

WHY CAN'T I PLAY BALL NEAR THE CEMETERY?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Emor

Why Can't I Play Ball Near The Cemetery?

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 591, The Kohain and the Gerusha. Good Shabbos!

Rashi cites a teaching of our Sages concerning an apparent redundancy in the opening pasuk [verse] of Parshas Emor. The parsha begins "Hashem said to Moshe: SAY to the Kohanim, the sons of Aaron, and you shall SAY to them..." [Vayikra 21:1]. Rashi cites the Talmudic lesson derived from this redundancy: "To enjoin the adults with regard to minors" [Yevamos 114a]. This teaches that parents and the Beis Din may not allow children (prior to Bar Mitzvah) to transgress. Even though such minors themselves are not technically commanded to observe the Torah, adults have a responsibility to see to it that minors are not in violation of Torah precepts.

It is for this reason that we may not, for example, give non Kosher food to young children or let them desecrate the Shabbos. The whole concept of educating our children (Chinuch) from a young age to observe Torah laws is derived from this "redundancy" of "SAY to the Kohanim, the sons of Aaron, and you shall SAY to them..."

Rav Yaakov Weinberg, zt"l, suggested a reason why the Torah chose this venue of Tumas Kohanim [ritual impurity of the Priests] to introduce us to the whole topic of "seeing to it that the adults warn the children". Rav Weinberg noted that there is something specifically fundamental to Chinuch [Jewish education] regarding Kohanim and their children.

Imagine the following scenario: The kids are playing ball. The ball field is adjacent to a cemetery. What happens when kids play ball? Someone hits a home run and the ball rolls into the cemetery. What do the kids do? Someone runs into the cemetery to retrieve the ball. This may be somewhat disrespectful to the dead, but technically speaking there is no problem with that... unless one is a Kohain. But if one IS a Kohain, he cannot run into the cemetery.

The father has to tell his son, "Moishele, you cannot play ball with the other kids by the cemetery." The son asks, "What do you mean I can't play ball with the other kids? Everyone is playing ball by the cemetery. Why can't I play ball with the other kids?" The father explains, "Because you are a Kohain and a Kohain can't go into the cemetery." The child still protests, "But everyone else is doing it!" The father then has to explain to his child, "Because you are different than everybody else and what everybody else can do, you can't do. What is good for everybody else is not necessarily good for you."

This concept is something that every father has to be able to give over to his child. This is -- Rav Weinberg stated -- one of the greatest challenges of Jewish parenting. We have to explain to our children that they have to be themselves. They have to grow up to be individuals -- not what somebody else is becoming. They have to grow up -- not imitating what somebody else does or who somebody else is. Each person has to be himself. And sometimes being one's self means being different.

It is clear that the Kohain has the challenge of teaching his child that he is different from everyone else. It is appropriate then that this lesson of "Chinuch" appears in this context and from here we apply it to all Jewish parents in general.

One might suggest another reason why it is specifically in this context that the Torah introduces the principle of "Chinuch".

It is relatively "easy" to get across to children the idea that they should honor their parents, that they should act with kindness towards those in need, that they should give charity, they should not slander, etc. These are rational principles that we can sit down with children and explain to them.

But it is a task of an entirely different magnitude to -- using the same example as before -- try to explain to a young boy that he cannot go into a cemetery because there is "tumah" there. "Where is 'tumah'? What is 'tumah'? Can I feel it? Can I touch it? Can I smell it?"

The bottom line is that we need to explain to our children "This is a Divine Decree (gezeiras hakasuv)". This is a 'chok' -- something that cannot be understood rationally. This is the battle when trying to transmit Torah requirements to our children. The primary task of Jewish education is to transmit to our children the idea that they must accept certain restrictions even if they do not understand them. This idea of "Na'aseh v'nishma" (First do, understand later) is where chinuch becomes difficult. Therefore, the Torah chose this parsha of ritual impurity from dead bodies (tumas mes) to introduce the idea of "having the adults warn the minors" - i.e. Jewish education of our young. This is where the chinuch battle resides.

Receipt of the Torah is an Every Day Event

Parshas Emor contains the holidays of the Jewish calendar year. In connection with the festival of Shavuot, the Torah says: "You shall offer a new meal offering to Hashem" [Vayikra 23:16]. This "new

meal offering" is what is known as the "Shtay HaLechem" [Two Loaves]. Rashi cites the simple interpretation of the expression "new meal offering", namely that it must come from the new year's wheat crop.

