

The Path To Follow

Acharei Mot - Kedoshim

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Rabbi David Pinto Shlita

Act Normally

It is written, “Hashem spoke to Moshe after the death Aaron’s two sons, when they came near Hashem and died” (Vayikra 16:1). The Ohr HaChaim asks why the verse states, “Hashem spoke” without mentioning what He said. He also asks why the verse states “and died,” since it already says “after the death.”

We may explain this in light of a remark by our Sages on the verse, “By which he shall live” (Vayikra 18:5), namely: “He shall live by them [the mitzvot], but he shall not die because of them” (Yoma 85b). The Sages also say, “The Torah’s words are firmly held by one who kills himself for it” (Berachot 63b). How can a person abide by both of these teachings? When one separates himself from the pleasures of this world and only eats what is strictly necessary in order to live, it is considered as if he has killed himself for the Torah. In fact the Zohar states, “The Torah endures only with one who kills himself for it” (Zohar II:158b). Now death always denotes poverty, for the poor are considered to be like the dead, and the Midrash teaches: “The Torah is not found with one who seeks pleasure and honor in this world, but with one who kills himself for it, as it is written: ‘This is the Torah: A man who dies in a tent’ [Bamidbar 19:14]” (Yilamdeinu 76b).

However Nadav and Avihu did not do this. They truly killed themselves for the Torah and sanctity, to the point of being ready to die in order to draw closer to the holy Shechinah. They did not get married for this very reason (Vayikra Rabba 20:9), as well as to be close to the Shechinah at all times. Hence the verse twice mentions that they died, in order to teach us that they killed themselves to draw closer to the Shechinah. The verse states, “When they came near Hashem and died,” but what caused their death? It was the fact that they drew too close to Hashem. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: If you want to draw close to Me, you do not have the right to annul even the smallest part of the Torah, even for a limited time. Do

not say that these mitzvot will turn you away from serving Me, or that these mitzvot are empty, for have I given the mitzvot to angels? I gave the Torah and mitzvot only to man, as the Sages have taught: “The Torah was not given to the ministering angels” (Berachot 25b). When you observe Torah and mitzvot, and when you sanctify your material deeds, you will draw closer to the Shechinah and surpass the level of angels. However if you try to resemble the angels, then as surely as you live, I will take your souls! Furthermore, since you plan on killing yourselves for sanctity and you are not acting normally, you are responsible for your deaths, for I placed man in the world so he could live, not die. Just as it is forbidden to physically injure the body (Bava Kama 91b), how much more is it forbidden to kill the body! However by acting normally, and by studying Torah and practicing mitzvot, you can draw closer to the Shechinah. Yet I have not approved of the way you are acting.

This is why the verse states, “Hashem spoke to Moshe after the death.” It teaches us that this is precisely what Hashem said here, neither more nor less. What did He say? He said that the Children of Israel should not live austere lives like Nadav and Avihu, who cut themselves off from a normal life and believed that they were angels. It is only by observing the Torah and mitzvot that a person attains holiness, and yet they cut themselves off from the life of this world. We find something similar in the book Arvei Nachal (Parsha Va’etchanan), which states that the philosophers who came before the giving of the Torah believed that they could improve their future and ensure the survival of the soul by fleeing into the desert, by nourishing themselves with herbs and doing similar things. They believed that it was impossible to improve otherwise, and they perished in their foolishness. The Torah teaches us that the path which is pleasing to Hashem is to fulfill concrete mitzvot that pertain to this world, as our Sages have said:

“Combine the study of [Torah] with a worldly occupation” (Berachot 35b). A person may ask, “Why did Holy One, blessed be He, not say this before Nadav and Avihu entered the Holy of Holies, where they died?” The answer is that they had already feasted their eyes upon the Shechinah at the giving of the Torah, and they were therefore liable for death. As our Sages have taught, “Nadav and Avihu uncovered their heads and allowed their eyes to feast on the Shechinah, as it says: ‘He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the Children of Israel. They saw G-d, and they ate and drank’ [Shemot 24:11]” (Shemot Rabba 45:5). G-d did not want to disrupt the joy of the Children of Israel, which is why He waited until the eighth day of the inauguration, as the Midrash states: “For this the elders, as well as Nadav and Avihu, deserved to be instantly burned. Yet since the day of the giving of the Torah was precious to G-d, He did not wish to harm them on that day.... Yet at a later date, He collected the debt from them” (Bamidbar Rabba 15:24). Why had they feasted their eyes upon the Shechinah? It is because they thought they could approach the Shechinah all at once, and therefore they were punished.

