



Yeshivat Har Etzion – Israel Koschitzky VBM Parsha Digest, Year II, #31

Parashat Shemini 5780

Selected and Adapted by Rabbi Dov Karoll

Quote from the Rosh Yeshiva

Each one of us must feel a sense of responsibility. In a certain sense, all of us, especially those in Israel, are survivors. The Nazi forces were but a short distance from Israel; only a miracle stopped them from reaching here. Had Montgomery not defeated Rommel, “we and our children and our children’s children would have been subjugated....” In addition to our moral duty to continue the mission of the victims, the fact of our survival imposes a religious duty upon us...

Hence, when we commemorate “**Yom ha-Shoah ve-ha-Gevura**,” we should remember the physical “gevura” that was manifest at that time, but no less importantly we must commemorate the spiritual heroism of that time, the people who – despite being persecuted and downtrodden – held on and maintained their faith and their Divine spark of humanity....

-Harav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l



Parashat Shemini “Take Courage!”

Based on a Sicha by Harav Moshe Lichtenstein

Based on: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/take-courage>

“Draw close to the altar”

At the beginning of Parashat Shemini we read that Moshe commanded Aharon to “draw near to the altar” in order to offer his sin offering and burnt offering. Why was Aharon hesitating? Ramban (Vayikra 9:7-8) offers two explanations.

Entering at ease

One explanation, based on a midrash, compares this scenario to a king who married a woman who was timid in his presence. Her sister encouraged her to “Take courage,” for it was precisely for this reason that she had married the king. Similarly, Moshe tells Aharon that he was chosen to be Kohen Gadol in order to serve God, and thus he should “Take courage” and step forward to serve.

This parable suggests that Aharon was hesitant to enter the Holy of holies. God was about to bring His Presence to rest amongst Am Yisrael, a wondrous, unforgettable event, but there was a frightening, threatening element. The simple woman in the story who married the powerful king feared entering and serving him lest she lose herself in the power and majesty of his presence. One might fear losing his own essence and personality in making God’s Presence felt in the world. Moshe therefore commands Aharon, “Take courage!” He instructs him to direct himself towards God with inner peace and tranquility.

Aharon is prepared to perform the special service in the Kodesh Kodashim, but he fears losing himself in this service, afraid that he will become wholly a “representative of God” (shluchei de-rachmana). Moshe assures him that he will remain a “representative of man” (shluchei didan), an individual with free will, not just a servant of God.

When faced with choices and decisions, some feel resistance and doubts regarding a given action – not because of the action itself, but rather because of the social image or stereotype associated with it. For instance, one who is considering becoming active within his community might feel comfortable undertaking the activity but hesitate for fear of being viewed in a certain way.

Similarly, a young man who comes to study at yeshiva after high school is at the peak of his physical strength; his self-image might center around sports and the special unit which he hopes to serve in the army, but he fears the change of image that yeshiva study

may entail. He does not want to find his future self wearing a kapote and streimel, hunched over books all day. One who decides to become an educator or rabbi may likewise dislike the idea that people will stand when he enters the room and will no longer share jokes with him. In these and other similar instances, it is important to separate one's hesitations and doubts concerning the action, its importance, and the chances of its success, from the fear that one's personality will somehow be forced into a different mold.

"My brother – take courage!" Torah study itself is not frightening; it fills a person with joy and pleasure, and we must approach our study with inner peace and calm. Even after we have embarked on yeshiva study, we must maintain our warmth, our sense of humor, our smile. Yeshiva study must not diminish a person in any way; it must broaden his personality and his horizons, not narrow and restrict them. We might compare the entry into the world of yeshiva study to a person getting into a pool to swim: it makes no sense to remain outside the water and just dip his finger in, nor to fall in all at once without looking where he is going. He descends step by step, confidently, calmly, and without fear. That way the encounter with the environment flows from his free will and his desire to connect, with no fear of being swallowed up and obliterated.

The trauma of sin

The second explanation that Ramban offers is that Aharon feared the altar as it appeared to him like an ox, reminding him of the golden calf. Moshe encouraged him to "Take courage" and approach the altar, despite his fear related to the sin.

Aharon, "holy unto God," who only sinned in the incident of the golden calf, sees the calf before him at all times. He approaches the altar to offer up the sacrifices – and perceives the altar in the form of a calf, recalling his sin.

Many modern teachings direct one to forget his past sins, put them out of his mind, and start every day as a new beginning. Moshe does not take this approach, but he also takes pains to prevent the opposite extreme: he exhorts Aharon not to dwell in his trauma, leaving him room for renewal. One who has sinned must atone through a significant inner process of repentance, confession, and a firm resolution for the future – but under no circumstances should he allow the sin to define him or his personality.

There is a Hassidic saying: "A Jew must never despair, and one must never despair of a Jew." This message resounds in Ramban's commentary here. A Jew must never despair of his ability to effect repair and change, even though he is in need of them himself. And we must never despair of a fellow Jew, believing that he is so deeply immersed in sin that he is incapable of change and repair.

