

A PRIVILEGE, NOT A BURDEN

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape # 96, "Kovod Habrios": The Concept of Human Dignity. Good Shabbos!

Hard to be a Kohain? Appreciating the 'Vayomer'

Parshas Emor contains the portion of Priesthood, beginning with instructions to the Kohanim regarding their special laws. These laws include the fact that a Kohain is not allowed to have any direct contact with a dead body except for his immediate relatives. Even after a Kohain buries a close relative, Rachmana litzlan, he may not go back to the cemetery. This is a very difficult thing, but that is part of being a Kohain.

Kohanim have other restrictions, beyond that of normal Jews. They are not allowed to marry divorcees. They have to be careful in their consumption of Teruma and Kodshim. If it is "difficult to be a Jew," as the world says, it is even harder to be a Kohain.

If that is the case, the choice of words that the Torah uses to begin this portion, seems strange. The verse begins "Vayomer Hashem el Moshe" (And G-d said to Moshe) [Vayikra 21:1]. We know that most chapters in the Torah begin with the words "Vayedaber Hashem el Moshe leimor" (And G-d spoke to Moshe saying).

Our Sages tell us that the difference between "Vayomer" and "Vayedaber" is that the latter is a harsher type of speech, the former is a much softer type of speech.

To give an example, when I want my children to make their beds and clean up before they leave the house in the morning, I say, "Will you PLEASE make your bed?" That is 'Vayedaber.' When I tell them "Go take a snack," that is 'Vayomer.' They will readily take it.

If that is the case, what choice of words should the Torah have used over here? Obviously, since the Torah was giving restrictions -- in terms of who they could marry, in terms of what they could eat, in terms of what type of funerals they could go to -- we would have expected "Vayedaber Hashem!"

G-d is asking them to give up a lot. It should need a harsher type of language. Yet, the Torah

employed the much softer expression, Vayomer.

Rav Moshe Feinstein says a beautiful thought [in Darash Moshel: The role of the Kohanim was to be the spiritual mentors of the Jewish people. "They teach Thy Laws to Jacob and Thy Teachings to Israel" [Devorim 33:10]. In order for a person to be an effective leader and teacher, in order to for him to be an effective role model, he can not feel that his life is a drag. He can not feel that he has a difficult life and that his restrictions are a pain.

If the person, who is supposed to be the leader and teacher, feels that his lot is a tough lot, then he cannot be an effective Kohain. In order to give over a heritage to someone, one must feel privileged, rather than burdened. If the Kohain feels that all the things that the Torah put on him are a burden rather than a privilege, then he can't be the spiritual leader that we want him to be.

That is why the Torah uses the language "Vayomer." Even though it may seem hard, they must accept it and feel as if it is easy. Rav Moshe goes on to say, that the Rambam writes in Mishneh Torah, at the end of Hilchos Shmitah v'Yovel [13:13], a very famous passage. He says that this role of spiritual mentor is not restricted to the Tribe of Levi. Any person who accepts upon himself a life of Holy Service, any one who decides to step into a role of Torah disseminator, any one who decides to devote his life to the work of G-d, he too has the status of a Kohain or a Levi.

Rav Moshe says that this is an ethical lesson to be learned by those who enter the Holy Professions, the work of teachers, the work of Rabbis, the work of community professionals. Even though we all know the burdens that Torah teachers and Rabbis have to suffer, even though we all know that so many times they are treated without the proper respect they deserve, but if the Levi or the teacher or the Rebbe feels that it is a pain and he is constantly 'kvetching' about his situation, Rav Moshe says, he should get out. He cannot be an effective teacher.

The effective Rabbi, must feel that it is a 'Vayomer.' It is tough, but it is a privilege. Yes, we all may have our moments where we feel that it is too much, but they should only be moments. That must not be the way we always are.

If we feel that it is too difficult, we can't give it over. If one can't give it over, according to Rav Moshe then he should get out now.

That is way the Parsha of Kohanim is said with 'Vayomer.'

The Key To Understanding the Significance of the Omer

In this week's parsha we find the mitzvah of the Offering of the Omer. The Torah says that on the 16th of Nissan, on the second day of Pesach, the Jewish people were obligated to bring an Omer offering. The bringing of the Omer offering permitted all types of new wheat crops (Chadash) to be eaten.

