

G-d recognized that Kayin was disappointed because his offering had not been accepted. However, G-d told Kayin, before he acted on his anger and killed Hevel, that He expected Kayin to minimally control his behavior and to maximally challenge why he was angry and depressed. There are times when anger and depression are natural, healthy, and expected; however, the incident with the offering wasn't one of them. G-d let Kayin know right from the start that he would not accept "I couldn't help myself that 's how I felt" as an excuse.

Allow me to suggest a very contemporary application to the concept of thoughts, emotions, and attitude. Often I hear women complain that there is a clear disparity between men and woman in Halacha. G-d gave the Torah to the entire nation, men and women. Why then is the mitzvah of Limud Hatorah - learning Torah only incumbent upon men?

As part of my response, I will try to explain that the mitzvah of Liumud Hatorah is far more profound and invasive that most people realize, and that they might reconsider their position if they took all of its aspects into consideration.

As a child growing up in a Torah home and studying in Yeshiva, the study of Torah was of paramount importance. As such, unless you could justify why you were not learning Torah, it was expected that you would always be studying Torah. This expectation was especially pronounced because individuals who learned Torah all the time surrounded us. Their mere presence demanded that the importance of every deed be evaluated in contrast to the study of Torah.

As you can imagine, this proved to be a significant source of self-imposed guilt. To this day the words, "Bitul Torah - wasting time from the study of Torah" are the Jiminy Cricket of my life. I wonder how many men would truly accept that kind of constant commitment and challenge if they didn't have to do so; and how many women would willingly subject themselves to the same? "Thank you Hashem for making me as You willed!"

The price of being special is far greater than most people understand. To be intimate with G-d demands restrictions and impositions on all aspects of our lives, including our emotions and our thoughts. True, the Torah can only mandate action, but there are still significant sources and examples of what it really means to integrate G-d into everyday life. Awareness of G-d must challenge every aspect of our physical, intellectual, and emotional expression.

As a society and a governing system of values, what we do is of the greatest importance. However, the real proof of our being G-d's kingdom of priests and His holy nation is when we willingly accept

His presence and direction in the privacy of our thoughts and emotions.

Parshas Parah

This week, in addition to the regular Parsha, we read the section known as Parah. The additional sections of Shekalim, Zachor, Parah, and Chodesh are read prior to Pesach for both commemorative and practical reasons. Shekalim, the first additional section, dealt with the 1/2 Shekel and the public sacrifices. The reading of the second section, Zachor, facilitated our fulfillment of the Mitzvah to remember the evil of Amalek. The two sections of Parah and Chodesh are directed toward our preparations for Pesach.

On Parshas Parah, we read the section found in the beginning of Parshas Chukas known as Parah. This section discusses the necessary steps that had to be followed to remove the impurity which caused by having had contact with a dead person. This process involved a seven day period during which the impure - Tameh person underwent a process involving the ashes of the Red Heifer. The process was facilitated by a Kohen, and had to take place in Yerushalayim.

The status of being Tameh restricted a person from entering into the Temple compound and / or participating in certain select activities. Although these restrictions are less applicable today because we do not have the Bais Hamikdash; nevertheless, it is incumbent upon all people, male and female, to keep these laws to the degree that they do apply.

In the time of the Bais Hamikdash it was required of every male adult to visit the Bais Hamikdash and offer a sacrifice a minimum of three times a year: Pesach, Shevout, and Succoth. However, it was even more important to be there on Erev Pesach to sacrifice the Korban Pesach - Pascal Lamb. Anyone who happened to be Tameh, from having had contact with a dead body, would have to undergo the process of the Parah Adumah - the Red Heifer, to remove the status of Tameh and be allowed to bring his Pascal Lamb to the Bais Hamikdash.

The Talmud tells us that the furthest point in Israel from Yerushalayim was a two weeks travel. If so, a person who was Tameh living two weeks travel away would require a minimum of three weeks to arrive in Yerushalayim with sufficient time to go through the one week process of the Red Heifer and be able to offer his Korban Pesach. Therefore, Chazal ordained the reading of Parah on the week before the reading of Chodesh as a public reminder to those who are Tameh that they must immediately arrange to get to Yerushalayim so that they can purify themselves in time to bring the Korban Pesach.

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