The Kli Yakar gives a more homiletic interpretation of this expression. The Kli Yakar suggests that the "new meal offering" alludes to Yom Matan Torah [the day of the giving of the Torah]. The Torah should be seen as new to us, every day, as if just we had just received it from Sinai that very day. In other words, the sacrifice that symbolizes the essence of the holiday of Shavuos is a "new meal offering". Shavuos represents the day Torah was given and Torah equates with the idea that "every day it should be fresh in your eyes."

How many times have we heard Parshas Emor? How many times have we learned it? Torah is an amazing thing. People have been learning Parshas Emor for thousands of years, but there is always something new. There is always a novelty to be found in its pasukim. The Torah must be a "mincha chadasha" -- a fresh meal offering. If the Torah wanted to pick one offering to symbolize the essence of Torah, it could chose nothing more appropriate than the new meal offering.

The Kli Yakar points out that Shavuos is unique among all Torah holidays in that there is no specific calendar date associated with it. Pessach is the 15th of Nissan, Yom Kippur is the 10th of Tishrei, and so forth. Each Yom Tov has an exact date and time. Shavuos has no set day. (It is merely 50 days after the second day of Pessach. Depending on the number of days in Nissan and Iyar in a given year, the date for Shavuos can "float"). The lesson behind this is that every day is a day of receiving the Torah. There was only one day on which the Exodus occurred. But receipt of Torah is an "every day event." The symbol of this holiday is the NEW meal offering to Hashem.

Anticipating The Fulfillment of Mitzvos

The pasuk says, "You shall guard (u'shmartem) My Commandments and do them, I am Hashem" [Vayikra 22:31]. The Chasam Sofer links the verb u'shmartem with the similar expression in Parshas Vayeshev: "So his brothers were jealous of him, and his father guarded (shamar) the matter" [Bereishis 37:11].

The commentaries explain that the meaning of the expression "his father guarded the matter" is that Yaakov stood by, waiting and anticipating what would happen with Yosef's dreams. Likewise, the Chasam Sofer exhorts: "You shall guard My commandments" does not only mean that we should keep mitzvos, but we should anticipate and look forward and think about the opportunity to do mitzvos.

This, he says, is the interpretation of the famous Gemara at the end of Brochos [61b]. When the Romans took Rabbi Akiva and were scraping the skin off his body with metal combs, he had an expression of joy on his face, because he waited his whole life in anticipation for the opportunity to fulfill the commandment of martyrdom ["with all your soul"].

The Chasam Sofer says this is the same nuance implied in "You shall guard (u'shmartem) My commandments" -- anxiously anticipating the opportunity to perform mitzvos.

I heard a powerful story from Rabbi Paysach Krohn. In Amsterdam, the community consecrated a new cemetery. They purchased a piece of land and had a ceremony that everyone attended. It was a memorable event. Lo and behold, after the ceremony, a Jew died and he had the "honor" of being the first person to be buried in this particular cemetery.

The procession arrived at the cemetery with the coffin, and to everyone's surprise they found that the grave was already fully dug out. Normally, this was something that occurred after they already arrived at the gravesite. The members of the Chevra Kadisha were at a total loss to explain who dug up the grave.

Finally, they found out that there was a Kohain in the city. Never in his life did he merit the mitzvah of burying the dead. The reason was obvious -- a Kohain is not allowed to go to a cemetery because he is prohibited from coming into contact with tumas mes [impurity caused by being in proximity with dead bodies]. When this Kohain found out that a Jew died and was going to be buried in a new cemetery that had no pre-existing grave sites, he was overjoyed at the opportunity that presented itself. Although designated as a cemetery, the land in question did not yet contain any corpses. Therefore he was allowed to enter and dig up the grave himself. He jumped at the opportunity. He dug up the ground by himself so that at least once in his life he would fulfill the (very rare -- for a Kohain) mitzvah of burying the dead.

This is a classic example of "And you shall guard My commandments". One waits a whole life in anticipation of fulfilling a mitzvah. This, on a smaller scale, is the equivalent of Rabbi Akiva's statement just before being killed -- "When will this mitzvah come to my hand that I may fulfill it!"

This write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah Portion. The halachic topics covered for the current week's portion in this series are:

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