We can now understand a statement found in the Midrash on this parsha: “After the death of Aaron’s two sons. Rabbi Shimon opened his discourse with the text, ‘All things come alike to all. The same fate awaits the righteous and the wicked’ [Kohelet 9:2]” (Vayikra Rabba 20:1). What does this have to do with Nadav and Avihu? We may explain this according to what we have said: The evildoer who rejects the yoke of the Torah is liable to death, and the tzaddik who truly kills himself in order to draw closer to the Shechinah, following the ways of Nadav and Avihu, is also liable to death. We must all choose the middle path, sanctifying ourselves in what is permitted.

Living for the Sanctification of Hashem's Name

It is written, "Which a man shall do, and by which he shall live" (Vayikra 18:5).

People usually understand the concept of devoting oneself to "the sanctification of Hashem's Name" as referring to dying as a martyr. Yet from this verse, we understand that the Torah has no less of a desire (and perhaps even more of one) for a person to sanctify Hashem's Name by living. The Torah accords tremendous value to life, and it demands that a person live by fulfilling the mitzvot in every situation he faces, even the most difficult, not to die in order to fulfill them. We see millions of people devoting themselves to the opinions of some obscure writer enclosed in his room, unaware if his ideas have some practical value or not, and yet our perfect Torah is not valued to the same degree as his empty words. The Torah is worth everything we can give to it throughout our lives. So many people are prepared to die in war, and yet they cannot even resist the least of their desires! The Torah demands the very opposite: It wants a person to live his life, but to live it by devoting himself to performing mitzvot.

In his final moments, Rabbi Akiva was led to his death and his flesh was ripped away with iron combs. At that point he took upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, lingering over the word echad in the recitation of the Shema, until his soul departed at echad. This constituted exceptional devotion, carried out in the midst of the greatest of suffering by taking upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven.

However the Gemara seems to stress a completely different point. It reads, "When Rabbi Akiva was taken out for execution, it was the hour for the recital of the Shema, and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the Kingdom of Heaven" (Berachot 61b). This means that his execution occurred precisely at the time for the mitzvah of reciting Shema, which is why he fulfilled it. This implies that Rabbi Akiva's greatness was not that he let himself be tortured in order to sanctify Hashem's Name, but that as he was being killed, he did not let a mitzvah pass him by without performing it. In fact a Jew's duty is to observe the Torah throughout his life, even in difficult times, and even in his final moments. For as long as he is alive, a Jew must fulfill mitzvot. Hence we cannot say that Rabbi Akiva died with devotion. Rather, he lived with devotion and performed the mitzvot with devotion, for this is what the Torah commands. – Rav Shach, Bezot Ani Bote'ach

A Pearl From the Rav:

Everyone Must Show Compassion to Others

The Sages say that the goat for Azazel was fed before being sent into the desert, something that

is quite surprising. Why was it fed, since it would soon be thrown off a cliff and die? The word seir ("goat") is formed by the same letters as the word rasha ("evildoer"), which tells us that even if a person is evil, the Holy One, blessed be He, does not desire his death. As it is written, "For I do not desire the death of him who dies, says Hashem G-d. Therefore turn and live!" (Ezekiel 18:32). The Sages explain that the term "dead" means "the wicked who in their lifetime are called dead" (Berachot 18b). The Holy One, blessed be He, knows that they will do evil tomorrow, but He still provides them with sustenance. Similarly, we find that the ministering angels accused Ishmael by saying: "Master of the universe, will You provide a well for one who will eventually slay Your children with thirst?" Hashem demanded, "What is he now?" "Righteous," they said. "I judge man only as he is at the moment," said Hashem (Bereshith Rabba 53:14). He therefore enabled Ishmael to find bread and water.

