

Weekly Parsha ACHREI MOS
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

This Torah reading is inextricably connected to the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur. The first half of the reading comprises the very same Torah reading that is read on the morning of Yom Kippur, while the latter part of this reading is read publicly during the afternoon service of that day. The first part deals with the ritual and service of the high priest in the holy Temple on Yom Kippur. The second part deals with those physical relationships between humans that are regulated and, in many cases, considered forbidden by the Torah.

While it is quite understandable why the first part of this Torah reading dealing with the service of the high priest of the Temple on Yom Kippur fits with this theme of Yom Kippur itself, it is somewhat puzzling as to why the second part of this Torah reading, dealing essentially with physical and sexual immorality, should be the theme of the afternoon services on Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur represents to us the ability to disassociate ourselves from bodily wants and needs and to transcend to be in the company of angels, so to speak. Merely reading about the sins mentioned in the context of this second part of the Torah portion of this week already raises images within our subconscious mind that apparently are not fitting for the holiness of the day of Yom Kippur. Yet the rabbis of Israel who were the wisest judges of human nature and understood the human condition fully, chose that this portion should specifically be read and emphasized on the afternoon of the holiest day of the Jewish calendar.

There are many explanations for the issue that I have raised in the previous paragraph. But one that seems to be most relevant in our time, when there is no longer any definition present for sexual immorality or deviance, is that the Torah does not want to allow ourselves to be fooled by the holiness of the day and by our abstinence from the usual bodily needs of everyday life. Judaism teaches that just as human beings can reach the highest forms of holiness, selflessness and piety, so too can these very same human beings sink to levels of evil, selfishness and incestuous depravity.

The Talmud warns us that there is no guarantee or guardian for human beings when it comes to matters of desire and physical sexuality. No one is above it and only those who think that they are somehow immune to it are the ones who are most vulnerable.

On Yom Kippur, when we are at our holiest, we are also reminded how low and evil we can be if we do not guard ourselves. To ignore our weaknesses is to constantly live in peril of irreparable damage to ourselves and to others. Even a cursory review of daily events in our time will show us how easily even great and noble people can create the greatest harm to themselves simply because they believed that it could not happen to them. The Torah is the book of realism, the book of humanity. That is how it is to be read, studied and understood.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

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A prayer for Yom HaShoah
Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Today, on Yom HaShoah, we remember the victims of the greatest crime of man against man – the young, the old, the innocent, the million and a half children, starved, shot, given lethal injections, gassed, burned and turned to ash, because they were deemed guilty of the crime of being different.

We remember what happens when hate takes hold of the human heart and turns it to stone; what happens when victims cry for help and there is no one listening; what happens when humanity fails to recognise that those who are not in our image are none the less in God's image.

We remember and pay tribute to the survivors, who bore witness to what happened, and to the victims, so that robbed of their lives, they would not be robbed also of their deaths.

We remember and give thanks for the righteous of the nations who saved lives, often at risk of their own, teaching us how in the darkest night we can light a candle of hope.

Today, on Yom HaShoah, we call on You, Almighty God, to help us hear Your voice that says in every generation:

Do not murder.

Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbour.

Do not oppress the stranger.

We know that whilst we do not have the ability to change the past, we can change the future.

We know that whilst we cannot bring the dead back to life, we can ensure their memories live on and that their deaths were not in vain.

And so, on this Yom HaShoah, we commit ourselves to one simple act: Yizkor, Remember.

May the souls of the victims be bound in the bond of everlasting life.

Amen.

As we approach Yom HaShoah, the day in the Jewish calendar when we remember the victims of the Holocaust, it is worrying to see levels of antisemitism and antisemitic attacks continue to rise in countries all over the world.

In my latest whiteboard animation, which you can watch <http://rabbisacks.org/rabbi-sacks-on-the-connection-between-judaism-and-israel/> I explore the connection between Jews as a people, Judaism as a religion, and Israel as a state. I also show how this connection is intrinsic to the link between antisemitism and anti-Zionism; something too often overlooked or misunderstood.

Please share this video on Facebook or Twitter, and help spread the message.

This is the third in a mini-series of animations produced over the past year or so.

To watch the videos on the mutation of antisemitism and the dangers of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign

חדשות ערוץ 7

Thinking Fast and Slow (Acharei Mot 5779)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

If we put together recent discoveries in neuroscience with Midrashic tradition we may be able to shed new light on the meaning of the central mystery of Yom Kippur: the two goats, identical in appearance, over which the High Priest cast lots, sacrificing one as a sin offering and sending the other, the scapegoat, into the wilderness to die.

In past Covenant & Conversation essays on Acharei Mot, we have looked at the scapegoat as it figures in Jewish tradition and, in a very different way, in other cultures. But there are other dimensions of the rite that cry out for explanation. We argued that there were two goats because Yom Kippur represents a dual process of kappara, atonement, and tahara, purification, directed respectively at guilt and shame. But this does not explain why the two animals were required to be as similar as possible to one another, nor does it account for the role of casting lots (goralot). Presumably, these elements were designed to inspire feelings of awe and penitence on the part of the crowds that thronged the Temple on the holiest day of the year, but how and in what way?

Over the centuries, the Sages sought to decipher the mystery. Two animals, alike in appearance but different in fate, suggests the idea of twins. This and other clues led the Midrash, the Zohar, and classic commentators such as Nahmanides and Abarbanel to the conclusion that in some sense, the two goats symbolised the most famous of all the Torah's twins: Jacob and Esau.

There are other clues too. The word se'ir, "goat," is associated in the Torah with Esau. He and his descendants lived in the land of Seir. The word se'ir is related to sei'ar, "hairy," which is how Esau was born: "his whole body was like a hairy garment" (Gen. 25:25). When Rebecca urged Jacob to pretend to be Esau in order to take Isaac's blessing, Jacob said, "My brother Esau is a hairy [sa'ir] man while I have smooth skin" (Gen. 27:11). According to the Mishnah, a red thread was tied to the scapegoat, and "red" (Edom) was Esau's other name. So there was a tradition that the scapegoat in some way symbolised Esau. Azazel, the mysterious place or entity for which the goat was intended, was Samael, Esau's guardian angel.

In particular, the phrase “two kids of the goats,” *shnei se’irei izim*, mentioned in the High Priest’s rites, reminds us of the very similar expression, “two kids of the goats,” *shnei gedi’ei izim*, mentioned in Genesis 27, the scene of Jacob’s deception. Isaac had asked Esau to catch him some wild game and prepare him a meal so that he could bless him. Rebecca tells Jacob to “Go out to the flock and bring me two choice kids of the goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, the way he likes it. Such verbal parallels are not coincidental in the Torah. They are part of its sustained intertextuality, its finely woven prose in which one verse sheds light on another.

So the two goats of the High Priest’s service evoke in multiple ways the figures of Jacob and Esau, and specifically the scene in which Jacob pretended to be Esau, dressing in his clothes so that he would feel and smell like his brother. It was then, answering his father’s question, “Who are you, my son?” that Jacob said the words, “I am your firstborn Esau,” leading Isaac to say, “The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau” (Gen. 27:22).

Who then were Esau and Jacob? What did they represent and how is this relevant to Yom Kippur and atonement? Midrashic tradition tends to portray Jacob as perfect and Esau as an evil-doer. However, the Torah itself is far more nuanced. Esau is not a figure of evil. His father loved him and sought to bless him. The Sages say that in one respect – honouring his father – he was a supreme role model.[1] And in Deuteronomy Moses commands, “Do not despise an Edomite [i.e., a descendant of Esau], because he is your brother” (Deut. 23:8).

Esau in the Torah is not the epitome of evil. Rather, he is the man of impulse. We see this in the scene in which he sells his birthright to Jacob. Coming in one day exhausted by the hunt, he sees Jacob making lentil broth:

He said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!”... Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.” “Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?” But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright. (Gen. 25:30–34)

This vignette of Esau’s impetuosity – selling part of his heritage for the sake of a bowl of soup – is reinforced by the unique description of the action in the staccato form of five consecutive verbs (literally, “he ate, he drank, he rose, he left, he despised”). Every time we see Esau we have the impression of an impulsive figure always driven by the emotion of the moment, be it hunger, filial devotion, a desire for revenge or, at last, generosity of spirit.

Jacob is the opposite. He does not give way to his feelings. He acts and thinks long-term. That is what he does when he seizes the opportunity to buy Esau’s birthright, when he works for seven years for Rachel (a period that “seemed to him but a few days”), and when he fixes terms with Laban for payment for his labour. Rebuking his son Joseph for the seeming presumptuousness of his dreams, the Torah tells us that the brothers were jealous of Joseph “but his father kept the matter in mind.” Jacob never acts impulsively. He thinks long and hard before deciding.

Not only is impetuosity alien to him, he is also critical of it when he sees it in his children. On his death bed, he curses his three eldest sons in these words:

Reuben, you are my firstborn.... Unstable as water, you will not excel.... Simeon and Levi ... Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel!” (Gen. 49:3–7)

Acting on the basis of anger and impetuosity is for him the sign of an unworthy personality with which he does not wish to be associated.

What does all this have to do with sin, transgression, atonement, and two goats?

Recent years have seen a revolution in our understanding of the human brain, and with it, the human mind. One key text was Antonio Damasio’s book *Descartes’ Error*. [2] Damasio discovered something unusual about patients who had suffered brain damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex. Their ability to think remained unchanged, but their ability to feel dropped to almost zero. The result

was that they found it impossible to make decisions. They would reason endlessly but fail to make their mind up on one course of action rather than another.

Much subsequent work has shown that Descartes and Kant were wrong in their assertion that we are, first and foremost, rational animals. David Hume was right in his view that we are primarily emotional beings who make decisions on the basis of feelings, desires, and drives of which we may be barely conscious. We justify our choices, but brain scans show that we may have made those choices before being aware that we had done so.

