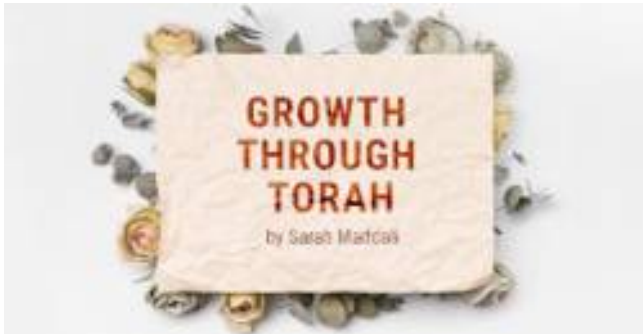


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You Were Created for This

In this week's Torah portion, Aharon, the High Priest and Moses's brother, was going to perform the dedication in the *Mishkan*, the Holy Tabernacle, that contained God's Presence. However, as he was about to perform the sacrifice, he hesitated. Our Torah commentaries say that Aharon got scared because part of the altar where the sacrifice took place reminded Aharon of the sin of the golden calf.

Aharon still felt responsible since he was the leader who unsuccessfully tried to discourage the

Jews from sinning and making the golden calf. However, Moses reassures him, telling him to continue in his mission.

Why didn't Moses suggest that someone else perform the sacrifice since it was hard for Aharon? Since he was fearful, someone else would have been more suitable for the job?

Lesson:

While counterintuitive, often those things that are difficult for us, be it a certain relationship, character trait, situation, are most closely related to our mission in life. Someone who is naturally more impatient by nature often encounters situations that put that impatience to the test: are they going to snap at the slow cashier when they are already running late, because that comes more naturally than taking a deep breath and realize that this is an opportunity to work on their patience?

Those things that are often fraught with difficulty are usually those things that God places in front of us so that we can truly grow and stretch beyond ourselves. If someone wants to build muscle, they do not lift something that is easy for them. Rather, they lift that which challenges them, that which is difficult, which is the only way to truly get stronger.

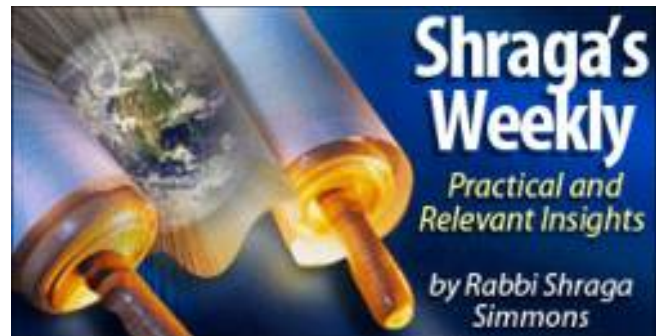
Moses was conveying this message. In that moment when Aharon hesitated to bring the sacrifice, he could have felt inadequate, insecure, guilty, and fearful about moving forward. *How could I act as High Priest and perform such an important, holy, and lofty sacrifice to G-d when I had such a large part in one of the most grievous*

transgressions? However, Moses encouraged Aaron, reminding him that God loves him and already forgave him for the golden calf incident.

If you cling to feelings of guilt and inadequacy, you'll miss out on becoming the amazing person you're meant to become. Moses was telling Aharon the important message that he is bigger than his mistake and was created for this mission! Though it seemed difficult to overcome, he can and will succeed!

This idea provides strength for us when we encounter challenges in our daily lives. Instead of getting caught up in the whirlwind of emotion, we can take a step back and recognize that this is an opportunity presented by God for our personal growth. God wants us to be the best we can be and thus gives us situations to stretch ourselves and become better. Just like the person at the gym, we build our character muscles through challenging our current status quo. So when things get tough, instead of being discouraged, we can strengthen our resolve and tell ourselves, "You can do it! You were created for this mission!"

Exercise: When encountering something challenging tell yourself, "I can do it! I was created for this!"



Acts of Human Kindness

While waiting in line at the bank this week, I opened up an illustrated copy of the Torah and the man next to me must have thought I was a zoologist – because there were pages filled with pictures of birds!

This week's Parsha enumerates all the non-Kosher birds – e.g. raven, vulture, magpie. I guess keeping kosher is pretty easy! But wait – the Torah also says you can't eat falcons. Oh ... no more of my favorite Falcon Burgers!

Another of the non-kosher birds listed is the *chasida* bird (Leviticus 11:19). The Talmud says it's called "*chasida*" because it does *chesed*, which in Hebrew means performing acts of kindness.

