

In This Issue

- **Ancient Wisdom & Modern Psychology** by Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman
- **Shraga's Weekly** by Rabbi Shraga Simmons
- **Torah for Your Table** by Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis



Beyond Control

A core principle of many psychotherapies is personal responsibility. If we want to improve, we need to take responsibility for the things that we can change and try our hardest to improve our condition. Yet, there is a danger lurking in such an approach. Sometimes we can take responsibility for things that we can't change or that aren't our fault. This could lead to unhealthy shame and self-blaming, which could make matters worse. Striking a balance between personal responsibility and acknowledging what is not in our control is difficult, but essential.

Part of the sacrificial service of the Yom Kippur day was that the Kohen would take two goats and draw lots. The *Mishna* (*Yoma*, chapter 6), building on the verses (*Vayikra* 16), explains that the two goats

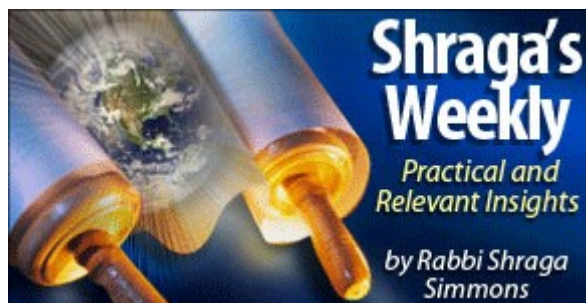
needed to be exactly alike in appearance, size, and value and they needed to be bought at the same time. Based on the drawing, one goat was designated “for Hashem” and the other “for Azazel.” The goat “for Hashem” had the privilege of becoming a sin offering in the *Mishkan*. The goat “for Azazel” had no such luck. It was sent through the wilderness and thrown off a cliff, as an atonement. Although they were virtually identical, their destinies, as determined by the chance of a lottery, were not.

How are we to understand this cryptic and seemingly capricious ceremony? When considering repentance and atonement, the same tension exists between taking personal responsibility and acknowledging external circumstances beyond our control. On the one hand, repentance requires us to own up to our shortcomings; on the other hand, not everything that goes wrong is completely our fault. In a powerful analysis of the deeper symbolism of this ritual, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains that “[t]he secret of atonement is thus indicated in the ceremonious casting of the lots. It reflects the basis for the penitent’s claim to forgiveness, that his moral directions were similarly influenced by forces beyond his control, that his sinning was not entirely a free and voluntary choice” (*Reflections of the Rav*, p. 46). Just like the destiny of the goats was determined by lots, so too, we ask for forgiveness based on our claim that not everything was our fault.

While we have free will, man “does not choose the family into which he is born and reared, nor the society whose values will

have such an impact on him. He makes choices, yet major aspects of his life seem to be governed by capricious, chance events and circumstances beyond his control. He is a vulnerable creature whose serenity may suddenly be jarred by overpowering temptations, peculiar turns of events, unexpected political coups, an economic collapse, a terminal illness, or traumatic shocks" (*Reflections of the Rav*, 41). Thus, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, the ceremony of the goats acts as a plea to God to keep in mind all of the circumstances that are beyond our control that may have influenced our decisions.

Accordingly, this ceremony provides a healthy counterpoint to the generally appropriate and worthwhile pursuit of self-accountability in the process of change. It is important for us to take responsibility and strive to improve, but it is equally as important not to overdo it to the point of unrealistic and unhealthy self-blame. The ceremony of the goats reminds us to put things in perspective and realize that not everything is our fault and not everything is in our control.



Too Close for Comfort

This week's Parsha begins with the tragic

deaths of Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu.

The Torah says that "*fire consumed them*" (Leviticus 10:2), and then says they were removed from the camp with their clothes still intact (10:5). How did their clothes survive a fire that killed them? Rashi explains: They were electrocuted by two lightning bolts which shot out from the Holy of Holies and split through their nostrils.

