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The Lower East Side
Parshat Hashavua Sheet

*A collection of Divrei Torah
from around the Internet*

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Parshat Shemini / Hachodesh

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JUST SAY TREIF!

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

In teaching us the *kosher* laws this week, the Torah deviates from a meritorious procedure.

Normally the Torah hardly elaborates unnecessarily, yet Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi tells us in Tractate *Pesachim* that in *Parshas Noach* the Torah deviated from its normal propensity to abbreviate. In fact, it added eight letters for a very special reason. Rabbi Yehoshua explains, “A person should never emit a harsh expression from his mouth that is why in *Parshas Noach* when the Torah tells us that Noach brought the animals into his ark it takes pain to add letters.” The Torah tells us that “Noach took sets of seven males and females of each the *tahor* (kosher) animal species, and a set of two animals non-*tahor* (kosher) species” (*Genesis* 7:8-9).

“The Torah,” continues Rabbi Yehoshua, “could have just said one simple word to describe the non-kosher animals – *tamei*! (*treif*). Yet to teach us the importance of clean speech it uses an elaborate Hebrew terminology, *animals that are not kosher*, instead of a simpler and shorter expression, *treif animals*. The Torah avoids calling creatures, even non-kosher ones, *tamei* (impure) rather it labels them as ‘animals that are not classified as *tahor*.’”

This week however, the Torah is not as tempered. In *Parshas Shmini*, the Torah prescribes the laws of kosher and non-kosher. It specifies for us those signs and characteristics of kosher animals. Those who do not meet the specifications are deemed *tamei* (non-kosher). Among those classified as non-kosher are hare, the camel, the hyrax, and of course, the pig. The Torah refers to these animals as *tamei*! It waives the graciousness it displays in *Parshas Noach*. It does not label them as “animals that are not *tahor*. It calls them *treif*! Why the curt classification? What happened to the gentle etiquette so beautifully professed by Rabbi Yehoshua?

The governor of a group of small villages decided to make an official visit to one of the more backward farm communities of his province. The mayor of the village, a simple farmer who had no idea of neither social graces, nor etiquette received him. The farmer's wife made tea, the water of which was scooped from a muddy stream and set to boil. Upon sipping the first bit of the dirt-filled libation, the governor immediately spit it out and shouted, “What did you serve me? This is terrible!” The governor proceeded to show the mayor and his wife exactly how to strain water through cheese-cloth in order to make a proper glass of tea. Amazed, both husband and wife accepted the advice gratefully. A few weeks later, there was a fire in the village. Reports to the governor said that though there had been ample water, manpower, and time to contain the blaze, for some reason the fire had managed to destroy most of the town. The governor arrived at the home of the mayor to inquire what, exactly, went wrong. “You see, dear governor,” beamed the hapless mayor, “the men were going to use the muddy brook-water to extinguish the blaze, but I stopped them! I showed them how to filter the water, and remove the small rocks and dirt. Since your visit, we never used filthy water again!” “You fool!” shouted the governor. “You filter for tea, not a fire! When a fire is raging you must put it out immediately – even with dirty water!”

The story of Noach is a narrative. The Torah can well afford to classify the non-kosher animals in a positive light. After all, for the sake of the story it does not make a difference if the animals are referred to as *tamei*, or not *tahor*. The Torah chose the gentler way. However when telling us to avoid eating animals which are not kosher, the Torah does not offer circuitous etiquette, it declares boldly – **“they are *traif*!”**

We live in a world that is wrought with many dangers. Sometimes we must say, “no,” to our friends, our children, and ourselves, in a very curt and abrupt way. A particular action, behavior, or influence, may be much worse than “not-so-good.” They may be *traif*, and must simply be stated as such. Saying “no” may lack class, but it may work.

There is a time and place for every expression. When etiquette will work, it must be used; but when a fire is burning, and the situation demands powerful exhortation, any water, even if it is a little muddy, must be used!

Why Aaron Was Chosen

by Rabbi Yosef Farhi

"And Moshe said to Aaron, Approach the altar...and atone" ([Vayikra 9:7](#)) Rashi says that Aaron was afraid and embarrassed to approach the Altar. Moshe responded, "Why are you embarrassed? For this you were appointed!" Two questions can be posed here on Rashi. Why was Aaron embarrassed? And how did Moshe's answer to him help?

The Ben Ish Chai explains why Aaron was both embarrassed and afraid. The sacrifices of that day were to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. Since Aaron was unintentionally involved in the making of the calf, he first had to bring a sacrifice for himself, and he was embarrassed. He was also afraid that other Leviim might use the fact that Aaron was involved in the sin to undermine his authority, like Korach later did.

