

TIMELESS TORAH

EMOR: THE CONTRAST BETWEEN ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Future Education, Present Responsibilities

Educating and transmitting our ideals to the next generation is critical to the continued existence of our tradition. But focusing on the future comes with the risk of neglecting the responsibilities of the present. The balance between these two elements is strikingly portrayed in the opening passage of Parshat Emor, which details the various personal responsibilities of the kohanim. It begins with a double expression: '*Emor ... v'amarta* – Speak ... and say [to the kohanim]'. With this terminology, Rashi explains, the Torah is stressing the fact that the hereditary nature of the priesthood means that the kohanim must educate their children about their status and the responsibilities that it holds.

According to the Ramban and the Chatam Sofer (Pressburg, d.1839), this is why the kohanim are referred to here both as 'kohanim' and as '*bnei Aharon* – sons of Aharon'. When describing the ritual service of the Beit Ha-Mikdash and the other functions assigned to the kohanim, the Torah uses the term '*bnei Aharon*', because the emphasis is on the role of the priestly lineage in general. Here, however, the Torah also emphasises their granular responsibilities on a personal level, using the term 'kohanim'.

Sensitivity to Time

Looking at a later passage in the parshah, we can observe the same concept – the relationship between roles and responsibilities – regarding the rest of the Jewish people. Preceding the lengthy discussion about the Yamim Tovim is a series of seven verses (22:27-33) that contain a number of seemingly unrelated mitzvot. In brief, they are: the viable age when an animal may be brought as an offering; the prohibition against

slaughtering a mother and its young on the same day; the prohibition against offering a *korban todah* (thanksgiving sacrifice) with intent to consume it at the wrong time; the mitzvah to sanctify Hashem's name – to the extent that one must give up their life rather than transgress one of the cardinal sins.

In a masterful explanation, the Seforno (d.1550) explains that the theme behind these mitzvot is a sensitivity towards time. The passage immediately preceding this one deals with the prohibition against bringing a maimed or blemished animal as a sacrifice. Hashem's work is perfect, the Seforno explains, and the relationship with Him in the sacrificial service must also reflect perfection. With this series of mitzvot, the Torah is teaching that the same sensitivity to perfection must apply in the realm of time as well; a sacrifice must be offered neither too late nor too early.

While this idea might explain why this passage follows the passage about blemished offerings and precedes the passage about the sanctified times of the Yamim Tovim, it does not explain how this is connected to the last verse of the series – the mitzvah of *kiddush Hashem*. The key to understanding this is found in the verse that links the first five verses to this last one: 'And you shall guard my commandments and do them'. Rashi, explained by the Mizrahi (Constantinople, d.1526), writes that to 'guard Hashem's commandments' means to study them well – not only carefully understanding how to apply them, but internalising them so deeply that they become engrained in one's psyche. In this way, the mitzvot becoming truly 'guarded' and protected in our hearts. In a complementary explanation, the Chatam Sofer writes that the word for 'guarding', *shemirah* can also mean 'anticipating'.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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The aim is to become so familiar with the mitzvot that they become a natural part of us, so much so that we anticipate every moment in which we can sanctify Hashem's Name through them. Life's vicissitudes may throw challenges and dilemmas in our path, but living a life that is focused on mitzvot and doing Hashem's will has the power to change our perspective. This is the connection to the rest of the mitzvot in this series; Divine service demands sanctification not only of space but of time as well. Aside for being embodied in the time-bound nature of several elements of the sacrificial service, sanctifying time in our daily lives can itself become a vehicle for *Kiddush Hashem*.

Developing this idea further, Rabbi Yaakov Kaminitzky (New York, late-20th century) points out an unusual phrase used by the Rambam in his codification of the mitzvah of *kiddush Hashem*. Describing the most extreme example of *kiddush Hashem*, giving up one's life to avoid transgressing the three cardinal sins, the Rambam writes, '*Kol beit Yisrael* – The entire house of Israel' are commanded in this mitzvah. According to Rabbi Kaminitzky, this rare and inclusive term of the Rambam means that not only adults but also children are included in this mitzvah. Although the mitzvot cannot normally devolve on minors, Rabbi Kaminitzky explains, the mitzvah of *kiddush Hashem* is expressed in the Torah in the passive form: '*v'nikdashti* – and I will become sanctified'. As such, there is no specific instruction to any person in particular to sanctify the Name of Hashem, but the entire Jewish people are collectively instructed to ensure that Hashem's Name is sanctified. Throughout history, there have been countless episodes, some well-known and others less so, of Jewish martyrdom. In this approach, these are not accounts of individuals adhering to the mitzvah of

kiddush Hashem. Rather, these events are the corollary of the national pursuit of Hashem's will. Just as the kohanim are instructed in their own personal duties as well as their collective role, so too the role of the rest of the Jewish people must be ingrained in them so deeply that all Jews, young and old, naturally internalise and act on these responsibilities when called upon to do so.

Generational Attitude

There is a striking counterpart to this at the end of the parshah in the episode of the person who cursed Hashem's Name. The Torah specifies that this person, although Jewish, was the son of an Egyptian man, and the commentators explain that this is why he, out of all the Jewish people, stumbled in this way. The Egyptians, personified by Pharaoh, proclaimed 'I do not know Hashem'. It was this attitude that motivated this person's actions.

The obvious difficulty with this is that there is a long distance between an idolator denying Hashem's existence and a believing Jew actually cursing the Name of Hashem. But, as Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz (d.1979) explains, this highlights the importance of education in attitude from an early age. The lack of seriousness about Hashem's presence displayed in earlier generations of Egyptians re-appeared in a magnified form in the younger generation. The parshah thus ends with this sobering thought, which mirrors the inspirational idea behind the rest of the parshah. True education of the next generation begins with the effort that we put into accepting our own responsibilities.

NEXT WEEK: BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI - Blessing in Motion: Creating an Upward Cycle