We are more driven by emotion and less by reason than Enlightenment thinkers believed. This discovery has led to new fields of study like behavioural economics (what people actually do rather than what theory says they do), emotional intelligence, and interdisciplinary studies linking neuroscience to morality and politics.

We have, in fact, a dual-system or twin-track brain. This is what Daniel Kahneman is referring to in the title of his famous book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. [3] One track is rapid, instinctive, emotional, and subconscious. The other is slower, conscious, deliberative, and calculating. The former allows us to react quickly to situations of immediate potential danger. Without it, we and our ancestors would not have survived. Many of our instinctive reactions are benign. It is natural to have empathy, and with it the tendency to feel other people’s pain and come to their aid. We develop a strong sense of attachment that leads us to defend members of our family or community. But not all instincts are benign. Anger, envy, jealousy, fear, hate, and the desire for revenge may once have been functional, but they are often deeply destructive in social situations. That is why the ability to “think slow,” to pause and reflect, matters so much. All animals have desires. Only human beings are capable of passing judgement on desires – of asking, should I or should I not satisfy this desire?

These recent discoveries in neuroscience and related fields do not tell us something new. Rather, they have vindicated an ancient insight that was often obscured by Enlightenment rationalism. We cannot live, choose, or love without emotion. But one of the fundamental themes of Genesis is that not all emotion is benign. Instinctive, impulsive behaviour can lead to violence. What is needed to be a carrier of God’s covenant is the ability to “think slow” and act deliberately. That is the contrast between Isaac and Ishmael (of whom it was said, “He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him,” Gen. 16:12). Even more so, it is the contrast between Jacob and Esau.

Which brings us to Genesis 27 and the moment when Jacob dressed up in Esau’s clothes and said to his father, “I am Esau your firstborn.” The two goats of the High Priest’s service and the two goats prepared by Rebecca symbolise our duality: “The hands are the hands of Esau but the voice is the voice of Jacob.” We each have an Esau and Jacob within us, the impulsive, emotional brain and the reflective, deliberative one. We can think fast or slow. Our fate, our goral, our life-script, will be determined by which we choose. Will our life be lived “to the Lord” or “to Azazel,” to the random vicissitudes of chance?

This is the moral drama symbolised by the two goats, one dedicated “to the Lord,” the other “to Azazel” and released into the wilderness. The power of ritual is that it does not speak in abstractions – reason versus emotion, instinctual deferral rather than gratification. It is gripping, visceral, all the more so when it evokes, consciously or otherwise, the memory of the twins, Jacob and Esau, together at birth yet utterly divergent in their character and fate.

Who am I? That is the question Yom Kippur forces us to ask. To be Jacob, we have to release and relinquish the Esau within us, the impulsiveness that can lead us to sell our birthright for a bowl of soup, losing eternity in the pursuit of desire.

Shabbat shalom

Rav Shlomo Aviner Shlit" a

Ha-Rav answers hundreds of text message questions a day. Here's a sample:

Erasing Rav Kook's Picture

Q: There is a picture of Maran Ha-Rav Kook painted on the wall of our youth group room. We are repainting it. It is permissible to paint over his picture or is it disrespecting him?

A: It is permissible. It is not disrespectful.

Immersion in Mikveh for Sandek

Q: How many times should a Sandek immerse in the Mikveh before a Brit Milah?

A: There is no such obligation. If he wants to be strict and do so, he can immerse as many as he wishes.

Non-Jewish Father

Q: If one has a Jewish mother and non-Jewish father, how is he called to the Torah?

A: Ben Avraham or Ben his mother's name (See regarding Rav Meri ben Rachel – Rashi on Berachot 16a. Ketubot 23a. Baba Batra 149a).

Prayer for the Spaceship Bereshit

Q: Is there a prayer for a successful mission of the spaceship Bereshit?

A: Tehilim.

Tiferet Yisrael on the Mishnayot

Q: I spoke with a Chasid and I quoted something from the commentary Tiferet Yisrael on the Mishnayot. He said that they do not learn this commentary. What is the reason? Is it permissible to learn it?

A: They are opposed this commentary for two reasons: 1. He writes that Metzitzta during a Brit Mila is only a medical matter and we should follow the opinion of the doctors (Shabbat 19:2). 2. He brings a "Midrash" that Moshe Rabbenu's nature was evil but he overcame it (end of Kiddushin #77). Almost all Gedolei Yisrael disagreed with him regarding these two matters (Regarding Metzitzta, see Shut Da'at Cohain #140. Regarding Moshe Rabbenu, see Ha-Rav's book "U-Madua Lo Yereitem Ledaber Be-Avdi Be-Moshe", Chapter 5), but this commentary is great, and it is permissible - and recommended - to learn it.

Prayer for Sick

Q: I Daven for the sick and have a long list of people I do not know and am not in contact with. How do I know how long to continue Davening for each person?

A: Daven for a month for each person.

Trances

Q: Is it permissible to listen to trances?

A: One must listen to Kosher music which does not arouse low inclinations. Igeret Ha-Rambam to Sages of Aram Tzova, Mehadurat Ha-Rav Shilta, p. 428.

Moshe or Mordechai

Q: B"H, we had a baby boy born to us on the 7th of Adar (The birthday and Yahrtzeit of Moshe Rabbenu). The Brit Milah will be on Purim. We are in doubt whether we should name him Moshe or Mordechai. What is Ha-Rav's opinion?

A: 1. Both names are great and it is a personal decision. B. Ha-Rav Moshe Feinstein was born on 7th Adar, and although his Brit Milah was on Purim and his father thought to name him Mordechai, he decided to name him Moshe (Shut Igrot Moshe Volume 8 in the Kuntres "Man Malchi Rabbanan", p. 7), i.e. his father based it on the day of his birth. 3. It is widespread to name a child "Moshe Mordechai" and many Gedolei Yisrael have that name: Ha-Rav Moshe Mordechai Epstein (who was Rosh Yeshiva of Knesset Yisrael in Slabodka and Hevron), Ha-Rav Moshe Mordechai Ha-Levu Shulzinger (author of Mishmar Ha-Levi), Ha-Rav Moshe Mordechai Chadash (who was Rosh Yeshiva of Ohr Elchanan in Yerushalayim) and others.

Maran Ha-Rav Kook's Chair

Q: Is it permissible to sit in Maran Ha-Rav Kook's chair in Beit Ha-Rav and to get one's picture taken there?

A: No (See Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 242:15).

Pluralism

Q: Why don't we believe in Pluralism?

A: Because we believe in Hashem and He gave us the Torah.

Rav Kook Torah

Kedoshim: First Impressions

Eating Before Prayer

Together with various other forbidden practices, the Torah admonishes, "Do not eat the blood" (Lev. 19:26). Literally, the verse reads, "Do not eat over the blood." What does it mean to "eat over blood"?

The Talmud offers several explanations, including the warning, "Do not eat before you have prayed over your blood [i.e., for the sake of your soul]" (Berachot 10b). Why is it so important to refrain from eating before reciting the morning prayers?

Refining the Nefesh

We find that the Torah equates blood to the nefesh (the soul), as it says, "The blood is the nefesh" (Deut. 12:23). What is the nefesh? This is the lowest part of the soul, the basic life-force that is common to both humans and animals. The desires of the nefesh naturally relate to our physical needs. However, the human intellect can guide and direct these desires. In fact, this is the function of prayer: to refine and elevate the emotional and imaginative parts of the soul. Through prayer, we bind our feelings and desires to pure and holy aims.

On this basic level, what we do in the beginning of the day sets the tone for the entire day. Our initial feelings and impressions accompany us throughout the day.

If we start the day by eating, then we have already weighed down our souls with the burden of satisfying physical wants. This establishes the desires of the nefesh as base and animalistic.

But if the very first act of the day is prayer, then we have ensured that the initial impressions on the soul will be pure, directed towards higher and holier aspirations. While the day is fresh and the soul has not been burdened with lowly images, prayer can make its impact, impressing upon the soul the sublime goal of drawing close to our Creator.

(Gold from the Land of Israel (now available in paperback), pp. 205-206. Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. I, p. 248; Ein Eyah vol. I, p. 61)

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Acharei Mot

For the week ending 27 April 2019 / 22 Nisan 5779

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Insights

Google Shadchan

"...after the death" (16:1)

Gone are the days when checking a shidduch (marriage match) was carried out through discreet personal enquiries: a call to the in-laws, to the neighbors, school friends, rebbes or teachers. Nowadays, due diligence demands another line of enquiry — Google. One of my in-laws told me that before he allowed a shidduch to proceed, he googled me and found a shiur (lecture) that I had given on a certain platform. Apparently he didn't dislike the shiur sufficiently to cancel the shidduch. It is said that in 1927 when the Chafetz Chaim was told of the existence of a transatlantic telephone service, he exclaimed that he now understood how a person would speak and it could be heard on the other side of the world. This world is full of physical counterparts to spiritual realities: This world is a mashal (parable) for us, and the Torah is the nimshal (moral).

I wonder what the Chafetz Chaim would have made of Google, apart from its obvious dangers and abuses. Perhaps he would have seen, "Know what is above you: an Eye that Sees, an Ear that Hears, and all your actions are written in a book." (Avot 2:1)

"G-d spoke to Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons when they approached before G-d and they died."

Why did the Torah connect the death of Nadav and Avihu with the commandment restricting Aharon's entry into the Holy of Holies? Rashi says that Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria compares this to sick person being cautioned not to eat cold food or sleep in a damp place. One doctor merely gives a caution, whereas a second doctor adds to the instructions, "so that you don't die like so-and-so." Clearly the second doctor's warning is stronger than the first.

This world is full of signs if we only have the eyes and ears to recognize them.

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OU Torah

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

No Exit

There is much that the Torah leaves to our imagination. Regular students of the weekly Torah portion soon become convinced that the narratives they read each week are deliberately abbreviated, as if to encourage us to fill in the missing links on our own.

