
The Aura of Torah

*A Kabbalistic-Hasidic Commentary
to the Weekly Readings*

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cal vicinity. Those things cry out for our concern, and we must guard against complacency or indifference. I think he is saying that we need to try to see the good even in bad events if we can, to perceive God at work even in bad news. For even bad news can be a goad to our empathy and positive action.

Shemini

[76] It Depends on You

“This is the thing that the Eternal has commanded you to do that the glory of the Eternal may appear.”

Leviticus 9:6

CONTEXT

The previous parashah ends with a description of the seven-day inauguration ceremony for the priests. Shemini begins with the ritual undertaken on the eighth day.

The Seer of Lublin was an important link between his teacher, Elimelch of Lyzhansk, and the new Hasidic teachers of Poland in the following generation.

We have to say that this is a verse on its own, and that it is not especially intelligible. According to what is said in [the commentary by] R. Moshe Alsheich on the verse “Make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among you” [Exodus 25:1], the Holy One desired to live among us in fact, and not just in the Tabernacle. Israel desired the Tabernacle, and they presumed and expected that, through the Tabernacle, the Shechinah [the Presence of God] would come to dwell [among them], “that the Glory of the Eternal may appear.”

He told them: Do not trust in this, but only in the essential thing, which is [that] “this is the thing which the Eternal has commanded you to do”—it depends on the Torah; then “the Glory of the Eternal may appear.” No Tabernacle is required, and it is obvious that it does not depend on a Tabernacle, but only what you do of “what the Eternal has commanded you.”

Ya’akov Yitzchak HaLevi Horowitz, the Seer of Lublin (1745–1815), *Zikaron Zot* [A memorial of this] (Ashdod, 2004), p. 90

NOTES

This is a verse on its own. In the previous verse, the entire community comes to the Tabernacle for the next part of the ceremony. In the subsequent verse, Moses speaks again, “then Moses said to Aaron,” apparently a new speech. Hence, verse 6 seems to stand alone.

It is not especially intelligible. It is difficult to understand in its context.

R. Moshe Alsheich. A prominent member of the Safed community of kabbalists and author of a detailed Torah commentary, Alsheich died sometime after 1593. For this comment, see *Torat Moshe* [The Torah of Moses] (Warsaw, n.d.), v. 1, pt. 2, p. 177.

He told them. The subject seems to be the Seer of Lublin.

COMMENT

It has been said that in past generations Judaism flowed from the home into the synagogue, but that nowadays it flows from the synagogue into the home. This is an overstatement: synagogues always included opportunities for study as well as prayer, and the result of study often did flow into the home. But there was also a vast reservoir of Jewish observance in most homes, which in turn led to attendance at synagogue, and that is often lacking in today’s communities. The Seer’s discussion of the Tabernacle reminds us that the focus of our Jewish lives on synagogues is misplaced. Synagogues are important, for all kinds of social as well as religious reasons, but ultimately Judaism depends on us, on our thoughts and actions. Without our performance of the commandments, whether at home or in shul, synagogues are merely relics of a glorious past with a future only as museums. We cannot afford to confine our Judaism to synagogues.

[77] Refining Your Plans

“The sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, each took their censers . . . and fire burst forth from before the Eternal and consumed them.”

Leviticus 10:1-2

CONTEXT

As the inauguration of the priests reaches its climax on the eighth day, Aaron’s two eldest sons are tragically struck down for offering “strange” or “unauthorized” fire.

Copies of *Mei HaShiloach* were burned when it first appeared, and from the following example it is easy to see why. R. Mordechai suggests that people may step outside the boundaries of acceptable behavior, of Torah, if circumstances warrant. Here he adds the proviso that they must consider the case for doing so very, very carefully.

Look here, all the sins of Israel written in the Torah are intended to teach the whole of Israel words of Torah, as it states in the Talmud: “The Israelites made the [Golden] Calf only so that penitents could make a good case. . . . David was not the kind of man to commit that act. . . . [Thus,] if an individual has sinned, he or she could be referred to the individual [i.e., David], and if a community sins, they should be told: ‘Go to the community’ [i.e., those who made the Golden Calf].”

So too in the case of Nadab and Abihu: what is written in the Torah is there to teach the fear [of God] to the individual. They were innocent on account of their mother, who was the sister of Nahshon ben Amminadab, [and] from whom would come the dynasty of the house of David. Now, “a king may break boundaries” provided that he trusts that his will is the will of God. [Thus,] they had periods of relying on their own will—for security comes from God. Therefore, in this manner has God demonstrated that no one should undertake any act without refining it seventyfold.

Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica (1800–54), *Mei HaShiloach* [The waters of the Siloam (Isaiah 8:6)] (Bnei Brak, 1995), v. 2, p. 76

NOTES

As it states in the Talmud. *Avodah Zarah* 4b.

“David was not the kind of man to commit that act.” I.e., adultery with Bathsheba. This story is found in 2 Samuel 11.

“He or she could be referred to the individual.” If David was forgiven for his affair with Bathsheba, then other individual sinners should not despair of forgiveness.

“They should be told: ‘Go to the community.’” The fact that the Israelites were forgiven after the Golden Calf affair can be held up as an example of how the community may be forgiven for other sins in the future.

