

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת שמיני

וישא אהרן את ידו אל העם ויברכם וירד מעשת החטאת והעלה והשלמים

“Aharon raised his hands toward the people and blessed them; then he descended from having performed the sin-offering, the elevation-offering and the peace-offering” (9:22)

There are a number of halachos regarding Birchas Kohanim which are derived from this posuk, the first reference in the Torah to a Kohen blessing the people. One of these halachos is that a Kohen must raise his hands while reciting the blessing. The posuk clearly states that Aharon lifted his hands when he blessed the nation. The Nodah B’Yehuda (מ"ק או "ה סי' ה') was asked a question about a Kohen who, in his old age, could not keep his hands steady and raised for the duration of Birchas Kohanim. To compensate, he put loops in his hat through which he could insert his arms and support them in a raised position. Was such a contraption permissible according to halacha? The Noda B’Yehuda ruled that this was not allowed because a Kohen has to raise his hands on his own without any support, as we see in this posuk that Aharon lifted his hands by himself.

Why do we derive this halacha, along with a number of other relevant halachos, from here and other places in the Torah rather than from the main source for this mitzvah in Parshas Naso? Rabbi Friedman suggests that when the Torah records the text of the blessing, it intentionally does not discuss the halachos in order to teach the kohanim that their main focus should be on the blessing itself and the words that they are saying. The focus should be more on the text of the blessing and less on the other technicalities involved in doing the mitzvah. This is illustrated by the placement of sources for many relevant halachos elsewhere in the Torah.

ואת החסידה האנפה למינה ואת הדוכיפת ואת העטלף

“The *chasidah*, the *anafah* according to its kind, the *duchifas* and the *atalef*” (11:19)

The chasidah, generally identified as the stork, is called “chasidah” because it acts kindly and does “chesed” toward its friends. If this bird is so virtuous, asks the Chiddushei HaRim, why is it not kosher? The answer is that it only deals kindly with its friends but not with anyone else. We can learn an important lesson from this thought. We should not restrict our generosity to our cliques and our small circle of friends. We should be willing to help all Jews from all walks of life and from all over and not limit our acts of kindness.

The Gemara in Sotah 38b says that even birds recognize people who are stingy and they do not eat from their food. How is it that birds can be so smart? Rabbi Friedman suggests that giving food to an animal is a big chesed because a person who does so helps one of the creatures that Hashem created by supporting it. But Hashem does not want to give a stingy person the merit of doing such an act of kindness. Therefore, Hashem causes the birds to avoid the food put out by such a person. Only one who acts properly is afforded further opportunities to do mitzvos.

והאנקה והכח והלטאה והחמט והתנשמת

“The anakah, the koach and the leta’ah; and the chomet and the tinshemes” (11:30)

The Torah lists eight sheratzim (creeping creatures) that transmit impurity. One creature is noticeably missing from this list – the snake. One would think that the snake should be an impure reptile because it was the root of the sin in Gan Eden and it brought impurity into the world in the first place. Not only is the snake left off the list, but it is specifically listed at the end of the parsha as forbidden for consumption but not transmitting impurity. Why is this so?

R’ Bachya says that the snake is not counted among the sheratzim even though it brought impurity to the world because the Torah is meant to be a path of peace. The Torah did not want to cause people to avoid killing snakes because of potential impurity because they would be endangered by their venom. In fact the other creatures mentioned along with the snake at the end of the parsha, the scorpion and the centipede, could also have qualified as sheratzim but are poisonous and thus were considered pure so

that people could readily kill them in order to save themselves without pausing to take impurity into consideration.

The Torah is meant to be good for us and not to cause us harm. This is more than just a theory - it is a halachic principle. Chazal knew that all halachos had to align with this idea before it could become law and there are instances in the Gemara where potential laws are rejected because they do not comply with the mandate that the Torah is a Torah of peace.

כי אני ה' אלקיכם והתקדשתם והייתם קדושים כי קדוש אני ולא תטמאו את
נפשותיכם בכל השרץ הרמש על הארץ

“For I am Hashem your G-d – you shall sanctify yourselves and you will be holy; and you shall not contaminate yourselves through any teeming thing that creeps on the earth” (11:44)

What does the Torah mean by the seemingly repetitious command to “sanctify yourselves and you will become holy”?

Rabbeinu Bachya begins to answer this question by writing that a person has natural physical desires. These tendencies are very stronger, much stronger than a person’s intellectual power and what he knows to be right. These instincts are ingrained in a person from his youth, before his intellect fully develops, and it also possesses the tools and outlets to fulfill its desires, as opposed to the mind which remains purely theoretical. The mind and the soul are from a holy source and are deposited into a physical world where it is completely cut off from its origins and faces a world whose values are inimical to its own. It has no friends in this physical world and is surrounded by forces that threaten to overcome it. It seems impossible for a person to follow his mind and overthrow his desires.

For this reason, Hashem gave us Torah and mitzvos with which we can weaken our physical desires and strengthen our intellect by actualizing its values. There are many mitzvos limiting the use of the expression of physical instincts and/or promote the performance of good deeds, i.e. kashrus, forbidden relationships, prayer, charity, kindness. These mitzvos bring us kedusha and enable us to loosen the grip of the desires and weaken them. Without mitzvos, one would be unable to restrain his natural desires and to be in control. It is not our birth status as Jews that separate us from

the other nations of the world, but it gives us the great potential to achieve kedusha through mitzvos, to overcome our instincts and become elevated. If a person feels that he has not reached this level and sees that his desires are strong, he should re-evaluate his Torah and mitzvah observance to see if they are where they should be.

After understanding all this, writes Rabbeinu Bachya, we can fully appreciate the Sifri's explanation of this posuk: "You shall sanctify yourselves" with mitzvos and then afterwards "you will become holy." Whenever we do a mitzvah, we recite a blessing thanking Hashem "Who sanctified us with his commandments." The mitzvos allow us to grow and overthrow our physical nature if we perform them properly. When we strive to sanctify ourselves by doing mitzvos properly, we will reach higher levels.

*Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman
Written by Michael Gutmann*