One outstanding example of such an incomplete narrative is the story of the death of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron the High Priest. Just a few short weeks ago, in Parashat Shemini (Leviticus 10:1-7), we read of their tragic sudden deaths. In their eager enthusiasm to draw closer to the Almighty, they brought an “alien fire” to the altar, a ritual procedure that they invented on their own and were never commanded to perform. For that they were instantly struck down and consumed by a heavenly fire.

This terrifying event occurred on a day of momentous importance during the inauguration of the holy Tabernacle. It happened in the presence of a throng of celebrants. We can assume that there were at least some eyewitnesses to the events, and we can be certain that many individuals heard about it within mere minutes.

But we know almost nothing about the reactions of those who were apprised of the tragic news that two princes in Israel, two young men who were next in line for the High Priesthood, potential leaders of the Jewish nation, were executed, cremated, by an act of God.

It is natural for most of us to empathize immediately with the father and mother of these ill-fated young men. We wonder what they felt when they first learned of their unspeakable loss. But we are left to our own devices by the text and can only imagine their reaction. All we are told is, “and Aaron was silent.” Aaron’s silence leaves us silent, lost in introspection, asking ourselves how we would react to such nightmarish news.

In this week’s Torah portion, Parashat Acharei Mot (Leviticus 16:1-18:30), we read a bit more of the story. The opening paragraph of our parasha begins “and it came to pass after the death of Aaron’s two sons...” Those words encourage us to believe that the suspense has been lifted and that we are about to learn the rest of the story. We are teased into supposing that we are about to discover the nature of the emotions that lay buried in Aaron’s silence.

Alas, we are disappointed. Instead of a glimpse into Aaron’s tormented soul, we are taught in elaborate detail of his newly prescribed ritual role. We read of the Temple procedures which he is to conduct on the holy Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. We soon discover, to our surprise and dismay, that Aaron is to be required to replicate his sons’ behavior, the very behavior for which they were frightfully punished. They lost their lives because they sought to draw too close to the Divine, and now Aaron their father is commanded to draw close to the Almighty. Indeed, he is summoned to enter a sector so sacred that his sons dared not set foot there.

Granted, he is to enter that sacred space at one specific moment in the entire year, and only after many preparatory procedures. But nevertheless, the objective of Aaron’s great mitzvah and privilege, approaching the Almighty as closely as possible, is the identical objective that his sons desperately strived for, and for which they were catastrophically punished.

We can easily suppose that we are being called upon to imagine how Aaron, in the very act of entering the Holy of Holies, would be overwhelmed by heartbreak, haunted by the image of his children who were cut down in the prime of their lives while performing the very act that he was now commanded to perform!

In what way, however, was Aaron’s entrance into the innermost sanctum fundamentally different from Nadab and Abihu’s attempt to approach the Most Sacred One?

The answer lies in a careful reading of the rest of the opening chapter of this week’s Torah portion. For there we learn that Aaron was not only instructed to enter the Holy of Holies. He was also instructed to leave that sacred space. To use contemporary jargon, he was given an exit strategy.

Attaching an exit strategy to an intense and sublime religious experience is one of the secrets of authentic spirituality. More specifically, the exit strategy is intrinsic to the Yom Kippur experience. Aaron was instructed to enter the inner sanctum, yes. But he was also directed to depart from it and return to the far less sacred world at large. Seldom do we not enter Yom Kippur with an attitude of remorse and solemnity. But we exit Yom Kippur with the confidence that our sins have been forgiven and that we can now embark upon the forthcoming joyous Succoth days.

Nadab and Abihu, on the other hand, entered a “no exit” situation. The lesson is clear: spiritual ecstasy is wonderful. But it can never be an end in itself. It must be but a means to an end, an opportunity to become inspired with the purpose of bringing inspiration back to a mundane and imperfect world.

This was the example that Moses taught when he entered a realm even more sacred than the Holy of Holies. He ascended to the peak of Mount Sinai, and even further upwards to the very heavens on high, to the realm of the angels and the site of the divine throne of glory. But he never lost sight of his goal of returning to his people with the message he received from on high. His intent was always to descend, to ultimately reunite with the people who sought to cope with the problems of ordinary existence.

This is also the central message of Yom Kippur. It is a day of atonement and repentance, of introspection and awe. Our spirituality that day is akin to that of the angels, removed from the human body’s physical requirements of food and drink. But the climax of Yom Kippur must be the image left to us by Aaron and all the subsequent high priests. That image is described by our Sages as “the yom tov of festivities that the High Priest celebrated when he exited safely from the Holy of Holies.” The exit strategy from Yom Kippur is a festive and joyous meal, a return to reality, a reconnection to the ordinary, to the vulnerable, to the human.

Our religion has its serious, even somber, occasions; we know well days of self-examination and of longer periods of time dedicated to remorse and self-criticism. We know well days, months, and even years of grief and mourning. But for all these, our religion prescribes exit strategies: forgiveness for the sinner, return for the wayward child, and consolation for the mourner.

Nadab and Abihu were guilty of a truly fateful error. They wished to enter the spiritual state of no return. Our religion teaches us that spirituality must never be a condition of “no exit.” Authentic spiritual experience must be designed to culminate with a return to the real world with song for those formerly sad and speech for those once crippled by silence.

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Rabbi Buchwald’s Weekly Torah Message – Acharei Mot 5779-2019

“The Forbidden Relationships Work Both Ways”

(Revised and updated from Acharei Mot 5760-2000)

In this coming week’s parasha, parashat Acharei Mot, we encounter, in a very forceful manner, the rules and regulations regarding immorality and forbidden sexual relationships.

In Leviticus 18:3, the Torah boldly declares, You, the People of Israel, must not perform the practices of the land of Egypt in which you dwell, or perform the practices of the land of Canaan to which I bring you. Do not follow their traditions. Rather, says G-d, (Leviticus 18:5 And you shall observe My decrees and My laws which a person shall carry out and by which he shall live, I am the L-rd. The Torah (Leviticus 18:30), then proceeds to list many prohibited sexual relationships between relatives and concludes, You shall safeguard My charge I am the L-rd your G-d.

As we often note, the family structure is regarded by Judaism as the basic construct of society and civilization. Judaism cannot emphasize enough the centrality of family life, because all of morality depends upon it. Stronger family life, results in a stronger society, and a more beneficial communal lifestyle.

Imagine if you will, how extremely difficult it was for the Hebrews of old, to share the same lands with many ancient tribes, who, in the name of their religions, zealously practiced all sorts of sexual perversions. In the midst of the satyrs and holy prostitutes who served in their pagan temples, the Jews tried to lead a revolutionary life of morality.

Clearly, the Torah was the most radical document in its time. After all, what we today consider to be “sexual decadence,” was commonly practiced and entirely acceptable among the Canaanite nations and the neighbors among whom the Jews lived. It is not at all surprising, therefore, to learn that, according to Jewish tradition, the Israelites in Egypt had declined to the 49th level of impurity, and were just one level away from oblivion.

We often look upon the ancients as “primitives” with little or no education, few opportunities to appreciate the finer things in life and, consequently, thoroughly subject to the vile blandishments of their times and society. On the other hand, we view contemporary society as stronger, more sophisticated, more educated, and far more in control of our natures than the ancients. But, truth be told, the ethical and moral challenges which we face today are as great, perhaps even greater, than those faced in antiquity.

Frankly, it is very difficult to be a Yeshiva boy in Sodom. The impact of our modern day Sodom is constant, relentless and crushing. Many of us who have lived through the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky affair in the United States and have seen our vaunted legislators, the American Congress, vote to release to the general public, to even our little children, the most prurient information which was of little or no relevance to anyone, have much reason for concern. The revelations of the “Me Too” movement, and, of course, the vulgar contemporary entertainment, make the Clinton era shenanigans appear rather demure! Without doubt, we are living in an age where the challenge to remain moral is greater than ever.

That is why the admonition in next week’s parasha, (Leviticus 19:2) *קְדָשִׁים תִּהְיֶינָה*, Be holy, be sacred, is particularly timely. This statement, as interpreted by the Ramban to mean be “separate,” is especially relevant. We need to separate ourselves from those things which rob us of our holiness.

In light of this, it should be quite clear why parashat Acharei Mot and the forbidden sexual relationships are read on Yom Kippur afternoon. Obviously, on the day of Yom Kippur, when we try to achieve forgiveness and atonement, the sexual trespasses are among the foremost to be emphasized.

It is therefore fascinating that the commentators suggest that one of the reasons for reading this portion dealing with —Arayot, forbidden relationships, on Yom Kippur afternoon is that by reading this portion on this holy day, we, the People of Israel, remind the Al-mighty, that He too must remain faithful to us—just as He has commanded us to remain faithful to our partners. “You, G-d, must be loyal to us. We beseech You to never exchange us for another people.”

Every portion of the Torah has dramatic and profound messages, and is filled with the most wonderful insights. For us, it is vital to search for, and uncover, those messages that are relevant to our times and lives.

Perhaps there is nothing more meaningful for us during these challenging times than to underscore the need for all human beings, and especially the People of Israel and G-d Almighty, to affirm our sacred loyalty to each other.

May you be blessed.

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Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

Spiritual Nourishment: The Icing on the Cake

With the taste of matzah still in our mouths, I'd like to share with you an exciting teaching of the Vilna Gaon which appears in Aderes Eliyahu on parshas Acharei Mos. In Vayikra (18:5) we are taught, "you shall observe My decrees and My laws, which man shall carry out and by which he shall live (v'chai bahem) - I am Hashem." Interestingly, Rashi and Targum Unkelus understand the words v'chai bahem as referring to the world to come; the Torah is assuring and promising reward in the next world.

