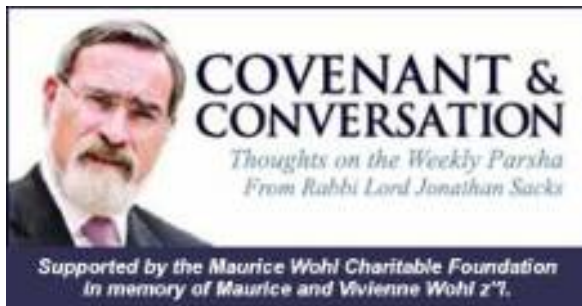


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On Leadership: Not Being Afraid of Greatness

Embedded in this week's parsha are two of the most fundamental commands of Judaism - commands that touch on the very nature of Jewish identity.

Do not desecrate My holy name. I must be sanctified among the Israelites. I am the LORD, who made you holy and who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the LORD.' (Leviticus 22:32)

The two commands are respectively the prohibition against desecrating God's name, *Chillul Hashem*, and the positive corollary, *Kiddush Hashem*, that we are commanded to sanctify God's name. What are these commands and what do they mean?

First we have to understand the concept of "name" as it applies to God. a name is how we are known to others. God's "name" is therefore His standing in the world. Do people acknowledge Him, respect Him, honour Him?

The commands of *Kiddush Hashem* and *Chillul Hashem* locate that responsibility in the conduct and fate of the Jewish people. This is what Isaiah meant when he said: "You are my witnesses, says God, that I am God" (Isaiah 43:10)

The God of Israel is the God of all humanity. He created the universe and life itself. He made all of us - Jew and non Jew alike - in His image. He cares for all of us: "His tender mercies are on all his works" (Psalm 145:9).

Yet the God of Israel is radically unlike the gods in which the ancients believed, and the reality in which today's scientific atheists believe. He is not identical with nature. He created nature. He is not identical with the physical universe. He transcends the universe. He is not capable of being mapped by science: observed, measured, quantified. He is not that kind of thing at all. How then is He known?

The radical claim of Torah is that He is known, not exclusively but primarily, through Jewish history and through the ways Jews live. As Moses says at the end of his life:

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god

ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? (Deut. 4:32-34)

Thirty three centuries ago, Moses already knew that Jewish history was and would continue to be unique. No other nation has survived such trials. The revelation of God to Israel was unique. No other religion is built on a direct revelation of God to an entire people as happened at Mount Sinai. Therefore God - the God of revelation and redemption - is known to the world through Israel. In ourselves we are testimony to something beyond ourselves. We are God's ambassadors to the world.

Therefore when we behave in such a way as to evoke admiration for Judaism as a faith and a way of life, that is a *Kiddush Hashem*, a sanctification of God's name. When we do the opposite - when we betray that faith and way of life, causing people to have contempt for the God of Israel - that is a *Chillul Hashem*, a desecration of God's name.

That is what Amos means when he says:

They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground, and deny justice to the oppressed ... so desecrate My holy name. (Amos 2:7)

When Jews behave badly, unethically, unjustly, they create a *Chillul Hashem*. People say, I cannot respect a religion, or a God, that inspire people to behave in such a way. The same applies on a larger, more international scale. The

prophet who never tired of pointing this out was Ezekiel, the man who went into exile to Babylon after the destruction of the First Temple. This is what he hears from God:

I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions. And wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, "These are the LORD's people, and yet they had to leave his land." (Ezekiel 36:19)

When Jews are defeated and sent into exile, it is not only a tragedy for them. It is a tragedy for God. He feels like a parent would feel when he sees a child of his disgraced and sent to prison. He feels a sense of shame and worse than that, of inexplicable failure. "How is it that, despite all I did for him, I could not save my child from himself?" When Jews are faithful to their mission, when they live and lead and inspire as Jews, then God's name is exalted. That is what Isaiah means when he says, ""You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified" (Isaiah 49:3).

That is the logic of *Kiddush Hashem* and *Chillul Hashem*. The fate of God's "name" in the world is dependent on us and how we behave. No nation has ever been given a greater or more fateful responsibility. And it means that we each have a share in this task.