To suffer such a fate, they must have done something really really awful. What was it?

After waiting months for the inauguration of the Tabernacle, Nadav and Avihu were so anxious to get close to God that they took incense-pans and rushed headlong into the Holy of Holies.

The problem is that the Holy of Holies is an environment which only tolerates entry on one day of the year – Yom Kippur, and by one person – the *Kohen Gadol* (high priest).

In the pure spiritual center of the Tabernacle, Nadav and Avihu had entered an environment for which their wiring could not sustain – and they vaporized.

The Torah calls Nadav and Avihu "*those close to me*" (Leviticus 10:3). They had positive intentions – to get close, to unite, to connect. Of course God wants closeness. But there are appropriate boundaries. Nadav and Avihu crossed the line ... and were subsumed.

For the Sake of Others

This incident teaches the need for fences and boundaries in our own relationships. Because there's a fine line between the

desire to get close, and something unhealthy.

The Talmud makes the following intriguing statement: "Even more than the baby calf wants to drink, the mother wants to nurse." The simple explanation is that of course the calf is hungry and needs to eat, but even more so the mother is full of milk and needs to get it out.

I heard in the name of Rabbi Simcha Wasserman that this teaching must be understood differently. Because if the mother's only concern was to get rid of her milk, then it would come out in one big gush. And we see instead that it comes out precisely in the right proportion to satisfy the specific needs of the calf. So when the Talmud says, "More than the baby calf wants to drink, the mother wants to nurse," it is saying that even more than the calf desires to eat, the mother wants it to eat – not for the mother's sake, but because that's what's best for the calf!

That's what a good relationship is all about: close, giving, concerned. But not over-bearing. Not smothering. The Kabbalists explain this by way of metaphor: If my candle is lit, and another's is not, then it is a great kindness to use my candle to light the other. But then once the second candle is lit, the real kindness is to back off, to take my candle away and let the other candle burn on its own.

The role of parenting (or any education) is to bring the student to a point of independence. Thus Maimonides writes that the highest level of charity is to create financial independence – by giving a gift, a

loan, or a job.

The dependent relationship is an unhealthy one; it is "too close for comfort."

Open Door Policy

The Talmud (Avot 5:13) describes different people by the way they share their possessions. One type has a completely open policy with others, saying "What's mine is yours, and what's yours is mine."

The Talmud says this person is an ignoramus.

Why? Because this set-up is chaos. Yours, mine. Nobody has anything at all.

Let's say a person wants to make their home an "Open House" where anyone is free to come and go as they please. Sounds great? Not really, because that person has no basis to give anymore. If you invite me, then it's meaningless – since anyone can come it's not really your house, and it's not me you're inviting!

There is no distance, no boundaries between individuals. Is it any wonder that Communism failed.

Splitting a Piece

In describing God's Covenant with the Jewish people, the Torah uses the expression, "*Karet Brit*" (see Exodus 34:10, Deut. 29:13). The literal meaning – "to cut a covenant" – is an oxymoron. "Cut" implies a separation, whereas covenant implies a joining together!

The Maharal explains that the way to get close to someone is not to give up

everything, but rather to "cut" from yourself a special part, and share it with the other person. That way, you will always want to stay close to that person, because they share such an intimate part of you. Yet at the same time you preserve your own individuality.

It's all a matter of knowing where to set the boundary. If we place boundaries wisely, we can achieve proper closeness with everyone. We may find it appropriate to confide with a colleague about personal finances, talk to the rabbi about religion, and a neighbor about politics. But unrestrained closeness with everyone is a recipe for personal disaster.

This applies to physical intimacy also. We must set boundaries clearly and objectively, so that in the heat of passion we don't cross an unhealthy boundary. This is one reason why the Torah speaks against promiscuity, or even against "social hugging" between members of the opposite sex. Because if I'm doing it with everyone, then what's left for my spouse?!