Their mother, who was the sister of Nahshon ben Amminadab. This is stated in Exodus 6:23. Her name was Elisheba. Nahshon was fifth in the line of descent from Judah, patriarch of the tribe of the same name, and thus a prince of the tribe. His name appears in the genealogy that leads to King David in Ruth 4. Thus Nadab and Abihu are descendants of what was to become the royal line.

“A king may break boundaries.” In its original context, this means that kings have the right to seize land for the building of roads. (See Talmud, *Bava Kamma* 60b, and Rashi’s comment there.) For the rebbe of Izbica, this means a king like David has the moral and spiritual authority to act in an apparently immoral way for some higher good. In the case of his affair with Bathsheba, still married to Uriah the Hittite, this was so that the Davidic line would be continued through Solomon, their son, down to the Messiah.

They had periods of relying on their own will. With a background and a family future like theirs, Nadab and Abihu felt that they could escape punishment for bringing “strange fire” as an offering.

In this manner has God demonstrated. The tale of Nadab and Abihu is an object lesson in considering your actions very carefully. They clearly had not!

COMMENT

The lives of most Jewish people today are not bound up with the observance of *halachah*, Jewish law. The carefully observant are a minority in our overall numbers. *Halachah* fosters important values: community, reverence for God, and tradition are just examples. It provides a precise moral compass. But *halachah* can also feel like a straitjacket. The rebbe of Izbica lived in a strictly Orthodox environment, but he realized that sometimes we need to move outside its strict confines for the sake of a

higher spiritual purpose, like some biblical figures did. He understood that sometimes we need to break a part of the law to uphold the whole of the law. The question for us as modern Jews is how far the process can go before the framework of the law is itself cast into doubt.

[78] Dedicated to God

“For I am the Eternal who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be to you for God.”

Leviticus 11:45

CONTEXT

Almost the last verse in a chapter devoted to the kosher food laws is this reminder of the Exodus from Egypt, reinforcing the idea that kashrut has a great deal to do with our self-identification as Jews.

Rabbi Yisra’el ben Eliezer is much better known as the Ba’al Shem Tov (nicknamed “the Besht”). The founder of the modern Hasidic movement, he brought a new, psychological understanding of Kabbalah to many ordinary people in Ukraine and beyond.

In the name of Rabbi Yisra’el Ba’al Shem: The meaning is that you must see that even your “to you,” that is, your permitted desires, should be “for God,” only for the Eternal alone. Take care to understand this.

Yisra’el ben Eliezer, Ba’al Shem Tov (1700–1760), *Sefer Ba’al Shem Tov* [The book of the good master of the Name], ed. Shimon Menachem Mendel of Govarchov (Jerusalem, n.d.), v. 2, p. 93

NOTE

“To be to you for God.” The Besht’s comment is based on a superliteral reading of the verse, including the actual word order employed in the Hebrew. JPS: “to be your God.”

COMMENT

Chapter 11 of Leviticus is devoted to the laws delineating which animals may and may not be eaten according to the rules of kashrut. And although

many types of animals are not permitted, others are, such as mammals that chew the cud and have cloven hooves, fish that have both fins and scales, and certain birds. Clearly, refraining from eating those that are not permitted is a religious act. But what about eating those that are allowed? Or to put it another way, is the observance of kashrut the sum total of our spiritual involvement with eating?

The traditional answer, of course, is no. There are blessings to be said before and after we eat, for example, which emphasize our dependence upon God.

It appears that for the Ba'al Shem Tov this does not quite go far enough. By reading this verse in a superliteral way, he comes to the teaching that all our permitted desires, that is, all the physical acts that we are permitted to engage in, not just eating and drinking, but also acquiring wealth, enjoying music, sex, and so forth, all these things must be dedicated to the service of God. The things permitted "to you" should also be "for God." The service of God is not confined to "religious" acts.

Tazria'

[79] We All Receive

"If a woman conceives and gives birth to a male. . . ."

Leviticus 12:2

CONTEXT

Leviticus 12, one of the shortest chapters of the Torah, is concerned with the ritual uncleanness incurred by women at childbirth. The mother remains in this state for thirty-three days after the birth of a son, and sixty-six days after the birth of a daughter, at the end of which she was to bring an offering and then become clean again. This opening section of Tazria' is troubling for many modern Jews. And it must be obvious that any mystical interpretations offered on it will probably be rooted in language that we would term "sexist" today.

Yisra'el of Ruzhyn was the great-grandson of Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch, and founder of a dynasty of Hasidic teachers that continues to this day. His remarks here must be seen in the context of premodern notions of sexual inheritance. Before the development of modern genetic science, it was not understood that both parents contribute genetic material to the fetus. Instead, people's understanding was based on a limited idea of the sexual act itself, in which the male alone seems to be giving, and the female receiving, the seed.

It is written: "Who can precede Me that I should repay [him]?" [Job 41:3], for people should realize that all their actions, all, come from God—that is, that every mitzvah [commandment] that you do the Holy One has put into your hand. For [God] gives [you] a house, and you affix a mezuzah. [God] gives you a four-cornered garment, and you put fringes upon it. Similarly with any active commandment—the Holy One is the essence, that is, the internal aspect of anything. You should truly realize that everything is from God.