Sin must not paralyze a person, as this would be the greatest victory for the yetzer ha-ra. The Ramban explains that Aharon was struggling not with psychological trauma, but with Satan himself, with Moshe encouraging Aharon to overcome that challenge, too.

Satan seeks to cause one to despair of his ability and his potential for repentance and repair; he seeks to "fix the sin in his thoughts." One overcomes Satan by daring to draw close to God despite one's doubts and fears. If a child violates his parents' values by committing some grave act, he may feel that reconnecting and rebuilding is beyond his ability. But parents await a child's return nonetheless. There is a price to be paid for betrayal and sin, but severance is an even heavier price, one that we dare not pay.

(This sicha was delivered at seuda shelishit, Shabbat Parashat Shemini 5774 [2014]. Adapted by Binyamin Fraenkel, Translated by Kaeren Fish)

Parashat Shemini

The Sin of Nadav and Avihu and the Animals Prohibited for Consumption By Rav Amnon Bazak

Based on: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/sin-nadav-and-avihu-and-animals-prohibited-consumption>



A. The Problem

Following the tragic death of Nadav and Avihu, the Torah interrupts the narrative with a command highlighting an additional function of the kohanim: "And to distinguish between the holy and the profane, and between the impure and the pure; and to instruct Bnei Yisrael concerning all of the statutes which God spoke to them at the hand of Moshe." (10:10-11)

These verses set forth the framework for the chapters that follow in chiastic order. First, the Torah discusses the differences between the impure and the pure, in terms of the types of animals that may or may not be eaten (ch. 11), and the various types of impurity and purity (P. Tazri'a, Metzora, and Acharei Mot), then it addresses the differences between the holy and the profane (P. Kedoshim and Emor). What do these categories and the differentiation between them have to do with the sin of Nadav and Avihu? Why are the kohanim given the new job of differentiating between these realms specifically here, in the midst of the events of the "eighth day"? To answer this question, let us examine the animals listed in chapter 11 as forbidden foods, identifying 2 groups.

B. "Impure" vs. "Abomination"

As noted, chapter 11 introduces the differentiation between the impure (*tamei*) and the pure (*tahor*). The first part of the chapter distinguishes between those animals that may be eaten and those that may not, in 4 clearly defined units:

1. Verses 2-8: "These are the beasts which you shall eat of all the animals that are upon the earth..."
2. Verses 9-12: "These you shall eat of all that is in the water..."
3. Verses 13-19: "And these you shall regard as an abomination among the birds; you shall not eat of them..."
4. Verses 20-23: "These you may eat of every creeping thing that flies..."

There is an important difference between the first of these 4 units and the 3 that follow. The first unit refers to that which is forbidden as "impure" (*tamei*) – see verses 4-8.

In contrast, the other 3 units do not mention "impurity," as the Torah uses the word "sheketz" (abomination) instead (see vv. 10-20).

This discrepancy in the terminology is not coincidental. We find further that the animals that are forbidden as food, which are defined as such because they are "impure," transmit impurity even after their death – see verses 24-28.

In contrast, those marine animals, birds, and flying insects which are defined as being forbidden because they are an "abomination" do not convey impurity once they are dead. What is the meaning of this difference?

C. "I Wish To" or "I Have No Wish To"?

The question of why the Torah forbids the consumption of particular types of animals has long engaged sages and scholars. On the one hand, there is Chazal's well-known teaching: "A person should not say, 'I have no wish to wear sha'atnez; I have no wish to eat the flesh of a pig...' Rather, 'I wish to – but what can I do; my Father in heaven has decreed this upon me'" (Sifra, Kedoshim, p. 10).

This suggests that there is no rational reason for these prohibitions; they should be regarded as expressing Divine decree, and their careful observance expresses acceptance of the yoke of Heaven. On the other hand, the Rishonim nevertheless suggest rational reasons for them, and over the generations these concepts have developed in different directions.

Some, such as Rashbam (on verse 3), have addressed the physical aspect, asserting that these animals are disgusting, damaging and unhealthy. Others view the matter as pertaining to the spiritual realm, as in Ramban's claim (on verse 13) that the impure birds are cruel in nature, and the impure animals carnivorous, unlike the pure animals.

It seems that both ideas represent "the words of the living God," and each approach finds expression in a different type of forbidden foods. The units in which we find the root "sh-k-tz" (abomination) seems to express a rational reason for these prohibitions. An "abomination" is something disgusting. The same meaning is conveyed by other appearances of this word in Tanakh, especially in connection with idolatry (see Devarim 7:26; Melakhim II 23:24).

It seems, then, that the marine animals, birds and insects defined as "abominations" are foods that are meant to disgust a person.

Matters of impurity and purity, in contrast, generally belong to a different mindset: they belong to the realm of "What can I do; my Father in heaven has decreed this upon me" (see Rambam, Hilkhot Mikvaot 11:12).

The definition of prohibited animals as "impure" therefore implies that the prohibition does not express a sense of disgust; rather, refraining from them expresses acceptance of the yoke of Heaven and God's laws, even when we do not understand them.

This helps explain the dual conclusion of the chapter which first addresses the prohibitions concerning abominable things (see verses 43-45) and then addresses the distinction between the impure and the pure animals (see verses 45-47), emphasizing the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven in the latter context.

