

## **A Weekly Byte... from Isralight**

### **(Portion of Shemini))**

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny

*So many years later, I still remember his face: the wild eyes, full of anger, zeal, hatred...and passion?*

*We were on patrol in Jebalya, a nasty little piece of real estate in the Gaza strip. Only a few months into the Intifada, and still coming to terms with the reality of being in the army, and yet policing civilians, we were all on edge. At least in Lebanon, for the most part, you knew who the enemy was, and the rules of engagement were abundantly clear.*

*But here, in a refugee camp teeming with women and children, life was much more complicated.*

*This was my first reserve duty as an officer, and the knowledge that for the first time I was in the army for only thirty days, was little comfort when every day was a different adventure and a different challenge.*

*Riots and stone throwing, burning tires and Molotov cocktails, and the ever-present danger of terrorists with guns and human shields were a cocktail for frayed nerves and constant tension. On the one hand, everyone wanted to get home safe and sound, and on the other, you didn't want to fire at the wrong target, G-d forbid, and end up in court for the rest of the year.*

*Things had gotten so out of hand that our patrol orders were identical to a combat zone. No three-man jeep roaming down alleyways to serve as a presence, we were now on a twelve-man patrol, complete with nearly all the combat (and riot) gear we had when we were on the Syrian border.*

*We were heading towards the main square of Jebalya, near the clock tower, and we were split in two lines of six men each, along both sides of the street. We were walking in 'Rivchei Yom', or day distances, which means the distance between each man and the next soldier in line is a good twenty yards, spreading the column out over a good distance. The idea is that in the event anyone would open up on us, or throw a grenade, they would not be able to take out an entire patrol at once. Patrolling in bunched up groups may work in the movies, when everyone has to be in the camera lens, but in real life it's a bad idée. The down side to this system is that your men are spread out over a good distance, which makes it very difficult to remain in tune with what is going on all the way at the rear of the line. In addition to the fact that each column is supposed to keep half an eye up towards the rooftops of the buildings across the street, covering the parallel column, (and making sure no-one sneaks up on a roof and heaves anything down on the men,) the two men in the back of the column (one on each side of the street) are also supposed to keep an especially sensitive eye towards their rear (actually turning a full three hundred and sixty degrees while they walk every minute or so) to cover our backs.*

*To this day, I am not sure if the guys in the back dropped the ball, or whether this fellow was just that fast, but all of a sudden I heard a blood curdling scream of "Allah' Hu' Akbar" ("G-d is great") and turned in time to see an Arab, who looked to be about twenty five years old with an axe raised high*

*above his head, not two feet away from the guy at the back of the column, clearly determined to imbed this axe in our man's back.*

*I can still recall that intense feeling of complete helplessness; with all my men in between me and this terrorist, there was nothing I could do but watch in horror as our man glanced over his shoulder to see this Arab two feet away with that axe.*

*Generally speaking, every man on patrol has a 'pakal', a specific item of equipment that is his responsibility, and as luck would have it, this soldier happened to be wearing the ten-liter jerry can full of water, on his back.*

*Instinctively, he leaned forward and away from the terrorist, whose axe imbedded itself in the jerry can, instead of in our man's head. The men quickly overcame this fellow and battalion eventually came and took him off to the local base for questioning and eventual trial. But I will never forget the look of pure hatred in that man's eyes, as, all alone in the street, he was determined to kill or be killed. It was as if there was nothing else he could see save that Israeli soldier's back.*

*Contrast that experience with the need to train soldiers to suppress a very similar emotion under fire.*

*One of the first rules they teach you is what is known as 'ishur kav', which literally means 'straightening out the line'.*

*When a unit under fire reaches the point where it has to charge an enemy position, the final forty or fifty feet of 'hista'arut' or full charge, has to be done with everyone in a straight line. This makes perfect sense, because if five or six men are charging a position, and one of them is faster and breaks ahead of the rest of the men, he will very quickly render those behind him incapable of firing as he will have placed himself in between them and the enemy.*

*When you charge up the hill, the most challenging aspect is to make sure everyone stays in a reasonably straight line across, so that all of you can keep firing. Inevitably, this means you will be moving as slowly as the slowest amongst you, which sounds easy to do, but in practice is extremely difficult, as it goes against every instinct screaming in your brain to get up that hill just as fast as your legs can carry you.*

*In fact, it takes what should be an experience of pure passion and energy, and invests it with a constant stream of calculated thought and consideration.*

*Is there some significance to this difference? Is there a lesson to be gleaned from the line between the passion and zeal that can threaten to completely overwhelm us, and yet allows us to focus on one goal to the exclusion of all (and everybody) else, and the calculated process which allows us to be in control of our passion, seeing everyone and everything around us, ensuring that they are as much a part of the goal, as the goal itself?*

This week's portion, **Shemini**, offers us a case in point:

*"And it was on the eighth day, Moshe called to Aaron and his sons, and to the elders of Israel. And he said to Aaron: 'Take for you a calf for a sin offering (a Chatat) ...and offer it (literally: bring it close) before G-d.*

“And to the Children of Israel speak saying: take a goat for a sin offering (*Chatat*) and “a calf and a lamb which are yearlings for a whole burnt offering (an *Olah*).” (VaYikra 9:1-3)

Essentially, a year after the sin of the golden calf, the Jewish people have now completed the Tabernacle (the *Mishkan*) and have finally arrived at the day of its dedication ceremony.