The Talmud (Yuma 85b), in providing sources for the law that saving a life overrides the Shabbos, teaches that Shmuel used the verse "v'chai bahem" as the primary source that mitzvos are to be lived, and except for the three cardinal sins of idolatry, adultery and murder, all laws of the Torah are suspended to save life. In keeping with this understanding that the verse is referring to life in this world, the Vilna Gaon teaches that mitzvos are the source of life for the Jew. The Zohar (Parshas Tetzaveh 183b) calls matzah, "michla d'asvasa - bread of elixir" and "michla d'm'hemnusa - bread of faith." I believe the above may be taken literally, that in addition to the flour and water, one of the benefits of ingesting matzah is Vitamin F - faith. It helps the Jew believe, and when crises occur throughout the year, the injection of Vitamin F assists in responding with faith. Similarly, the Vilna Gaon teaches us that inherent in all mitzvos is a spiritual reservoir that enriches the soul. This is true not only regarding positive mitzvos but also, as the Talmud (Kiddushin 39b) teaches, regarding one who withstood temptation and did not violate a negative commandment, for whom it is reckoned On High as if he did a positive mitzvah. However, while this understanding of the hidden treasures found in the mitzvos might be an alluring factor to observe the mitzvos and thereby enrich one's soul, it is for this reason that the verse concludes, "Ani Hashem," to teach that the ideal performance of the mitzvos is for His sake and not for one's personal enrichment.

Indeed, this is how the Gra understands Birkas Hamitzvos. First we acknowledge, "asher kidishanu b'mitzvosav - that He has sanctified us with His commandments", which is an incredible commitment by Hashem to the Jewish people and perhaps provides sufficient motivation for one to perform a mitzvah - to derive the personal spiritual elevation and closeness to Hashem. Therefore, the bracha continues, "v'tzivanu - and He commanded us", teaching us that ultimately we are to perform the mitzvos because He, Hashem ordained their performance. The highest form of service is to focus on serving the Master who commands the mitzvah, rather than how the mitzvah benefits and enriches the performer of the mitzvah. Thus, performance of mitzvos provides a double benefit: it nourishes and enriches one's body and soul, and allows for a personal service and relationship with Hashem.

The Vilna Gaon also teaches that the reverse is true regarding the violation of transgressions. As the mitzvos maintain and nourish the individual, so too in a natural way, aveiros - sins cause a degeneration and atrophy of the soul. Just as in the natural world if one ingests poison the deadly effect is not a punishment but rather a natural consequence of one's actions, so too the negative action has a deteriorating effect on the soul. This is familiar to us regarding the effect of non-Kosher food on one's soul, as the Torah teaches (Vayikra 11:43), "v'nitmesem" which is understood by our Rabbis (Yuma 39a) as, "v'netamem - your soul will be dulled and weakened". This is true regarding all the negative commandments of the Torah.

This conclusion is drawn by the Vilna Gaon from his sharp analysis of the effect of Adam's sin. Hashem advised him to eat of all the fruits in the Garden of Eden. Interestingly, notes the Meshech Chochma, had he eaten from those fruits first, it could have fortified him to withstand the temptation of eating from the forbidden fruit. Hashem warned him that were we to eat from the tree of knowledge, he would die, which is understood by the Ramban to not mean immediate death but rather becoming mortal. Thus when he does eat from the forbidden tree, why is his punishment to work the land with great difficulty, that the land should yield thorns and thistles, and to gain his bread by the sweat of his brow? His punishment should have been simply that he is now you mortal! The answer is as stated above, that his becoming mortal was not

the punishment but the natural consequence of eating from the forbidden tree. Once Hashem said that on the day Adam eats from the tree he will die, the transformation from immortal to mortal became a natural characteristic inherent within the tree and was not a punishment per se. Adam deserved to be punished over and above the natural consequences of his action for not listening to Hashem, and that punishment consisted of the curses above listed.

Thus "v'chai bahem" teaches that the observance of mitzvos is endowed with spiritual vitality, while the effect of aveiros is decay and atrophy of the soul. However, the verse ends with the sublime admonition of "Ani Hashem" - don't do mitzvos primarily to build yourself and your character, but ideally you should do them to serve Hashem.

Having begun with "v'chai bahem" and the obligation to sustain life, I'd like to close by remembering the Kedoshim of the Shoah who if they could trade with gentile prisoners their ration of bread for soup, did so, as not to violate eating chametz on Pesach. Those who had to eat chametz to fulfill "v'chai bahem" note the emotional anguish that accompanied their eating of chametz on Pesach by the prayer composed by the Rabbis in Bergen-Belsen to be recited prior to their eating of chametz:

"Our Father in Heaven, it is known and revealed before Thee that it is our will to do Thy will and to observe the festival of Passover through the eating of matzah and by not violating the prohibition of chametz. For this our hearts are grieved - that our enslavement prevents us and we are in danger of our lives. Behold, then. We are prepared and ready to fulfill Thy commandment of 'though shall live by them and not die by them' and to carefully heed the warning 'take therefore good heed and guard thy life very much.' Therefore, it is our prayer unto Thee that Thou keep us alive and preserve us and redeem us speedily so that we may observe Thy statutes and do Thy will and serve Thee with a perfect heart. Amen."

May their fulfillment of "v'chai bahem" under the most extreme and challenging conditions inspire us to fulfill and appreciate "v'chai bahem" in happiness and excitement leading up to "Ani Hashem".

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Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Acharei Mos Safeguards Against Assimilation to Prevent Inter-marriage

Dedicated in memory of Chazan Sherwood Goffin a"h, Shimon ben Chaim Eliezer

The last pasuk of Parshas Achrei Mos states: "You shall safeguard My charge that these abominable traditions that were done before you not be done, and not to make yourselves impure through them. I am Hashem, your G-d." [Vayikra 18:30]. The Talmud derives the idea of making a fence around the Torah from this exhortation to "safeguard" the commandments (Mishmeres l'mishmarti) [Moed Katan 5a; Yevamos 21a].

If people would only observe the strict Biblical commandments and not observe the Rabbinical safeguards that were added later, we would not recognize what we now call "observant" Judaism. Shabbos observance is a totally different experience because of the Rabbinical enactments that "safeguard" the basic prohibitions of labor. The scope of virtually every area of halachic restriction that we practice has been greatly expanded by virtue of the principle of "make a safeguard for My charge."

Sometimes a person may question the extent of "Rabbinical fences" and wonder whether the Rabbis did not go "too far." We look at some "D'Rabanans" and say, "this sounds a little too farfetched; we would never make a mistake over here." However, we need to understand that the Rabbis were extremely wise, and knew exactly what they were doing. Their basic intent many times was not so much concern with stopping a specific violation, as with creating a certain atmosphere. They were interested in establishing a pervasive attitude.

I recently taught my Yeshiva class about the laws of consuming food prepared by non-Jews (which are in the Talmud, in Tractate Avodah Zarah). There are prohibitions against eating food prepared (under

certain circumstances) by a non-Jew and of drinking wine that is so much as touched (under certain circumstances) by a non-Jew. The rationale behind all of these Rabbinic prohibitions is "lest we come to intermarry with them" (mi'shum chasnus).

A person can ask, if the food only contains Kosher ingredients and I take it into the confines of my own home, why should the fact that it happened to have been cooked by a non-Jew be any cause for concern that I might come to marry a non-Jewish woman? Is that not farfetched?

The Rabbis were not worried that if someone ate something cooked by a non-Jew, they would immediately go out and marry that person. Rather, they were interested in creating an atmosphere that shouts to us "we need to remain separate." Once we start breaking down the little things and start tampering with the atmosphere, we quickly reach the situation that we have today in the United States of America: over fifty percent intermarriage. We no longer have an atmosphere of separation.

The following is excerpted from a column by the rabbi of a Reform congregation in Miami, Florida:

"We think that intermarriage leads to assimilation, but it is the other way around. We marry people like ourselves. The average middle-class Jew is as different from the average middle class Gentile as your average Hutu is different from your average Tutsi. I know Rabbis aren't supposed to say things like this. We are supposed to fight assimilation tooth and nail. But to be honest I am about as assimilated as you can get. Put me in a lineup of the average middle class goy [sic] and the only way you could tell us apart is to play a Jackie Mason tape and see who laughs. The truth is our kids don't intermarry. They marry people just like themselves. People who eat stone crabs marry people who eat stone crabs."

The rabbi has it exactly right. People are not intermarrying. They are marrying people exactly like themselves. The reason why a strictly religious person would not contemplate marrying a non-Jew (or vice-versa) is because they are so different. Those who follow the Rabbis' safeguards live in an environment nearly as different from that of the average middle class American non-Jew, as either of those environments are different from that of the average Tutsi. The cross-cultural divide is too great. The groups are too different from each other, so they do not intermarry. It would be like marrying someone from a different planet. However, if someone eats like them and talks like them and dresses like them, then it is not intermarriage at all. It is marrying within one's own kind.

He wrote further: "As far as religion goes, they both have the same fake sense of spirituality. They both believe in a G-d without being able to define either belief or G-d. They both hold goodness above theology and righteousness above tradition. Religion does not matter to most of our kids. We tried to make it matter and we failed. They don't intermarry. They marry the same kind."

This all started because of an attitude that said, "so what if I go ahead and eat food cooked by non-Jews? So what if I drink a cup of wine with them? It's kosher food! It's kosher wine!" Once one breaks down the "safeguard of My charge" then anything can happen.

Therefore, when we see Rabbinic decrees that sometimes strike us as being farfetched or even absurd — we need to step back and acknowledge that the Rabbis knew exactly what they were talking about. They wished to create an attitude and an atmosphere, as the Torah instructs: "Make a safeguard for My charge."

Those who mock the concept of making safeguards for the Biblical laws should go out and look at what is happening in the world. The alternative is all too readily present for us to painfully witness. People who eat stone crabs marry people who eat stone crabs.

