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Sefer Kol Aryeh

Harav A. Leib Bakst zt"l (the Rosh Yeshiva of Detroit)
As recorded by Rabbi Dovid Godfrey. Translated with AI assistance
Motzaei Shabbos Parshas Acharei Mos Kedoshim 5756

קדושים תהיו – שמירת המעלה

[Intrinsic Kedushas Yisrael that Cannot be Waived]

[Rav Leib Bakst was my mother's first cousin. So, I had the privilege of observing a Gadol up close. Rav Bakst's essay on שמירת המעלה is all the more remarkable to those who knew Rav Bakst, as he was considered one of the most unassuming and modest of all the great American Roshei Yeshiva. CS]

1. The laws of כהונה are unique to the tribe chosen for special honor within Klal Yisrael, and their status stems from their elevated kedusha as stated in the pesukim ויקרא כ"א ו-ח' קדשים יהיו לאלקיהם וגו' כי את אשי ה' לחם אלקיהם הם מקריבים והיו קדש אשה זנה וחללה לא יקחו וגו' כי קדש הוא לאלקיו וקדשתו כי את לחם אלקיו הוא מקריב קדש יהיה לך וגו'.

These halachos cannot be changed or waived, as derived from וקדשתו בעל כרחו, meaning that if a כהן refuses to separate from prohibited relationships he is compelled until he complies, as stated in Chazal. Similarly, a nazir who separates from wine and tumah attains a high level and is called kadosh as it says כל ימי נזרו קדש הוא לה', and it is obvious that a nazir cannot simply relinquish his kedusha to permit himself wine or tumah.

However, from another angle we find in the mitzvah of השבת אבידה that a זקן may refrain from retrieving a lost object when it is not fitting for his kavod derived from והתעלמת פעמים שאתה. Even so, it is considered proper to go beyond the letter of the law and return it, as in the case of Rabi Yishmael son of Rabi Yosi who acted for משורת הדין. This requires an explanation, what is the difference between retrieving an אבידה that the זקן can forego his honor and כהונה where the כהן cannot waive his status, and likewise a נזיר cannot waive his nezirus.

I recall that in Shanghai there was a כהן עם הארץ who wished to marry a divorcee, and he sent כתב התפטרות (resignation) from his כהונה status, which he even had notarized. Clearly such an idea is absurd. A כהן or nazir cannot waive their status, because their status is not merely an exemption from a mitzva but an intrinsic מדרגה that cannot be waived.

The distinction is that there are two categories, mitzvos and מעלות. Within mitzvos there are פטורים and חיובים, and one may forego the exemption, and even when the exemption is due to kavod, the proper approach is humility and to perform the mitzvah. Therefore a זקן who returns an aveidah despite kavod is acting for משורת הדין not to rely on an exemption [as permitted by ג' רס"ג סעיף ג']. But מדרגות and נזירות are not merely obligations, they are מעלות, and one who attains such a level must preserve it. As the Ibn Ezra explains איש כי יפליא לנדר נדר נזיר, that he performs something wondrous, since most people follow their desires. By separating, he rises to a higher מדרגה similar to a כהן. One who possesses a מדרגה must guard it, and to violate it is a degradation, not humility.

2. The Ramban explains on קדושים תהיו that this extra level of kedusha applies to all of Klal Yisrael. After citing Rashi that it refers to separation from עריות and עבירה, the Ramban adds that the Torah permitted many physical pleasures, such as marital relations, meat, and wine, and one could become a ברשות התורה, indulging excessively while technically remaining within halacha. Therefore, the Torah commands a general פרישות [self-imposed restraint] from excess, to sanctify oneself even in permitted areas, guarding speech, consumption, and conduct, until one attains true פרישות.

Thus, all of Klal Yisrael are obligated to preserve their kedusha through restraint, and one who has a higher מדרגה must act with greater refinement. As the Rambam writes, just as a chacham is distinguished in his דעה, so too he must be distinct in his actions, in his food, speech, dress, and conduct, all of which should be refined and elevated. (Rambam, Hilchos De'os 5:1: ... כשם שהחכם ניכר בהכמתו... כך צריך שיהיה ניכר במעשיו... ויהיו כל המעשים האלו נאים ומתוקנים ביותר) Similarly the Sforno explains regarding a nazir that he must not profane his kedusha by engaging in matters beneath his level, just as a כהן גדול avoids certain involvements. This applies broadly, that one engaged in Torah must not compromise his status.

3. At times even בני תורה justify associating closely with those who are not בני תורה, claiming humility, saying that they are not particular about kavod and can relate to anyone. This is often a mistaken

humility, because it involves relinquishing one's מדרגה and the kedusha of Klal Yisrael, similar to a כהן waiving his כהונה. A תורה בן must maintain his distinct conduct in dress, behavior, and associations. Even activities done לשם שמים, such as exercise, must be conducted in a manner befitting a תורה בן, not imitating improper styles. One must preserve his מעלות in all aspects of life.

The Gemara defines חילול השם as behavior that causes others to be embarrassed by association. If a תורה בן associates with inappropriate public figures, it reflects degradation and חילול השם. Conversely, success and refinement create קידוש השם. ...

Similarly, the Gemara states האוכל בשוק פסול לעדות, and Rashi explains that one who lacks self-respect degrades himself. One might think this is humility, but in truth it reflects a lack of appreciation of one's מדרגה, which is unacceptable.

4. The תלמידים of R' Akiva died because they did not show kavod to one another. This does not mean simple disrespect, but that they established an approach minimizing distinctions, treating all as equal and foregoing kavod. Although this may have been rooted in humility, it was flawed, because the proper approach of a תלמיד חכם is to recognize and honor the elevated status of a תורה בן. There is no place for humility that erases structure and kavod.

I recall that in Europe seating in shul reflected hierarchy, each person according to his standing. When arriving in America after WW II, I was told that here in shul everyone sits equally and no one is particular about kavod. This was presented as a virtue, but in truth it reflects a loss of structure and מדרגה. Equality in this sense erases important distinctions and מדרגות that are important.

5. All beings possess a מדרגה, as man is created בצלם אלקים. This obligates conduct that reflects that status, as רבינו יונה [13th century Rishon] writes that all creation exists for kavod Shamayim, and one who fails to fulfill this purpose undermines his very essence. Kedushas Hashem is expressed through speech, behavior, and all aspects of life, demonstrating that avodas Hashem is central. Thus, a תורה בן should not disregard his מדרגה. A parable is given of a person who wishes to live like an animal, abandoning human dignity. Such behavior would be rejected, because man cannot live as a בהמה. So too, abandoning spiritual dignity is not humility but degradation of צלם אלקים.

Every דבר שבקדושה דבר requires conduct that reflects its kedusha. Regarding Shabbos, the Torah says ויקדש אותו and Chazal explain that one's clothing, speech, and conduct must differ from weekday behavior, so that its מדרגה is recognizable.

6. In all matters of Kedushas Yisrael there is no place for a waiver, and all of Klal Yisrael are obligated to preserve it. This explains the Ramban regarding the avoda zara *Molech*, where the Torah emphasizes חילול מקדשי, referring to Klal Yisrael itself. The Ramban explains that the entire הארץ must act, because such acts damage the kedusha of the entire nation and cause the שכינה to depart. The severity lies in the fact that it is a חילול of Kedushas Yisrael, and therefore all are responsible to remove those who destroy that מדרגה, in order to preserve the kedusha of Klal Yisrael.

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PARSHAS KEDOSHIM – HOLINESS

[Defining and Achieving Jewish Holiness]

THE MISHNAH (Avos 3:14) teaches, "Beloved is Man, for he was created betzelem (in the image of G-d) . . . Beloved is Yisrael, for they are called banim laMakom (children of the Omnipresent)." The explanation of this distinction would seem to be that non-Jews have the potential to develop the middos Elokus (characteristics of G-dliness) within themselves. Bnei Yisrael, however, have a "tzelem Elokim squared," a deeper degree of "the image of G-d" - innate spiritual qualities that we possess from Hashem Himself. Just as children possess the genes of their parents, banim laMakom means that a Jew is not born as a tabula rasa; rather, he has the middos Elokus as "spiritual DNA" already built into his system. Therefore, the passuk that teaches, "You shall be holy, for holy am I, Hashem, your G-d" (Vayikra 19:2) can be understood as follows. Since I, Hashem, have kedushah and I created you, Bnei Yisrael, with a status of banim laMakom, you are obligated to preserve that degree of kedushah already implanted within you and not to distort that tzelem Elokim. This seems to parallel the passuk, "And you shall go in His ways" (Devarim 28:9). This is not a mitzvah to imitate something that we are not. Rather, we are commanded to maintain the "ways of Hashem" that we were born with, to see to it that we do not tarnish those middos Elokus. The very next passuk explains the natural consequence of successfully going in the ways of Hashem: "Then, all the peoples of the earth will see that the Name of Hashem is proclaimed over you."

