

This week we begin reading the Book of *Vayikra*, which our Sages call "*Torat Kohanim*" / "The Law of the Priests." R' Shaul Yisraeli z"l (1909-1995; rabbi of Kfar Ha'roeh, Israel, member of Israel's Supreme Rabbinical Court, and *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Mercaz Harav) writes: *Vayikra* holds a special place among the Five Books of the Torah in that generations of Jewish children began their study of *Chumash* with this Book. "Why did they not start at the beginning, with *Bereishit*?" asks the *Midrash Yalkut Shimoni*, and it answers, "Since children are pure, and *Korbanot* / sacrificial offerings require purity, let the pure ones come and occupy themselves with matters of purity." R' Yisraeli elaborates: *Torat Kohanim* is not merely a book that teaches us how to fulfill our obligation to offer *Korbanot*. It is, by its nature, the *Torah* of the "Kingdom of Priests," the *Torah* of the "Holy Nation" (see *Shmot* 19:6). There is no time more appropriate to imbue its values in the Jewish soul than when the student is very young--"Let the pure ones come and occupy themselves with matters of purity."

What particular values does this Book teach? R' Yisraeli explains: *Pirkei Avot* (1:2) teaches that the world stands on three things: *Torah*, *Avodah* / service, and *Gemilut Chassadim* / acts of kindness. "*Avodah*" refers to *Korbanot*, the Divine service *par excellence*. *Torah* is the intellectual part of Judaism, and *Gemilut Chassadim* is the interpersonal side. However, those two aspects are insufficient; they must be accompanied by the *Avodah* of the *Korbanot*. The only solid foundation for interpersonal relationships is a solid relationship with the Creator, built on *Torah* and Divine service. (*Si'ach Shaul*)

Pesach

We read in *Pirkei Avot* (4:2), "Run to perform [even] an easy *Mitzvah* . . . For the consequence of a *Mitzvah* is a *Mitzvah*." R' Menachem Ha'meiri z"l (1249-1306; Provence; author of widely-used Talmud commentaries and other works) comments: To me, this means that no *Mitzvah* should be light in your eyes, for the consequence of the *Mitzvah* is its essence. In other words, what results from a *Mitzvah*, *i.e.*, the understanding that one gains by doing it, is the essence of the *Mitzvah*. It follows that even if a *Mitzvah* appears to you to be "light," know that what comes from it may be very weighty. Therefore, do not judge the importance of any *Mitzvah* by whether it is easy to perform.

R' Ha'meiri continues: Take, for example, the affirmative commandment to tell the story of the Exodus on the night of the fifteenth of *Nissan*, as we read (*Shmot* 13:8), "You shall tell to your son on that day . . ." We fulfill that commandment by reading the text of the *Haggadah*, which is a very easy *Mitzvah*. However, what results from that *Mitzvah* is very weighty--it implants in our hearts knowledge of the truth, including belief in *Hashem's* wonders and in His ability to alter nature at will. That is the "fruit" of the *Mitzvah*, its essence, and its purpose, though the *Mitzvah* itself is an easy one. (*Chibbur Ha'Teshuvah* 1:12)

R' Ha'meiri writes similarly elsewhere: We read (*Mishlei* 13:13), "He who scorns a word will cause himself injury, but he who reveres a commandment will be repaid." It appears to me, R' Ha'meiri writes, that the verse is teaching that one who treats a *Mitzvah* lightly and is not concerned with observing it harms himself in two ways: He will be punished for neglecting the *Mitzvah* and he also will miss out on the understanding he would have gained by performing the *Mitzvah*, which may be significant. In contrast, one who reveres a *Mitzvah* will gain that understanding.

- Continued in box inside -

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“... *Hashem* spoke to him from the *Ohel Mo'ed* / Tent of Meeting, saying.” (1:1)

Rashi z”l writes: Another explanation of “Saying” is, “To reply to G-d.” The verse means: “Go and tell them My commands and bring Me back word whether they will accept them, as it is written (*Shmot* 19:8), ‘And Moshe returned the words of the people to *Hashem*.’” [Until here from *Rashi*]

R’ Shlomo Kluger z”l (1785-1869; rabbi of Brody, Galicia) asks: Why now, all of sudden, does *Hashem* want Moshe to tell Him whether *Bnei Yisrael* accept His commandments?

He explains: We read (*Vayikra* 1:3), “If one’s offering is an *Olah*-offering from the cattle, he shall offer an unblemished male; he shall bring it to the entrance of the *Ohel Mo'ed*, voluntarily, before *Hashem*.” The *Gemara* (*Rosh Hashanah* 6a) derives from this verse that all sacrificial offerings must be brought voluntarily. But, the *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 88a) derives from the verse (*Shmot* 19:17), “They stood at the bottom of the mountain,” that there was an element of coercion involved in getting *Bnei Yisrael* to accept the Torah. (The *Gemara* interprets: “He held the mountain over them like a barrel,” etc.) It follows, writes R’ Kluger, that a new, truly voluntary, acceptance of the Torah was required in order that any sacrifices would be brought with no element of coercion, and whether there was such an acceptance is what *Hashem* was asking Moshe to report back to Him.