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Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Acharei Mos

פרשת אחרי תשע"ט

ונתן אהרן על שני השעירים גרלות גורל אחד לד' וגורל אחד לעזאזל

Aharon shall place lots upon the two he-goats: one lot “for Hashem”; and one lot “for Azazel.” (16:8)

The two goats are identical in every way; yet, one becomes a *korban*, sacrifice, to Hashem, while the other is sent to Azazel. Apparently, the goats had no say in the matter. We assume that this also happens to people. Two people both do all of the right things (or at least they thought so), but one makes it, while the other does not fare as well. What happened? What about *bechirah chafshis*, freedom of choice? It almost seems that regardless of past choices, one’s future is determined for him.

Clearly, this is not true. If we are taught that we have freedom of choice, then unquestionably we have the ability to choose and determine our own destinies. What, then, should we derive from the two identical goats that seem to have no choice? I think the Torah is teaching us that we have a lifetime in which to choose, but, at a certain point in time, it becomes too late. Judgment Day is the time in which all the choices have to be in. This is the time when consequences are rendered, and the choices that we have made come to light. Choice is no longer an option. It is payback time.

We have an entire year to choose the path that we want to travel. Are we traveling *l’Hashem*, to G-d, or have we deviated, made poor choices, and are on a destination course towards Azazel? We are afforded an entire year to choose, to do it right, or – if we err – do *teshuvah*, repent and change course with new and positive choices. This extends throughout the year all the way up until *Yom Kippur*, when the option for choice is removed. At this time, Hashem chooses either to grant us a good year – or not. He has been very patient with us, allowing us every opportunity to make the change, to make the correct choice. Now, however, it is *Yom Kippur*, Judgment Day, a day of unparalleled *kedushah*, holiness, a day when all of us – the entire world – stands before Hashem to receive our fate. Hashem is now making the decisions based upon our choices. We no longer have the option of choice, unless we do last minute *teshuvah*. If a person has not earned the coveted designation of being considered a *tzaddik*, righteous person, he must plead his case to Hashem, beg for mercy. Otherwise, he is likely to have a humbling experience.

Two identical goats: one is a sacrifice to Hashem; one meets Azazel in the wilderness. No choices; it is not fair. It is *Yom Kippur*. Choices should have been made earlier. On *Yom Kippur*, we stand in judgment – just like the two goats. No choices anymore; it is Judgment Day.

ושפך את דמו וכסהו בעפר

He shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. (17:13)

The Torah commands us to cover part of the blood of the kosher birds or non-domesticated kosher animals that he slaughters. The *Sefer HaChinuch* explains that the *shoresh*, root, of this *mitzvah* is in the relationship between the soul of the slaughtered animal or fowl and its blood. Blood is the life source of the living animal, thus, it is fitting for us to cover the soul and hide it from the eye prior to consuming its meat. When we eat the meat with the blood exposed, we acquire a tinge of cruelty in our souls. In other words, to have a meal of meat or fowl, while the life source of this “meal” lays exposed, indicates a lack of compassion. For the members of the nation for whom compassion is one of its three primary characteristics, this is considered inappropriate behavior.

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, relates a powerful story which underscores the character trait of compassion, which is a priority and a critical component of the Jewish DNA. This vignette demonstrates to what extent the *middah*, attribute, of *rachmanus*, compassion, is inherent in a Jew, to the point that at the very last moment of his life he chose to thank his brethren, to grace them with one last act of compassion.

An elderly Jew, a G-d-fearing Torah scholar, had been interned in Auschwitz in his younger years. He witnessed countless brutalities, acts of cruelty, executed by demons in the guise of human beings, acts that one would never believe could be perpetrated by man. Yet, they were. Although it was many years after the war, and he was

living comfortably with his family in America, the brutality and heinous cruelty which he had witnessed continued to haunt him. In all public venues he acted like anyone else. Every *Yom Tov*, however, when the *Kohanim* blessed the congregation, he would act in an unusual manner, by covertly leaving the *shul* shortly before *Bircas Kohanim* and retuning just as the *Kohanim* concluded their blessing.

One day, the *Rav* of the *shul* decided to ask his elderly congregant why he did this. The man was willing to share his story with the *Rav*: “*Rebbe*, you are well aware that all of the members of my original family were sacrificed in Auschwitz. I, together with a group of inmates, decided one *erev Pesach* that we had nothing to lose. Our families had all been murdered by the Nazis. We might as well have one last spiritual ‘fling.’ We were going to bake *matzos* and eat them at the makeshift *Seder* which we were going to conduct.

“We did it! One man was able (over a period of days) to obtain a small amount of flour. Another obtained the necessary utensils to form, roll and bake the three prize *matzos* that we succeeded in making. We were even able to obtain a small amount of wine. We all gathered together and began to recite the *Haggadah* from memory. We were a group of broken shards, whose only joy in life was being celebrated with the recital of the *Haggadah* in anticipation for the eating of the precious *matzah* that we had prepared. Suddenly, the door burst open, and in walked the camp commandant. When he saw what was going on before his very eyes, no words could describe his fury. ‘Who is responsible for this outrage? I will kill you all unless you tell me who is behind this!’ he screamed at us. Meanwhile, he had already moved over to my close friend, selecting him as his sacrifice. ‘You! You are the one that is behind this rebellion! Did you think that you could get away with it?’ he screamed. ‘I will shoot you in front of your friends, so that they will not forget the punishment meted out to one who mutinies against us!’

“As the Nazi held the gun to the head of my friend, he had a moment of decency (if such a word could even be used in connection with such a blood thirsty savage), ‘Do you have a last request before you die?’ he asked. The Jew replied, ‘Yes, I do. I would like to speak with my brothers for two minutes.’ The Nazi permitted him to speak. Moments before he was to die, our brother turned to us and said, ‘Today is *Yom Tov*, and I am a *Kohen*. I would like my last living act on this earth to be *Bircas Kohanim*. I would like to bless you for the last time.’ Before we could realize what was happening, he raised his hands and declared, *Yevarechecha Hashem v’Yishmiracha!* We responded with a loud resounding *Amen!* He cried; we cried. He blessed; we said ‘*Amen*.’ The Nazi came over to him and shot him in the head. He fell down to the ground, blood pouring out of the wound. As long as I live I will never forget that moment. My friend’s last act on this world was to care about us, to bless us with Hashem’s protection.

“The war ended a few weeks later. I was a broken shard of my former self. It had gotten so bad that I had decided to renege my Jewishness. I would no longer adhere to our religion – not after what I had experienced. Every time that I was about to execute that act, however, to perform the transgression that would sever my relationship with *Yiddishkeit*, my friend’s *Bircas Kohanim* appeared before my eyes. His love, his compassion for us – I could not turn my back on him. This encouraged me and gave me the strength to continue to remain steadfast in my commitment to our religion. Nonetheless, whenever the *Kohanim* raise their hands to recite the *Bircas Kohanim*, I have to leave. The scene brings back painful memories. I do not want to weep in the *shul*; so I go out and weep quietly in the hall.”

Rav Zilberstein observes that exclusive of the unusual heroic act of compassion evinced by the *Kohen*, we derive from this incident how one experience can forever remain imbedded in someone’s mind for a lifetime – inspiring him positively, and ultimately being the catalyst for maintaining his fidelity to Hashem.

Parents spend time, money and exert every effort to imbue their children with the proper *hashkafah*, outlook, in life. They want their children to grow into the consummate *bnei Torah* and *bnos Yisrael*. They pray and weep, so that they merit to receive *Yiddishe nachas* from their offspring. Yet, not all succeed. Why? While I do not have the

answers, one thing is certain: If parents personally maintain a lifestyle that is obverse to what they expect of their children, they are undermining their own efforts. The best medium for inculcating a child with the proper Torah values is to set an example by personally living such a lifestyle. "Do as I say – not as I do" is counterproductive and sends a destructive message. While it is difficult to alter one's personal lifestyle, it indicates how much a parent really cares about his/her child's spiritual and moral growth. One can hardly expect better from the son than to be a reflection of his father.

כמעשה ארץ מצרים אשר ישבתם בה לא תעשו

Do not perform the practice of the land of Egypt in which you dwelled. (18:3)

The holy *Peshisha*, *Horav Bunim*, *zl*, renders this *pasuk* homiletically, deriving from the ensuing exegesis an important lesson for Jewish living. On an almost constant basis we are confronted with challenges to our spiritual well-being. These challenges come in the context of our base desires. We must exert extreme effort to overcome these physical passions, which scream out to us: "Why not be like everybody else?" Obviously, the optimum defense to triumph over the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, and its wiles is to circumvent a confrontation between the provocation of physical desire and spiritual ascendancy. By providing ourselves with a sort of fence, parameters which are protective barriers from sin, we are able to quell the urge to defer to physicality. How can we achieve success in this endeavor? What protective device can empower us in this way?

The *Peshisha* teaches us to take a penetrating look at those who think that they have satisfied their base desires and have absconded to a lifestyle of moral turpitude, of spiritual bankruptcy – and then ask ourselves: "Is this really what we want for ourselves?" All we have to do, says the *Rebbe*, is to look at these icons of a bankrupt society and ask: "Did they really succeed?" "Are they really satisfied?" Is one ever satisfied by moral profligacy? Is his demeanor respectable, dignified, something one would want to emulate? Anyone with a modicum of intelligence and an ounce of common sense will respond with a resounding, "No!" to these questions. Thus, the greatest deterrent from living life as an "Egyptian" is to take a deep look at his life. This should be all one needs to erect a fence to protect himself from sin.

All one has to do is open his eyes and read about the rich and famous whose names grace the front pages of the secular media. Who is unable to discern the vacuous nature of the secular lifestyle? They live a life of wanton abandon, bereft of discipline or scruples. Can anyone in his right mind be envious of such a life? The greatest deterrent to living their aberrant lifestyle is to take a cogent view of the manner in which they live and then ask oneself: "Is this really what I want out of life?"

When we look at the behavior of the modern-day *Mitzrim*, Egyptians, we are provided with a powerful restraint for our own life. Veritably, at first glance, to the eyes of the unknowing, immature, unsuspecting seeker of "fun," it may appear to have all the ingredients for which he is searching. When he sits back and pauses, he realizes the vacuity and utter misery (at the end of the day) of their lives.