In Hebrew, the name of something reveals its essential characteristic. The Midrash (Genesis Rabba 17:4) tells us that the first man, Adam, looked into the essence of every animal and named it accordingly. The donkey, for example, is characterized by carrying heavy, physical burdens. In Hebrew, the donkey is named *chamor* - from the same root as *chomer*, which means physicality. Which means to say, the donkey (*chamor*) typifies physicality (*chomer*).

(Compare this to English, where the word "donkey" doesn't reveal much about the essence of a donkey!)

Highest-Level Kindness

But if the bird is called *chasida* because it does *chesed*, then why does the Torah list it as a NON-kosher bird?! It's understandable (as Maimonides writes) that the raven and vulture should be classified as non-kosher: They're vicious birds of prey and it is spiritually unhealthy to internalize these traits. But since the *chasida* bird seems to embody the desirable trait of *chesed*, why isn't it kosher?!

Let's look closer: The Talmud explains that this bird does *chesed* "by giving food to its friends." The Chidushei HaRim (19th century founder of the Ger Chassidim, and my cousin's great-great grandfather) explains: The *chasida's* generosity is limited to its own circle of friends, to the exclusion of others. Such partisan kindness is not what the Torah wishes us to practice. Hence, the *chasida* bird is non-kosher.

Consider the following illustration:

About 100 years ago, a group of neighbors in Jerusalem wanted to form a Chesed Society amongst themselves. Proposed activities included: inviting each other over for Shabbat meals, collecting clothes for families who couldn't afford it, and providing interest-free loans for someone wishing to start a business.

So the group went to the great sage, Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin, to get his blessing for their new Chesed Society. The rabbi asked them, "What if someone outside your neighborhood

needs help?" To which they replied, "We would have to politely refuse, because we've limited our activities to just amongst our own group of neighbors."

The rabbi replied: "It's very nice that you want to help your friends and family. In fact, the Talmud states that our obligation is to help those closest to us first – our family, our community – and only then the rest of the world."

The rabbi continued: "But real *chesed* is about caring for others – and since all the kindness you're proposing comes back to you, you're essentially only caring for yourselves!"

Applying the Principle

Chesed cannot be predicated on an expectation of return. Did you ever have a relationship where the other person was always keeping score? ("You drive this time because I drove last time!") That's not friendship at all! A real friend sometimes gives and sometimes takes, but never keeps score.

How can we apply this principle to our relationships? Let's say a colleague at the office (we'll call him Bill) comes to me and says, "I'm taking care of some personal things on Wednesday, and I need someone to handle my calls. Can you cover for me?" So I'm thinking, Bill sits at the desk right next to me, I see him every day, and at some point I may need him to cover for me, so... "Of course, Bill, sure, I'll be happy to help you out!"

But then imagine someone comes to me and says, "We've never actually met, and I work in a different department, and in fact this is my last week with the company. I'm taking care of some

personal things on Wednesday, and I need someone to handle my calls. Can you do that?" So I'm thinking, I'm never gonna see this guy again!

Judaism says when someone requests a favor, I need to consider: Is my response based solely on whether or not I perceive this as worth my own while? If so, then I'm serving no one but myself.

The Torah describes one particular act as "*chesed shel emet*," the true ultimate *chesed*: Taking care of funeral arrangements for someone who's died. This is true *chesed* because in this act we have absolutely no expectation of return.

Rights & Responsibilities

Years ago before I was getting married, I went to one of the biggest sages in Jerusalem and asked, "What's the key to a successful, happy marriage?"

He told me that the secret is to be a giver. Because if you come into marriage asking, "What will she do for me?" then you're pulling in the opposite direction, away from your spouse. But if you come in asking, "What can I do to provide and contribute?" that builds a connection. And if both partners approach marriage with this same attitude, the relationship flows beautifully in both directions.

Today we live in a society where everyone seems concerned about his rights: "What's in it for me? What do I get out of it?" The Torah perspective, on the other hand, is always from the standpoint of responsibility. For example, when the Talmud discusses property damage, it always states the law in terms of "Shimon is *responsible* to pay Reuven," as opposed to "Reuven has the *right* to collect from Shimon."

In the good ole days, the idea of civic responsibility was a standard feature of Western society. Perhaps the tide began to shift in the 1960's with changing roles and liberation – prompting John F. Kennedy to remind us all: "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

Do Now, Feel Later

But, you say, sometimes I just don't "feel" like helping anyone! As any baby will attest, we're born selfish. Yet the process of maturing involves developing our sense of caring for others. This is crucial for our spiritual health. The Talmud likens someone who doesn't give to others as the "walking dead." A non-giving soul is malnourished and withered.