The Jewish Test

Before God gave the Torah at Mount Sinai, He commanded Moses to set up a boundary around the mountain, lest the people come too close. This instruction is so important that it is repeated in Exodus 19:12, 19:21 and 19:24.

"Getting too close" has been a Jewish test throughout the ages. We have such drive and desire to reach out, to fix the world, to bring peace and to usher in the Messianic era. With this intensity, we sometimes rush

in with the right intentions – but in the wrong direction.

Success in life is dependent on knowing where we're headed and how far to go. Our drives have to be harnessed in the proper amount, and in the right place and time. Perhaps this is the reason that Jerusalem – the holiest of all Jewish sites – is a "walled" city.

Ignoring this was the fatal mistake of Nadav and Avihu.



The Path to Holiness

Acharei Mos-Kedoshim focus on sanctity. We, the Jewish people, are not only mandated to adhere to God's commandments, but through these commandments, we sanctify ourselves and become holy. In these two *parshiyos*, which are usually read together, the Torah gives us specific instructions as to how we might attain that lofty goal. It is not only what we must *do* that is of concern; equally significant is that which we must *avoid* doing.

"Do not imitate the practice of the land of Egypt in which you dwelt, and do not imitate the practice of the land of Canaan to which I bring you, and do not follow their

statutes." [1] And this applies to all lands of our sojourns.

It is always tempting to be part of the group - to follow the masses and to adopt that which is in vogue. Therefore, at the very outset of our history, Hashem warns us that if we are to survive as Jews, if we are to retain our faith, then we cannot imitate the ways of the nations among whom we dwell. Our morals, our ethics, are all rooted in Sinai and are not given to change, but the rules that regulate the lives of the nations, the laws by which they live, are in a constant state of flux. That which only yesterday was considered immoral may very well be accepted today, and this holds true for every aspect of life. Just consider the language that has become politically correct, the manner of dress that is termed "high fashion," the entertainment that is regarded as "culture," the manner in which the young are permitted to address their elders, the breakdown of our families, and you will see for yourself the wisdom of this prohibition.

But what if we don't see it? What if we are comfortable and have no objection to what society advocates? Then remember the concluding words of this passage: "Do not follow their statutes." The only way in which we, the Jewish people, have survived centuries of exile, the only way that we have maintained our Jewishness in a hostile world, the only way we have resisted the onslaught of assimilation was to cling tenaciously to our Torah laws and divorce ourselves from even those statutes to which at first glance we may have been drawn. Our way of life, our values, our morals and

ethics are all rooted in Sinai and that Divine Voice from Sinai binds us eternally in every culture, in every century.

Trust: The Basis of All Relationships

One of the mitzvos mentioned in this *parashah* is, "You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind." [2] This statement is not meant to be taken only literally; it also means that we must be careful not to give misleading advice. We also have to insure that we do not have hidden agendas and that our motivations for giving advice are pure. The question that must arise, however, is, why the Torah doesn't simply state that we are not permitted to mislead others. Why use this figure of speech, "place a stumbling block before the blind"?

The Torah wants to impart to us the seriousness and the importance of trust. Even as no sane individual would countenance tripping a blind person or allowing him to step in front of a moving vehicle, so too, misleading someone who is unaware is equally deplorable. We all know how painful it is to discover that we have been betrayed by people in whom we placed our trust, so we should take care not to do this to others. All relationships are built on trust. Neither individuals, nor families, nor societies can survive when trust is missing. When we come to this understanding and realize that deceiving or misleading someone is no different than allowing a blind person to walk into traffic, we will surely be more sensitive to every word that we pronounce.

The Golden Rule

Love your neighbor as yourself." [3] Rabbi Akiva proclaimed that this is a fundamental principle of the Torah, from which we learn how to relate to our fellow man. The question is asked whether it is possible to love another as we love ourselves. The great Chassidic master, the Baal Shem Tov, responded by reminding us that, even as we are aware that we have many faults and yet still love ourselves, similarly, we should feel kindly toward our fellow man and love him despite his faults.