From the proper way in which we conduct ourselves, we will serve as "a light unto the nations" (Yeshayah 49:6). Once we will demonstrate by example that we have succeeded in preserving our tzelem Elokim, the result, as described in the end of the passuk, will be: "the nations of the world will learn from us how to act with yir'as Shamayim." The nations of the world also have tzelem Elokim, albeit not to the degree of banim laMakom, and they will be able to learn this lesson from Bnei Yisrael and preserve that tzelem Elokim (Gr"a, Divrei Eliyahu). Just as a firstborn child is expected to aid his parents in the raising of his siblings, Bnei Yisrael, referred to as בני בכורי ישראל - "My firstborn son, Yisrael" (Shemos 4:22), are called upon to serve as role models for the nations of the world. This is what being the Am HaNivchar (Chosen Nation) means - that we have the responsibility to influence the other nations by impressing upon them the values of honesty, integrity, and decency by which we live.

On the passuk, "And when He had finished speaking with him, Hashem ascended from upon Avraham" (Bereishis 17:22), the Bereishis Rabbah (47:8) comments: "the Avos, they themselves were the Divine chariot." There was a continuous hashra'as haShechinah upon the Avos. The Mesillas Yesharim (perek 26) understands that this quality was not limited to the Avos, but applies to all tzaddikim who are a merkavah laShechinah. A tzaddik is supposed to act with a degree of kedushah, maintaining the tzelem Elokim that was implanted within him, so that the Divine Presence is recognizable through his actions. Bnei Yisrael, as banim laMakom, are required to act in keeping with their unique status. They should dress and speak properly, in a dignified and honorable fashion, and not like the lower class of

RAV SCHACHTER ON THE PARSHA Vol 1

Insights and Commentary Based on the Shiurim of
Rav Hershel Schachter Adapted by Dr. Allan Weissman
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society. The basis of the obligation of kavod habriyos is due to Man's creation betzelem Elokim. This obligation not only applies in regard to others, but also obligates every person to maintain his own self-dignity. This is the simple explanation of the Ramban's comment regarding קדשים תהיו that the Torah warns that one not be a נבל ברשות - "degenerate within the parameters of what is permitted by the Torah." Since, according to Torah law, one may marry many wives, one could arrange that he would always have one of his wives available to him. A person could be careful to make sure that all the food he eats is kosher, but eat in a gluttonous fashion. Such a person, without refined eating habits and an elegant style in his interpersonal relations, is one who is a נבל ברשות התורה which the command קדשים תהיו addresses.

Many have the mistaken impression that a life of asceticism, consisting of frequent fasting, abject poverty, and withdrawal from social interaction, is considered to be a life of kedushah. This does not seem to be in line with Yahadus's definition of kedushah. The Gemara in Yoma (86a) understands the passuk, ואהבת את ד' אלקיך, - "You shall love Hashem, your G-d" (Devarim 6:5), to include the requirement שיהא שם שמים מתאהב על ידך - "that the name of Heaven become beloved through you." One should act in such a way that those who observe him should "fall in love" with Hashem. People should see the way a Jew acts and become so enamored with Yahadus that they feel compelled to join the Jewish religion. Clearly, in our world, one who lives an ascetic lifestyle will not likely be able to influence others.

Rav Shimon Shkop ז"ל (introduction to Sha'arei Yosher) provides an additional understanding of קדשים תהיו. He defines kedushah as doing for others. The Midrash on קדשים תהיו considers whether the Torah requires that we attain a level of kedushah identical to that of Hashem Himself. The Midrash concludes that since the passuk continues, כי קדוש אני ד', we understand that מקדושתכם - "My kedushah is of a higher level than yours" (Vayikra Rabbah 24:9). [The sefer Da'as Sofer (p. 214) explains that the Tanna'im expounded the passuk in this way because קדשים תהיו is written in the chaser (incomplete) form, without a "vav," while כי קדוש אני is in the malei (full) form, with a "vav," implying that only Hashem has the full degree of kedushah.]

Using his definition of kedushah, Rav Shimon explains the Midrash as follows. Hashem is totally altruistic, as He lacks nothing; He never does anything for His own benefit. Therefore, Chazal considered the possibility that we too must be required to concern ourselves exclusively with the needs of others, ignoring our own needs. However, just as Rabbi Akiva posits, חייך קודמים לחיי חבירך, - "Your own life takes precedence over your fellow's life" (Bava Metzia 62a), Chazal here conclude קדושתך למעלה מקדושתכם, that human beings should not act in the completely altruistic fashion of Hashem. Rav Shimon suggests this as an interpretation of the Mishnah, אם אין איני, וכשאני לעצמי מה אני, - "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am for myself, what am I?" (Avos 1:14). A person must be somewhat selfish; he cannot negate his own needs. However, it is improper to have the attitude that he will act exclusively for himself. Rather, when he is satisfying his own needs, it must be with the recognition that "if I am for myself, what am I?" He must broaden his definition of self to include his spouse, his family, his community, his nation, and ultimately the whole world. He is doing for himself, but he views himself as part of a larger group; he extends

"himself" to include the concerns of many others. According to Rav Shimon, the Ramban's warning not to be a נבל ברשות התורה means that if one involves himself with an overabundance of food and marriage partners, that pursuit will not spill over to help those many others. It will satisfy him alone. One must be selfish enough to meet his own needs only to the extent that by doing so he will be in the position to enable others to satisfy their needs. He will then be able to extend assistance to the many others who are dependent upon him. There is an ancient custom to read Megillas Rus on Shavuot. It is usually assumed that the connection between these two is that they share the element of geirus. Ma'amad Har Sinai is considered to have been the national geirus of Bnei Yisrael (see essay on Parshas Mishpatim), and this Megillah describes the geirus of Rus (Bi'ur HaGr"a, Orach Chaim 490:9, from Avudraham). We may, however, suggest an additional connection. There is a famous Midrash that teaches that Megillas Rus does not include dinim relating to tum'ah or taharah, to issur or to heter. It was written entirely to teach us the great reward reserved for those who bestow acts of kindness upon others (Rus Rabbah 2:15). Because Rus was so kind to her impoverished and widowed mother-in-law, Na'omi, Rus was rewarded by having the Malchus Beis Dovid descend from her. It is interesting that according to Rav Shimon's understanding, bestowing acts of kindness upon others is synonymous with the concept of kedushah. This is the reason Megillas Rus, the "Megillah of kindness," is also the "Megillah of geirus," because geirus is the acceptance upon oneself of kedushas Yisrael.

Mesillas Yesharim (perek 26) seems to present yet another definition of קדשים תהיו. By way of introduction, the Radak comments on the passuk, משה עבד ד', - "Moshe, servant of Hashem" (Yehoshua 1:1), that the term "eved Hashem" should be understood in the same way as one who is a servant to his human Master. In regard to the acquisitions of an eved, Chazal teach, מה שקנה עבד קנה רבו, - "Whatever a slave acquires, his Master automatically acquires" (Pesachim 88b). Moshe is described as an eved because his entire life was dedicated to the service of Hashem. He led his life for the sole purpose of the performance of mitzvos. He gave himself over to Hashem and belonged fully to Him. This is similar to Rashi's comment on the passuk, וירד משה מן ההר אל העם, - "Moshe descended from the mountain to the people" (Shemos 19:14). Moshe did not attend to his own business, but rather went directly from the mountain to the people. This attitude is not only reserved for tzaddikim; Hashem desires that all of us be avadim, כי לי בני ישראל עבדים, - "For Bnei Yisrael are servants to Me" (Vayikra 25:55). The Rambam (Hilchos Deos 3:2) elaborates on this theme in explaining the passuk, בכל דרכיך דעהו, - "In all your ways know Him" (Mishlei 3:6). Whatever one does in the course of his daily life, including eating, sleeping, or working, should be done leshem Shamayim. For example, eating a nutritious meal in order to maintain good health, including some dessert to put one in a good mood, can be viewed as being done leshem Shamayim. However, excessive eating, as in the Ramban's description of the נבל ברשות התורה, is not performed for the sake of good health and cannot be viewed as being done leshem Shamayim. Following this approach to life is how one can "know" Hashem in all of his ways.

The sefer Yesod VeShoresh Ha'Avodah (sha'ar 1, perek 8), elaborating on what he refers to as the "klal hagadol (great principle) of the Chovos HaLevavos" (Sha'ar Avodas Ha'Elokim, perek 4),

teaches that there are not really three categories of human activities - obligatory mitzvos, prohibited aveiros, and a middle category of devar reshus (optional activities). In truth, there are only two categories, because the term devar reshus is a misnomer. The middle category is termed devar reshus only because those activities are not absolute mitzvos or aveiros, but rather are dependent upon one's particular circumstance. In the case of food, for example, if one must consume a given food to be healthy and satisfied, then partaking of the food is obligatory. If the food is unnecessary and excessive, it is prohibited to partake of it. There is no truly optional activity that one has the choice to perform or to abstain from.

