

MISTAKEN INSTINCT MISTAKEN CHOICE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The Talmud in tractate Avodah Zara (2b) discusses the manner of G-d's justice at the end of time. It describes a conversation He will have with the other nations of the world at that time. The conversation is based on the famous Medresh that only after G-d offered the Torah to the other nations and they turned Him down, did He offer the Torah to the Jews, who accepted. Nations: Why do we deserve to be punished? Did You give us a Torah that we did not keep? G-d: I offered it to you just like I offered it to the Jews. They accepted it and you did not.

Nations: True, but in the end we did not accept it. How can You find us guilty for not doing Your commandments? They were not commanded to us! G-d: That is why I find you guilty. You had the chance and you turned it down. The Jews accepted My Torah and will be rewarded. Nations: What about the fact that You coerced them into accepting when you threatened to destroy them if they did not accept? Had You coerced us we too would have accepted! G-d: You misunderstand Me. I am not concerned about the commandments that you did not accept. I find you guilty of not fulfilling the Seven Mitzvos Commanded to the Sons of Noach (all of humanity - not just the Jews) that you did accept!

The Talmud goes on to present scriptural proof for the non-compliance of the other nations in fulfilling the Seven Noahide Laws and states, "Because the nations were not keeping the Seven Noahide Laws G-d voided their obligation to do so."

The Talmud questions the voiding of the obligation by asking, "G-d's voiding the other nation's obligation to keep the Seven Laws because of non-compliance is a reward not a punishment! Why reward the guilty?"

G-d answered: The Seven Mitzvos were not voided. The nations must still keep the Seven Laws. The difference is that until now they were commanded by Me to keep the Seven Laws; now they will have to keep them because of social and rational humanism. Acting because of rational humanism has social benefit in this world and the reward for doing so is enjoyed in this world; however, doing them because I commanded them to do so benefits them in this world and in the world to come!

A fundamental Hashkafa (philosophical principle) in Judaism is that we want to be commanded. As the Rambam (Maimonides) explains, the only person who can claim to be doing a commandment and the only person who should receive reward for doing a commandment is the one who believes that it is a commandment commanded by the Commander. The one who does a "good-deed"

because it is socially correct and intellectually justifiable is not doing a Mitzvah; instead, he is serving himself, his own rational, his own intellect, and his own feelings - not the wishes of G-d. Remember, the great danger of rational, social, humanism is that values, ethics, and morals change with circumstances. What is good and right today may be determined bad and wrong tomorrow. On the other hand, divinely mandated values, ethics, and morals are as immutable as G-d Himself. They never adjust to society; instead, society must adjust to them.

The ultimate goal of having free will is to willingly give it up. We want to do what G-d wants us to do, not because we decide that we want to but because we have no other option but to do G-d's wishes. The goal is to attain that level of servitude and subjugation that negates any possibility of doing a Mitzvah for any other reason than because it is a commandment commanded by the Commander.

The story of Nadav and Avihu in this week's Parsha is all about their desire to attain the highest level of absolute subjugation to G-d. What went wrong? Why did they have to die?

The verse states, (10:1) "...and they brought near to G-d an offering that they had not been commanded to bring." The commentaries explain that they brought the Ketores (incense) offering into the Holy of Holies, an offering that could only be brought by the Kohain Gadol (High Priest) on Yom Kippur. The commentaries also explained that their motives were noble but tragically misguided. Their desire was to be as close to G-d as possible. They were single minded in their drive to understand more about G-d and do more to emulate Him. They were also gifted with exceptional talent and intellectual acumen. As the Talmud states, "They were equal to Aharon and Moshe." The Medresh also says that everyone assumed that they would eventually replace Moshe and Aharon as the leaders of the nation.

Unfortunately, Nadav and Avihu were not yet equal to Moshe and Aharon. Moshe and Aharon had attained a level of subjugation nearing ultimate servitude because of their humility. In fact, Moshe transcended Aharon's level of humility so that G-d confirmed him as the humblest of all to ever be. Nadav and Avihu were not there yet.

Nadav and Avihu knew better than everyone else (except Moshe and Aharon) that the ultimate goal of having free will was to willingly give it up. In fact, they believed that they had attained it. They believed that they had achieved a level of servitude beyond that of their father, and maybe even beyond Moshe. Of course they were tragically mistaken, but that is what they believed.

The law was very clear. They had been taught by Moshe and Aharon that only the Kohain Gadol could enter the Holy of Holies, and only on Yom Kippur. They knew that it was forbidden for the service in the Mishkan (Tabernacle) to be performed with any privately owned vessel. The service was for the public and had to be performed with items owned by the public. Yet, the verse says, (10:1) "And the sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, each took their own fire pans..." They (independent of each other) took their own vessel, took the special incense, and entered the Holy of Holies. How

could they do so? How could they have been so mistaken about laws that were so clear? Why didn't they at least ask Moshe if their thinking was correct? How could they think that they were doing the will of G-d when it is so clear to all of us that they were only doing what they wished to do, not what they were commanded to do?

I would like to suggest that Nadav and Avihu believed that they had ascended so high in their relationship with G-d that they were the absolute manifestation of G-d's will. They had become what the Mishnah in Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers) says, "Make G-d's will your will so that G-d will make His will as yours." (So that He will grant you what you wish.) They believed that there was no barrier of free will between themselves and G-d. They were incapable of doing anything else except for the will of G-d. They saw themselves as any other non-free-willed animal whose every response is dictated by instinct and not choice.

When they conceived of the idea of bringing an offering that had not been commanded they immediately justified it by saying, "Why else would we feel this way if it was not the will of G-d. Clearly, G-d wants us to bring this offering regardless of what He commanded everyone else!" That is why their transgression included so many illegalities from not first asking Moshe and Aharon to using their own fire pans to entering the Holy of Holies! They believed they were doing G-d's will. In fact, because each one independently thought to do the same thing it proved to them that it had to be the will of G-d!

In the end they tragically died. They were truly great and their punishment reflected their righteousness and their closeness to G-d; and yet, in this instance they were absolutely wrong. Instead of proving their own level of absolute servitude, the burden of subjugation and servitude fell to their father Aharon. He was the one who had to accept G-d's punishment, the death of his two sons, with humility and love. (10:3) "... And Aharon was silent."

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.

For Parshas Parah, we read the section found in the beginning of Chukas known as Parah. It discusses the necessary steps that had to be followed for the removal of impurity caused by contact with a dead body. The 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 Kohain, and had to take place in Yerushalayim.

Being Tameh restricted a person from entering the Temple compound and / or participating in

certain select activities. Although the 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 Tameh from contact with a dead body had to undergo the process of the Parah Adumah - the Red Heifer, to remove the Tumah and be permitted to bring his Pascal Lamb to the Bais Hamikdash.

The Talmud tells us that the furthest point in Israel to Yerushalayim was a two weeks travel. If so, a Tameh person living two weeks travel time away from Yerushalayim required a minimum of three weeks to travel to Yerushalayim and go through the one week process of the Red Heifer enabling him to bring the Korban Pesach. Therefore, Chazal ordained the reading of Parah on the week before the reading of Chodesh (approx. 3 to 4 weeks before Pesach) 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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