From here we learn that everyone must show compassion to every Jew, even if he is wicked, just as long as he does not incite others to commit idolatry, for this is how Hashem acts. He shows compassion to all His creatures, even the wicked. A person must not say, "Why should I give my possessions to so-and-so, who I saw committing a sin?" Instead he should give him his possessions, for a man must emulate the conduct of G-d. Hence, "Just as He is gracious and compassionate, so should you be gracious and compassionate" (Shabbat 133b). The Gemara explains that the verse, "His mercies are on all His creatures" (Tehillim 145:9) applies even to unbelievers and Sadducees (Berachot 7a). Elsewhere the Sages say, "The ministering angels wanted to chant their hymns, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'The work of My hands is drowning in the sea, and you want to chant hymns?'" (Megillah 10b).

Faith in Hashem Leads to Love for Others

A person who has complete faith in Hashem will be led by this faith to love Hashem's creatures, meaning that he will love other people and make peace among them. Such a person will especially not be stingy with his goods, nor will he covet or take other people's money. Since he has faith, he knows that all his sustenance is given to him by Hashem, so why would he take what belongs to others? What has not been given to him is certainly not his, and he will not want to obtain anything that Hashem has not given him. One who does not love Hashem's creatures, it is a sure sign that he does not strongly believe in Hashem, since it is impossible for a person who believes in G-d not to love others. This is because they were created in the image of the King, as it is written: "And G-d said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (Bereshith 1:26). Whoever loves the King will love the work of His hands, and whoever does not love the work of His hands proves that

he does not love the King.

Let us see just where the Sages take this concept. On the verse, "He who is hanged is cursed by G-d" (Devarim 21:23), Rashi says that this constitutes a disgrace to the King, for man is made in His image and the Jewish people are His children. This can be compared to twin brothers living in one city. One brother becomes king, while the other becomes a thief and is hanged for his crimes. Whoever sees him will say, "The king has been hanged!" The Sages also said, "When a man suffers, what does the Shechinah say? 'My head aches, my arm aches!'" (Sanhedrin 46a). Hence G-d grieves over the spilled blood of the wicked, and even more over the blood of the righteous. The Gemara states, "A non-Jew presented himself before Shammai and said, 'Convert me on condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot.' He repulsed him with the builder's cubit that was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him: 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor'" (Shabbat 31a). Furthermore, Rabbi Akiva said, "You shall love your fellow as yourself [Vayikra 19:18] is a great principle of the Torah" (Sifra, Kedoshim 4:12).

The Power of a Concrete Realization

It is written, "Hashem spoke to Moshe after the death Aaron's two sons, when they came near Hashem and died" (Vayikra 16:1).

From here the gaon Rabbi Eizik Scherr learned just how important it is to give a warning in a concrete way, not to content ourselves on giving a simple or theoretical one. In fact the verse before us deals with Aaron the Kohen Gadol, who had reached a level comparable to Moshe, as it is written: "Moshe and Aaron among His priests" (Tehillim 99:6). Furthermore, this warning was addressed directly to him, through his brother Moshe, from Hashem. Could anyone possibly think that such an order would be insufficient, such that encouragement and the threat of punishment were needed? However as long as a person lives, all the forces of nature act in him, and because of these forces, a concrete realization can influence a person more than a theoretical understanding. Hence even Aaron had to be warned in this way, by using the concrete image of his sons' death.

The Sacrifices are Meant for Repentance

It is written, "One lot for Hashem, and one lot for Azazel" (Vayikra 16:8).