This is the basis of the Mesillas Yesharim's concept of kedushah. Just as *הקדשים* - "the Kohanim eat [the korban] and the owners then gain atonement" (Pesachim 59b), a purely physical act can be a source of great spirituality as long as it is performed *leshem Shamayim*. Once considered within the realm of kedushah, the concept of *פשטה קדושה בכלולה* - "the sanctity spreads through the entire being" (Kiddushin 7a) will apply to it. Moreover, the principle of *מוסיפין מחול על הקודש* - "we add from the profane (weekday) onto the holy" (Yoma 81b) applies. Whenever it can, kedushah spreads and extends itself. The purely physical acts performed *leshem Shamayim* will lead to a sense of *פשטה קדושה בכלולה* and all of one's actions, *בכל דרכיך*, will be considered *leshem Shamayim*.

Perhaps we may add the following contemporary message. On the phrase *קדשים תהיו* Rashi quotes the comment of Chazal, "Be removed from the forbidden relationships and from sin [of immoral nature], for wherever you find restriction of immorality, you find kedushah." The Mishnah reports a related teaching of the Anshei Kenesses HaGedolah, *עשו סייג לתורה* - "Make a guard for the Torah" (Avos 1:1). Mesillas Yesharim (perek 26) writes that it is a common mistake to think that the obligation to create *harchakos* (safeguards) rests solely on the Sanhedrin. In truth, the obligation, *ושמרתם את משמרת* (Vayikra 18:30), expounded to mean, *עשו משמרת למשמרת* - "Make a safeguard for My charge" (Yevamos 21a), devolves upon each individual as well. Whatever Chazal saw fit to prohibit as a *seyag* is applicable in every place and time, in all situations. But each person, depending on his own occupation, society, and generation, must realize that if he finds himself in a situation in which he may be led to sin, he must make his own personal *harchakos*. We live in a society with a great deal of *pritzus* and *geneivah*, and it would seem that we are obligated to make our own personal *harchakos* in these areas.

While it is true that one should endeavor to lead his life in a manner that is *מערבת עם הבריות* - "compatible with people" (Kesubos 17a), "that only applies if they are humans who conduct their lives as humans, not if they are humans who perform animalistic actions" (Mesillas Yesharim, perek 5). The Torah warns us specifically, "Do not perform the practice of the land of Egypt, in which you dwelled, and do not perform the practice of the land of Canaan to which I bring you" (Vayikra 18:3). There is, of course, much that is positive that we can learn and gain from the nations of the world. The Midrash teaches, *אם יאמר לך אדם יש חכמה בגוים תאמין* - "If one will tell you there is wisdom by the nations, believe it" (Eichah Rabbasi 2:17), and the Gemara describes certain rules of etiquette that we gleaned from the Persians (Berachos 8b). We must be extremely careful, however, not to pick up the negative characteristics of the lower levels of society. In order to properly differentiate, one needs to have a strong *masorah*, which informs our attitudes, not just our

halachic system. Proper *hashkafah* is also part of our Torah SheBe'al Peh tradition. This is clearly indicated by the opening line of Pirkei Avos, the Maseches dedicated to the transmission of what the Torah considers to be ethical behavior: *משה קבל תורה מסיני* - "Moshe received the Torah from Sinai."

The Yalkut HaRe'uveini (from Midrash HaNe'elam) attributes great significance to the inverted nunim found before and after the section of *ויהי בנסוע הארון* in Parshas Beha'aloscha (Bamidbar 10:35-36), teaching that the non-Jews have been excluded from these nunim and that it is through these nunim that Hashem is destined to redeem Bnei Yisrael in the times of Mashiach. The word "nun" in Aramaic means fish, and the Gemara in Avodah Zarah (39a) tells us that a sign of a kosher fish is that it possesses a spine, enabling it to survive in a river in which the waters flow forcefully. The inverted form of these nunim, then, represents the idea that the Jewish People must be like the kosher fish, which has the ability to swim upstream, against the powerful force of the current of societal pressure. One must consult with our *ba'alei masorah* to determine which aspects of our society are acceptable and lend themselves to an attitude of *עם הבריות* and which unacceptable aspects require of us to be unyielding, to travel against the tide.

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date: Apr 22, 2026, 11:57 PM

subject: Rav Frand - What Might Have Been? Mourning Past Tragedies

Rav Frand

Parshas Acharei Mos

What Might Have Been? Mourning Past Tragedies

These *divrei Torah* were adapted from the *hashkafa* portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1378 – Standing Up for One's Parents – Why Don't Most People Practice This Mitzvah? Good Shabbos!

Parshas Acharei Mos begins with the *pasuk*: "Hashem spoke to Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons, when they approached before Hashem and they died." (Vayikra 16:1). Parshas Acharei Mos describes the intricate *avodah* (priestly service) of Yom Kippur in the Beis Hamikdash. In fact, this is the *krias Hatorah* of Yom Kippur. In many *machzorim*, there is a comment from the Zohar printed at the beginning of this *krias Hatorah*, which states that if someone sheds tears when he hears the words "After the death of the two sons of Aharon," he will be saved from losing any of his children during his lifetime. In other words, if a person shows his compassion and empathy for Aharon's loss of Nadav and Avihu, it is a *segula* that he will be spared from a similar loss.

The *Ponevezher Rav* (Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman 1886-1969), *zt"l*, commented: Over the course of Jewish history, there have been many unfortunate incidents in Klal Yisrael where people have died, and yet we find no such similar *segula* – that crying for those who died in the past will spare us from similar tragedy. What is unique about the death of Nadav and Avinu that should literally move us to tears? Anyone who knows anything about the life of the *Ponevezher Rav* will appreciate the answer he gave to his question. The *Ponevezher Rav* said that we know from the previous *parsha* (Shemini) that Nadav and Avihu were not just any two people from that generation. They were unique and special to the extent that Chazal say that

Moshe Rabbeinu told his brother that he knew that the Mishkan would be sanctified through the death of those “close to Me,” but he thought that would be either himself or Aharon (see Rashi on the words “bikrovai akadesh” (Vayikra 10:3)). “But now that I see it was Nadav and Avihu who died during the sanctification of the Mishkan, I realize that they were greater than you and me.”

It is hard to imagine, but Moshe Rabbeinu said that Nadav and Avihu were greater in certain respects than even Moshe and Aharon! If that is the case, said the Ponevezher Rav, what type of effect would the leadership of Nadav and Avihu have had on Klal Yisrael, if it would have had a chance to come into effect? Consequently, the death of Nadav and Avihu is not just a singular event that affected Aharon Hakohen. Rather, not having two leaders like Nadav and Avihu had a generational effect. It effected the entire generation that did not benefit from being led by Nadav and Avihu, who were even greater than Moshe and Aharon. The whole nature of Klal Yisrael could have been changed by being led by these two great figures.

Rav Kahaneman explained an incredible insight into the Holocaust based on this explanation. Six million Jews were killed. Among them were many gedolei olam and gedolei Yisrael. Great roshei yeshivos were killed – such as Rav Elchonon Wasserman, Rav Menachem Zamba; and great admorim with whole courts of chassidic followers were just wiped out. Beyond that, millions of pious individuals, men of action, beautiful Jews, were killed. What would Klal Yisrael have looked like had there not been a Holocaust? It would have changed everything.

Here we are, eighty years post-Holocaust, so we are finally demographically getting back to where we were. Torah has been rebuilt. Chassidus has been rebuilt. But the Holocaust remains a tragedy of untold dimensions. If by Nadav and Avihu, we need to cry because we think ‘what could have been?’ so too, we must ask ourselves ‘What would have been had there not been a Holocaust?’ These thoughts are obviously related to the days of the sefiras haomer counting as well. During these days, we mourn the 24,000 talmidim (students) of Rabbi Akiva. These people were all future tana'im, disciples of the great Rabbi Akiva. There would have been 24,000 more tana'im. What effect would they have had on the future of Klal Yisrael? There are certain tragedies that have national ramifications, not only for their generation but for all future generations as well.

That is why we need to mourn the tragedy of Nadav and Avihu, the tragedy of the Holocaust, and the tragedy of the 24,000 talmidim of Rabbi Akiva.

The Precious Ones of Jerusalem

The Gemara says in Masseches Yoma that significant effort was made to keep the Kohen Gadol awake on the night of Yom Kippur. They didn't want the Kohen Gadol to fall asleep on that night. Bear that in mind when we think about the avodas Yom Hakippurim. Shavuot is coming up and we know what it is like to stay up the whole night. We know what it is like when we get home at seven o'clock in the morning. We make a bee-line for our beds and want to get into them as soon as possible. We know what we sometimes look like at three or four o'clock in the morning when we are falling asleep over our Gemara or whatever it is we are studying. It is tough to stay up at night.

