

THEY DIED AND THEY DIED AGAIN

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Acharei Mos

They Died And They Died Again

At the beginning of Parshas Achrei Mos, immediately following the death of Aharon's two eldest sons, Aharon is given the mitzvah of the ritual service on Yom Kippur. There is, however, a redundancy in the Parsha's opening pasuk [verse]: "Hashem spoke to Moshe after the death of Aaron's two sons, when they approached before Hashem, and they died." [Vayikra 16:1] Why does one pasuk mention the fact that Aaron's sons died two times?

The Shemen HaTov answers this question by reference to a well known Gemara [Moed Katan 24a]: When Rabbi Yochanan was told that Rabbi Chanina died, he tore kriyah on 13 expensive wool garments (out of grief and mourning) and commented "The man I was afraid of has departed." The Talmud asks why Rabbi Yochanan tore kriyah on a hearing "distant news"? Normally one only rips clothing "at the moment of heat" (i.e. - when the tragedy is fresh news). The Talmud answers: Rabbis are different since at every moment their teachings are quoted, every moment (even after much time has passed from the death) is considered "at the moment of heat".

Here too, the two sons of Aharon were "those near to Him, through which He was sanctified." They were great men of Israel and great men of the world. With such people, it is not a matter of "they die and it's over with". The lack of their presence is felt constantly. Achrei Mos (after they died) v'ayamusu (their death is felt all over again).

Special Divine Love Brings Special Divine Responsibility

The mishna in Pirkei Avos [Ethics of the Fathers] [3:18] states: He (Rav Akiva) used to say - Beloved is man, for he was created in G-d's Image; it is indicative of a greater love that it was made known to him that he was created in G-d's image, as it is said: 'For in the image of G-d has He made man' [Bereishis 9:6]. Beloved are the people Israel for they are described as children of the Omnipresent; it is indicative of a greater love that it was made known to them that they are described as children of the Omnipresent, as it is said, 'You are children to Hashem, Your G-d' [Devorim 14:1].

It is noteworthy that the pasuk chosen to buttress the idea that man was created in G-d's Image is a pasuk in Parshas Noach (Chapter 9 of Bereishis). It may seem a bit strange to quote a pasuk from Chapter 9 when there is a pasuk in the very first chapter of the Torah that states explicitly: "And G-d created Man in His Image, in the image of G-d He created him" [Bereishis 1:27]. Why did Rabbi Akiva, in impressing upon us the fact that man is beloved because he was created in the Image of G-d, take a pasuk that appears 8 chapters later, passing over the first and most explicit reference in the Torah to this very fact?

Likewise, in supporting the idea that the Almighty treats Israel as his children (banim), the Tanna goes all the way to the middle of Sefer Devorim to find the proof. This idea is also explicit much earlier in the Torah -- in the book of Shemos, where it says: "My son, My first born, Israel." [Shemos 4:22]

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik offered a beautiful insight: The 'chibah yeseirah' [greater love] that G-d grants man over the rest of the creatures of the universe, and the 'chibah yeseirah' that G-d grants Israel over the rest of the nations, comes with responsibilities. Divine Love is not a gratuitous gift. It comes with obligations and requirements. Rabbi Akiva passed over the initial mention that man was created in G-d's image and cited the pasuk in Parshas Noach because it is there that the Torah links man's Divine image with the prohibition of murder: "Whoever sheds the blood of man among men, his blood shall be shed, for in the Image of G-d He made man." Where did G-d "make known to man" his chibah yeseirah? He made it known to him when he taught him his special responsibilities.

Likewise with the chibah yeseirah of the Jewish people, the initial pasuk alluding to the father-child relationship between G-d and Israel was a gratuitous gift. This appears in a statement directed to Pharaoh. Rabbi Akiva is trying to impress upon Israel that their special relationship with the Almighty binds them to a code of behavior: The pasuk in Devorim makes such a connection: "You are children to Hashem THEREFORE you shall not cut yourselves and you shall not make a bald spot between your eyes for a dead person." The chibah yeseirah stems from the fact that the Jewish people are different. Because they are like children to G-d, they must act differently. This is how and where He makes His special love for them known to them.

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