

TIMELESS TORAH

SHEMINI: FINDING SPIRITUAL STRENGTH & SENSITIVITY

The Power of Self-Introspection

The parsha opens with the momentous eighth day of the inauguration ceremony of the Mishkan. After Moshe had acted as the Kohen for the first seven days, it was now time for Aharon to take up the position of Kohen Gadol. At this instant, he and his sons would assume eternal responsibility for the service of the Mishkan and subsequent Beit HaMikdash. But Aharon was plagued by unease. The very first sacrifice he was told to bring was a calf, which was an overt reference to the episode of the Golden Calf, a debacle for which Aharon held himself responsible. Hearing this, according to the Midrash, he was paralysed by fear. In his humility, he had not allowed himself to move on from this error and was certain that he was not worthy of the priesthood. Eventually, Moshe commanded him to 'draw near to the Mizbeach' and offer up the sacrifices (9:7). In the words of Rashi, quoting the Midrash, Moshe told him, 'Do not be shamed - for this you have been chosen'. Following this encouragement, Aharon indeed 'drew near ... and slaughtered his calf sin-offering' (9:8).

The word for 'draw near' used in these verses is '*krav*', and it carries a nuance of alacrity and enthusiasm. Aharon was being told not to allow his past to hold him back from achieving his future potential. The Netziv (d.1893) argues, however, that alacrity is essentially a character trait, and although a person can work on developing it, it is impossible to command a person to behave in this way. Rather, the word '*krav*' in this context must mean 'battle'. Aharon was afraid to draw near to the Mizbeach, but he was encouraged to wage war against his natural instincts

and focus on fulfilling Hashem's command.

Citing the Yerushalmi, the Netziv invests this idea with a practical application. When looking for a *chazzan* to lead the congregation in prayer one does not say, 'Go and pray', but rather, 'Go and draw near', suggesting that the *chazzan* might have to battle to put aside his natural reservations and do what needs to be done. This call of 'drawing near', concludes the Netziv, echoes down the centuries. When we are circumspect in taking that next step in our spiritual journey, we should not restrain ourselves. This is the moment to take a bold step forward to achieve our potential.

Silence of the Sun

There is another moment in this parshah when Aharon is silent. This time, however, his silence is not born of misgiving but of strength. Faced with the tragic death of his two sons in the midst of the joy of the inauguration service, the verse says that '*vayidom Aharon*' (10:3), Aharon stood in silent acceptance of his fate. The Baal HaTurim (d. 1340) connects this phrase with a similar one in Tanach - '*vayidom hashemesh*' - which describes how the sun miraculously delayed setting, allowing Yehoshua to continue his battle against the Canaanites (Yehoshua 10:13). According to the Baal HaTurim, this is an allusion that the death of a person of the stature of the sons of Aharon is so significant that even the celestial spheres cease their movements. In such a painful moment, the entire universe is affected.

Taking this in a slightly different direction, Rav Yekutiel Aharon Kamelhar (*Shiluv Ha-Masoret*, d.1994) explains that this comparison is being made to underscore the potency



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of human decision making. The sun, as powerful as it might be, was created without free will. It performs its tasks faithfully just as it was as it was commanded to at the beginning of Creation, but it has no capacity to vary its role. On the other hand, a human being, with all his or her frailty, is endowed with the freedom to choose whether or not to obey. Aharon, with his silence, chose to accept this tragedy as the will of Hashem, and with this, he sanctified Hashem's Name in a far greater and more profound way than the sun is capable of. Thus, Aharon's strength in overcoming his previous reticence, stepping forward to perform Hashem's will against his own inclination, now gave him the strength he needed to sanctify Hashem's Name through accepting the Divine will.

In this light, the Netziv explains the meaning behind the subsequent passage, in which the Kohanim are warned against performing the sacrificial service after drinking intoxicating beverages. This can certainly be understood on a simple level: such an important duty must be carried out with a clear head. But the Netziv suggests that Aharon was also being advised how to overcome his sorrow following his loss. Aharon's duty was to avoid alcoholic drinks, and rather to 'differentiate between the holy and the profane' and to 'teach the Jewish people'. A depth of clarity on this level requires both strength and skill, but Aharon was being told that this was also the key to finding joy in the future through meaningful living. Distinguishing between right and wrong and then using this knowledge to guide others is one pathway towards rediscovering meaning in life, even after suffering a devastating loss.

Growth Through Strength

While the bulk of Parshat Shemini revolves around the service of the Kohanim and the laws that their special status entails, there is one lengthy passage, regarding the laws of kashrut, that is interposed in the middle of the parshah and is relevant to every Jew. The Alshich HaKadosh (Tzfat, d.1593) observes that this placement is deliberate. Had the Torah continued discussing the laws of ritual impurity immediately after the narrative of the inauguration and its associated laws, this might have been led the ordinary people to a dangerous conclusion. The unending focus on the special laws for the Kohanim would have given the impression that the Kohanim are the elite of society and there is little hope of any meaningful spiritual growth for the rest of the people. The laws of kashrut negate this mistaken view. They teach that the lesson of '*krav el haMizbeach*, draw near to the Mizbeach' is open not only to those chosen to perform the service in the Mishkan but to each and every member of the Jewish people. Spiritual growth depends on spiritual strength, and the restraint required to keep the laws of kashrut is as critical a tool for every member of the Jewish nation as the silence and unbending obedience of Aharon himself.

NEXT: Tazria-Metzora: The Power of Self-Introspection

The Timeless Torah weekly shiur will resume in person on Wednesday, 22nd April, Parshat Acharei-Mot Kedoshim