Why did the goat destined for the inner offering – the blood of which the Kohen Gadol himself brought into the Holy of Holies in a state of complete purity, and whose innards were offered on the altar – only atone for the impurity of sacred things, whereas the goat that was sent away – from which nothing was taken, and whose caretaker had only a temporary role to play, and who could have been a non-kohen, and even impure, with

none of these sacred tasks to perform – was precisely the goat that procured atonement for all sins, both minor and major? This is strange indeed! The answer is that the significance of a sacrifice lies in the fact that it moves a person to wholeheartedly repent, to imagine that everything that was done to the animal should really have been done to him. That being the case, since everything done to the inner offering were done inside, in holiness and purity, the one who saw it would think, “May my soul die the death of the righteous,” for the sight of the offering will not fill him with any fear. Therefore its atonement is not so great, for it is solely done regarding the impurity of sacred things, such as the sanctity of an offering, nothing more. However the person who sees the fate of the scapegoat – how it is sent from the house of G-d to the land of the decree, and how its bones are broken and its body torn to pieces for Azazel in the land of death – will reflect upon the fact that what was done to the goat should really have been done to him. Therefore a tremendous fear will fall upon and shake him to his very core, which will lead him to complete repentance. Hence this sacrifice procures atonement for all of Israel’s sins, both minor and major.

– Beit Aaron

Judging Others Favorably

It is written, “With righteousness shall you judge your fellow” (Vayikra 19:15).

The Sages interpret this to mean, “Judge your fellow favorably” (Shevuot 30b). How can we apparently lie to ourselves by judging people favorably in every case, when in certain cases we can see them doing the very opposite of something favorable? What is the meaning of this mitzvah in that case? The Sages have said, “Any man who is insolent will in the end stumble into sin” (Taanith 7b). This means that shame serves as a barrier and an obstacle to sin. Once a person had breached the barriers of modesty and shame, there is nothing to prevent him from sinning, as it is written: “It is a good sign if a man is shamefaced. ... No man who experiences shame will easily sin” (Nedarim 20a). The same applies to a person’s influence on others. The first one who sins completely breaches the barriers of shame. The one who follows him does not require as much insolence to sin, and the third person needs even less, once these barriers have been broken down. This is why the sin of desecrating Hashem’s Name is so grave. A person who openly sins diminishes the intensity of the fear and shame that are engraved in man with regards to committing a sin, thereby prompting others to sin as well.

We can now understand how the advice given to us by the Sages, to judge others favorably, is designed to help us. It is meant to ensure that the barriers of shame are not breached within our own hearts, for once we are certain that everyone is righteous, how could we dare to be the first ones to sin? However if a person tries to find fault with everyone, he will be more likely to sin at a time of weakness.

– Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin

Guard Your Tongue

Practicing the Mitzvah of “You Shall Love Your Fellow as Yourself”

When we think about it, we realize that practicing the mitzvah of judging others favorably and guarding the tongue depends on fulfilling the positive mitzvah, “You shall love your fellow as yourself.” In fact if we truly love others, we will certainly not speak Lashon Harah about them, but instead we will try as much as possible to justify them. We will imagine that if we ourselves had done something bad and people were talking about it – although we had a reason for it, since it was not done on purpose or for any other reason – then how much would we want someone to justify us so that we would not be humiliated! It is precisely in the same way that we should act with others.

– Sha’ar HaTevuna 5

Meticulous Attention to Shechita

It is written, “Any man from the house of Israel who will slaughter an ox, a sheep, or a goat” (Vayikra 17:3).

Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky always made certain not to eat meat that had been slaughtered by an elderly shochet who still performed shechita properly. One day he had to sit on a Beit Din in Switzerland. When he arrived at an inn and inquired about the shochet, he was told: “We have two shochatim here. One is an old, G-d fearing man. The other is a young man who just came into the profession.” Rabbi Yechezkel asked to be served meat that was slaughtered only by the young shochet. One day Rabbi Yechezkel was served chicken soup, but decided not to taste it upon finding an ant in it. Soon afterwards, the innkeeper arrived with the main course, and he saw that the Rav had not eaten his soup. The Rav then showed him the ant. Now great attention was paid to cleanliness in that particular inn, so when the innkeeper saw that an ant had nevertheless made it into the soup, he became quite emotional. He told the Rav that on that day the young shochet had not come to town, and therefore he had decided to serve the Rav meat that had been slaughtered by the old shochet. Now he clearly saw that Heaven had prevented him from doing this, since an ant had fallen into the soup. Rabbi Yechezkel said that when a person takes it upon himself to do something for the sake of Torah and mitzvot, Heaven helps him to accomplish it.

