

DISCIPLINE AND SILENCE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The parsha of Shmini deals with two issues that are apparently not connected to one another, being totally disparate in theme and content. One is the description of the tragedy that strikes Aharon and his family when his two elder sons are killed by heavenly fire during their installation service in the Mishkan. The other is the detailed description of the laws of kashrut which laws are the basis of Jewish life throughout the ages. These two issues dominate the parsha and are the source of much of the commentary to the parsha by the great scholars of Israel over the centuries.

Upon deeper inspection, I feel that there is a connection between these two matters that are the parsha of Shmini. The suddenness and irrationality of tragedy in human life is a well known phenomenon. I have attended weddings where parents of the groom and bride have fallen dead under the chuppah. I have seen the unexpected and unwanted imposition of tragedy on families. How do people cope with such heartbreak? People of faith find a way to accept and come to terms even with the worst of circumstances. Aharon remains silent in the face of the awful scene. His silence represents the acceptance of the terrible mysteries of human existence that defy any explanation. This is the bedrock of faith - acceptance of God's will and of events in life over which we have no control.

The discipline that the laws of kashrut impose on us is also a matter of acceptance. Even if the laws of kashrut could be proven to be healthful and life-prolonging, it would still be a matter of discipline and faith to observe them. Look at the number of otherwise wise and rational people who eat in an unhealthy fashion, even though their brain knows better. One eats or refrains from eating usually only on the basis of taste of palate. But to be able to control one's eating habits on the basis of religious discipline requires acceptance of a heavenly discipline. And this heavenly discipline, like all heavenly disciplines, in no way is understandable to the ordinary or extraordinary human mind. It is the acceptance of the discipline that is the key to Jewish survival throughout the ages. The message of the parsha of Shmini is therefore the message of acceptance of God's will - not understandable to our finite minds as they may be.

Shabat Shalom.

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