The *Tiferes Shlomo* views the *pasuk* as an admonition not to live, not to do anything in a manner similar to the way in which the *Mitzrim* acted. The manner in which we act must reflect Torah ideals, Torah values – hence, Torah demeanor. Our deportment must be unlike that of our gentile neighbors: we eat differently; we sleep differently; we behave differently. The Jew and the *goy* have absolutely nothing in common. The sooner we accept this verity, the happier and more self-satisfied we will be. There are some fine, well-meaning, decent gentiles who (on the surface) act in a dignified, respectful and religiously appropriate manner. Their core values, however, are not Torah values. Their lives are neither guided nor inspired by Torah. Thus, they are different. Their level of decency is guided by contemporary culture, which is subjective. Our life is guided by Hashem. Need I say more? They might be religious, adhering to the dogma of their religion, but only an imbecile could compare it to Judaism and its structure of law. The term *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, is a term that is foreign to them, since the concept of Hashem, with His constant *Hashgachah*

Pratis, Divine Providence, is a concept they neither fathom nor accept. When religion is subjective, then life is viewed through the idiomatic lens of "self." Thus, the only entity such a person worships is himself. Why would a Jew choose to emulate such a person with such a way of life?

Clearly, no dearth of stories exists that depict the character and commitment to the religion of Jews of old. For the most part, our people have historically lived in ghettos, isolated (not by choice) from any form of relationship with their gentile neighbors. From a religious perspective, this was a good thing. We cannot be negatively influenced when we are separate, distinct, away from the *goyim*. *Yahadus Ashkenaz*, Jewish living in Western Europe post French Revolution, saw the ghetto walls torn down, allowing them to interact with the gentile. Sadly, many could not handle the tension and assault on their religious commitment once they came face to face with their gentile neighbors. Relationship led to friendship, which led to the sin of sins: intermarriage, which was usually followed by a complete revocation of faith: apostasy.

The stalwart commitment of some Jews to Torah and *mitzvos*, however, withstood the challenge of the breakdown of the ghetto walls. For the most part, Orthodox Jews comprised the *Kehillah kedoshah*, holy congregation, of Frankfurt Am Main, under the leadership of *Horav S. R. Hirsch*, *zl*. The following is a characterization of one of these Jews, taken from "A Son Remembers His Father" (Rabbi Meyer Schwab).

The Jewish cemetery in Frankfurt Am Main is what remains (in Europe) of the glorious (not large), deeply committed Torah community started by a handful of laymen under the leadership of *Rav Hirsch*. They withstood the assault on the Torah perpetrated by the secular stream, products of the *Haskalah*, Enlightenment and German Reform, who sought to undermine and eventually destroy Torah Judaism, which they felt was irrelevant to their progressive society. We see today how wrong they were. Torah Judaism is thriving, while the secularists are sadly no longer members of the fold, or even Jewish. By depriving their children of our history, they separated them from our community. As a result, even those who are biologically Jewish have adopted other faiths.

Buried in that cemetery are the remains of a number of Torah giants, scholars who achieved distinction in their day and whose merit continues to illuminate our lives. Additionally, another type of Torah giant is buried there, men whose devotion to Torah and *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, was peerless and without compromise. In a secluded section of the cemetery is one such grave, graced by a headstone erected in 1875, a tribute to the memory of a unique individual, a layman who personified the true *ben Torah*. He was Yehudah Loeb, *ben Moshe Schwab* (Father of *Horav Shimon Schwab*, *zl*, *Rav* of the *Ashkenaz Kehillah* of Washington Heights – his brothers: *Rav Moshe*, *Rav Mordechai* – each a *gadol* in his own right). His epitaph is striking and underscores the distinction between a *Yehudi* and a gentile: "He feared sin more than any menace. He clung to goodness. Only there did he find solace."

Rav Hirsch imbued his *kehillah* with an unequivocal sense of *yiraas Shomayim*: no shortcuts; no compromise. Mr. Schwab moved from southern, rural Germany to Frankfurt Am Main in order to enroll his children in *Rav Hirsch's* newly-established *Reale Schule*, to afford them a Torah education. What made him do this? A sense of *yiraas chet*, fear of sin.

Rav Schwab distinguishes between fear of Heaven, *yiraas Shomayim*, and fear of sin, *yiraas chet*. *Yiraas Shomayim* is tantamount to fear of punishment. Obviously, there are various levels, but one who fears Heaven fears retribution. He knows that sinning against G-d catalyzes serious ramifications. *Yiraas chet*, however, is on a higher spiritual plateau. Such a person fears more than punishment. He shudders from the very thought that sin will taint his soul. It is not the punishment, but the violation that frightens him. His soul will be sullied. His pure G-d-given soul is no longer pure. This is what he fears most – even more than punishment. Punishment is a natural consequence of sin.

It is to be expected – and accepted. Contamination through sin is a spiritual offense that besmirches his soul. This he cannot tolerate. Mr. Schwab feared the taint more than the retribution. This is what made him so special. Imagine explaining this to a gentile.

Rav Shimon Schwab would relate how his home looked prior to *Shabbos*. (This gives us an idea how his parents merited to raise children who became *gedolei Yisrael* in a generation that was torn by spiritual strife, in a country that was the epicenter of spiritual mutiny against Hashem and His Torah). On Friday afternoon the table was set, and the entire house was prepared for *Shabbos*. The little children, who were already bedecked in their *Shabbos* clothes, played in the parlor. Then, their father entered the home, uncharacteristically late due to last minute business matters. He enlisted the “services” of his children in getting him ready to greet the *Shabbos* Queen. To one child, he gives his shoes to be polished; to another, his coat to be brushed off; and to yet another, to brush his hat. He then would ask his children, “Why are you not yet ready for *Shabbos*?” They replied, “But we are ready, and have been so for a little while.” To this he countered, “But I do not see the *eimasa d’Shabbos* (the awe of the approaching *Shabbos*) on your faces.” Thus, the children were inculcated with a powerful lesson: with the heightened joy of the upcoming *Shabbos* comes (also) a strong sense of *yiraaas chet*, dread of (Heaven forbid) violating the *Shabbos*.

אשר יעשה אותם האדם וחי בהם

Which man shall carry out and by which he shall live. (18:5)

The *mitzvos* were given to us for the sake of life and living. Therefore, if the performance of a *mitzvah* may endanger life – the need to maintain one’s life supersedes his observance of the *mitzvah*. The exceptions to this rule are the three cardinal sins: murder; idol worship; and adultery. A life in which these *mitzvos* are not observed is no life at all. The *Chassidic* Masters derive from this *pasuk* the requirement to observe *mitzvos* with “life” – not apathetically. One should throw all of himself into his *mitzvah* observance. Indeed, it should be the source, the *raison de’etre*, of his life.

Horav Moshe, zl, m’Kubrin, once walked into the *bais hamedrash* where he observed an elderly Jew studying Torah. Every once in a while the man was overtaken by sleep. As he began to lower his head to doze, he immediately jerked his head up and exclaimed (to himself), “What will be with you? In the end, you will die, and you have so much more to accomplish.” This went on for a while. Each time he began to nod off, he berated himself. The *Rebbe* went over to him and said, “You should instead say, ‘We must live!’ A life such as this (without studying Torah) is no life! Focus on the positive.”

Some individuals sleep through life, exhibiting no passion in their religious observance. A cute, but very true, anecdote that might well accompany this behavior is: “Life is a dream – only if one is sleeping.” Otherwise, life is – and should be – exciting. It affords us the opportunity to serve Hashem and develop spiritually, to the point that we will earn a share in *Olam Habba* for ourselves. If we sleep away our life, however, the portion that we receive might become our nightmare.

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prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum*

The Mourning Period of Sefirah By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

What Are the Guidelines for Aveilus Observed During the Sefirah Weeks?
Reason for Mourning

The midrash teaches that one reason for the counting of the omer is so that we again experience the excitement of anticipating the receiving of the Torah (quoted by Ran, end of Pesachim). At the same time, it is unfortunate that this very same part of the year has witnessed much tragedy for the Jewish people. Indeed, the Mishnah (Eduyos 2:10) points out that the season between Pesach and Shavuos is a time of travail. One major calamity that befell us during this season is the plague that took the lives of the 24,000 disciples of Rabbi Akiva. They died within several weeks in one year between Pesach and Shavuos because they did not treat one another with proper respect (Yevamos 62b). The world was desolated by the loss of Torah until Rabbi Akiva went to the southern part of Eretz Yisroel to teach five great scholars, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi

Shimon bar Yochai, Rabbi Yosi, and Rabbi Elozor ben Shamua, who became the upholders of the future of Torah.

Again, in the time of the Crusades, terrible tragedies happened to the Jewish communities of the Rhine River Valley during the period between Pesach and Shavuos (Taz and Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chayim 493). Some of these catastrophes are recorded in the Kinot that we recite on Tisha B’Av. The reciting of “Av Harachamim” after Kerias HaTorah on Shabbos was introduced as a testimonial to remember these holy communities who perished in sanctification of Hashem’s Name rather than accept baptism.

What Practices Are Prohibited?

Because of the tragic passing of Rabbi Akiva’s disciples, the minhag was established to treat the sefirah period as a time of mourning and to prohibit the conducting of weddings during this season. It is interesting to note that, although it is forbidden to hold a wedding during this season, if someone schedules a wedding during this season in violation of the accepted practice of the community, we do not penalize him for having done so (Teshuvos Hage’onim #278). Thus, although this person violated the community rules by scheduling the wedding, others may attend the wedding (see Shu”t Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 2:95). There are poskim who permit weddings under extenuating circumstances, such as concern that a delay may cause the engagement to be broken (Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chayim 493:2).