Reasons for the Mitzvot

Sins are Purely from the Outside

It is written, “Aaron shall lean his two hands upon the head of the live goat and confess upon it all the iniquities of the Children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and send it with an appointed man into the desert” (Vayikra 16:21-22).

How can sins be transferred to the head of a goat? How can a goat carry sins with it into the land of the decree? How are sins transformed once the goat’s bones are crushed?

In his Guide to the Perplexed (3:46), the Rambam explains that the sending away of the goat to Azazel constitutes, on one hand, a call to the Children of Israel to repent and reject the burden of sin and completely distance themselves from it, just as the goat is sent far from the people. On the other hand, the sending away of the goat encourages and reassures the Children of Israel that their sins have been completely taken away from them by their repentance and the atonement procured by Yom Kippur. They should now demonstrate no slack in serving Hashem because of the sins they committed up to now. They should realize that their transgressions have been removed and their sins have been forgiven.

The sending away of the goat takes place once a year, on Yom Kippur. However each day, by the mitzvah of tefillin, a similar service occurs: We roll up each parsha from beginning to end, and it is placed on a small piece of parchment. It is a Halachah given to Moshe on Sinai that we place a hair from a clean animal over it...the norm being for the hair to come from a calf. This hair should be seen from outside of the casing (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 32:63). In the Mishnah Berurah we read: From a calf, to recall the episode of the golden calf and not to sin. And also to atone for this sin. The tefillin are a testimony to the selection of the Jewish people, for “all the peoples of the earth shall see that the Name of Hashem is proclaimed over you, and they shall fear you” (Devarim 28:10). In parallel with this, what is written in the tefillin of the Master of the universe? “Who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth” (Berachot 6a). Emerging from the casing of the tefillin is the calf hair, done in order “to recall the episode of the golden calf and not to sin,” as well as “to atone for this sin.” The hair emerges as a separate thing, for “the soul of Jacob is intrinsically pure and holy, and the fact that they sin comes from the outside, from the side of the evil inclination” (Maharal). This is the meaning of their atonement.

The Rebbe Rabbi Avraham of Amshinov

Rabbi Avraham was the son of Rabbi Menachem, the Rav of Amshinov from the Vorki dynasty, which was known for its love of Israel. He was also the son-in-law of Rabbi Avraham Issachar HaCohen, the author of Chessed L'Avraham and the Rebbe of Radomsk. As soon as he arrived in Radomsk, Rabbi Avraham lived in the court of the Rebbe, wearing his tallit and tefillin for most of the day. Rabbi Avraham conducted himself with holiness and purity, his whole life being devoted to the study of Torah, prayer, and a love for Israel. He combined a balance of asceticism and hospitality within himself, for he was detached from all materiality, fasted throughout his life, and only prayed Shacharit towards evening. However this asceticism and lack of sleep never distanced him from people. On the contrary, he drew everyone closer to him, even the simplest of people, with great love. Needless to say, he detested bribes. Due to his personal conduct, he received Chassidim very late into the night, and he never thought about his material needs. Hence poverty reigned in his home. His wife the Rebbetzin (the daughter of the Chessed L'Avraham), who had been accustomed to living in comfort, was forced to make due with a very difficult life. All his spiritual greatness revealed itself during times of persecution, when his home became a refuge for the misfortunes of the Jewish people.

When it was suggested that he leave Radomsk for another ghetto, Rabbi Avraham absolutely refused. He said, "I've lived with these Jews, and I'll die with these Jews." Rabbi Avraham died in the destruction of the Radomsk ghetto. May Hashem avenge his blood.

– Gedolei HaDorot

In the Light of the Haftarah

The Land of Israel

It is written, "The splendor of all lands" (Ezekiel 20:15).