However, with just two words (*L'kach nivcharta* - for this you were chosen), Moshe changed Aaron's perspective. Moshe knew that, rather than being a handicap, it is essential that a leader have some sort of embarrassing episode in his past, so that he does not become arrogant.

The source of this idea is in the Talmud ([Yoma 22b](#)). The Sages explain why King David's royal dynasty will last all the way until Mashiach, as opposed to King Shaul's, which ended. David's lineage was "controversial" - his maternal grandmother, Ruth, was a Moabite convert. The Torah states that a man from Moav may not convert to Judaism, and there was great debate among the rabbis about whether a Moabite woman may enter the Jewish nation (the halacha is that she may). Also, because of his different hair color and other reasons for suspicion, his brothers rejected him and called him a mamzer, and he was relegated to the role of shepherding in places where he was in danger of attack by wild animals. Because of all this, David remained humble and never felt that he deserved to be a King.

King Shaul on the other hand, had a perfectly respectful background and complexion to be a leader. Therefore, the Talmud concludes that we only appoint a leader who has a "*Kupa shel Sheratzim*" - some type of background and past that will remind him "go back to where you belong" if he gets haughty.

Moshe told Aaron that, especially as Kohen Gadol, his sin wasn't something to be embarrassed about, and was no cause for fear. In fact, it was his ticket to being a successful leader! Any of the other Leviim wouldn't have qualified for this position because the entire tribe remained clean. This is a phenomenal perspective which can be perceived from many viewpoints. First, a lesson can be derived about the importance of humility as a leader. This can only be brought about by someone who recognizes that he is not worthy. Modesty is one of the exceptional traits of Jews. It is not a social handicap; it means recognition of where one's place is.

Another concept that can be derived is that even failure and weaknesses can be "traded in" for assets and strengths after proper recognition of faulty judgment. Repentance can only work when one realizes that he can actually turn his weaknesses into strengths. When one does not recognize this, he still might see himself as an eternally doomed sinner. Even after he comes to terms with his faults and he goes through the proper elements of change and repentance, he will still feel he has a skeleton in the closet which can't have proper burial. This feeling is destructive and counter-productive.

By merely focusing on one's past misbehavior, one does not gain the power to stand up against a future tide of challenges or to release himself from a guilty, negative mindset. There was truth to Aaron's feelings that his mistake left him unworthy of being a leader. However, a more positive belief and perception would have been to take this opportunity to learn how to empathize with others who have made mistakes and want to repent.

Consider the following parable: Morris, an observant Jew, wore tefillin every day. When he was 80 years old, he decided to have his tefillin checked to see if they were kosher. One day, a well-known scribe passed through his town and put up a stand in shul offering to check tefillin. To his dismay, Morris discovered that his tefillin were not kosher. Morris was beside himself. He approached his rabbi with a choked voice and watery eyes, unable to accept the bitter news that he had never properly fulfilled the mitzvah of tefillin. The rabbi suggested that Morris should offer to donate money for others to get their tefillin checked and fixed for free, and that he could donate kosher tefillin to Bar Mitzvah boys who either didn't have the money or didn't understand the importance of having kosher tefillin. Instead of focusing on the past that he was unable to change, Morris found in this piece of advice a way to rectify his loss and help many other people to wear kosher tefillin for the rest of their lives.

Moshe taught Aaron how to find the positives in everything, even in his own mistakes. We can experience great joy and transform ourselves if we can internalize this message as well.

Acquiring a Friend

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

The Torah Portion begins with the joyful celebrations of the Inauguration of the Mishkan (tabernacle), however this joyous occasion becomes a time of mourning with the sudden deaths of Aaron's two oldest sons, Nadav and Avihu. "The sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, they put fire in them and placed incense upon it; and they brought before Hashem an alien fire that He had not commanded them. A fire came forth from before Hashem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem."

The Rabbinical sources offer a number of explanations as to the exact wrongdoing of these two great men which caused them to receive such a strict punishment. The Torat Kohanim writes: "...Nadav and Avihu did not seek advice from Moses... and each man went on his own accord and they did not seek advice from each other." This Midrash teaches us that Nadav and Avihu did not actually go to offer the incense together; rather they each had the same idea and went alone to offer the incense in the Mishkan. They are criticized because they did not seek advice from their teacher, Moses, before undertaking this bold act, and also because they did not seek advice from each other. Rav Berel Soleveitchik asks that this Midrash is very difficult to understand; it is obvious why they should have consulted Moses because he would have surely advised them to not offer the incense, however why are they criticized for not consulting with each other? They both evidently believed in the correctness of their plan and so what benefit would have been gained from consulting each other - surely they would have merely confirmed that the plan was a good one?!