And it is a mistake to wait until we're emotionally "inspired" to help others. Rather, it is through the act of giving that I transform myself into a "giver." Eventually, my emotions will catch up with my actions. And in the meantime, a lot of good will have been done.

One of the 613 mitzvot is to emulate God. What does God actually "do" that we should emulate? We know that God, being infinite, has no needs at all. He didn't create the world for amusement, nor as a science experiment, nor because He was lonely. The Kabbalists explain that God created the world because He had no one outside of Himself, so to speak, to "give to." God's primary purpose of creation therefore was to bestow kindness upon others. Therefore the most profound way we can emulate God is through giving.

Is there a limit to the giving? Everyone, of course, reaches a point where they need something in return – or else they will resent being taken advantage of. But we must know our limits – and reach for them.

A World Built on Kindness

The story is told of a *tzaddik* at home one day when he hears a knock at the door. The *tzaddik* opens the door and finds a homeless man standing there. "Can I have a dollar for some food?" he asks. So he does what any good *tzaddik* would do: Hurries to find his wallet, rushes to give the beggar the dollar, and quickly sends him on his way.

The homeless man is already halfway down the street when he hears someone calling after him, "Wait, wait!" He turns around to see the *tzaddik* waving, who then hands the beggar another dollar.

Upon returning home, the *tzaddik's* wife is standing in the doorway astonished.

"I'll explain," he says. "When I first opened the door and saw a smelly, raggedy, grimy man standing in front of me, I felt uncomfortable. I ran to get the dollar because I wanted to get rid of him as soon as possible. But after he'd left, I realized that I didn't give him the dollar for *him*, I gave him the dollar for *me* – because I felt uncomfortable. So I wanted to give a second dollar – this time for *him*!"

Chesed means reaching out altruistically, with love and generosity to all. The Talmud says it was baseless hatred amongst Jews which brought about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Thus it is only through unconditional love that our idyllic future will be built.

For in the words of King David (Psalms 89:3): *Olam chesed yi-baneh* – "the world is built on kindness."



A Terrible Tragedy

On the very day that the dedication of the Temple took place, Nadab and Abihu, the two noble sons of Aaron the High Priest, suddenly perished. The Torah describes the reaction of Aaron simply as "*vayidom Aharon*"¹ meaning that Aaron remained silent. The word *vayidom* usually refers to a *domeim*, an inanimate object that is incapable of speaking. This teaches us that while we may be able to control our external responses, in our hearts we are often in turmoil, and our facial expressions betray our feelings. Aaron's faith in the justice and compassion of God and in the eternity of the soul was so all encompassing, that even as an inanimate object is silent, he too was silent in his heart. His trust in God was so complete that he found peace in the knowledge that his sons' deaths were the Will of God; thus, *vayidom Aharon*, Aaron was silent.

Aaron's faith was so powerful that it transcended the generations and speaks to us for all time. Whether we experience personal or national tragedy, we recall and are sustained by Aaron's *vayidom*. Our faith, even as Aaron's, remains constant.

Consider only those who survived the unspeakable calamity of the Holocaust. We recall our own parents and grandparents: Our grandfather, Rabbi Avraham HaLevi Jungreis, *zt"l*, who saw his entire family wiped out in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, remained the only surviving son of his noble rabbinic family. Upon arriving on these shores in 1947, he built a yeshivah, saying, "We will rekindle the light of the Torah that the Nazis tried to extinguish." Our father, HaRav Meshulem HaLevi Jungreis, *zt"l*, saw his entire family perish, but continued their lifework by teaching Torah to new generations of American Jews; and our mother, Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis, may she have length of days, founded Hineni at a time when the concept of Jewish outreach was virtually unknown in the world.

This same story was repeated by countless survivors, and today, the Torah academies of the *shtetls* of Europe are to be found in the United States, England, and Israel. Yes, the faith of Aaron the High Priest has transcended the generations and has infused us with strength and the ability to go on.

WHOSE WILL?

The question still remains: Why did this terrible calamity befall Aaron's two sons?

The explanation that the Torah offers is that they (the two sons) "brought before God an *alien fire* that He had not commanded..."²

The strength of our people, our ability to triumph against all odds, can be found in the fact that we never deviated from the Divine commandments. While Nadab and Abihu were most sincere in their desire to serve God, they nevertheless desired to do so *in their own way* and bring *their own fire* rather than the one commanded by our Torah.