In addition to abstaining from weddings, certain other mourning practices are observed during the period of sefirah. One does not take a haircut during this season (Tur Orach Chayim Chapter 493). However, if there is a bris during sefirah, the mohel, the sandek, and the father of the baby are permitted to have their hair cut in honor of the occasion (Rema), but not the kvatter or those who are honored with “cheika,” who are those who bring the baby closer to the bris (Mishnah Berurah 493:12). Those who are permitted to have their hair cut in honor of the occasion may even have their hair cut the evening before (Mishnah Berurah 493:13).

Dancing is not permitted during the sefirah season (Magen Avraham). Listening to music is likewise prohibited (Shu”t Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 1:166; Shu”t Minchas Yitzchok 1:111; Shu”t Yechaveh Daas 3:30). One is permitted to teach, learn, or play music if it is for his livelihood (Shu”t Igros Moshe 3:87). This is permitted since he is not playing for enjoyment. However, one should not take music lessons for pleasure.

Rav Moshe Feinstein ruled that if a wedding took place on Lag B’omer or before or on Rosh Chodesh Iyar (in places where this is the accepted practice, see below), it is permitted to celebrate the week of sheva berachos with live music and dancing (Shu”t Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 2:95). There are others who disagree (Shu”t Minchas Yitzchok 1:111. See Piskei Teshuvos Chapter 493 footnotes 39 and 81, who quotes many authorities on both sides of the question.).

Although certain mourning practices are observed during sefirah, many practices that are prohibited during the three weeks or the nine days preceding Tisha B’Av are permitted. For example, house remodeling, which is prohibited during “the Nine Days” is permitted during the sefirah period (Shu”t Yechaveh Daas 3:30). Similarly, although during the Nine Days one is discouraged from doing things that are dangerous, no such concern is mentioned in regard to the period of sefirah. Thus, although the Minchas Elozor reports that he knew of people who would not travel during sefirah, he rules that it is permitted and that this practice is without halachic basis (Shu”t Minchas Elozor 4:44).

In a similar vein, according to most poskim, one may recite a brocha of shehechyanu on a new garment or a new fruit during the period of sefirah (Maamar Mordechai 493:2; Kaf Hachayim, Orach Chayim 493:4). The Maamar Mordechai explains that the custom not to recite shehechyanu is a mistake that developed because of confusion with the three weeks before Tisha B’Av, when one should not recite a shehechyanu (Maamar Mordechai 493:2). However, there are early poskim who record a custom not to recite shehechyanu during the mourning period of sefirah (Piskei Teshuvos, quoting Leket Yosher).

It is permitted during sefirah to sing or to have a festive meal without music (Graz; Aruch Hashulchan). It is also permitted to make an engagement party (a vort) or a tnoyim during the sefirah period, provided that there is no music or dancing (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim Chapter 493 and Magen Avraham).

When Do We Observe Mourning?

There are numerous customs regarding which days of sefirah are to be kept as a period of mourning. The Shulchan Aruch rules that the mourning period runs from the beginning of the sefirah counting and ends on the thirty-fourth day of the omer count (Beis Yosef and Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim Chapter 493; Kaf Hachayim 493:25). In his opinion, there is no celebration on Lag B’Omer, and it is forbidden to schedule a wedding on that day! The source for this opinion is a medrash that states that the plague that caused the deaths of the disciples of Rabbi Akiva ended fifteen days before Shavuos. According to the Shulchan Aruch’s understanding, the last day of the plague was the thirty-fourth day of the

omer. Thus, the mourning ends fifteen days before Shavuot, on the day after Lag B'Omer.

However, the generally accepted practice is to treat the thirty-third day of the Omer count as a day of celebration (Rema and Darchei Moshe, Orach Chayim Chapter 493, quoting Maharil) because, according to this tradition, the last day of the tragedy was the thirty-third day of the Omer (Gra). There are several other reasons mentioned why Lag B'Omer should be treated as a day of celebration. Some record that it is celebrated because it is the *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the author of the Zohar (Birkei Yosef; Chayei Adam, Klal 131:11; Aruch Hashulchan). Others say that it is celebrated because it is the day that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was able to leave the cave in which he had been hiding (Aruch Hashulchan). Another reason recorded for celebrating this day is because it was the day that Rabbi Akiva granted *semichah* to his surviving disciples (Kaf Hachayim, Orach Chayim 493:26). Others record that it was the first day that the man began falling for the Jews in the desert (Shu"t Chasam Sofer, Yoreh Deah #233, s.v. *Amnam yodati*).

According to Maharil and Rema, the evening of Lag B'Omer should be included in the mourning period and the celebration should not begin until daytime. In their opinion, Lag B'Omer is still counted as one of the thirty-three days of mourning. The *aveilus* period ends on the morning of Lag B'Omer because of a concept called *miktzas hayom ki'chulloh*, which means that the last day of mourning does not need to be a complete day (Moed Katan 19b). If one observes the beginning of the day in mourning, the entire day is included in the count of the mourning days. For this reason, someone getting up from sitting *shiva* does so on the morning of the seventh day. Observing mourning requirements at the beginning of the seventh day satisfies the requirement to observe the seventh day of *shiva*. Similarly, one satisfies the requirement to observe the thirty-third day of *sefirah* mourning by observing mourning only at the beginning of that day. According to this approach, one should not conduct a wedding on the evening of Lag B'Omer, but only in the daytime. This is because we *paskin* according to the opinions that the principle of *miktzas hayom ki'chulloh* applies only if the mourning was observed in the daytime, and it is insufficient to observe *aveilus* only in the evening of the seventh day.

However, there are other opinions that permit scheduling a wedding already on the evening of the thirty-third, at least under extenuating circumstances (see Graz 493:5; Kaf Hachayim, Orach Chayim 493:28; Shu"t Igros Moshe 1:159). Some explain that, since we consider Lag B'Omer to be a day of celebration, it is not counted as one of the days of mourning (see Chok Yaakov 493:6 and Kaf Hachayim, Orach Chayim 493:28). Thus, there are some *poskim* who contend that there are only thirty-two days in the *sefirah* mourning period (Graz 493:5). Another reason to permit scheduling a wedding the evening of Lag B'Omer is based on the opinion that *miktzas hayom ki'chulloh* applies even when one observes the mourning only at night (Ramban, *Toras Ho'adam*, Chavel edition page 215). Thus, according to this approach, it is sufficient to have the beginning of the night of Lag B'Omer as a mourning period. (It should be noted that, according to this opinion, *shiva* ends in the evening of the seventh day, not in the morning.)

When Lag B'Omer falls on Shabbos or Sunday, there is a dispute among early *poskim* whether it is permitted to get a haircut on Friday in honor of Shabbos. The accepted practice is to permit it (Rema, Orach Chayim 493:2 and *Be'er Heiteiv ad loc.*). Apparently, the combined honor of Shabbos and the approaching Lag B'Omer together supersede the mourning of *sefirah*. Some *poskim* even permit a wedding to take place on the Friday afternoon before Lag B'Omer that falls out on Sunday (Shu"t Ha'elef Lecho Shelomoh, Orach Chayim #330). (Bear in mind that the custom in Eastern Europe, going back hundreds of years, was to schedule weddings on Friday afternoon.)

Are those who follow the practice of observing mourning during the beginning of *sefirah* permitted to play music during *Chol Ha'moed*? This subject is disputed by *poskim*, but the accepted practice is to permit music during *Chol Ha'moed* (see *Piskei Teshuvos* 493:6).

There are several other customs that observe the mourning dates of *sefirah* in different ways. Some observe the mourning period the entire time of *sefirah* until Shavuot except for *Yom Tov*, *Chol Ha'moed*, and *Rosh Chodesh* (and also, presumably, Lag B'Omer). Therefore, they permit the playing of music on *Chol Ha'moed* and holding weddings and playing music on *Rosh Chodesh*. (One cannot have a wedding on *Chol Ha'moed* for an unrelated reason. The sanctity of *Yom Tov* precludes celebrating a wedding on this day; see *Moed Katan* 8b.) This approach is based on an early source that states that Rabbi Akiva's disciples died only on the thirty-three days of *sefirah* when *tachanun* is recited, thus excluding the days of Shabbos, *Yom Tov*, *Chol Ha'moed*, and *Rosh Chodesh* (Bach, Orach Chayim quoting *Tosafos*). If one subtracts from the forty-nine days of *sefirah* the days of *Pesach*, *Chol Ha'moed*, *Rosh Chodesh*, and the Shabbosos, one is left with thirty-three days. It is on these days that the mourning is observed. (This approach assumes that in earlier times *tachanun* was recited during the month of Nisan and during the several days before Shavuot.)

Another, similar, custom is to observe the mourning period only from the second day of *Iyar* until *Rosh Chodesh*, with the exception of Lag B'Omer. This approach assumes that the mourning period is only on the days when *tachanun* is said, but does not assume that there are thirty-three days of mourning.

Yet another custom recorded is to refrain from taking haircuts or making weddings from the beginning of *sefirah* until the morning of Lag B'Omer, but after Lag B'Omer to observe partial mourning by refraining from weddings, although haircuts are permitted. This approach follows the assumption that the original custom of *aveilus* during *sefirah* was based on the fact that the plague that killed the disciples of Rabbi Akiva ended on Lag B'Omer. Later, because of the tragedies of the Crusades period, the custom developed not to schedule weddings between Lag B'Omer and Shavuot. However, the mourning period instituted because of the tragedies of the Crusades was not accepted as strictly, and it was permitted to take haircuts (Taz, Orach Chayim 493:2). This is the prevalent custom followed today by *Ashkenazim* in *Eretz Yisroel*.

Still others have the custom that the mourning period does not begin until after *Rosh Chodesh Iyar*, but then continues until Shavuot (Maharil, quoted by *Darchei Moshe*, Orach Chayim 493:3). This approach assumes that the thirty-three days of mourning are contiguous, but that the mourning period does not begin until after the month of Nisan is over. In *Salonica*, they observed a *Sefardic* version of this custom: They practiced the mourning period of *sefirah* from after *Rosh Chodesh Iyar* until Shavuot. However, they took haircuts on the thirty-fourth day of the *sefirah* count (cited by Shu"t Dvar Moshe, Orach Chayim #32).