Alternatively, R’ Kluger writes, before the sin of the Golden Calf, there was no possibility of bringing a *Korban* for atonement because, at that point, *Bnei Yisrael* were on such a lofty level that, like all *Tzaddikim*, they would have been held strictly accountable for any failings. (*Korbanot*, in contrast, are possible because *Hashem* shows *Rachamim* / mercy to those who cannot withstand His *Midat Ha'din* / Attribute of Strict Justice.) It follows that the original acceptance of the Torah, which was before the Golden Calf, did not include accepting the laws of the *Korbanot*, so Moshe had to ask *Bnei Yisrael* now whether they would accept those laws.

(*Imrei Shefer*)

- Continued from back page -

One example of this, perhaps (R’ Ha’meiri writes), is reciting *Kiddush* on *Shabbat*. One might take this *Mitzvah* lightly, thinking that it is enough to refrain from work on *Shabbat*. However, what results from reciting *Kiddush* is belief in Creation, for one recalls in *Kiddush* that (*Shmot* 20:11), “In six days *Hashem* made the heavens and the earth.”

Another example [as noted] is reading the *Haggadah* on *Pesach*, which is the fulfillment of the *Mitzvah* to relate the story of the Exodus to one’s child: By observing it, one gains belief in *Hashem*’s ability to perform wonders and change nature.

(*Peirush Ha’meiri Le’Mishlei*)

“He called to Moshe, and *Hashem* spoke to him from the *Ohel Mo'ed* / Tent of Meeting, saying.” (1:1)

Rashi z”l writes, based on a *Midrash*: “To him” is meant to exclude Aharon. Thirteen times, the Torah says that *Hashem* spoke to Moshe and Aharon together, and thirteen times the Torah implies the opposite. This teaches that the words were not spoken to Aharon, but only to Moshe, with the instruction that he communicate them to Aharon. [Until here from *Rashi*]

For example, writes R’ Tzvi Abba Gorelick z”l (*Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshiva Gedolah Zichron Moshe in South Fallsburg, N.Y.; died 2010) based on the *Midrash Mechilta*: We read (*Shmot* 12:1), “*Hashem* said to Moshe and Aharon in the land of Egypt, saying.” Paralleling this we read (*Shmot* 6:28), “It was on the day when *Hashem* spoke to Moshe in the land of Egypt.” Only Moshe is mentioned as being spoken to in Egypt, not Aharon.

But why would the Torah say that *Hashem* spoke to Aharon if He did not? R’ Gorelick asks. He explains: In reality, Aharon did hear *Hashem*’s words in the thirteen instances at issues. What *Rashi* and the various *Midrashim* on which his comment is based mean is that even though Aharon heard the *Mitzvot* in question from *Hashem*, he had to hear them again from Moshe. Moshe--and only Moshe--was the prophet appointed to transmit the Torah to *Bnei Yisrael*. Therefore, even if Aharon heard a commandment directly from *Hashem*, it did not become part of the Torah until Aharon heard it again from Moshe.

(*Pirkei Mikra*)

To whom are the above *Midrashim* speaking? asks R’ Chaim Zaichyk z”l (1906-1989; *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Bet Yosef-Novardok in Buchach, Poland; later in Haifa, Israel). Who would want to equate Moshe and Aharon, and who needs to be reminded not to do so?

He answers: There are two such parties--one praiseworthy, and the other not. The first is Moshe himself, who always tried to avoid the spotlight--beginning at the Burning Bush, when he asked *Hashem* to appoint Aharon in his place. Moshe would want to downplay his superiority over Aharon as a prophet. The other is *Bnei Yisrael*, who always had a higher regard for Aharon than for Moshe, as the *Midrash Yalkut Shimoni* relates: *Bnei Yisrael* cried more when Aharon died than when Moshe died, because Moshe used to rebuke them. They, too, would want to downplay Moshe’s superiority.

Our verse highlights Moshe’s humility, R’ Zaichyk adds. A *Midrash* relates that Moshe was afraid to enter the newly completed *Mishkan* because the “Cloud” of the *Shechinah* rested on it. *Hashem* said, “It is not proper that Moshe, who made the *Mishkan*, should stand outside while I am inside.” Immediately, says our verse, “He called to Moshe.” [Until here from the *Midrash*]. Can we imagine, asks R’ Zaichyk, a person who led the building campaign for a *Shul* or *Yeshiva*--raising the money, supervising the architects and contractors, and so on--who would hesitate to enter the completed building without permission? That, however, is exactly what Moshe did.

(*Ohr Chadash*)