Rav Soleveitchik answers that we learn from here a fundamental principle in human nature: A person may want to commit a certain sin and yet he may simultaneously see the flaw in such an action when his friend is about to commit the very same sin. This is because each person is greatly influenced by his *yetzer hara* (negative inclination) which prevents him from making decisions with objectivity. Rather, the *yetzer hara* clouds his reasoning and causes him to rationalize that it is acceptable to undertake certain forbidden actions. However, when this same person looks on his friend about to perform the very same sin he is able to take a far more objective attitude towards his friend's actions. This is because with regard to others a person is not clouded by a desire for self-gratification and he can more accurately assess the validity of his friend's plans. Accordingly, had Nadav consulted Avihu about his plan (or vice versa) then there would have been a good chance that Avihu would have seen the flaw in his brother's reasoning despite the fact that he planned to do the very same act! That is why they are criticized for not consulting each other despite the fact that they both planned to do the same sin.

Rabbeinu Yonah brings out this principle from the teaching in Pirkei Avot: "...Acquire for yourself a friend." He writes that one of the benefits of having a friend is that he can help you in observing Mitzvot. "Even when a friend is no more righteous than him and sometimes he even acts improperly, nonetheless he does not want a friend to do the same [action], because he has no benefit from it." He then brings as a proof to this idea the principle that "a person does not sin on behalf of someone else." This means that a generally observant person usually sins because he is blinded by some kind of desire for pleasure, however with regard to someone else we presume that he is not blinded in the same way and therefore we do not suspect him of sinning on behalf of others. This idea is applied in a number of places throughout the Gemara. Rabbeinu Yonah thus teaches us the importance of acquiring at least one friend who can act as an objective onlooker towards our own actions, and that this friend need not necessarily be on a higher level than ourselves.

We learn from these ideas a very important life lesson; a person should not rely on his own assessments of his actions - it is impossible to be purely objective when making decisions because of one's natural subjectivity that causes him to rationalize the validity of committing certain sins. Rather, he must realize the necessity of finding a friend who will be prepared to offer advice and even rebuke when necessary when he sees that his friend is blinded by his desires. May we all merit to acquire true friends who can help us find the true path in our spiritual growth.

The Secret Symbolism of the Calf and Goat

By Rabbi Menachem Feldman

After an act of deep betrayal, the children were about to reconcile with their Father. They gathered for what was to be the culmination of a month-long effort to rehabilitate their loving relationship, yet one important question remained: could the children reunite with their Father before they healed the division between themselves?

The opening verse of this week's parshah, Shemini, describes how the Jewish people finally completed the construction of the Tabernacle after months of tremendous devotion and effort. The Tabernacle was the place where the Divine presence would dwell, and where the people would see that the terrible betrayal—the sin of the golden calf—was forgiven, and that G-d would once again dwell in their midst as He had at Sinai. How would the reconciliation take place?

And it was on the eighth day that Moses summoned Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel. And he said to Aaron, "Take for yourself a bull calf as a sin offering."

Moses told Aaron to offer a calf for atonement. It was clear to all that the Divine presence could not return to the Jewish people before the betrayal was finally and completely healed. But why a calf? We may need to consult with Rashi for that explanation, but to the people of Israel at the time it was apparent: the calf would atone for the sin of the golden calf.

But Moses continued: And to the children of Israel, you shall speak, saying, *"Take a he-goat as a sin offering..."* What now? Why a goat? What other "unfinished business" did the people have to attend to before the glory of G-d would appear before them?

While the calf immediately evokes the story of the golden calf, finding the meaning of the goat is a bit harder. We must turn back to the book of Genesis to discover that indeed the goat played an important role in the most tragic sin of the family of Israel: the sale of Joseph. After the brothers tore their family to shreds by selling Joseph into servitude in Egypt (a sale which ultimately led the entire family to relocate to Egypt and descend into slavery), instead of showing remorse they used a goat for their cover-up:

And they took Joseph's coat, and they slaughtered a he-goat, and they dipped the coat in the blood. And they sent the fine woolen coat, and they brought [it] to their father, and they said, "We have found this; now recognize whether it is your son's coat or not." He recognized it, and he said, "[It is] my son's coat; a wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn up."