But we don't let the Kohen Gadol fall asleep. We try hard to keep him awake. One of the strategies the Gemara mentions is that the

young kohanim stayed up with him on the night of Yom Kippur, learning with him and snapping their fingers at him if he seemed to be dozing off. But the Gemara says that there is another measure that they used. The “yakeeray Yerushalayim” (special people of Jerusalem) would stay up that night, moving around in the streets and creating a tumult and commotion. They did this to make noise so that the Kohen Gadol should not fall asleep. (Yoma 19b)

I saw an interesting observation from the present Tolner Rebbe: Why are they called the “yakeeray Yerushalayim?” Seemingly, this complementary title is specifically given to these people who used to roam the streets making a commotion on the night of Yom Kippur but not to the young kohanim who had a much more direct role in the process because they actually stayed up with the Kohen Gadol, trying in their own way to prevent him from falling asleep. They should also be called “yakeeray Yerushalayim!”

The Tolner Rebbe notes that the people who were in the chamber of the Kohen Gadol on the night of Yom Kippur had a tremendous opportunity and a tremendous honor. The Kohen Gadol got to know and interact with them personally! What an experience that must have been! Those who had the privilege of being with him that special night were among the chosen few of the entire population! On the other hand, the “yakeeray Yerushalayim” were anonymous individuals walking the streets, talking out loud, schmoozing and making a commotion. The Kohen Gadol didn't know them. All he knew was that they were creating a racket outside that prevented him from falling asleep. There was no kavod and no sense of satisfaction in being part of this group. They were doing it anonymously, solely lishma (for the purpose of the a mitzva).

That earns them the title “yakeeray Yerushalayim.” When someone does something without the expectation of any kavod or any satisfaction, it is deserving of praise. The closest thing that I ever came to these pirchei kehuna was many years ago on Yom Kippur when I was still a bochur. Rav Ruderman, who was getting older, had to go home in the middle of davening. He asked me to walk home with him. I remember it vividly. The Rosh Yeshiva was in his tallis, his kittel and his hat. I was walking him home, arm in arm. Do you know what the Rosh Yeshiva told me on that night of Yom Kippur? Absolutely nothing. He walked in silence – which is itself a lesson. Rav Ruderman was a schmoozer – in learning and in other things – but that night of Yom Kippur, he said absolutely nothing. But, nevertheless, I was feeling good. I had the privilege of walking the Rosh Yeshiva home. I felt close to the Rosh Yeshiva.

So imagine these kids – the pirchei kehuna – the young kohanim sitting there in the Kohen Gadol's chamber on the night of Yom Kippur. This is something they could tell their grandchildren about! But the “yakeeray Yerushalayim?” No one knew them. No one heard from them. Those who do that kind of thing in anonymity earn the title “the special ones of Jerusalem.”

We Only See Shortcomings in Other People

I saw an interesting Medrash Tanchuma: Bar Kapara in the name of Rabi Yirmiya ben Elazar states that the sons of Aharon died for four reasons. Because of: (1) “coming close” (2) the “offering” (3) the “foreign fire,” and (4) the fact that they did not consult with one another. The Medrash elaborates: “coming close” – that they entered the Kodosh Kadoshim (Holy of Holies). “The offering” – that they brought an offering they were not commanded to offer. The foreign fire” – that they brought fire that was not from the mizbayach (altar).

“And they did not ask each other for advice before proceeding with their offering.”

We need to understand this last critique: The pasuk says that they brought the korban together. Clearly, they were partners in this ill-advised offering. The Medrash infers from the expression “ish machtoso” (each man his fire-pan) that they each independently had this idea to bring a foreign fire. They each took their own pan and did not consult with one another prior to this undertaking.

The question must be asked: If they both came up with this same idea of offering a fire that was not commanded, how would asking each other have helped?

Nadav: “You know what? — I’m thinking of bringing my own korban in the Kodosh Kodoshim.”

Avihu: “Hey! I was thinking the exact same thing! That’s a great idea!”

So what does the Medrash mean that they are culpable for not consulting with one another? If they would have consulted, would it have changed anything?

Rav Dovid Soloveitchik, z”l (1921-2021), shared an interesting observation: If they would have asked each other about the idea of bringing a korban that was not commanded into the Kodosh Kodoshim with a foreign fire, the other one would have responded, “Are you out of your mind!? You can’t do that. We are not permitted to do that!” Why would that have been his reaction if he himself was about to do the same thing? That this is a profound insight into human beings: The answer is that we see chisronos (shortcomings) in other people. We don’t see them in ourselves.

Many times, I see someone doing something and I say to myself “That’s not right!” or “That’s silly!” and then I turn around and notice that it is something that I also do. So how come I question this very action when I see someone else do it? The answer is that I see the flaw in someone else, but I don’t see it in myself.

If Nadav would have asked Avihu “What do you think of this idea?” Avihu would have been ready and capable of seeing and pointing out the shortcoming in his brother’s plan, even though he had been thinking along those very same lines himself.

The Medrash is implying that had they asked one another, perhaps they would have stopped each other. Like the Mishna (Negaim 2:5) says (in a play on words): A person may see all types of negaim other than his own negaim. A kohen may pasken the status of a tzaraas-like blemish on any other person, but he is unable to rule regarding his own tzaraas-like blemish. This is the straight halacha. The message of this halacha, however, is that a person cannot see his own blemishes. We don’t see our own shortcomings. We are very good at seeing them in other people, but not in ourselves.

The Medrash is implying that if Nadav and Avihu had asked each other before going ahead with their korbanos, each brother would have responded, “Hey! You cannot do that. You are going to be chayav meesah (deserving death).” However, they did not take counsel from each other and therefore “the two sons of Aharon died” (Vayikra 10:2).

Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem

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חיים Rav Chaim Friedlander zt"l

[Rav Chaim Friedlander (1923-1986) was the Mashgiach in Ponevitzh yeshiva in B'nei Brak and Yeshivas HaNegev in Netivot]

Translated from original Hebrew

את משפטי תעשו ואת חקתי תשמרו ללכת בהם אני ה' אל-קיום - שמרתם את חוקותי ואת משפטי אשר יעשה אותם האדם וחי בהם אני ה'

Achrei Mos 18:4-5

חיים [FOUR LEVELS OF AVODAS HASHEM]

Chazal darshen: וחי בהם ולא שימות בהם *you shall live by them and not die by them*. The simple understanding is that the Torah was given so that a person should live through it. Therefore, even issurim are set aside when necessary in order to preserve life, with only specific, exceptional cases where one must give up his life. However, we must further analyze the positive meaning of the pasuk וחי בהם. What exactly is this “life” that the Torah gives? Certainly, it does not refer merely to physical life. Rather, it points to a deeper form of vitality, the preservation and inner life of the נפש (soul), and only in rare cases is one commanded to sacrifice himself. We must still understand more deeply the חייב inherent in וחי בהם. What is this life that Torah provides? Clearly, it is not just גשמיים חיים. Rather, it relates to שמירת הנפש. This is why pikua'ch nefesh overrides the entire Torah.

In order to properly understand the meaning of וחי בהם, we must approach it through the framework explained by the Ramban (Achrei 18:4) who clarifies the different levels that exist within the true, spiritual life of a person:

רמב"ן אחרי מות 18:4 ודע כי חיי האדם במצות כפי הכנתו להם [א] כי העושה המצות שלא לשמן על מנת לקבל פרס יחיה בהן בעולם הזה ימים רבים בעושר ובנכסים וכבוד ... [ב] וכן אותם אשר הם מתעסקין במצות על מנת לזכות בהן לעולם הבא שהם העובדים מיראה זוכים בכוננתם להנצל ממשפטי הרשעים ... [ג] והעוסקין במצות מאהבה כדן וכראוי עם עסקי העולם הזה יזכו בעולם הזה לחיים טובים כמנהג העולם ולחיי העולם הבא... [ד] והעוברים כל עניני העולם הזה ואינם משגיחים עליו כאילו אינם בעלי גוף וכל מחשבתם וכוננתם בבוראם בלבד כאשר היה הענין באליהו בהדבק נפשם בשם הנכבד יחיו

Level I: Performing mitzvos for reward in this world

The first level: It is known that a person’s spiritual life within mitzvos is defined by his כוונה in performing them. One who performs mitzvos שלא לשמן in order to receive reward will merit through them an abundance of success in olam hazeh, wealth, possessions, and honor, as it says וישר וכבוד *in its left hand are wealth and honor*, and Chazal explain (שבת סג) that this refers to those who approach Torah in a secondary manner.

Although it is not proper to serve Hashem שלא לשמה in order to receive reward, nevertheless, as a preparatory stage toward לשמה, it is permitted to utilize שלא לשמה. At this level, however, a person’s avodas Hashem remains constrained within the framework of receiving reward. His entire orientation is still within olam hazeh. Accordingly, his “life” is defined by that framework, and his reward is given within that same plane, material success, wealth, and honor, since that is what he seeks.