The prophet Ezekiel describes the land of Israel with the word *tzvi* ("splendor"). Radak states that it is the splendor of all lands, the glory and desire of all countries, for its landscape is moderate, being the most beautiful of all landscapes, and its climate is better than all other lands, as it is written: "The fairest of sites, the joy of all the earth" (Tehillim 48:3). The term *tzvi* in Aramaic means "desire," as in the poem of the Akdamot, which describes Israel as the land that the entire world wants and desires. Kings have always yearned to live there, and even to the present day the descendants of Ishmael fight for it. The Sages say that as Sisera was about to fight against Israel, all the kings longed to drink the waters of the land of Israel, and so they begged Sisera to let them fight with him. Contrary to every other king, who seeks fighters and pays mercenaries to help him, here all these kings said to Sisera: "We do not ask anything of you. We will accompany you for nothing, because we long to fill our stomachs with the waters of that land." Thus it is said, "The kings came and fought. Then fought the kings of Canaan, from Ta'anach to the waters of Megiddo; they took no monetary gain" (Judges 5:19). In order to tell us that no other land is as precious as the land of Israel, the Sages end by stating: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: 'The land is surely precious to Me' – as it says, 'A land that Hashem your G-d cares for' [Devarim 11:12] – 'and Israel is precious to Me' – as it says, 'Because Hashem loved you' [ibid. 7:8]. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'I shall bring Israel, who are precious to Me, into the land that is precious to Me' – as it says: 'When you come into the land of Canaan' [Bamidbar 34:2]" (Bamidbar Rabba 23:7).

The Greatness of Wisdom and Modesty

Before King Solomon built the Temple, he sent emissaries to Pharaoh Necho, the King of Egypt, with a request: "Can Pharaoh send trustworthy craftsmen to help King Solomon in the construction of the Temple? He promises them generous wages."

Upon hearing this request, Pharaoh assembled all the astrologers in the country and said to them: "Tell me all the people who are destined to die this year!"

The astrologers saw who would die, and Pharaoh sent them to King Solomon.

King Solomon foresaw by Ruach HaKodesh that the people sent to him by Pharaoh would die in that same year. What did he do? He gave them burial shrouds and sent them back to Pharaoh with this message: "You apparently had no shrouds in which to bury your dead. I am sending you both the victims and their shrouds!" When Pharaoh Necho saw this, he understood that it was impossible to trick King Solomon, the wisest of all men. He also realized that it was not surprising that it was precisely Solomon who received the order to build the Temple for the G-d of Israel!

– Adapted from Bamidbar Rabba 19:3

A woman by the name of Kimchit had seven sons, all of whom served as Kohen Gadol.

The Sages asked her, "How did you merit for all your sons to serve as Kohen Gadol?"

She replied, "All my life, the beams of my house never saw the hairs of my head!" She paid so much attention to the laws of modesty that even in her home she never uncovered her head. In fact the beams of her house never even saw her hair!

To her the Sages applied the verse, "All glorious is the daughter of the king within. Her clothing is of embroidered gold" (Tehillim 45:14). In other words, the woman who maintains the honor of the king's daughter and conducts herself with modesty inside her home will merit golden garments. She will have sons who will serve as Kohen Gadol and wear the golden garments of the Kohen Gadol.

– Adapted from Yoma 47a

Eishet Chayil

Faith in G-d at All Costs

We must realize that faith in G-d does not depend on merit. Even a person who is not meritorious, but who has great faith in Hashem, is protected by the strength of this faith, and Hashem will demonstrate His goodness to him, as the Vilna Gaon writes. The same idea appears in the Midrash regarding the verse, "Many are the afflictions of the wicked, but kindness surrounds one who trusts in Hashem" (Tehillim 32:10). It also follows from the verse, "The eye of Hashem is on those who fear Him, upon those who await His kindness" (ibid. 33:18). Since it does not say "on those who fear Him and hope in His kindness," it means that these are two different things. Regarding this subject, we have heard that even if we are not among those who fear Hashem, yet we place our hope solely in His goodness, Hashem will look upon us and sustain us in famine.

– Shem Olam