

PARSHAS TAZRIA-METZORA 5778 (CHUTZ LAARETZ)

PARSHAS ACHAREI MOS-KEDOSHIM 5778 (ISRAEL)

In Parshas Shemini, we read about the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. But immediately following, we have a long detour where the Torah discusses the laws of kashrus, tumoh and taharah of animals and sheratzim, and then laws of yoledes, metzora and tumas odom. We veer far off from the death of the sons of Aharon and suddenly in Acharei Mos we resume the subject. Why the large digression?

What was the sin of the sons of Aharon?

The posuk says they brought ketores that was not commanded. Chazal have many other opinions. One says it was because they were not married. Another says it was because they were drunk. Yet another says they issued a halachic ruling in the presence of their rebbe. How do we reconcile all these views?

After the sons of Aharon died, Moshe tells Aharon that Hashem chose to do this because only with His close ones can He be sanctified. Rashi explains that Moshe told Aharon that He knew that there will be a death of two gedolei hador with the commencement of the avodas HaMikdash. I thought it would be us, he said, but now we see it was your sons who were just as great if not more so.

The Netziv explains this statement of Moshe Rabbeinu with a beautiful insight into the aveiros of bal tosf and bal figra.

Bal tosf is adding to the mitzvos of the Torah. You do the mitzvah plus more. This makes it necessary for the Torah to make a separate aveiroh since you are doing everything the Torah demands and more. But why does bal figra need to be commanded as a separate aveiroh? If you do less than what the Torah commands, then you haven't fulfilled the mitzvah at all! What is the purpose in listing this as a separate mitzvah? It is a bittul of the mitzvah anyway.

The Netziv answers that the aveiroh is in having the attitude that some mitzvos don't necessarily apply to me because I am special. And the Torah is saying no. Every mitzvah is necessary for every member of Klal Yisroel to fulfill equally. We all keep the exact same Shulchan Aruch. No one—no matter how great and no matter how pure their motivation, can declare that this aveiroh is blocking my unique path to avodas Hashem. Even the gedolei hador have to live within the same 4 chalokim of Shulchan Aruch. They cannot say it was only meant for the "hamon am" and wasn't intended for someone on my level.

This lesson can only be taught by the two gedolei hador. Hashem has to show Klal Yisroel that even they are held to the same standard as everyone else. No one can say I don't need this mitzvah to come close to Hashem or I don't need this aveiroh to restrict me in my avodas Hashem.

Nadav and Avihu had an inflated assessment of themselves. They thought they were above the need to get married. They thought they could do the avodah while drunk and it would

enhance their avodah. They thought they can make decisions for themselves without conferring with higher authorities first. And in front of their rebbe, Moshe Rabbeinu.

The midrash gives us another insight. After all these parshiyos we finally arrive at the beginning of Acharei Mos—telling us what is the proper way to approach Hashem and enter the Kodesh Hakodoshim. That is the end goal—the highest form of avodas Hashem of any human being. But you can't just go straight there without first undergoing a long careful process of refinement elevation.

You first start with controlling your taivos and monitor what goes into your mouth. That is step number one.

Step two is taharas hamishpacha—a person has to train himself to control the other taivos haguf. You have to show that your neshama is in charge of your guf.

But there are other taivos of the nefesh and the ego—loshon horo and gaivoh. That is the next level where you manage your relationships with other people. But before you tackle the taivos of the personality and the nefesh, you first have to master the taivos haguf.

Of all the relationships you have to master, the hardest and most complicated is the one you have with your wife. Once you get through all of that, you can approach the Kodesh Hakodoshim.

Nadav and Avihu wanted to enter the kodesh without going through this entire process. They never managed to refine their taivos of the nefesh and their ego. They paskened sheilos before their rebbe. They never got married and never had to interact with a spouse. They thought they were above that already. They thought they didn't have to follow the rules that everyone else has to follow. They thought their pure kavonos were the only thing that matters.

We are in an interesting period of the Jewish calendar. We are in the middle of a period of mourning. We don't shave and don't have weddings. Why? Because 1900 years ago, 24,000 talmidim of Rabbi Akiva died. Is that event so important to us today?

We can only appreciate the days of sefiroh when we understand the historical background the gemara provides to Rabbi Akiva and his period. It was right after the churbon Beis Hamikdash and Klal Yisroel suffered a tremendous blow. The people were devastated and their spirits were shattered. But then there was a sudden revival. Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakai set out to rebuild through Yavneh and her chachomim, and the great Rabbi Akiva amassed an incredible number of talmidim. Klal Yisroel had gone from the depths of devastation to all of the sudden everything is turning around.

Then, out of nowhere, between Pesach and Shavuos, all these 24,000 talmidim died. The gemara says the result was that the

world became desolate. Klal Yisroel were devastated again with another churbon. Just imagine the shock. They were learning! They were shteiging! But they didn't give enough respect to each other.

The number given in Chazal isn't 24,000. It was 12,000 chavrusos. There is a message in this. Each pair of chavrusos didn't respect each other as much as they should. Hashem was telling them, "I'm not interested in your Torah if you can't manage your relationships with other people." So Rabbi Akiva went south, assembled five talmidim and started all over again.

It is a very powerful message for us today.

When we reflect upon the aftermath of the Holocaust of just 73 years ago, there was the feeling of despair and hopelessness, and suddenly a rebirth of Torah learning here and in America. But there has to be respect given to one another. This is how we can approach the kodesh. You can't just rush into the holiest of holies. You have to control your taivos haguf and your ego. Only then can you enter.

As much as we mourn over past churbonos with the halachos of not shaving and not having weddings, we also have to understand what we are trying to achieve with these signs of mourning. We can only achieve that when we make a cheshbon hanefesh. We have to realize that learning Torah isn't just a stimulating intellectual exercise. Torah has to refine a person's taivos haguf and transform his relationships.

These parshiyos have the same message. Some people find certain halachos inconvenient and look for all sorts of heterim to bandy about in order to rationalize their behavior. Sholom

bayis is a heter, kiruv rechokim is a heter, and darkei sholom is a heter. But the Torah's halachos are absolute and universally applicable.

Also, there are two things a person has to know if he wants to elevate himself in ruchniyus. He has to control his taivos and perfect his middos. Giving respect to one another is not a small matter. No matter how much Torah learning is flourishing, we have to keep vigilant and root out the aveiros that are infecting the lomdei Torah and potentially causing churbon. Chazal didn't do autopsies to identify any disease or bacteria which wiped out these 24,000 talmidim. They did a cheshbon hanefesh and found a failure in middos which was the cause.

I speak to a number of talmidim. Many claim to have problems with their chavrusos but I can't understand why people can be so critical. Even if you don't think exactly like he does or understand things like you do, so what? He is a human being with a neshomo trying to understand the Torah. He deserves respect.

Giving respect to your fellow Jew is sometimes a big nisayon in our circles. We are always putting people down for not being this or for being that—being too frum, or not being frum enough, etc. This yeshiva is too this, that yeshivah is too that. To see the sincerity and to value the sincerity of another Jew trying to learn Torah and keep mitzvos is our avodah today.

We should use the aveilus in these weeks to evaluate our attitudes towards other people and other groups, and how successfully we are controlling our taivos hanefesh as well as our taivos haguf.