This is also the meaning of what Chazal say (שבת פח) לימינים בה סמא דחיי (שבת פח) *for those who take it with the right hand it is an elixir of life, and for those who take it with the left hand it is an elixir of death*. Rashi explains, לימינים refers to those who engage in Torah בכל כוחם, while למשמאילים refers to those who engage שלא לשמה. If a person uses סם חיים as a means to arrive at לשמה, then Torah becomes for him a שלא לשמה. But if he remains fixed in לשמה and seeks only reward, then the Torah becomes, chas v’shalom, a סם המות, because his entire sense of life is confined to the limited perspective of olam hazeh.

This idea is reflected in פסחים נ: *כי גדול עד שמים* in the distinction between *for Your kindness extends until the heavens* versus *Your kindness extends above the heavens*. As long as a person’s framework remains within *olam hazeh*, even if elevated to the level of “the

heavens,” his *chesed* and his “life” are still bounded. But true *חסד*, and thus true *חיים*, are מעל השמים, beyond those limits. This reinforces that remaining within an *olam hazeh* orientation, even a refined one, is inherently limited.

Level II: הם מתעסקין במצות על מנת ליכות בהן לעולם הבא שהם העובדים מיראה
Performing mitzvos in order to merit in the next world

The second level consists of those who engage in mitzvos in order to merit Gan Eden. This is עבודה מיראה, motivated by fear of punishment and desire for reward, and about them it is said *ונפשם בטוב תלין*, *their soul will rest in goodness*. They are saved from the judgment of the *resha'im* and attain a portion in *olam haba*. As the רמב"ן puts it: ולחיי עולם הבא זכותם שלמות שם. This level represents a clear advancement over the first. There, the person's orientation was toward *olam hazeh*, whereas here his focus has shifted to a spiritual reality. Nevertheless, this is still not a complete level, since the *avodah* is driven by external considerations, namely שכר and עונש, rather than by the intrinsic truth of serving Hashem. It is therefore categorized as יראה, even though it yields real and lasting reward.

Accordingly, the “life” associated with this level is already a spiritual one, but it remains defined by what the person receives rather than by what he becomes. His connection to Torah and mitzvos is still mediated through the outcome they produce, even if that outcome is *olam haba* rather than *olam hazeh*.

Level III: מאהבה העוסקין במצות מאהבה
Performing mitzvos from love of Hashem

The third level consists of those who perform mitzvos מאהבה, properly and in the correct manner, while engaging in *olam hazeh* only out of necessity. Their involvement in the physical world is limited to what is required; it is not the מקום of their *חיים*. Rather, their true life is in the פנימיות of *avodas Hashem*, and *olam hazeh* functions only as a כלי to enable that *avodah*. At this level, the person serves Hashem מתוך אהבה not out of a desire for reward, whether in *olam hazeh* or even in *olam haba*. This corresponds to the Rambam (הלכות תשובה פ"י) who writes מצוות התורה אל יאמר אדם הריני עושה מצוות התורה כדי שאקבל הברכות... אלא יעשה האמת מפני שהוא אמת *a person should not say I perform mitzvos in order to receive blessings... rather he should do the truth because it is truth*. Any שפע or success that comes is not the goal, but merely a means provided so that one can continue to serve Hashem.

Nevertheless, there is still a distinction to be made. One who serves Hashem מיראה in order to merit *olam haba* remains in the previous level, since his *avodah* is still defined by what he receives. Here, by contrast, the person's *avodah* is no longer oriented around שכר at all. Even when reward exists, it is incidental and does not define his *חיים*.

Accordingly, the “life” of this level is already of a different quality. It is not a life that comes from what a person attains, but from the *avodah* itself. The person is no longer living for something external; he is living בתוך עבודת ה'.

The reward of those who serve out of love: The reward of those who serve Hashem מאהבה is fundamentally different from the earlier levels. Even though they do receive reward, both in *olam hazeh* and in *olam haba*, that reward is not the objective of their *avodah*. Rather, it is given to them only as a means to enable and expand their *avodas Hashem*.

As the Rambam explains (הלכות תשובה פ"י), all the good that a person receives is not the purpose of mitzvos but a consequence of them. The *brachos* of *olam hazeh* are provided so that a person will have the ability and clarity to continue learning Torah and fulfilling mitzvos. Thus, success, health, and tranquility are not “payment,” but conditions that allow for deeper *avodah*.

Accordingly, one who serves מאהבה does not view reward as something he is striving toward. Even when he receives שפע, it does not define his *life*, because his life is already rooted in the *avodah* itself. The *schar* he receives is therefore qualitatively different from that of the earlier levels. It does not constitute his *חיים*; it merely supports them.

This is the meaning of what the Rambam concludes, that the ultimate טוב is הבא. Not because it is a “reward” in the ordinary sense, but because it is the natural continuation and completion of a life lived in דבקות. For one who serves מאהבה, *olam haba* is not something separate that he attains; it is the extension of the very life he is already living.

Level IV: מתוך דבקות בבוראם Serving Hashem העוזבים כל עניני העולם הזה
cleaving to Hashem

The fourth level consists of those who serve Hashem גמורה in complete closeness to Hashem. At this level, a person no longer serves for any form of reward, not in *olam hazeh* and not even in *olam haba*. His entire *avodah* is rooted purely in ה' אהבת itself, without any external consideration. This represents the highest level of שלימות. Even the framework of “reward” no longer plays a role here. The person is not motivated by what he will receive, but by the עצם הקשר with Hashem. His *חיים* are not defined by attainment at all, but by the reality of that connection.

At this level, a person has already, in a sense, transcended the ordinary structure of שכר. He has refined himself to the point that he no longer requires external incentives, whether material or spiritual. His entire existence is directed toward *avodas Hashem*, and that itself is his life. This is the fulfillment of ואהבת את ה' אלקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאודך *you shall love Hashem your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might*, an אהבה שאינה תלויה בדבר. The person's vitality is the דבקות itself. He is not seeking life through Torah; he is living it fully through his connection to Hashem.

Accordingly, the meaning of וחי בהם reaches its fullest expression here. The “life” of Torah is no longer something granted or even something cultivated. It is identical with the person's very existence, as he lives entirely בתוך עבודת ה'.

The body will receive its reward in olam haba together with the soul: To understand this level, Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (רמח"ל) explains what benefit the body can receive. In order to remove the defilement of the sin of Adam HaRishon, the neshamah ascends to *olam ha'elyon* while the body remains below. Yet it is established that the body, too, will receive reward in *olam haba*. Since Hashem created man as גוף ונשמה together to serve Him, and together they carried out Torah and mitzvos, the ultimate reward must also be shared. Just as the body was a partner in the *avodah*, so too it shares in the reward.

The body's שלימות begins only after the neshamah has received its תיקון in the grave and has been refined in *olam ha'elyon*. The neshamah then returns, purifies the body, refines its חומר, and elevates it to its proper level. At that point, the neshamah becomes dominant, and the body becomes fit to receive from its radiance, as Chazal describe regarding *techiyas hameisim*.

This process culminates in a level where the body no longer acts as a barrier to the neshamah, but as an instrument through which its light is expressed. Although the neshamah remains spiritual and the body physical, the body is refined to the point that it can receive, in its own way, from the neshamah's radiance.

This is the meaning of the Ramban's statement that the *tzaddikim* will be resurrected and will not return to dust. Their bodies will become so refined that, after תחיית המתים, they will rise further, following a prior purification of both body and soul through which the חומר itself is transformed and made capable of sharing in that radiance.

Different dimensions of “life” based on a person's level of evaluation: Chazal conclude, based on the Ramban, that the meaning of life varies according to the structure of the אדם. As the Torah say: *your days will be lengthened* למען יאריך ימך *that you may live and prolong your days*, because a person's life is measured in accordance with his inner state. The true *חיים* are the eternal ones, as the Torah states *length of days is in its right hand*, meaning that through Torah one attains a form of existence that is not limited to the physical.

Accordingly, the Torah gives a person his true *חיים*, aligning with his level. Thus, the *pasuk* וחי בהם refers to these higher *חיים*, not merely physical survival. As explained in (שער א פרק י"ד) נפש החיים שם הויה represents the totality of existence, and a person must attach himself to Torah and mitzvos in order to draw that *חיים* into himself.

From this perspective, the earlier levels also take on new meaning. Even in the lower מדרגות, a person receives life in accordance with his level, and that life itself prepares him for the higher reality of *olam haba*.

The higher levels, however, bring a person to a fundamentally different awareness. As the Rambam explains (הלכות תשובה פ"י), one who serves Hashem properly does so not for reward, but because the truth itself compels him. This awareness opens a person to a deeper experience of היים, one rooted in connection rather than attainment.

Chazal illustrate this with a משל: a person standing outside a palace longs to enter. As he draws closer, his desire intensifies until he reaches the entrance and is allowed inside. Once within, he no longer stands at a distance; he lives inside the palace itself. So too, a person initially seeks closeness to Hashem from afar, but through Torah and mitzvos he is gradually brought inside, until his entire existence is lived within that closeness.