As the people gathered at the Tabernacle waiting for a sign of the Divine presence, Moses taught them that in order to heal the relationship with their Father, the children must first heal their relationship with each other. He explained that the jealousy and division which led to the sale of Joseph, was, in fact, the precise character trait which led to the division and separation from G-d at the golden calf, and in order to find harmony with G-d, it must be eradicated from their midst. For indeed, the only way children can be in complete harmony with a parent is when they are in complete harmony with each other.

Earthen Vessels

By Rabbi Mordechai Wollenberg

This week's Torah reading discusses the complex laws of ritual impurity and purity, *tum'ah* and *taharah*. The Torah tells us that "every earthen vessel into which any [impure creature shall] fall . . . shall be unclean." There is an interesting distinction made in Jewish law between different types of utensils. If a source of impurity comes within the inside space of a vessel which is made of earthenware, even if it doesn't touch the walls of the vessel, then the vessel becomes impure. However, if it did not enter the vessel, even if it touched the walls from outside, the vessel remains pure.

With all other utensils, the opposite is the case: having a source of impurity placed within the space of a vessel does not make the vessel impure, whereas touching any part of the vessel does render it impure. Why is this?

The value of a utensil made of wood or metal is contained not only within its function as a container. The material that it is made of has intrinsic value. On the other hand, a vessel made of earthenware, whose makeup is nothing more than mere earth, is of value only when used as a container; accordingly, its status of ritual purity is determined by what happens inside the vessel. The outside of the vessel, by itself, has no intrinsic value.

There is a simple yet very beautiful lesson from these complex legalities. The Torah tells us that "G-d formed man out of the dust of the earth, and He blew into his nostril a living soul." We humans are earthenware vessels! Ethics of the Fathers tells us, "Do not look at the vessel, but rather at its contents." Therefore we must remember that our worth lies not in our physical material exterior, but in the inner contents. That which is relevant to the inner self and to the soul is what defines a person, not the superficial exterior.

“It was on the eighth day, Moshe summoned Aharon and his sons and the elders of Israel” (9:1)

Our parsha begins with the first day that Aharon and his sons began to perform the service in the Mishkan on their own. R' Dovid Feinstein asks: Why is this day referred to as the eighth day of the consecration rather than the first day of real service in the Mishkan? He explains that by calling it the eighth day, the Torah connects it to the seven days of consecration and lends importance to those days. The preparation is so important because the quality of a mitzvah is often a direct result of how much preparation was invested in it. Thus, the first day was only a special day because it was actually the eighth day since they began to prepare for this momentous occasion. R' Feinstein continues that we see that it is necessary for us to recognize the importance of preparation in order to improve our own mitzvah observance. For example, the Seder requires many weeks of preparation in order to make it a meaningful experience even though the Seder itself only takes a few hours. But without the preparation, it will be difficult to feel inspired by those few hours. A halacha that may be a result of this idea is that we do not say *שהחיינו* when building a sukkah, but include that mitzvah in the *שהחיינו* of Kiddush on the first night of Yom Tov (See Orach Chaim 641). Similarly, the Rosh (Pesachim 7, cited in Tur 432) writes that the *שהחיינו* of *בדיקת חמץ* is included in the Kiddush of the first night of Yom Tov. These preparations, which enable us to observe the Yom Tov properly, are integral parts of the mitzvos themselves and we recite the *שהחיינו* for them on the Yom Tov to stress that point.

Aharon came near to the altar and slaughtered the sin-offering calf that was his” (9:8)

The Targum Yonasan ben Uziel translates this posuk: "Aharon approached the altar quickly." Even though Aharon was initially apprehensive because he believed himself unworthy, once Moshe reassured him and urged him to continue, he rushed to do his job. When a person is faced with a decision, he should carefully weigh his options and calculate which choice is the best one. However, once he has ascertained the correct path to follow, he should disregard his initial uncertainty and act upon his decision quickly. Doubting previous decisions can only harm a person and cannot help. One must have confidence that he is doing the right thing and not question his original decision. Once the right path becomes apparent, he should follow it without delay.

