

# ***Parashat Shemini***

## **Recognizing Greatness in Our Midst**

*Parashat Shemini* begins by discussing the events which occurred on the eighth and final day of the inauguration of the *Mishkan*. After months of preparation and anticipation, Aharon and his sons were finally installed as Kohanim in an elaborate service. As part of this, two sin-offerings were brought, a bull calf for Aharon and a he-goat for the Jewish people (Leviticus 9:2-3). Why were sin-offerings necessary at this point?

*Targum Yerushalmi*, one of the earliest Aramaic renderings of the Torah, glossed that the bull calf was intended to atone for the golden calf worshipped at Sinai, and the he-goat for the goat whose blood Yosef's brothers used to deceive their father about his death. Evidently, before commencing the regular service of the *Mishkan*, these disturbing and staggering transgressions required additional rectification and forgiveness.<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik discerned a common thread joining the two sins. In a sense, both revolved around how to relate to a once-in-a-generation leader in our midst. The one sin was the product of too little respect, the other of too much. As with most things, the golden mean should be our guide.

When the brothers sold Yosef and tricked their father, beyond the horrifying enmity directed at their brother, they also displayed a callous lack of regard for their own father. The blame for this can be partially lain at Reuven's feet, since he was the first to disrespect Yaakov in the Bilhah incident, and the younger brothers took their cue from their big brother.<sup>2</sup>

If the towering figure of Yaakov received obscene treatment, it was quite the opposite with Moshe. The people felt absolutely reliant on him, given his extraordinary leadership, his performance of miracles, and his direct connection to God. When he failed to descend the mountain (Exodus 32:1), they made the golden calf. But this excessive dependency on a human being was misplaced:

It is forbidden to depend entirely upon a human being; our absolute reliance must only be on God. The Jewish people had faith in Moshe, but not in God; they mistakenly thought that Moshe was the redeemer. Had they displayed complete faith in God, the sin would not have taken place.<sup>3</sup>

We find a similar notion in the *Meshech Chochmah* by Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk. The breaking of the tablets was not a release of anger, he explained, but an act of pedagogy. Moshe realized that the people mistakenly thought he possessed some inherent holiness that enabled him to perform the miracles and redemption on his own. He broke the tablets to disabuse them of this notion once and for all. Even the divinely written tablets had no

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<sup>1</sup> This comment is printed as *Targum Yonatan* on Leviticus 9:2-3. Note that *Targum Yonatan* is the conventional but mistaken designation, as there is no *Targum Yonatan* on the Pentateuch.

<sup>2</sup> See further *Parashat Vayishlach*, "A Model Penitent".

<sup>3</sup> *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 3:54–55.

inherent holiness and might as well be destroyed if their words would not be heeded. The sanctity of all things derives from their relationship with God.<sup>4</sup>

The Rav further posited a deeper layer of meaning to the bringing of the bull calf for Aharon and the he-goat for the entire people. We often forget, living in an urban world, that animals have particular behavioral characteristics. Nothing escaped the Rav's attention. The brothers' behavior towards Yosef and Yaakov reflected a rebellious instinct, a refusal to accept Yaakov's choice of Yosef to be leader of the family. In this they behaved like brazen goats. The calf brought for Aharon is an animal that follows its mother around submissively, a symbol of the Israelites' unhealthy submissiveness to Moshe.<sup>5</sup>

These two sins required two separate sacrifices for atonement because rectification must address the root cause. The sale of Yosef and the making of the golden calf had contrary motivations: the first was a rejection of paternal and religious authority, as possessed by Yaakov; the second was a product of unhealthy devotion to a charismatic figure, Moshe. Therefore, they could not both be atoned for in a single sacrifice. The Rav teaches us that *teshuvah* (repentance) requires more than the recognition of sin. To truly repent, we too must follow our sins to their roots.<sup>6</sup>

### *Exploring the Rav's Insight*

The Torah itself indicates that one must revere the leading rabbis of the generation. The Rav quoted Rabbi Akiva's interpretation of the verse: "You shall be in awe of (*et*) the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:13). While ostensibly *et* marks the direct object, it is also homonymous with a preposition meaning "with," and so is understood as a marker of exegetical inclusiveness. In other words, here the verse instructs us to also be in awe of those who are close to God: Torah scholars.<sup>7</sup> *Tosafot* is quick to point out that this applies not only to a person's principal teacher but to the leading Torah scholars of the generation.<sup>8</sup> This mitzvah goes well beyond showing respect to *gedolei ha-dor*, the leading Torah luminaries of the generation. One must be in awe of them.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the failure to observe this precept led to the mortal sin of Nadav and Avihu. Rashi wrote that they made a halachic ruling in the presence of their teacher Moshe, which is forbidden.<sup>10</sup> The Midrash says they were so self-assured that they didn't seek counsel from Moshe, Aharon, or even each other.<sup>11</sup> The Talmud notes that Nadav and Avihu wondered to themselves, "When will these two elders die, so that you and I can lead the

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<sup>4</sup> *Meshech Chochmah* on Exodus 32:19, s.v. וע"ז צווח משה ככרוכי'א.

<sup>5</sup> *Stone Chumash*, 589.

<sup>6</sup> *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 3:54.

<sup>7</sup> *Bava Kama* 41b.

<sup>8</sup> *Tosafot* ad loc., s.v. לרבות ת"ח.

<sup>9</sup> Schachter, *Divrei ha-Rav*, 309.

<sup>10</sup> *Eruvin* 63a.

<sup>11</sup> *Yalkut Shimoni*, §524.

generation?"<sup>12</sup> All three explanations point in one direction: irreverence or, even worse, a disdain for the Torah personalities of their time.

Rabbi Yehudah Meir Shapiro did not find it likely that the great sons of Aharon would have acted so irreverently towards their own father and Moshe.<sup>13</sup> They were not waiting for their elderly father and uncle to just die already; they were merely excited about the prospect of leading the nation. Even according to this explanation, their overeagerness to try their hand steering the ship demonstrates they were not in awe of the two giants in their midst. This ended up leading them to offer the incense that had not been commanded by God.

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<sup>12</sup> *Sanhedrin* 52a.

<sup>13</sup> *Leviticus Rabbah, Shemini*, 12:2, says that in some respects they were even greater than Aharon and Moshe.