When a Jew, especially a religious Jew, behaves badly - acts unethically in business, or is guilty of sexual abuse, or utters a racist remark, or acts with contempt for others - it reflects badly on all Jews and on Judaism itself. And when a Jew, especially a religious Jew, acts well - develops a

reputation for acting honourably in business, or caring for victims of abuse, or showing conspicuous generosity of spirit - not only does it reflect well on Jews. It increases the respect people have for religion in general, and thus for God. This is how Maimonides puts it in his law code, speaking of *Kiddush Hashem*:

If a person has been scrupulous in his conduct, gentle in his conversation, pleasant toward his fellow creatures, affable in manner when receiving, not retorting even when affronted, but showing courtesy to all, even to those who treat him with disdain, conducting his business affairs with integrity ... And doing more than his duty in all things, while avoiding extremes and exaggerations - such a person has sanctified God.¹

Rabbi Norman Lamm tells the amusing story of Mendel the waiter. When the news came through to a cruise liner about the daring Israeli raid on Entebbe in 1976, the passengers wanted to pay tribute, in some way, to Israel and the Jewish people. A search was made to see if there was a Jewish member of the crew. Only one could be found: Mendel the waiter. So, at a solemn ceremony, the captain on behalf of the passengers offered his congratulations to Mendel who suddenly found himself elected de facto as the ambassador of the Jewish people. We are all, like it or not, ambassadors of the Jewish people, and how we live, behave and treat others reflects not only on us as individuals but on Jewry as a whole, and thus on Judaism and the God of Israel.

"Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have

greatness thrust upon 'em," wrote Shakespeare in Twelfth Night. Throughout history Jews have had greatness thrust upon them. As the late Milton Himmelfarb wrote: "The number of Jews in the world is smaller than a small statistical error in the Chinese census. Yet we remain bigger than our numbers. Big things seem to happen around us and to us."²

God trusted us enough to make us His ambassadors to an often faithless, brutal world. The choice is ours. Will our lives be a *Kiddush Hashem*, or God forbid, the opposite? To have done something, even one act in a lifetime, to make someone grateful that there is a God in heaven who inspires people to do good on earth, is perhaps the greatest achievement to which anyone can aspire. Shakespeare rightly defined the challenge: Be not afraid of greatness.

1. Maimonides, *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, 5:11.
2. Milton Himmelfarb, *Jews and Gentiles*, Encounter Books, 2007, 141.



The Perils of Judgement

The Parsha ends with the tragic story of the blasphemer – the man who cursed God when he was not accepted into any Tribe by the Jewish Court of Law (Beit Din), because his father was non-Jewish and the membership of a Tribe was dependent on the father's Tribe. The Torah does reveal that his mother was Shulamis Bas Dibri from the Tribe of Dan. The Rabbis teach a

number of causes for his terrible actions. However, the Daat Zekeinim offer another suggestion. They note the Torah's emphasis on the fact that his mother was from the Tribe of Dan. They cite a Gemara¹ that says that if one sees a person who always wants to go to Beit Din to resolve issues is likely from the Tribe of Dan, as the name Dan means 'judgment'. Rashi elaborates: "The one that says 'come to din (judgment)' in all his dealings with people he would always say to come to judgment, and would only listen to another person through a judge."

The Chiddushei Lev² discusses this Gemara and the Daat Zekeinim's connection of it to the story of the blasphemer. He notes that the Daat Zekeinim understands the Gemara to be criticizing this trait of always going to judgment. He asks why that is so bad – this person seems to be a man of truth who is ready to do the right thing according to the law. He answers that this kind of behavior is not in fact praiseworthy because it can often lead to disputes. When a person is not willing to make compromises or to give up his claim, then there is a good chance that his actions will breed negativity and could even lead to open fighting. The Daat Zekeinim is explaining that this trait caused the blasphemer to come to clash with his fellow Jews, and eventually led to his terrible action of cursing God.

The Chiddushei Lev poses another question on the explanation of the Daat Zekeinim's understanding of the Gemara. The Gemara derives that people from the Tribe of Dan like going to judgment from the blessing that Yaakov gave to his son, Dan. "Dan Yadin Amo K'echad miShivtei Yisrael."³ – "Dan his people

will judge like one of the Tribes of Israel." The Daat Zekeinim understands that this verse is the source of Dan's negative trait of going to judgment, yet the simple understanding of Yaakov's words are certainly not negative. Rather, Yaakov was blessing the Tribe of Dan that they would merit to have a Judge who would lead the Jewish people. This indeed came to fruition in the form of Shimshon. Accordingly, how can the Daat Zekeinim understand the verse to be revealing a negative trait?

The Chiddushei Lev answers that certainly Yaakov blessed the Tribe of Dan to have the positive traits of adherence to truth and justice. These are excellent traits as they enable a person to follow the true path and to distance himself from sins. However, this same positive trait has the potential to be misused if the person refuses to ever give in on his opinion or his view of how things should be. This can lead to sins in the realm of *bein adam l'chaveiro* (interpersonal relationships) as it can easily lead to hatred and disputes. The members of the Tribe of Dan were supposed to use this trait in the correct way but the type of person described by the Gemara as always going to Court, and the blasphemer himself, misused the trait with disastrous consequences.

