

RABBI GOLDBERG'S *Parsha Perspectives* FOR TODAY

Short Divrei Torah on Emor for your Shabbos Table

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DVAR TORAH FOR THE FRIDAY NIGHT MEAL

Respecting Every Person's צלם אלוקים

Parshas Emor begins with the command of טומאת כהנים – the prohibition for *kohanim* to come in contact with a מת, a human corpse. The Torah makes an exception in the case of a deceased family member: if a *kohen's* wife, parent, child, brother or unmarried sister dies, then he is permitted – and in fact required – to attend the burial out of respect for the family member.

The *kohen gadol*, however, is held to a stricter standard, and is not permitted to expose himself to טומאת מת (the impurity resulting from contact with a corpse) even in the case of a deceased family member. This is true also of a *nazir*, somebody who takes the nazirite vow, which forbids him from haircutting, drinking wine, and coming in contact with a human corpse. Like a *kohen gadol*, a *nazir* is not permitted to expose himself to טומאת מת even if an immediate family member passes away.

Significantly, however, this prohibition is suspended in the case of a מת מצוה, a dead body which is left without anyone to bury it. If a *kohen* comes across a body that requires burial, the prohibition of טומאת כהנים is suspended, and he is required to bury the body. This exception applies even to a *kohen*, and even to a *nazir*; even they are required to expose themselves to impurity for the sake of tending to a מת מצוה. In fact, even if a *kohen* or *kohen gadol* is on his way to the *Beis Ha'mikdash* to perform the *avoda*, to offer sacrifices, when he comes across a מת מצוה, he must bury the body even though this will defile him and disqualify him from performing the service in the *Mikdash*. Moreover, if any Jew is on his way on *Erev*

Pesach to bring the *korban pesach*, and he sees a מת מצוה, he must tend to the body, even though this will result in his forfeiting the opportunity to bring the *korban pesach*, as he will now be *tamei* and thus invalid for bringing the sacrifice.

This exception is made because of the great importance of protecting the dignity of this deceased individual. No matter who he or she is, the Torah demands that everything be done for the sake of respecting the צלם אלוקים, the divine image, within this person. This need overrides even the sanctity of the *kohen gadol*, the spiritual ambitions of the *nazir*, and the *korban pesach*.

Rav Eliyahu Lopian cites the *Chafetz Chaim* as observing that if this is how far the Torah goes in demanding that we show respect to the deceased, then how much more so must we ensure to preserve the dignity of the living. The Torah affords great importance to the burial of a מת מצוה because the body had housed a sacred soul, and must therefore be treated with respect. Certainly, then, a living person, whose soul is still within the body, must be treated with respect and dignity. The unique importance of burying a מת מצוה reminds us that every human being deserves to be respected by virtue of the צלם אלוקים with which he is endowed. We must be very careful in our dealings with other people to speak to them and treat them with the dignity that they deserve, recognizing the divine spark within them.

Destroying Our Lives

The final *pesukim* of Parshas Emor tell of the מגדף, the blasphemer, the man who became angry and publicly blasphemed God. Afterward, God instructed Moshe that this man must be put to death for this grave offense.

The Torah introduces this story by saying, ויצא בן אשה – that this man “went out” and proceeded to blaspheme God (24:10). Rashi brings different opinions as to what the word ויצא means in this context. According to one opinion, the *pasuk* is telling us that מעולמו יצא – the מגדף “left his world.”

How are we to understand this depiction of the blasphemer, his “leaving his world”?

Rav Shlomo Wolbe explains that sometimes a person can leave the world that he is supposed to create for himself. A person can lose his stability, his balance, his common sense, to the point where he destroys עולמו, the life that he is supposed to live. This מגדף allowed his anger and resentment to bring him out of his “world,” to ruin his life.

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avos* (4:21) warns us, – “Jealousy, lust and honor remove a person from the world.” These three negative tendencies are so consuming that they threaten to ruin a person’s life, to destroy the world that he is supposed to build for himself. The first is קנאה, jealousy, constantly comparing oneself to others, the need to compete with other people’s accomplishments, wealth, and so on. Such a person loses his “world,” as his attempts to keep up with the people around him undermine his ability to live the life that he is meant to live. The same is true of תאוה, when a person is consumed by lust, by the desire for physical enjoyment. An insatiable appetite for pleasure disrupts a person’s life to the point where מעולמו יצא, he is incapable of building his world and living the life that he is supposed to live. Finally, כבוד – the relentless pursuit of honor and fame, also has a tendency to consume a person, to take over his life, to the point where he loses the ability to build עולמו, preoccupied as he is seeking attention and recognition.

The tragic story of the מגדף serves as a warning to all of us about the risk of losing our “world,” the unique, beautiful life that we are meant to live. If we do not keep our emotions in check, and allow them to overtake us, they can derail us and undermine our ability to be the people whom we are meant to be.

A Profile of Extremism

As mentioned, Rashi brings several opinions as to the meaning of the phrase ויצא בן אשה ישראלית – that the blasphemer “went out” and cursed God’s Name. According to one view, the מגדף “left” from the preceding section of the Torah, which discussed the להם הפנים, the special bread which was placed on the *shulchan* (table) in the *Mishkan*. It was after he heard about this law that the מגדף proceeded to blaspheme God. He learned that the bread was baked only once a week, and left on the *shulchan* throughout the week, until Shabbos, when it is eaten by the *kohanim* and replaced by new, fresh bread. The מגדף could not understand how the King of the universe could have stale bread on His table. In his mind, this was terribly disrespectful to God. He was so disturbed and unnerved by this *mitzva* that he publicly blasphemed Hashem.

We must ask, how did this fellow end up cursing God after standing up for His honor? His anger was aroused by a perceived slight to the honor owed to the Almighty. If he was so upset about what he saw as an affront to God, why would he then turn around and blaspheme God?!

The *Yalkut Yehuda* answers that this man exemplifies an extreme personality. People who are drawn to extremism are generally not sincerely passionate about the cause they zealously champion. The extremist is not concerned about the value that he claims to uphold, but is rather looking for a cause to be zealous about. And so they can easily switch sides, from one extreme to the other.

The מגדף was not truly interested in defending God’s honor. He was not actually disturbed by the stale bread on the *shulchan*. As an extremist, he was looking for a cause, for something to fight about. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that he quickly shifted to the opposite extreme. One day he is fighting for God’s honor, and the next day he is speaking blasphemy. This is typical of extremists, of people who present themselves as sincerely championing an altruistic cause, when in truth, they are simply looking for something to be angry about.

The Rambam, in *Hilchos De’ios*, famously writes about the importance of the שביל זהב, following the “golden mean,” being measured, strategic and thoughtful in our conduct. A person who indulges in anger and rage is, in most instances, not purely sincere about the cause he claims to fight for. If we are sincere, then we act wisely and prudently, carefully weighing our words and our actions, without resorting to rash, extreme behavior.