

TORAH CALORIES

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Torah Calories¹

What could be the connection between the previous narrative about Nadav and Avihu and the long treatment of permissible and impermissible foods that these pesukim introduce? Perhaps we don't need one. Maybe, so to speak, there is always room for an appealing snack. Perhaps eating is so important a concern that you can always talk about it any place you have an opening.

Chances are that the opposite is true. The Torah wants us to take eating more seriously than we do. Moreover, this aim is the natural continuation of the sections that came before.

The Torah seized upon Nadav and Avihu's transgression to generalize a lesson about our service of G-d. Serving Hashem on the cutting-edge of spiritual growth (which is at the core of all the avodah of the Mikdosh) requires complete clarity of mind. Alcohol dulls the mind. Serving Hashem on the highest level requires that we not yield to momentary excitement (as Nadav and Avihu did, in thinking that they had to introduce a fire on the inner altar), but act with level-headed detachment. Alcohol makes this difficult, or less probable. For these reasons, kohanim are instructed to forego wine when serving in the Mikdosh.

The kohanim do not give up intoxicating wine as an exercise in self-denial. They forego it only because of what it does to people. Elsewhere, the Torah makes no similar demands. Nowhere does the Torah urge us to be teetotalers, or to approach permissible pleasures abstemiously. The kohain entering into the Mikdosh gives up his consumption of wine, but not because the holiness of his task requires that he deny himself the earthly pleasures of the common man. To the contrary. The section that follows the ban on drinking describes the atonement of a sinner who brings his korban to the Mikdosh. The kohanim play a key, final role in that procedure, but not through holy incantations and the like. The last step in the atonement process - after all the deep and beautiful symbolic rituals centering on the altar - sees the kohanim eating their significant share of the korban. As the gemara puts it, the kohanim eat, and those who brought the korban are atoned for. The ultimate expression of the success of the Mikdosh and its mission is not in denying us anything, but in the elevation of eating - and by extension all sensory pleasures. The changes that come over us through living in the presence of the Shechinah and in listening to its messages sanctify the most ordinary things in life.

Outside of the Mikdosh, then, it could easily be argued that affairs of the palate are largely irrelevant

to our responsibilities as Torah Jews. It is this mistaken notion that our parshah now addresses.

The section is addressed to both Moshe and Aharon - a rare occurrence in Chumash. The very first mitzvah sections - sanctifying the New Moon, and the korban Pesach laws - were given to both. So will a few of the sections that follow this one: laws of nega'im, zivah and nidah. Only in our case does the Torah add the words "saying unto them," specifically addressing their individual capacities in sharing their knowledge with the people as a whole.

Moshe was the ultimate teacher, the one who allowed us to understand the law completely. Aharon's job, as the head of the kohanim, was to ensure that the people could turn that law into reality, especially by maintaining the inner qualities of feelings, will and determination without which the system would founder. We find here a pattern of sections so crucial that they had to be entrusted to two giants, each overseeing a different role.

The first mitzvah sections in Chumash Shemos created the body of the Torah nation, of a people in a close covenant with Hashem, ready to perform His bidding. Parshas Mishpatim established a platform of social cohesion that would allow Bnei Yisrael to function as a nation. With parshas Terumah, we were brought to the next level - building a Mishkan that would embody the ideals of Hashem's Torah. This section stretches to the place in the text that we now find ourselves.

Building an abode for the Shechinah, and arranging for all its support personnel was important. It could have remained, however, an elegant showcase, a theoretical display of the ideals of the Torah, beckoning from an unreachable distance. The Mishkan was not designed to be an interactive museum, but a reality in the life of every single Jew. Every facet of life should be changed for the better by the Mikdosh. This would require a community longing for, cherishing, and savoring the holiness of the Mikdosh. The people would have to be those to whom the Torah could address that all-important demand that will appear a few chapters further on: "You shall be holy, because I Hashem your G-d am holy."

This holiness would not result simply from the will. Aspects of holiness would need be introduced in sweeping facets of people's lives, as in their eating, and even in the ways in which they would be conceived, as in the sections that follow. This is the task and challenge now put before Moshe and Aharon to translate into reality.

Holiness, Defined²

For I Hashem are your G-d. You shall sanctify yourselves, so that you shall become holy - for I am holy. Do not make your souls impure through any creeping animals that creep on the ground.

Holiness will come neither with complete ease, nor with insurmountable difficulty. I ask only that you work at it. Set your minds to it. Apply your energies and talents to keep at bay all things that make you less receptive to My demands, less able to act upon them. You will need to resist forces that

pull you in a very different direction.

If you sanctify yourselves - if you do work at it - I will guarantee that you will be successful. With practice, the distractions from holiness, the competitors, will become less and less attractive, and you will expend less effort fending them off. Then, you will absorb without a struggle all the morality and purity that I have in mind for you, and that grows out of My own holiness. You must become holy because I am holy.

I am the cause of your holiness in two ways. Firstly, I demand it of you. If you wish to be in close association with me, you must become beings closer to My nature. Your actions must harmonize with Mine.

This very holiness of Mine not only demands your holiness, but it enables it as well. Hence, a second dimension to our pesukim. This holiness of Mine is not a distant ideal, but something that lives already within you. This neshamah, this breath of Myself that I breathed into you, acts in your small world as I do in Mine. I am entirely above compulsion. Nothing forces Me to act in any way. I have complete freedom. I have planted that aspect of Myself within you. You, too, can free yourselves of compulsion and limitation. You can master the forces that sweep by you in the world I created for you, and become their small god.

This is the ultimate freedom - and the essential definition of holiness.

-
1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Vayikra 11:1
 2. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Vayikra 11:44
-