Rambam (Maimonides) teaches that this commandment instructs us to love every Jew as ourselves, by acting lovingly toward them and being as careful of their feelings, their possessions, their money, and their dignity as we would our own. On the other hand, Ramban (Nachmanides) teaches that the Torah does not demand that we literally love someone as we love ourselves. As a matter of fact, we have a ruling that, in times of danger, our own lives take precedence. What God *does* demand is that we desire for others that which we desire for ourselves, and we *treat them with the same respect and consideration* as we want for ourselves.

Hillel the Elder paraphrased this commandment, saying, "What is hateful to you, do not inflict upon others," and instructed a would-be convert, "That is the entire Torah. Go and study it. The rest is commentary."

The Path to Holiness

In this week's *parashah*, we discover the

meaning of spirituality. "*Vehiyisem li kedoshim, ki kadosh Ani Hashem* - You shall be holy for Me, for I Hashem am holy ..." [4] is God's proclamation.

But can ordinary man aspire to holiness? Is that realistic? Yes, the Torah states, not only is it possible for him to attain such a goal, but *he has a mandate to do so*. Our *parashah* does not present this command as a theoretical concept, but it details the exact steps that we must take to realize that goal. As a result, most of the essence of the Torah is mentioned in this *parashah*, for it is through the adherence to these mitzvos that we can become holy. These mitzvos range from revering parents to loving our fellow man as ourselves; from refraining from taking vengeance to being on guard against gossip; from being kind to the stranger to paying the day worker his wages on that selfsame day; from keeping the Sabbath to not worshiping or fashioning idols, and many more; every aspect of life is addressed.

Moreover, God commanded Moses to teach these commandments to the entire nation: "*Kol Adas Bnei Yisrael*" - every Jew had to be present to underscore the fact that sanctity cannot be attained through a hermitlike existence, nor through self-abnegation, meditation, or climbing the Himalayas, but only through reaching out to others in *chesed*, justice, consideration, and love, thereby bringing them and ourselves closer to Hashem.

Road Map to Sanctity

The Torah never leaves anything to

speculation, but provides us with a clear road map that shows us how to attain our goals. Our Sages outlined several paths, each leading to sanctity:

1) Separate yourself from that which is immoral and sinful.

Obviously, our Torah's definition of immorality and sin is a far cry from that which our 21st-century culture has come to accept as the norm. As responsible Jews, it behooves us to study exactly what "immoral and sinful" connote.

2) Sanctify yourself with that which is permitted. Thus, we are charged to temper all our actions and words with discipline; i.e., we are permitted to eat, but not to be gluttons; we are permitted to shop, but not to be shopaholics; we are permitted to drink alcohol, but not to become drunk. Thus, we sanctify wine by making *Kiddush*.

3) To make God beloved through our deeds and words.

As Jews, we are charged with the responsibility of being ambassadors of God. Thus, we have a mandate to inspire people so that they might praise and love Him. By demonstrating kindness, refinement, and consideration, we bring honor and glory to God's Holy Name. And this does not only pertain to major world-shaking events, but to our everyday interactions as well, such as saying "thank you" to a clerk in a store or to a flight attendant, giving someone the

right of way when driving, and not grabbing someone else's parking space - and there are myriad other examples.

4) Even as God is compassionate and forgiving, we must be compassionate and forgiving. We must strive to emulate God's attributes of mercy and forgiveness in our interpersonal relationships, for therein are to be found the essence of holiness. At first glance, this may appear to be the most difficult of all, but if we bear in mind that we want God to forgive us for our trespasses, then surely, we must also be capable of saying those two powerful words, "I forgive."

1. Leviticus 18:30.
2. *Ibid.* 19:14.
3. *Ibid.* 19:18.
4. *Ibid.* 20:26.

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