Even so, a person can engage in Torah and mitzvos without fully internalizing this awareness, if he does not connect them to their ultimate purpose. In such a case, he has not yet truly entered the deeper dimension of life that Torah offers.

Ultimately, through avodas Hashem, a person must strive to internalize the Torah's truths so that they shape his entire being. Through this, he draws himself closer to Hashem and becomes worthy of receiving the true היים, both in this world and in the next.

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Love Isn't Enough

By Rabbi Moshe Taragin

There are so many powerful verses in the Torah. Some speak of divine presence in this world, whether through creation or through supernatural intervention. Others describe the historical covenant forged between Hashem and His people, centered upon His land. And there are those that articulate fundamental beliefs, such as Shema Yisrael, which distills faith into a few words. Finally, there are dramatic verses that trace the lives of our great Biblical figures, Avraham and Moshe, capturing their struggles and heroics. Yet the great sage Rabbi Akiva chose a different verse as the most essential in the Torah: "Ve'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho". Love your fellow as yourself. He places the center of Torah not in belief, but in the way a person turns toward others. Compassion, a readiness to step beyond the self, forms the bedrock of both human character and religious life. Without mercy and compassion, piety slowly erodes, losing its moral core.

The Language of Action

The centrality of loving another as oneself had already been articulated generations earlier by a different sage, an intellectual forerunner of Rabbi Akiva. Decades earlier Hillel had already placed this trait at the heart of religious life. A potential but impatient convert approached Shammai, requesting "conversion on one foot," what we would call "religion in fifteen minutes". Shammai, quite understandably, turned him away. Judaism cannot be absorbed in haste. The greatest minds across generations have devoted entire lives to probing the depth and divine mystery of Torah. Hillel responded differently. He recognized that not everyone arrives with the same patience or intellectual endurance. Rather than dismiss the request, he offered a point of entry. He directed the convert to focus on loving one's fellow as the core of religious experience, a principle simple enough to begin with, yet one that can guide a person through the entirety of religious life. Interestingly, Hillel did not merely identify love for another Jew as the central tenet of religious life. He gave it definition and measure. The command to love can remain abstract and difficult to grasp. People often hurt those they love. Love and hurt often walk hand in hand. Hillel redirected the convert toward action rather than emotion. "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow". In reframing the command, Hillel made it concrete. It's not simple to feel love for every person. Jews, by nature, are confident and often stubborn. Differences in outlook inevitably lead to friction. Hillel wasn't asking for perfect emotion; he was guiding behavior. Treat others with dignity and respect, even when you disagree, even when they irritate you. Use your own expectations as the standard. Don't impose upon others what you yourself would find hurtful. Instead of speaking in abstract terms, Hillel anchored the mitzvah in daily conduct. This idea, to "treat others as you

would wish to be treated", has spread far beyond its source to many religions. Many assume it appears explicitly in the Torah, but the Torah speaks in the language of love. Hillel translated that language into behavior, into something lived and practiced. Separated by only a few generations, Hillel and Rabbi Akiva arrived at a shared center. Treating others with dignity stands at the heart of Jewish identity. Among all the powerful verses in the Torah, this one emerges as central and can serve as a portal to growth in religious life.

The Image of Man

Yet this wasn't the only way to define the center of Torah. Interestingly, there was a dissenting voice. A different sage pointed to a very different verse as the most central in the Torah. Ben Azzai turned not to the command to love, but to a verse in Bereishis that describes the creation of man. In the fifth chapter, the Torah presents man as having been created b'tzelem Elokim, in the image of Hashem. Of course, this cannot refer to any physical likeness, as Hashem has no form or semblance. Rather, it points to a cluster of capacities that set human beings apart from the rest of the natural world. We possess (i) emotion, (ii) free will, (iii) moral awareness, (iv) self-reflection, (v) creativity, (vi) language, and (vii) the ability to form deep relationships. These qualities are either absent in other creatures or appear only in limited form. It's precisely this distinction that defines us. We stand apart from nature, and in that difference we reflect our Creator, who stands beyond nature entirely. Our distance from the natural order isn't accidental; it's the imprint of the Divine image within us.

By highlighting this verse instead of "Ve'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho," Ben Azzai introduced two important shifts. First, this verse isn't a commandment but an assertion about human nature. Hillel and Rabbi Akiva identified a formal mitzvah as central. Ben Azzai suggested that the axis of Torah values can emerge from a statement about who we are. Religious life is shaped not only by obligation, but also by how we understand the human being, by the moral awareness embedded within us and by the way we see the world and our place within it. It's striking that, in Ben Azzai's view, the central verse describes who we are rather than telling us what to do. Second, Ben Azzai widened the scope of compassion and respect from fellow Jews to humanity as a whole. The command to love your neighbor is directed toward those who are your ideological neighbors, those who share your identity and way of life. The verse in Bereishis speaks more broadly. Every human being is created b'tzelem Elokim. That shared divine imprint demands a wider circle of respect. Honoring another person is, in effect, honoring the One who fashioned him. When that respect is absent, it reflects not only a failure toward others, but a failure in our regard for Hashem.

Losing Hope

It's not always easy to respect every human being and the divine image within him. We stand at the edge of a major shift that may reshape how we understand ourselves. No one knows exactly where this is headed. Will AI elevate our sense of human dignity, as we begin to generate creativity itself? Or will this process continue to erode what makes us distinct and chip away at our image of man? This process has been unfolding for centuries. Copernicus taught us that our planet isn't the center of the universe. Darwin taught that we weren't created as wholly distinct, but share an evolutionary branch with other primates. Freud taught that we don't fully possess free will, but are often driven, almost irresistibly, by darker psychological forces within us. With each step, something of human uniqueness felt diminished. Creativity remained one of the final markers of distinction. If even that begins to fade, how will we understand ourselves? This question will take time to unfold, but it will shape how we see the human being and what it means to be created in the image of Hashem.

Of course, even before any of this unfolds, the world already feels unmoored, gripped by hatred and drawn toward false narratives. The hostility we face, and the poor judgment we see around us, can tempt a person to lose faith in humanity. So many seem unable, or unwilling, to recognize the moral clarity of our cause. It's easy, in a world filled with hatred and antisemitism, to give up on man, or to lose faith in human potential. Ben

Azzai reminds us that every human being carries that potential. People don't always rise to it, and at times they distort it. Still, to live as a believing Jew is to hold onto faith in humanity, even when that faith isn't easily earned.

<https://vinnews.com/2026/04/19/how-rav-dov-landau-shlita-saved-the-sheitels/>

How Rav Dov Landau Shlita Saved the Sheitels

April 19, 2026

By Rabbi Yair Hoffman

It was the spring of 2004. Frum women everywhere faced a quandary. In Brooklyn many of them set curbside bonfires of their own sheitels. In Beit Shemesh, women who had spent two thousand dollars on a sheitel traded it for a five-dollar kerchief overnight. In Far Rockaway, the Moros of the Beis Yaakovs went home as the schoolday began and changed their sheitels to tichels. In Cleveland, a frum girls' school actually closed for a day because the teachers did not know what to put on their heads.

The question racing through the community was simple and terrifying: was the sheitel on my head tikroves avodah zarah — an offering to idolatry, from which no Jew may derive any benefit at all?

More than two decades later, most of those women are again wearing sheitelach, many of them made from Indian hair. Perhaps the main reason for the turn around in the frum community has been the ruling from one of today's leading Gedolim: Rav Dov Landau, citing the Chazon Ish.

Who Is Rav Dov Landau?

Rav Ephraim Dov Landau was born in Zgierz, Poland, in 1930, grandson of the Strikover Rebbe, Rav Elimelech Menachem Mendel Landa. His family made it to Eretz Yisroel before the war, settling in Rechovot, where young Dov learned first at Yeshivas HaYishuv HeChadash and then at Ponevezh, where his chavrusos included Rav Yaakov Edelstein zt"l and his rebbeim included Rav Dovid Povarsky zt"l and Rav Shmuel Rozovsky zt"l.

He married Rebbetzin Adina Sher, a granddaughter of Rav Yitzchak Isaac Sher, the rosh yeshiva of Slabodka. In the early 1980s he was appointed to the roshei yeshiva of Slabodka in Bnei Brak, a position he holds to this day, together with his cousin Rav Moshe Hillel Hirsch.

With the petirah of Rav Gershon Edelstein zt"l in 2023, Rav Landau became, along with Rav Hirsch, the chairman of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah of Degel HaTorah, and is widely regarded today as one of the zekeinim of the Lithuanian yeshiva world.

Although he was still a bochur when the Chazon Ish was niftar in 1953 — he considers the Chazon Ish his Rebbe Muvhak. He is today the rav of Chug Chazon Ish, and his halachic method is built, brick by brick, on Chazon Ish foundations. It was one of those foundations that he used to save the sheitels. The Problem with Indian Hair

Much of the world's supply of long, high-quality hair for wigs comes from India, and much of that hair is shorn in or near Hindu temples — most famously the Venkateswara temple at Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh — where pilgrims submit to tonsuring as a religious act. The hair is then auctioned on the international market and eventually finds its way into sheitelach worn in Lakewood, Flatbush, Gateshead, and Yerushalayim.