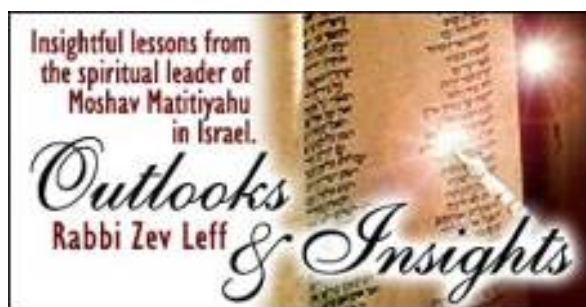
The Chiddushei Lev teaches that we learn from here an important principle with regards to character traits in general. Even with regard to traits that are generally viewed as positive, a person must be careful to avoid letting such traits cause him to sin. With regard to the specific area of strictly adhering to the letter of the law, some people do have a natural leaning towards justice and truth. As the Chiddushei Lev points out, these are admirable traits, but at

the same time, if a person does not control his character traits and does not direct them to serving God, then they can easily cause him to treat other people overly strictly and to avoid necessary compromises.

In this vein, the Gemara teaches that the Temple was destroyed because people were exacting on each other and treated them according to the strict letter of the law⁴. This demonstrates the seriousness of being overly strict. Moreover, even though another Gemara teaches that the second Temple was destroyed because of a different reason – baseless hatred – it seems that the two Gemaras complement each other. Because people were so exacting, it resulted in the proliferation of negativity and disputes.

May we all merit to apply the traits of judgment and truth in the right way.

1. Pesachim, 4a.
2. Vayikra, p.152. The Chiddushei Lev is written by Rabbi Henschel Leibowitz who was the Rosh Yeshiva of Chofetz Chaim in Queens, New York.
3. Bereishit, 49:16.
4. Bava Metsia, 30b.



Striving For Perfection

Sforno explains that even though there are blemishes that actually increase the strength and value of an animal, they nevertheless render the animal unfit for sacrifice. Throughout the Torah we find completion and wholeness taking

precedence over quantity. Thus in the recitation of the *haMotzi* blessing, a whole roll takes precedence over a much larger portion of a loaf of bread.

From this we learn that our service of God is measured not by quantity, but by how close it comes to perfection. Since God is the ultimate perfection, our goal must be to also achieve the greatest measure of perfection possible for a human being, for we are exhorted to emulate Him and *"to be complete with God."* Only by being as close to perfect as possible can we hope to have a relationship with God.

The Kohen is God's representative and the one most directly involved in His most exalted service. He must reflect perfection, and therefore physical imperfections render a Kohen unfit for service in the Sanctuary.

The clearest sign of man's inherent imperfection is death. As the verse says (Psalms 82:6): *"I said you are angelic, sons of the most high are you all, but like men shall you die."* Because man's mortality constitutes the greatest denial of his quest for perfection, the Kohen, who is to be the embodiment of perfection, is severely curtailed in his contact with dead bodies.

Even ordinary Kohanim, who are permitted to defile themselves for their seven closest relatives, are only allowed to do so if the corpses are complete. Though the Torah permits the Kohen to relate to the spiritual imperfection of man under the extenuating circumstances of a relative's death, this is only if the body is complete, so at least some semblance of perfection still exists.

QUEST FOR PERFECTION

The Sages tell us (Talmud – Berachos 5b) that

whether one does more or less is insignificant. What one actually accomplishes in this world is in the hands of God. The main consideration is that one direct and concentrate his heart toward heaven. What we can control is the intensity of our desire and purity of our effort in the quest for perfection:

Rabbi Yitzchak said: "The Torah teaches us that when a person does a Mitzvah, he should do so with a complete and happy heart. Had Reuven known that the Torah would record that he attempted to save Joseph from his brothers, he would have put him on his shoulders and run with him home. And if Aaron had known that the Torah would record that he would be happy when he met Moses after [Moses was chosen to be the Redeemer], he would have come with drums and cymbals. And if Boaz had known that the prophets would record that he gave Ruth some parched grain to eat, he would have given her a royal banquet." (Midrash – Yalkut Shimoni Ruth 604)

In each instance cited by the Midrash, there was doubt as to what the proper conduct really was. Reuven was unsure if saving Joseph was proper after the brothers judged him a threat to their existence. If Moses questioned his own suitability to be the Redeemer, Aaron likewise had the right to have reservations concerning his brother's appointment. And similarly, Boaz had grounds for doubts about the convert Ruth, not knowing her sincerity and character.