For seven days Moshe, at the command of G-d, has demonstrated for Aaron and his sons the process of putting the *Mishkan* together and taking it apart, going through the entire daily service until Aaron and his sons are ready.

Our portion begins with the eighth day, when Moshe and Aaron and Aaron’s sons erect the *Mishkan*, preparing for its dedication, and the passing over of the priesthood to Aaron and his sons.

As part of this very special day, Moshe tells Aaron and his sons, as well as the Elders (representing the people) of Israel, to offer up a number of special sacrifices, all of which raises a number of questions:

First of all, it seems as though we are missing the verse where ‘G-d speaks unto Moses saying’; why does this command seem to come from Moshe?

Why do Aaron and the people have different sacrifices? Shouldn’t we be as one? Why is there a need for separate sacrifices? And for that matter, what is the significance of these different sacrifices? Why does Aaron offer a *calf* for a sin offering (A *Korban Chatat*), whereas the Jewish people (through their elders) offer up a *goat* for the sin offering? Why is Aaron’s whole burnt offering (The *Olah*) a *ram*, whereas the people’s is a *calf*, in addition to the lamb?

What is the difference between the *Olah* (whole burnt) offering, as opposed to the sin offering that both are needed?

It is an unfortunate reality of human nature that causes us to steer away from the complex and the detailed; we usually prefer to see things in broad strokes. In fact, many of our perceptions stem from the fact that we often don’t want to get too bogged down in the details; we just want the bottom line: who is the good guy, and who is the bad guy? Which one is wearing the white hat, and which the black?

It would be reasonable to suggest that most people have quite a simple perception of sacrifices and the ritual of sacrificial ceremony. Somehow, we have erred, and we bring an animal and offer it up as if to suggest that ‘there but for the grace of G-d go I’. In other words, when we make mistakes and are not living life as it is meant to be, then ultimately, we are no longer worthy of being here. But while this may certainly be true, the *details* of the sacrifices should tell us (as with any other mitzvah) that there must be more at stake.

Why do we, indeed, need so many different sacrifices? Just pick an animal, offer it up, feel remorse, and let’s move on!

Obviously, the different animals, and different sacrifices, not to mention all the other different ritual details (such as which altar is used, what clothes the priest is wearing, what day the animal is offered up, and many more) are all meant to communicate different messages, which is then our challenge to receive and pass on.

**Rashi** points out (9:2), that the reason Aaron is told to bring a calf, is to demonstrate that he has been forgiven for his part in the sin of the golden calf. The reason the Jewish people bring the same calf is because they too, through the building of the tabernacle (now being dedicated) have achieved forgiveness for the golden calf.

This is why, suggests the **Kli Yakar**, their calves are brought in different sacrificial contexts (Aaron's as a sin offering, and the people's as a whole burnt offering), because the nature of the mistake was very different.

The "*Chet*", or sin, from which the *Chatat* (sin offering) draws its name, actually refers to a mistake; a transgression one did not intend to do. (In Hebrew, missing a target is: "Le'**Hachti** Et Ha'Matara" from the root **Chet**; a **Chet** then, is when we miss the mark.) In fact, one does not bring a sin offering for transgressions committed intentionally. A close look at the context of Aaron's error in the sin of the golden calf reveals, as both **Rashi** (Shemot 32:4) and the **Ohr HaChaim** suggest, (and as is clearly demonstrated by Aaron's own words in Shemot 32:24) that it was never his intent to build a golden calf, the gold was thrown in the fire and the calf was simply the result.

In fact, the story of Aaron is a valuable lesson in taking responsibility not just for the things we have done wrong, but, as well for the mistakes we have made which *resulted* in things being done wrong.

More fascinating, is the nature of the offering of the Jewish people, who offer the same calf (and the assumption is that it must be for the same reason, as expiation for the sin of the golden calf) as a whole burnt offering, the *Olah*.

The *Olah* is offered as atonement less for action, than for the desires and intentions that lead to that action. The term *Olah*, from the root '**Aleh**', implies a 'going up'. (Like an *Aliyah* to the Torah, which is a rising of spiritual consciousness and *Aliyah*, when someone moves to Israel, also a spiritual elevation of a sort.) This relates to the fact that all actions really begin with the passion and desire that raises them from the subconscious to the level of action.