In 2004 the question detonated. Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv zt"l, re-examining a teshuvah he had written in 1989 in light of new information about what actually happens at Tirupati, issued a ruling assuring that sheitels made from such hair were forbidden. Rav Moshe Sternbuch shlita ruled similarly. If the hair is tikroves avodah zarah, no benefit may be derived from it — not wearing it, not selling it, not even giving it away. The sheitel on one's head would have to be destroyed.

Other poskim — Rav Dov Landau among them — reached a different conclusion. To understand how, we need to travel first to the town of Tzaidan in the days of the Tannaim, and then to Bnei Brak in the days of the Chazon Ish.

A Tree in Tzaidan

The Gemara in Avodah Zarah (48a) tells of a tree in Tzaidan (Sidon) that was being worshipped as an avodah zarah. The townspeople were afraid to

come near it. Rabbi Shimon instructed them: go examine the pile of offerings lying beneath its branches.

They did. And buried in the pile they found a small tzurah — a carved form, an image.

Rabbi Shimon's ruling was immediate and counterintuitive: the tree is permitted. You may use its wood, sit in its shade, benefit from it however you wish. The worshippers, he explained, were never really worshipping the tree. They were worshipping the form. The tree was merely furniture.

The Rishonim explain that the form itself, of course, remains forbidden to derive any benefit from — but the tree is free.

What looks like the object of worship is often not the object of worship. It is the basis of the following article.

The Chiddush of the Chazon Ish

The Chazon Ish (Yoreh Deah 62:21) asks a question that sounds almost philosophical but is in fact deeply halachic: when an idolater bows down before his idol, what exactly is he worshipping?

The Chazon Ish drew a line that no one had drawn so sharply before: you cannot make a korban to something that does not exist.

There are, he explained, two fundamentally different cases.

In the first case, a person worships something Hashem actually created — the sun, the moon, a particular star, a malach. This is real avodah zarah in the full halachic sense. All the laws of avodah zarah apply, including the prohibition of tikroves.

In the second case, a person worships a koach mufshat — an abstract power that he has invented in his own mind. This power was never created. It does not exist now, and it never existed. It is purely a figment of his imagination. In the second case, the Chazon Ish rules, we are not dealing with avodah zarah in the technical halachic sense at all. We are dealing with minus — heresy. A terrible sin, certainly. But a different category, with different halachic consequences.

The Chazon Ish anchors this in the Rambam (Hilchos Avodah Zarah 2:1), whose careful formulation forbids worship of any created being — angel, sphere, star, element. Had the Rambam meant to forbid worship of every imagined power, he would have grounded the issur in "lo saasun lachem elohim."

He didn't.

Rather, the Rambam grounded it specifically in the worship of created things. The Chazon Ish finds confirmation in the Rambam in Hilchos Teshuvah, who labels one who attributes an image to Hashem a min — heretic — rather than an oveid avodah zarah.

From Bnei Brak to Tirupati

Rav Dov Landau applied this chiddush to the hair at Tirupati. His teshuvah appears in his sefer Minchas Dvar Mitzvah (ch. 26, in a footnote), and is cited as heter number fourteen in HaKetzeh'akta and more recently in Me'orei Simcha by Rabbi Simcha Friedman of Lakewood.

The question Rav Landau asked is the question Rabbi Shimon asked in Tzaidan. When a Hindu pilgrim stands before a statue in the Tirupati temple, what is he actually worshipping?

Based on the halachic testimony gathered by the poskim in 2004, Rav Landau understood the answer this way: Hindu theology, as described by its own adherents, posits an abstract spiritual power behind the physical statues. The statues themselves are not the deity; they are artistic representations of a koach mufshat, a power that the worshippers have conceived in their minds. Different statues, different representations — one imagined power behind them.

And that imagined power, Rav Landau argued, was never created by Hashem. It does not exist.

Which places Hindu worship, by the Chazon Ish's criterion, squarely in the second category. Not avodah zarah but rather heresy.

Why This Permits the Hair

Once the classification shifts, the halachic consequences cascade.

Tikroves avodah zarah — the prohibition of deriving benefit from an offering to idolatry — requires, as a logical prerequisite, that there be avodah

zarah to offer to. No avodah zarah, no tikroves. The hair shorn by pilgrims at Tirupati, however the pilgrims themselves may understand it, cannot halachically be an offering to something the halacha does not recognize as an object of worship in the first place.

Rav Landau adds a second point that strengthens the conclusion. Even within the temple complex, the shaving takes place in a separate area — not before the idol itself. So even one who disputes the first argument and maintains that Hindu worship does qualify as avodah zarah still has to contend with the fact that the hair was never placed before the idol as a formal offering.

The sheitel industry — and by extension, tens of thousands of women's daily donning had a halachic foundation to stand on.

A Subtle Distinction That Matters

The Chazon Ish's line is sharper than it first appears. It turns on a single criterion: was the object of worship ever actually created?

This means that worshipping the soul of a person who really lived is real avodah zarah. A soul is a created thing — it exists, it continues to exist after death (see Koheles 3:21 and Nazir 48a). To worship it is to worship something Hashem made.

But worshipping the soul of someone who never existed — a purely fictional figure — falls on the other side of the line. It is minus, not avodah zarah.

The distinction has implications well beyond sheitels, and poskim have debated its application to other religions. But it is the distinction itself that is the chiddush.

That is how Rav Dov Landau shlita saved the sheitels.

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<https://vinnews.com/2026/04/21/in-defense-of-the-sheitel-why-the-heter-still-stands-a-response-to-the-current-wave-of-attacks/>

In Defense of the Sheitel: Why the Heter Still Stands A Response to the Current Wave of Attacks

April 21, 2026

By Rabbi Yair Hoffman

A flood of emails has come in attacking the recent article on how Rav Dov Landau shlita saved the sheitels. Ads and articles are circulating that blame the sheitels for the recent car accident tragedies in Lakewood — and for cancer deaths and drownings as well. The senders assert that the Chazon Ish zt"l is wrong, that Rav Dov Landau shlita is wrong, and that the tens of thousands of bnos Yisroel who rely on psakim permitting the sheitels are walking around in aveirah.

What follows is the fuller halachic picture. Even if one wishes to attack the Chazon Ish's chiddush — and the attack does not succeed — his view is only one pillar among several in the heter. Even as a mere snif l'hakel, the heter stands firmly in the eyes of numerous Rabbonim and Poskim.

2004: ... [See first essay.]

More than two decades later, most of those women are again wearing sheitelach, many made from Indian hair. The question has resurfaced — several times by people and advertisements that stated that sheitels are forbidden, even with a hechsher, because in their view the hair comes from idolatrous rituals.

The Problem With Indian Hair

Much of the world's supply of long, high-quality wig hair comes from India... [See first essay.]

The halachic question is rooted in Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De'ah 139:6, based on the Gemara in Avodah Zarah 59b: no benefit may be derived from takroves avodah zarah. In 2004, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv zt"l — re-examining a teshuvah he had written in 1989 in light of allegedly new information about Tirupati — ruled that such sheitels were forbidden. Rav Moshe Sternbuch shlita ruled similarly. A letter later circulated in New York shuls, signed by Rav Chaim Meir HaLevi Vosner (Rav and Av Beis Din of Zichron Meir), Rav Sriel Rosenberg (Raavad in Bnei Brak), Rav Yehuda Silman (Av Beis Din in Bnei Brak), Rav Shimon Bodni (Chaver, Moetzes Chachmei HaTorah), and Rav Moshe Mordechai Karp of Modiin, declaring that no hechsher can be trusted because temple hair has saturated the market.

The letter cited an industry figure, Vince Selva of Indo Asian Human Hair International Inc., and listed 25 alleged "facts" about the human hair industry.

Other poskim — including Rav Yisrael Belsky zt"l and, most significantly, Rav Dov Landau shlita — reached a different conclusion. Their reasoning is a rope woven from several independent strands. Even if one strand frays, the rope holds.

Who Is Rav Dov Landau? ...[see first essay]

A Tree in Tzaidan

The Gemara in Avodah Zarah ... [See first essay.]

The Chiddush of the Chazon Ish ... [See first essay.]

From Bnei Brak to Tirupati

Rav Dov Landau applied this chiddush to the hair at Tirupati. ... [See first essay.]

The Attacks

The emails argue, in essence, that the Chazon Ish is wrong — that all Hindu worship is full-fledged avodah zarah not heresy — and therefore Rav Landau's heter collapses. Some go further, connecting recent tragedies to the sheitels that frum women are wearing. That requires a heavy answer.