Then the Torah gives us an added command: "And you shall count unto yourselves from the morrow after this sabbath, from the day of your bringing the omer of the waving, seven sabbaths shall it be" [Vayikra 23:15].

There are many difficulties that we find in connection with the Omer offering.

Number one: What does the word 'omer' mean? Omer was just a measure. It was the amount of grain that they had to bring. Is it not strange that the Korban should be called by the name omer? That is, in effect, like calling it the "Quart Offering" or the "Liter Offering." Other offerings are called names: Pesach, Todah (Thanksgiving), Shelamim (Peace), Shte HaLechem (Two Loaves). They have descriptive names. Omer is a measure. Why should that be the name of the Korban?

Number two: What is so crucial about this offering, that we tie our entire counting between Pesach and Shavuot to this Offering: The first day of the Omer, the second day of the Omer, etc.?

Number three: Why was the omer brought on the 16th day of Nissan? This is not one of the special days of Pesach -- it is neither here nor there. What happened on the 16th of Nissan that this Korban should be brought specifically then?

The Medrash elaborates on the great merit and significance of the Omer Offering: In its merit Avraham received the land of Canaan; in its merit the Jews were saved in the days of Gideon; in its merit they were saved in the days of Chizkiyahu; in its merit they were saved in the days of Haman; in its merit they were saved in the days of Yechezkel. The Medrash goes on and on about how this Omer offering saved the day.

What is so meaningful about this Korban HaOmer?

The Be'er Yosef says that the key to understanding the Omer is the following Medrash: "G-d said to Moshe 'In the wilderness I provided a daily Omer of manna for every Jew. As payment, let the Jews now bring for Me an Omer offering every year on the 16th of Nissan.'"

This Medrash is telling us that the purpose of the Korban Omer is to remind us of the Omer we that we all received in the wilderness. That is why it is called by the name Omer -- to remind us of the famous Omer of the manna.

As we mentioned many times, the manna that we received in the wilderness is our reminder that it is G-d who provides us with bread from Heaven. Just as in the wilderness we clearly saw, without a shadow of a doubt, that it was G-d who gives us our livelihood, so too in all generations we must remember that as much as we work and as successful as we think we may be, it is G-d that gives us bread from Heaven. That is the lesson of the manna.

That is what the Omer Offering is all about. When we are harvesting our new wheat crop and we might tend to think that "my might and the power of my hand, brought me all this wealth" we are commanded to bring a Korban HaOmer to remember the manna.

That is why the omer is brought on the 16th on Nissan. We have it by tradition that the manna stopped falling on Adar 7 (the day of Moshe's death) and they had left over in the vessels until the 16 of Nissan. On the day they ran out of manna they had to bring the Omer Offering.

That too is why we count Sefirah for 7 complete weeks and tie it to the Omer Offering. If we brought an Omer Offering only one day of the year, perhaps the crucial lesson that it teaches us would be lost. The Halacha therefore requires that we review this lesson 49 times, over and over, until it becomes second nature.

That is why the Medrash goes on and on and mentions how in the merit of the Omer the Jews were saved so many times. If we learn the lesson of livelihood -- that it is only G-d who gives us the ability to make a living -- this is indeed a lesson that can cause us to merit the acquisition of the Land and all the other salvations enumerated by the Medrash.

Glossary

Kohain (Kohanim) -- Priest(s)

Kodshim -- literally 'holies', food (generally meat or flour offerings) portions of which are offered on the altar and portions of which may be eaten by Kohanim.

kvetching -- oy vey, I have so many things to do I have no time to translate this for you...

korban -- offering (on the altar)

Personalities & Sources:

Rav Moshe Feinstein --- (1895-1966) Rosh Yeshiva and Posek (Halachic Authority); [Entire collection of published Responsa (Igros Moshe) and homiletic discourses (Drash Moshe) now available on CD-ROM.]

Ramba"m -- Rav Moshe ben Maimon (1135-1204). Author of first major code of Jewish Law, Mishneh Torah. Spain, Egypt.

Be'er Yosef -- Rav Yosef Salant, early 1900s, Jerusalem.

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