In fact, in the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf, (Shemot 32:28) three thousand Jews were killed by the Levites as a result of their idolatrous actions. The rest of the people were not killed, however, which seems to indicate that they did not necessarily actively participate in either the worship of the calf, or, certainly, the idolatrous orgy that surrounded it. Their transgression was not in action, but rather in desire. (And indeed all of the Jews brought gold to throw into the fire; they *wanted* a calf...)

Indeed, as we have explained elsewhere, (*Weekly Byte VaYakhel*), the essence of our mistakes is much more what we have *desire* to do, than what we have actually *done*. And the Jewish people here were caught up in the passion of the moment, in the desire to find an intermediary with G-d, and in the necessary process that any practice of idolatry entails.

Which leads us to one final point.

The **Meshech Chochmah** (Rav Meir Simchah of D'vinsk) quoting a Midrash (*Torat Kohanim*), suggests a powerful connection between the calf and the goat, which the Jewish people bring as a sin offering (implying a result that needs atonement, even if not intentional...):

*“In the beginning, they took Joseph’s coat, and killed a goat, and dipped it in the blood... and in the end they sinned when they made a golden calf.” (Torat Kohanim)*

The journey that led to the golden calf began with the goat whose blood the brothers dipped Joseph’s coat. This was done in an attempt to deceive their father Yaakov into believing that Joseph was dead (killed by a wild animal) after they sold him as a slave.

It seems the sin of selling Joseph is somehow intricately connected with the sin of the golden calf. But why? What does the story of Joseph have to do with the golden calf, which takes place hundreds of years later?

Think about it. What does it mean to sell your brother into slavery? Take a close look at the story of Joseph and his brothers. Immediately after throwing Joseph into a pit, *“Va’Yeshvu Le’echol Lachem”*, they actually sat down to eat lunch! (Bereishit 37:24-25)

This was the great tragedy of the sons of Yaakov. Because if you can sit down to lunch on the edge of the pit your brother is lying and crying in, then something is dreadfully wrong. It means that your own brother is just not there. And if your own brother is not there, then a part of you isn’t really there either. And, even more importantly, if you don’t have your fellow human being in your heart, then G-d is missing as well.

One of the basic underpinnings of a relationship with G-d in this world, is the recognition that there is a little bit of G-d inside every human being, and there can be no whole relationship with G-d, without a whole relationship with my fellow human being.

The tragedy of the golden calf, when, at the foot of Sinai, just a few short weeks after having heard the Ten Commandments, the Jewish people lost touch with G-d, has its roots in the brothers’ abandonment of Joseph three hundred years earlier.

Perhaps this is why these sacrifices in particular are given to the Jewish people by Moshe, and not G-d (directly); because it is precisely our ability to hear our fellow human being, and to be in communication with each other, that forms the basis of our relationship with G-d, as witness in the *Mishkan*.

Indeed, it is not accidental, as **Rashi** points out (Shemot 32:6) that the sin of the golden calf involved not only idolatry, but adultery and murder as well. Because once G-d isn’t really there, it doesn’t take too long before my fellow human being is gone as well.

In fact, **Rav Kook** (in his *Mimrahei Emunah*), points out that all of a person’s negative behavior really stems from their relationship with G-d. If a person’s relationship with G-d is ‘off’, then their relationship with themselves and the world around them will be ‘off’ as well.

( A person who may seem to be so involved with ritual, can nonetheless seem to have certain deficiencies in the realm of human behavior, because the real deficiency is in the realm of their relationship with Hashem.)

Moshe’s giving of these sacrificial mitzvot, suggests that sometimes these things have to come from us. Hashem desperately wants a relationship with us, and desires as such that we should have a healthy relationship with everyone around us, but we have to want to do that.

It all begins with the relationship we have with ourselves, because if a person doesn't have a healthy self-image, if he or she is not comfortable with who he or she is, then it will be very difficult to develop a healthy relationship with others.

How often do we meet people who seem wonderful but cannot commit to the relationships that come into their lives? Whether it is the person you are dating who can't seem to commit, or the spouse who can't seem to make enough time for you, or even the parent who never makes time for their children, it all stems from the relationships we have with ourselves. (This, incidentally, is why we begin our day every morning with the magnificent prayer, the "*Modeh Ani*". Most people translate this as "*I am thankful*", which is correct, but in Hebrew, before I mention G-d, I first have to be thankful for 'me'. Am I really happy with the 'me' I have become? This is our first offering of the day.)

Indeed, much of this is at the root of the challenges we are facing today in the world. If a person, in the name of G-d, can walk into a crowded pizzeria full of women and children and without a moment's hesitation, blow them to bits, Judaism suggests there is something off in their relationship, and indeed in their perspective of G-d. In fact, that zeal and passion which sees G-d alone and without every human being, regardless of race or creed as G-d's creations, was what pagan idolatry was all about.

May we merit soon to learn to see each other alongside ourselves, walking the same line, despite our different perspectives. Perhaps then, the possibility of one man's passion blocking out everyone else, even in the name of G-d, will be recognized for the idolatry it truly is.

Shabbat Shalom,

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