



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת שמיני תשס"ט • 5769 Parshas Shemini

THE CHOFETZ CHAIM'S WISH

A disciple of the Chofetz Chaim overheard a private prayer uttered by his *rebbe*. Apparently, the Chofetz Chaim would beseech Hashem: "Please, allow me to die *al kiddush* Hashem (for the sanctification of Your Name)!" (*Sichos HaChofetz Chaim, sec. 86*).

At first glance, this may seem difficult to understand. While many surely recognize the nobility of this act when a situation arises, the Chofetz Chaim seemed to carry the idea to a new level: he specifically *sought an opportunity* to give his life for Hashem's Name.

Perhaps we can gain a clearer insight into this special *madreigah* (spiritual level) in light of the events of this week's *parshah*.

At the glorious moment of the dedication of the Mishkan (tabernacle), Nadav and Avihu – Aharon's two sons – offer an "unauthorized fire" on the altar. They are subsequently engulfed in a conflagration that descends from Heaven.

The exact nature of Nadav and Avihu's "misstep" is the subject of much discussion in the writings of our sages (and a bit too extensive to do justice to in this forum). What is clear from Chazal, however, is that their stature was one of great righteousness, and their actions in this episode are not to be viewed as standard misbehavior. Indeed, if their "sin" is to be understood at all, it is only in light of their extremely elevated status, whereby they were held accountable for even the most miniscule of deviations from perfection.

What bears some scrutiny is the command Hashem directs toward Aharon and his surviving family regarding the loss of their loved ones: they were to

forego the usual observance of *aveilus* (mourning) (see *Vayikra 10:6* and *Moed Kattan, 15a*).

How are we to understand why this bereaved family was apparently "denied" the opportunity to express grief over their loss through mourning? Wouldn't they thereby be missing a certain measure of necessary comfort? And, for that matter, perhaps Nadav and Avihu themselves should be taken into account; did they not deserve to have their memories respected through the mourning rituals of their relatives?

To fully understand this, it is worthwhile to examine the whole notion of *aveilus* in general; what exactly is its function?

PURPOSE OF AVEILUS

What is perhaps the standard understanding of the institution of *aveilus* is expressed by the Ramban (introduction to *Toras Ha'adam*), who emphasizes the aspect of *teshuvah* (repentance). The *aveilus* practices help keep the mourner's focus on the situation at hand, with the hope of engendering some necessary self-reflection.

The *ba'alei mussar* (masters of ethical teachings) adopt a different approach, which may appear somewhat revolutionary. Nevertheless, it is actually quite logical and firmly rooted in the teachings of our sages. In fact, this approach is based on a particular trait, as expressed in the final chapter of Avos (6:6):

התורה נקנית בארבעים ושמנה דברים. ואלו הן:
בתלמוד, בשמיעת האזן... אוהב את המקום,
אוהב את הבריות... נושא בעל עם חברו...

"Torah is acquired by (mastery of) forty-eight traits, which are as follows: Diligent study, proper listening... (by one who) loves Hashem and loves people... and (by one who) shares the burden of his fellow..."

Dedicated in loving memory of
צבי בן הרב שמואל יצחק וזוגתו חנה בת יוסף Liebb
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The importance of this quality of *nosei b'ol* – feeling empathy for a friend – cannot be overemphasized. Its very inclusion in this exclusive list (of character refinement necessary for the complete absorption of Torah) is a testament to its necessity. In fact, of all traits, the Alter of Kelm describes this one as the “*k'lil ha'ma'alos*” (supreme amongst positive attributes) (*Chochmah U'mussar, vol. 1, sec. 2, p. 7*).

As it relates to the subject at hand, the *ba'alei mussar* understand that this trait serves as the very foundation for the institution of *aveilus*. In other words, one of the main functions of the mourning practices is to be *nosei b'ol im chaveiro* – empathize with the travails of another.

When someone is *niftar* (passes away) – *rachamana litzlan* – the situation is quite trying, of course, for all involved. But the one who experiences the most intense anguish of all is none other than the departed one himself. The *aveilus* practices are intended to keep the relatives' thoughts centered on the suffering of the *niftar* and to feel his pain together with him (*Da'as Chochmah U'mussar, vol. 3, sec. 295*).

NO NEED TO MOURN

With this insight, it is possible to understand why the usual observance of *aveilus* by the immediate family was waived in the case of Nadav and Avihu. Due to the nature of the circumstances, it simply had no place.

R' Dovid Povarsky (*Bod Kodesh, Vayikra, 10:3*) explains: the demise of Aharon's sons was actually a testimony to their greatness. As noted previously, their death was not a punishment meted out for some heinous crime. Rather, it demonstrated how the righteous are held accountable for even an apparently minor deviation. The awesome lesson absorbed by the populace in such an instance amounts to a true *kiddush Hashem*. As such, the righteousness of Nadav and Avihu were on display for all to see, having merited to be chosen for this

holiest of tasks. As Moshe Rabbeinu said to Aharon, “My brother, your sons only died to sanctify Hashem's Name,” (*Zevachim 115b*).

Since the purpose of *aveilus* is to share in the anguish of the departed, it simply does not apply to those who die *al kiddush Hashem*. For such elevated individuals, death is not filled with anguish, but rather, is truly elevating. As such, the lack of *aveilus* was actually a source of comfort for the bereaved and a show of respect for the departed. It underscores the fact that their demise is not a loss, but a triumph.

Perhaps this was the intention of the Chofetz Chaim as well. Of course, every moment and facet of life is priceless. An opportunity to give up one's life to sanctify Hashem's Name, however, is even more precious. As demonstrated by Nadav and Avihu, when a Jew gives up his life *al kiddush Hashem*, his life is not considered to have ended; rather, it is just beginning.

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