“Speak to the Children of Israel saying: These are the creatures that you may eat from among all the animals that are upon the earth”(11:2)

Although the Torah does not give a reason why certain foods are kosher while others are not, some commentators seek to answer this question. The Sefer HaChinuch says that Hashem forbade us to eat unhealthy foods. However, Abarbanel says that this is problematic because, aside from turning the Torah into a medical handbook, we also see gentiles that eat many non-kosher foods and they remain unaffected. Rather, Abarbanel suggests that these foods are harmful for the neshama. We may not understand how this works, but the Torah forbids it for this reason. The Or HaChaim (in Pesukim 43-44) reiterates this point and says that, as a result, a person has to be extremely careful not to put anything forbidden in his mouth even accidentally. Since these foods have a harmful effect on his neshama if they enter his system, it makes no difference whether he ingested it intentionally or not. He adds that if a person is very watchful about what he eats, Hashem will ensure that he eats no forbidden foods even accidentally. For example, when a person is scrupulous about checking his food for bugs, Hashem ensures that he will see the bugs if they are there. The parsha ends with a command to “be holy.” The Or HaChaim says that when a person avoids forbidden foods or anything that could possibly be problematic, Hashem promises that he will become holy.

“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.

Start Out Looking At The Positive

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

This week's parsha contains the first detailed enumeration of all the kosher and non-kosher animals in the Torah. The two signs that determine the permissibility of an animal are whether it has totally split hooves and whether it chews its cud. The Torah singles out particular animals that one may not eat despite the fact that they possess one of the two signs of permissibility. The camel (gamal), despite the fact that it chews its cud, is not kosher because it does not have split hooves. The same is true with the shafan (hyrax) and arneves (rabbit). The pig (chazir) is forbidden because although it has a split hoof, it does not chew its cud.

The Medrash points out that in regards to all four animals, the Torah first mentions its kosher sign (the fact that it chews its cud in the case of the gamal, shafan and arneves, and the fact that it has a split hoof in the case of the chazir) and then mentions the sign that disqualifies it. Why does the Torah do this? Why not just get straight to the point? The kosher sign is really irrelevant, given the other disqualifying characteristic. Why even mention the irrelevant kosher sign, let alone give it "top billing"?

The Medrash comments: Even when the Torah tells us that a pig or camel is not kosher, it only begins by stating its praiseworthy characteristics. Even when the Torah says something is treife (forbidden to eat), still the Torah goes out of its way to present a positive description first.

The point of the Medrash is that if G-d sees fit — even when talking about an impure animal — to try to find something good to say about it... If G-d sees fit to always present a redeeming aspect of the animal first, how much more so should we — when we look at another human being with all of his failings and shortcomings — make every effort to find positive things to say before we offer any negative assessment.

G-d is sending us a message here. When we look at someone or when we look at a situation, we should always attempt to accentuate the positive and see the value in the person or situation before we become totally dismissive.

When Is Passover this Year?

By Rabbi Elisha Greenbaum

We run our lives to the beat of our own calendar. Passover comes along anywhere from early March to late April, while Rosh Hashanah swings widely between September and October. We're all over the shop and it's more that the average guy can do to just keep up with the times.

Seems like a bit of wasted effort doesn't it? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could just hang with the locals and rule our lives by the common calendar? Rosh Hashanah would be regular, Passover would be punctual, we could schedule school holidays at the time suggested by the education department and there would be an absolute guarantee that the World Series and Yom Kippur don't clash.

The rest of the world operates on a solar cycle, with their lives and seasons dependent on the sun. The great big orb in the sky is the fair weather friend of the earth, regulating existence and warming us with its serene glow. As sure as the fact that the sun sets at night, we can be confident that our friend will rise again on the morrow, in the exact same location as the day before, at the same time.

A Jewish life is ruled by the ebb and flow of the moon. It waxes and it wanes, sometimes barely visible, at other times it hangs fat and indolent like a pie in the sky. Times of plenty are quickly succeeded by the poverty of persecution. No guarantees, no sense of permanence. Every day is different from the day before and we can never be positive what tomorrow will bring. A society that lives by the sun will flourish during the good times and will enjoy success for so long as the balmy blessings of nature continue to shine. However, should anything interfere with their peaceful existence then they will have developed no resilience, no survival techniques to weather the occasional ice ages or periods of global warming.

If there is one thing that the broad sweep of Jewish history has demonstrated is that we have mastered the ability to adapt to changes in fortune. We have survived all dangers and outlived all storms. We have faith and trust in G-d during the good times and continue to pray and believe even as instability threatens.

Each day is a new experience. We are mature enough to accept that the holidays we so enjoyed last year may be rescheduled and have to be celebrated under totally different expectations and conditions. We are the great survivors of life because of our capacity to roll with the punches and our refusal to allow any marginal event to distract us from our Divine mission. Trying to ride both time-streams simultaneously is no simple task. The easiest thing to do would be to get a divorce and follow one path through life. But Jews are notorious for their refusal to accept the easier solution.