

THE CHALLENGE OF THE EIGHTH DAY

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The events described in this week parsha occur on the eighth day - after the seven day dedication period of the Mishkan and the installation of the kohanim/priests that would serve in that sanctuary. And this eighth day turns into a day of challenge and eventually sad tragedy. By emphasizing that all of this occurred on the eighth day, the Torah teaches us a vital lesson in life.

The seven days of dedication are days of exhilaration and accomplishment. But such feelings and emotions cannot usually be maintained indefinitely. In life there always is the day after, the eighth day, which is one of challenge, struggle and even of pain. This day, though, can define and determine one's life and future.

I have often thought that this is perhaps one of the more subtle messages implied by the Torah when fixing the day of circumcision of a Jewish infant boy to be on the eighth day of his life. It is the day that imprints on him his Jewishness forever. It is a day of joy and commemoration for parents and the family, but also one of pain - with the drawing of blood from the infant.

It is therefore a day of solemnity and dedication and it teaches that sacrifice, consistency and determination all are part of one's lot in life. One of my revered teachers in the yeshiva put it to us starry eyed teenagers quite succinctly, if not somewhat ironically, many decades ago. He said: "Life is like chewing gum - a little flavor and the rest is simply chew, chew, chew." And so it is.

My beloved grandson, Binyamin Gewirtz, the youngest of all of my beloved grandsons, is celebrating his Bar Mitzva this Shabat. Happily, parshat Shmini was also my bar mitzvah parsha. I remember that my father of blessed memory said to me in his synagogue sermon that Shabat, that what I would make out of my life on the eighth day - after all of the bar mitzvah celebrations had receded - was the important challenge in life.

It is certainly correct that the challenge of the eighth day is the true test in life. I pray that the Lord grant my Binyamin all of the blessings of life but my main prayer is that he, like all of us, realizes that the challenges of life lie in the everyday mundane behavior which we can, if we so desire, transform with purpose and holiness.

That is the message that is transmitted here in the parsha to Aharon and his sons. Steadfastness,

belief, obedience to Torah law and Jewish values is what is asked of them. The seven days of celebration and dedication have ended and now the task of caring for the holy Mishkan is entrusted to them.

And perhaps that is what the rabbis meant when they indicated that the two sons of Aharon who were killed in the Mishkan died because they were inebriated from wine. They were still in the seven days of celebration mode which had ended and not in the eighth day mode which now descended upon them. Such errors in life can be fatal and often disastrous.

Shabat shalom.

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