Hence they acted without the complete and happy heart that could have made their Mitzvot perfect, and this blemish was reflected in the outcome of their actions. Joseph was sold into

slavery; the mission to Pharaoh met with initial failure (see Ha'amek Davar – Exodus 3:18); and David's lineage was impugned.

FIFTY LEVELS

After the Jewish people were freed from subjugation in Egypt to serve God, the first step in that service was to strive for perfection. That striving took the form of counting seven complete weeks, 49 complete days, until the giving of the Torah on the fiftieth day.

Fifty represents perfection (50 gates of wisdom, 50 gates of purity). Our task is to count 49. We are not capable of creating perfection; only God can make something perfect. All we can do is strive towards it. But by counting for 49 days, it is as if we counted the fiftieth also. For the fiftieth level is the automatic result of our efforts in securing the first 49.

This is the significance of Lag B'Omer as explained by the Maharsha (Moed Katan 28a). The majority of the *omer* count is reached when two-thirds of the time passes. That occurs on the thirty-third day. Once most of the period has passed successfully, one can be confident he will be successful in likewise fulfilling the remainder. Lag B'Omer is a day to rejoice in one's successful quest for perfection. The traditional bonfires symbolize the pure, intense fire of the heart that is the basis of our quest for perfection.

The Midrash comments: "When are the days of the *omer* perfect and complete? When we fulfill God's will" (Vayikra Rabba 28:3). It is the intensity of our quest for perfection in performing God's will that infuses our counting of the *omer* with added meaning and effectiveness.

May we strive for perfection in all that we do, so that our efforts will be crowned by success by God, Who will bring us to the ultimate perfection, "*granting His nation strength and blessing it with peace.*"



The Omer and Peak Potential

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

This week's Torah portion discusses the mitzvah of the Omer, which involves counting seven weeks from Passover until Shavuot. The Torah tells us that the Omer offering, which was brought to the Temple on the second day of Passover, must be "waved before God." This waving is clearly an integral part of the mitzvah, but it is not explained. What is the significance of waving the Omer offering? How does this mitzvah connect to the seven-week Omer period in which we currently find ourselves?

We are taught that the Omer offering was composed of barley, which our Sages considered to be animal food. The bread offering on Shavuot, however, was composed of wheat - a more dignified grain, appropriate for human consumption. By looking at the composition of these two offerings, we can begin to understand the goal of the seven-week intermediate period between them. During this time between Passover and Shavuot, we have

the opportunity to change from animals into people - to elevate our baser nature, which is driven by desires alone, and to channel its energy into the pursuit of a more meaningful, spiritually-oriented existence.

According to the commentator Netivot Shalom, this is the purpose of waving the Omer offering. Waving represents shaking off - in this case, shaking off layers of self-centered physicality and materialism in order to elevate our existence. We see a hint to this idea in the parsha itself (Leviticus 23:9-22), which mentions waving seven times. We could suggest that these seven mentions of waving correspond to the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot. Each week we have the ability to shake off another layer.

What are these layers, exactly? All the physical aspects of this world were initially created in seven days. Each week of the Omer period thus "shakes off" one of these physical layers of Creation. As we progressively refine and elevate ourselves, we prepare ourselves to receive the Torah on Shavuot.

(Nachmanides actually sees the seven weeks of the Omer quite literally as seven days. He writes that the Omer period can be considered a Chol Ha'Moed [intermediate festival period] between Passover and Shavuot. Since we start counting toward Shavuot on the second day of Passover, the holidays are fundamentally connected. Thus, instead of the usual seven-day duration of a festival, the "festival" of time from Passover until Shavuot lasts seven weeks, with each week representing a day. And, says Nachmanides, just like the Chol Ha'Moed of Sukkot is capped by Shmini Atzeret, so too the "Chol Ha'Moed" of Passover is capped by Shavuot, referred to by

the Torah as "Atzeret.")

The Jewish zodiac signs also illustrate the goal of progressive transformation. The Omer period always falls out during the three months of Nisan, Iyar and Sivan. The sign for Nisan is a sheep, and the sign for Iyar is an ox. These first two months are represented by animals, corresponding to our more animalistic nature at the beginning of the Omer period and the lower level of the barley offering that is brought then.

The sign for Sivan, however, is twins - people! By working on ourselves throughout the seven weeks of the Omer, we can steadily progress, week by week, until we reach the level of *people* who are prepared to receive the Torah.

May we be blessed to transform ourselves not just weekly, but also daily, as we grow towards a more meaningful, purposeful, and spiritual existence. By the time we reach Shavuot, may we stand at the peak of our potential, in the service of God.

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