Let's be clear: attributing specific tragedies to specific aveiros is a path the Gemara itself warns us away from. The Gemara in Brachos 5a, and the Rambam in Hilchos Ta'aniyos, tell us to examine our deeds in times of difficulty — but they do not give any of us license to announce which aveirah of which person or persons caused which tragedy. That is nevuah, and nevuah has been gone for a long time.

The halachic attack, though, deserves a halachic answer. Even if someone wishes to reject the Chazon Ish's chiddush entirely, the sheitels, according to many Pokim, are still permitted. The Chazon Ish is one strand. There are others.

Rav Belsky and the Nature of the Offering

I was personally present with Rav Yisrael Belsky zt"l when he both researched the issue and when he discussed it with the poskim in Eretz Yisroel. Dayan Dunner's research concluded that the Indian women were actually giving their hair as an offering to "the gods," and that the hair was therefore takroves avodah zarah. The research of others, including Rav Belsky zt"l, was that the women were offering to shave their hair as a sign of devotion, and that the hair itself was not the offering. According to that understanding, the hair is permitted. Rav Belsky discusses additional reasons for permitting it in his sefer Shulchan HaLevi page 438, where letters back and forth with Rav Elyashiv zt"l are printed.

Research at the time, including conversations with representatives at the Indian consulate, indicated that the hair itself is not an offering per se. The consulate official described tonsuring as a mark of personal devotion — the shaving itself is the avodah, not the hair that falls to the floor.

Further research revealed two different Hindu conceptions. Some pilgrims offer their hair as a sign of surrendering the ego. Others offer it in payment of a debt: according to Hindu lore, Vishnu took out a wedding loan so large it would take him thousands of years to repay, and devout Hindus "help pay off Vishnu's debt" by offering their hair. Those donating on the second account would arguably be producing takroves avodah zarah; those on the first are not. Punari Aruni, a pilgrim who appears in the documentary Hair India, describes her own donation in the first terms — surrender of ego, not a gift.

Crucially, many hair exporters operate entirely outside the temple system. Agents approach men in Indian villages and pay them roughly \$10 for their wives' hair (per a January 2014 article by Katie Rucke) — no temple, no "offering." Even at Tirumala Venkateswara, the largest of India's roughly 28 hair-exporting temples, the director has stated that pilgrims are not paid; the proceeds feed some 30,000 poor people daily. India exports roughly 2,000 tons of temple hair per year, but a substantial fraction is sold to stuff mattresses, manufacture oil filters, or extract amino acids for industrial use. The assumption that "all wigs must contain temple hair" is not supported by the industry data.

The Sfek Sfaika: Not Three Doubts, but Four or Five

This brings us to the second independent pillar of the heter — entirely separate from the Chazon Ish, and unaffected even if one rejects his chiddush entirely. Sheitels bearing a proper hechsher are permitted through the halachic mechanism of sfek sfaika, which the Shulchan Aruch deploys throughout, including in Yoreh De'ah 122:6.

A careful count yields not three but four, and arguably five, independent halachic safeikos. Each is logically distinct — each would need to resolve against the sheitel for the prohibition to apply.

Doubt One — the worshipper's own intent. Even granting arguendo that Hindu worship is avodah zarah, is the individual pilgrim actually worshipping the physical idol, or an abstract koach mufshat? As documented above — through the Indian consulate, pilgrims like Punari Aruni, and the ego-surrender theology described by Hindus themselves — much of the donation is explicitly framed as personal devotion rather than a gift to a deity. This doubt operates on the side of the worshipper. This is also the official notion in their religious texts. But just as there are people and Jews who believe that a Kashrus symbol means that a Rabbi "blesses" the food rather than supervising the food — there are errors of conception in every community.

Doubt Two — whether the hair qualifies as a takroves. Even if the pilgrim is worshipping an idol, is the hair halachically an "offering"? Rav Belsky's research concluded that the shaving itself is the avodah and the hair is simply what falls away — the byproduct of the devotional act, not the devotion itself. If a person cut off a thumb to demonstrate devotion to an idol, that would not automatically render the thumb a korban. Body parts shed during a devotional act may simply be different from objects brought before an idol. This doubt operates on the side of the offering.

Doubt Three — whether the shaving is even in the right place. Rav Landau notes that the tonsuring at Tirupati takes place in a separate building, not before the idol. A takroves requires a formal offering in the presence of the object of worship. Whatever happens in a separate shaving hall may not rise to that threshold. This doubt operates on the side of the ritual setting.

Doubt Four — whether any particular sheitel contains temple hair at all. Hair is collected from many countries. Much Indian hair is sourced from village agents with no temple connection. A large portion of actual temple hair is diverted to mattress stuffing, oil filters, and amino-acid extraction, never reaching sheitel manufacturers. For sheitels with a reliable hechsher whose supply chain has been investigated, the probability that the hair traces to a Tirupati tonsuring is reduced further still. This doubt operates on the side of the physical provenance.

Doubt Five — the status of commercially-sold hair. There is a strong halachic argument that once hair has been sold commercially at international auction, it is no longer considered takroves avodah zarah for the purposes of combining with other safeikos, on account of bitul. This is the ruling of Rav Yosef Teumim in his Pri Megadim (siman 586), based on the Gemara in Zevachim 74a, which does not rule like Shmuel's stringent view that sfek sfaika cannot be applied to takroves avodah zarah. The Beis Shlomo (Orach Chaim 30) likewise rules leniently. Whether one counts this as a fifth independent doubt or as the halachic gateway that makes applying sfek sfaika to this category possible, the result is the same: the ordinary stringency attached to avodah zarah does not block the combination of doubts here.

Each of these attacks the prohibition at a different logical joint — worshipper, offering, setting, provenance, and halachic category itself. The case is not a sfek sfaika but something considerably stronger.

Even Without the Chazon Ish, the Sheitels Stand

Even if someone wishes to argue that the Chazon Ish's chiddush does not apply to Hinduism, should not be extended to Tirupati, or is open to reconsideration entirely — the sheitels remain permitted. At worst, his position becomes a snif l'hakel joined to the other independent factors above. A snif combined with other grounds is how the Shulchan Aruch and the later poskim construct heterim in cases of shaas ha'dchak, hefsed merubah, and

kavod ha'briyos. Snifim are how difficult halachic cases are actually decided.

Even if the Chazon Ish's leg is removed entirely, the remaining legs — the nature-of-the-offering research of Rav Belsky zt"l, the industry reality that much hair is not temple hair at all, the separate-building argument, and the four-or-five-fold sfek sfaika grounded in the Pri Megadim, the Beis Shlomo, and Zevachim 74a — may more than suffice. And the Chazon Ish's position, even when not primary, becomes an additional snif strengthening the others. Where Stringency Is Appropriate

This is not a blanket permit for every product on the market. Hair extensions are a more significant halachic problem. The company Great Lengths, which produces high-end extensions, manufactures them exclusively from temple hair. That is not a sfek sfaika — it is close to a certainty. Anyone wearing such extensions should consult their rav. At best, extensions sold in ordinary hair salons might be permitted through a double doubt, but the grounds are considerably weaker than for sheitels.

Similarly, sheitels marketed as "ethical" or "temple sourced" should be avoided: the entire heter is built on doubt, and where the seller himself eliminates the doubt, the heter disappears. But the ordinary sheitel carrying a reliable hechsher, from a manufacturer whose supply chain has been investigated, is likely protected by multiple independent halachic arguments, any one of which may likely suffice.

A Final Word on the Tone of the Debate

To those connecting specific tragedies to the wearing of sheitels: b'ahavas Yisroel, please reconsider. Tragedies in Klal Yisroel are not puzzles to be solved by pinning them to one mitzvah or one aveirah. The Gemara in Bava Basra 16a and the sefer Iyov itself warn us away from this kind of accounting. When Chazal tell us to examine our deeds after tragedy, they speak in the first person, not the third.

To those attacking the Chazon Ish zt"l and Rav Dov Landau shlita: attacking gedolei olam is not a small thing. The Chazon Ish is the Chazon Ish. Rav Dov Landau shlita is the rosh yeshiva of Slabodka and a chairman of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah. One may respectfully disagree — great poskim have disagreed throughout the generations — but one does not discard their words lightly.

And to the frum women who have been made to feel that the sheitel on their head is a churban: please know that the heter on which you rely rests not on one foundation but on several. The Chazon Ish, Rav Dov Landau shlita, Rav Belsky zt"l, the Pri Megadim, the Beis Shlomo, the Gemara in Zevachim, the researched reality of the hair industry, and the time-honored principle of sfek sfaika all stand behind you. You are not, b'ezras Hashem, wearing takroves avodah zarah.

This third wave of controversy is only beginning, and the matter will need to be brought again before the gedolei haposkim in America, where most of the women in question actually live. Until a more airtight system for verifying sources exists, the multiple halachic grounds outlined above remain the basis for the psak.

May Hashem spare us further tragedy, and may we merit to see each other — and each other's mitzvos — with an ayin tovah.

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