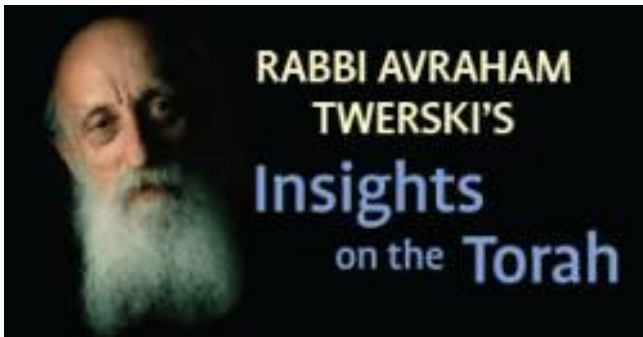
Through their tragic deaths, the Torah warns us of the terrible consequences that can result from departing from God's commandments. No matter how lofty our intentions may be, if our service does not conform to God's Will, it is unacceptable. Our God is One, our Torah is One, and our worship must mirror that Oneness. It cannot be based upon our personal needs or emotions. Precisely because our Torah is from God, it reflects *His Will* and *not ours*. The Torah is not a set of laws that can be tampered with or altered to suit our desires or to accommodate our weaknesses.

This teaching is of special significance to our generation. In our egalitarian society, we have come to believe that we have the right to fashion *our own* mode of worship, to contrive *our own* rituals, and to author *our own* ceremonies. We have come to believe that *our sincerity makes everything right*. But if our service does not reflect God's Will, *whom are we worshipping? Are we not worshipping ourselves rather than our Heavenly Father?* Had our ancestors fashioned their own mode of worship, there would, God

forbid, have been no faith for us to inherit. The strength of our people is to be found precisely in the fact that the very same fire that illuminated our souls at Mt. Sinai continues to shed light for us today.

Very often, we encounter people who challenge us, saying, "If you can give me a good reason why I should keep the commandments, I'll consider it." *What better reason can there be than that God commanded us to keep them?*

1. Lev. 10:3.
2. Ibid. 10:1.



Mind-Altering Chemicals

The sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, each took his fire-pan, they put fire in them and placed incense upon it; and they brought before God an alien fire that He had not commanded them (Vayikra, 10:1).

Rashi cites the statement of R' Yishmael in the Talmud that the transgression of Nadab and Abihu was that they drank wine before entering the Sanctuary. This statement appears remarkable. The Torah is explicit that their sin was the introduction of an alien fire, an *esh zarah*. How

and why does R' Yishmael give another reason, which seems to contradict the Scripture?

The answer is that R' Yishmael is not at all contradicting the Scripture. Rather, he is offering an interpretation thereof. While *esh zarah* is literally "an alien flame," it is also figuratively "an alien passion." R' Yishmael's interpretation is of singular importance today.

Nadab and Abihu were extraordinarily great men, so much so that Moses said that he considered them greater than himself and Aaron (Rashi, Leviticus 1:3). If they drank wine before entering the Sanctuary, it was not because they were out partying. Rather, they knew that in the Sanctuary they would have a spiritual experience. They believed that by drinking wine they would attain a state of mind more conducive to a spiritual experience. After all, the psalmist says, "Wine makes glad the heart of man" (Psalms 104:15). By relieving a person's tension, wine enables one to have greater joy, and joy can enhance a spiritual experience. It was for the intensification of the spiritual experience that they drank wine.

Why, then, were they so severely punished? Because one should not seek to enhance a spiritual experience by artificial means. Intense spiritual experiences should come as a result of prayer, Torah study and meditation, with contemplation on the Infinite, and not by altering the metabolism of the brain with a chemical.

In recent times we have suffered a plague of drug use which has destroyed many lives, ruined the minds of countless youth, and still poses a threat to the very survival of our society. Several decades ago, there arose a false prophet who



advocated “mind expansion” by use of potent mind-altering chemicals such as LSD, claiming that it would give people a perception of reality that they could not achieve otherwise. Many people believe that intoxicating the brain with alcohol, marijuana or other chemicals improves one's functioning. Many minds have been destroyed as result of this misconception.

R' Yishmael's point is that one should not seek spiritual enhancement by altering one's state of mind with a chemical. Nadab and Abihu's attempt to do so was introducing “an alien fire” into the Divine service. Now, as then, chemical alteration of one's state of mind is destructive.

I arrived at this interpretation of R' Yishmael's statement as a result of my clinical experience in treating people who have resorted to chemicals to alter their state of mind. I was thrilled to subsequently discover that several Torah commentaries had offered this interpretation.

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