A similar custom existed in many communities in Lithuania and northern Poland, where they kept the mourning period of *sefirah* from the first day of *Rosh Chodesh Iyar* until the morning of the third day of *Sivan*. According to this practice, weddings were permitted during the three days before Shavuot. This practice was based on the assumption that the disciples of Rabbi Akiva died after Lag B'Omer until Shavuot (Aruch Hashulchan, based on *Gemara Yevamos*). *Magen Avraham* reports that this was the custom in his area (*Danzig/Gdansk*); *Chayei Adam* reports that this was the practice in his city (*Vilna*); and Aruch Hashulchan report that this was the custom in his community (*Novardok*). These customs are followed to this day in communities where weddings are allowed after *Pesach* until the end of the month of Nisan.

Rav Moshe Feinstein points out that although these customs differ as to which days are considered days of mourning, the premise of most of the customs is the same: Thirty-three days of *sefirah* should be observed as days of mourning in memory of the disciples of Rabbi Akiva. In Rav Moshe's opinion, these different customs should be considered as one *minhag*, and the differences between them are variations in observing the same *minhag* (Shu"t Igros Moshe 1:159). This has major halachic ramifications, as we shall see.

Can One Change From One Custom to Another?

We would usually assume that someone must follow the same practice as his parents – or the practice of his community – because of the principle of *al titosh toras imecha*, “do not forsake the Torah of your mother” (*Mishlei* 1:8). This *posuk* is understood by Chazal to mean that we are obligated to observe a practice that our parents observed. However, Rav Moshe Feinstein contends that many of the different customs currently observed are considered to be one *minhag*, and that, when this is the case, changing from one custom to another that is based on the same halachic considerations does not constitute changing one's *minhag* and therefore permitted. There is evidence that other, earlier *poskim* agreed that a community may change its custom how it observes the mourning days of *sefirah* (see Shu"t Chasam Sofer, Orach Chayim #142). According to this opinion, the specific dates that one observes are not considered part of the *minhag* and are not necessarily binding on each individual, as long as he observes thirty-three days of *sefirah* mourning.

How Should a Community Conduct Itself?

The Rema rules that, although each of the various customs mentioned has halachic validity (*Darkei Moshe*, Orach Chayim 493:3), each community should be careful to follow only one practice, and certainly not follow the leniencies of two different customs. If a community follows two different practices, it appears that Hashem's chosen people are following two different versions of the Torah, *G-d forbid*.

Rav Moshe Feinstein points out that the Rema is discussing a community that has only one *beis din* or only one Rav. Under these circumstances, the entire community must follow the exact same practice for *sefirah*. However, in a city where there are many *rabbonim* and *kehilos*, each of which has its own custom regarding the observance of *sefirah*, there is no requirement for the entire community to follow one practice (Shu"t Igros Moshe Orach Chayim 1:159). Thus, there is no requirement that everyone in a large city follow the same custom for *sefirah*, unless it has been accepted that the community has one standard custom.

Of course, as in all matters of halacha, each community should follow its practices and *rabbonim*, and each individual should follow the ruling of his Rav. Attending a Wedding During One's Mourning Period

If a friend schedules a wedding for a time that one is keeping sefirah, one is permitted to attend and celebrate the wedding, even listening to music and dancing (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 1:159).

Thus, although I am required to have a mourning period during sefirah of at least thirty-three days, I may attend the wedding of a friend or acquaintance that is scheduled at a time that I keep the mourning period of sefirah. However, Rav Moshe rules that if one is going to a wedding on a day that he is keeping sefirah, he should not shave, unless his unshaved appearance will disturb the simcha (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 2:95).

We should all hope and pray that the season between Pesach and Shavuot should cease from being a time of travail, but instead revert to being a time of total excitement in anticipation of the receiving of the Torah.

Hilchos Sefirah

8207. There are two major minhagim of Aveilus during Sefirah. One minhag keeps Aveilus from after Pesach until Lag Ba'omer, and one minhag keeps Aveilus from Rosh Chodesh Iyar until Lag Ba'omer and from the day after Lag Ba'omer until Shavuot, (i.e. three days before Shavuot). Shulchan Aruch w/Mishnah Brurah 493:3

[Unless one is part of Kehilla where everyone keeps one minhag, one may change which minhag one wishes to keep from year to year. SA 493:3, S'U Chasam Sofer 142, S'U Minchas Yitzchok 4:84]

8208. During the days of Sefirah we do not make weddings, listen to music (even pre-recorded on a CD), or cut hair (and shave - without a specific heter for work), because during this period 24,000 talmidim of Rabbi Akiva died; therefore we keep some minhagim of Aveilus. Shulchan Aruch w/Mishnah Brurah 493:1

Of the 613 Mitzvos, there are Six Constant Mitzvos. Rather than requiring the performance of a certain action, these mitzvos are a state of being, of living with the reality of God's existence. The Six Constant Mitzvos are:

- * Believe there is a God.
- * Don't believe in other gods.
- * Believe God is one.
- * Love God.
- * Fear God.
- * Don't be misled by your heart and eyes.

From the sefer, *The Six Constant Mitzvos*; the practical aspect to these mitzvos:

1. Eemunah B'Hashem requires that Hashem's existence must be reflected in our decisions and actions.
2. Lo Yihyeh commands us not to seek success through means detached from the instructions God has given us.
3. Yichud Hashem is Living with the awareness that all events and circumstances are orchestrated by Hashem.
4. Ahavas Hashem is to Love Hashem; love life and its opportunities for spiritual growth.
5. Yiras Hashem requires us to live with the awareness of spiritual consequences.
6. Lo Sasuru requires us to take steps to avoid getting distracted and losing sight of our true goals and mission.

Shabbat Shalom: Parshat Acharei Mot (Leviticus 16:1 – 18:30)

By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “And God spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they came near before the Lord and died.” (Leviticus 16:1)

Which is the greater evil in God's eyes – hot sins of passion or cold sins of apathy? Rabbenu Zadok HaKohen of Lublin (1822–1900), in his masterful work *Pri Zaddik* on the portions of the week, cites a famous midrash of an individual walking on a road (life's journey), seductively being summoned either by fire to his right or snow to his left. The wise traveler understands that he must remain at the center, avoiding both extremes of either fanatic passion (fire) or disinterested apathy (snow). But which of the two extremes is more problematic?

A sin of apathy – symbolized by snow – could well describe the infamous transgression of the scouts, tribal chiefs sent by Moses to bring back a report about the land of Israel. Although they did not conceal the positive aspects of the Promised Land (flowing with milk and honey, and grapes so huge eight men were required to carry each cluster), ten of

the scouts nonetheless stressed the negative: a race of people descended from giants who would be impossible to conquer. At the end of the day it was their (and the nation's) apathy toward Israel and disinterest in the religious and political challenge and potential of national sovereignty, which led them to take the path of least resistance and either return to Egypt or remain in the desert. Their sin was one of coldness and disillusionment, a lack of idealism bordering on cynicism.

In contrast to the apathy of the spies, the classic example of a sin of passion may be ascribed to Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's sons who died when they brought an unauthorized offering of “strange fire,” referred to in the beginning of this Torah portion. The initial event describes the dedication of the Sanctuary, amidst all of the pomp and circumstance of the priestly ritual, which achieves a climax when the Almighty sends down a fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice of the Israelites and to demonstrate His acceptance of their service. The people become exultant, fall on their faces in worship! And in this moment of ecstasy Nadav and Avihu, sons of the high priest and major celebrants at this consecration, express their passion for God in bringing a “strange fire which had not been commanded.” They are immediately killed by God in a fire from above. It seems clear that here is the prototypical “sin of fire,” excessive ecstasy which – if not tempered by divine law – can lead to zealous fanaticism which must be stopped in its tracks.

Nevertheless, I would argue that in the scale of transgression, “sins of fire” are generally more forgivable than are “sins of snow.” Even if Nadav and Avihu committed a transgression in bringing their strange fire, Moses mitigates their crime when he communicates God's reaction to his bereft brother: “I will be sanctified through them that come near to me, and before all the people will I be glorified.” (Leviticus 10:3)

The sense of the verse is that although the transgression had to be punished, the perpetrators of the crime are still referred to as being “near” to the divine. In contrast, the apathy of the spies leads to major tragedies throughout the course of Jewish history, starting with the punishment of the entire desert generation: “They will therefore not see the land that I swore to their ancestors.” (Numbers 14:23)

Moreover, the self-imposed passion of Nadav and Avihu, although it leads to the tragic deaths of these two ecstatic celebrants, does not go beyond the “transgressors themselves”; the Bible adds a further commandment several verses after the description of their death: “Drink no wine or strong drink...when you go into into the Tent of Meeting, that you die not...” (Leviticus 10:9)

In effect, the Bible is forbidding unbridled ecstasy within divine service. But this is a far cry from the punishment of the Ninth of Av tragedy (the day of the scouts' report) which portends Jewish exile and persecution for thousands of years!

Finally, one most striking feature of this portion's opening verse, which refers back to the transgression of Aaron's sons who “came near before the Lord and died,” is the absence of the names of Nadav and Avihu. Could the Torah be distinguishing the act from the actors, the crime from its perpetrators? Passion that can lead to fanaticism must be stopped and condemned, but the individuals, whose motives were pure, remain close to the Almighty even in their moment of punishment! And despite the fact that excessive passion resulted in the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, the service in the Temple goes on. Once again, in contrast, when the ten tribal heads refuse to enter the land, they are in effect saying no to the entire plan of God; Jewish history comes to a forty-year standstill because of the apathy, and faithlessness of the scouts. Shabbat Shalom!