D. The Message of the Story of Nadav and Avihu

Let us return to our original question: What does the subject of the animals forbidden as food have to do with Nadav and Avihu?

It seems that the link between the 2 parashot comes in the first of the 4 groups of forbidden foods – those whose prohibition expresses acceptance of the yoke of Heaven.

Let us explain. The sin of Nadav and Avihu is described in the text in a simple, straightforward manner: "The sons of Aharon – Nadav and Avihu – took each his censer and placed fire in it, and they put incense on it, and they offered a strange fire before God, which He had not commanded them" (10:1). Nevertheless, the commentaries propose different ways of interpreting the sin (see, for example, the 2 explanations cited by Rashi, as well as Rashbam's commentary). The multiplicity of interpretations seems to stem from

the question of why this act of the sons of Aharon was considered so grave that they were deserving of death.

If we compare the service of Aharon and his sons (see 9:5-22) with the episode of Nadav and Avihu (10:1-2), some interesting and instructive contrasting parallels emerge. In both descriptions, the sons of Aharon take something and offer it before God, with a fire emerging from before God and consuming. But in the first instance, fire consumes the sacrifices, leading to song, while in the second instance, fire consumes those who offer the sacrifice, leading to weeping among the house of Israel (10:6). The reason for the huge discrepancy between these 2 instances is set forth explicitly. At first, everything is done “as commanded,” while Nadav and Avihu act as “He had not commanded them.” This is the root of the problem. Every religious experience, as important and inspiring as it may be, entails a danger. Is man’s purpose solely to serve God, or is he supposed to satisfy his own need for a spiritual experience?

One can distinguish between these via the question of “as Moshe commanded.” So long as an action is undertaken within the bounds of what is commanded, a person limits his actions in the spiritual experience, aware that he subservient to God’s word. When he acts other than as he is commanded, the question arises: Is this action or addition necessary, or appropriate, for serving God?

“Likewise they, in their joy – once they saw a new fire, they sought to add further love to the love that was already manifest.” (TK, Shemini, p 1). Adding their unnecessary, superfluous act of “love” teaches us that on this historic day, when the Divine Presence came to rest in the Mishkan, Nadav and Avihu broke through the bounds of Divine service and acted out of a quest for their own personal spiritual experience. Thus, their act was a sort of avoda zara – a foreign worship – and they were therefore deserving of death.

The sin is repaired through an emphasis on the need to adhere precisely to God’s command, and it seems that this is meaning of the unit on forbidden foods appearing here. Accepting the prohibitions in foods that simply express obeying God’s command, with no rational reason, is part of the tikkun for the fundamental deficiency which was manifest in the episode of Aharon’s sons.

E. “Could it be Accepted in God’s Sight?”

However, the Torah does not set down mindless decrees. Along with the lesson of accepting God’s command even where we do not understand it, the Torah presents a parallel system of forbidden foods that makes intellectual sense. The Torah is based on truth and justice, on understanding of man’s nature and his ability to internalize its messages. The message of accepting the yoke of Heaven and fulfilling God’s commands even if we do not understand them is important – but not the sole message. And indeed, most of the sections on forbidden foods do make sense.

Moreover, it seems that this concept is expressed in the story of Nadav and Avihu itself. Following their tragic deaths, Moshe discovers that the sin offering which the kohanim were supposed to eat has been burned. The Torah describes his response as “angry” with this action (see 10:16-18). Aharon’s responds by explaining his son’s behavior based on the events of the day (see v. 19). What is the meaning of this dispute?

It seems that Moshe’s conclusion from the the death of Aharon’s sons is, as discussed above, the importance of observing the mitzvot “as God commanded.” He therefore adopts measures to ensure that everything will be done precisely in accordance with God’s commandments, warning Aharon and his sons to continue their service with no observance of mourning, lest further disaster befall them (see 10:6). He then emphasizes the importance of eating the sacrificial portions meant for the kohanim (see 10:12-15). As such, one can understand Moshe’s anger when he discovers that part of the service was not carried out as commanded.

Aharon defends himself by insisting that some situations are exceptional, requiring that one deviate from the usual framework. Could there possibly be an act of eating to bring atonement on the day when Aharon has lost two of his sons? As Rashbam expresses it: “How can I eat the sin-offering, of the food sanctified for all future generations, on this day when our joy was spoiled and mixed? It would be like the disgrace of a bride who commits adultery while under the very wedding canopy!”

Indeed, deviation from the usual requirements is usually a sin, and sometimes it is even punishable by death. But every case is judged on the basis of its own circumstances; an act that was performed with extraneous motives is not the same as an act that befits the situation as part of the quest for that which is good in God’s sight.

Moshe’s greatness is revealed in his ability to understand this. The demand to observe absolute adherence to regulations, with no consideration for changing circumstances, is not always the correct approach, either. “And Moshe heard it, and he approved” (10:20).

It is not simple to find the balance between the complete subservience to God’s command that is required of man, even where the command does not appeal to his reason, and the understanding that circumstances sometimes do make a difference, and that this too is a true reflection of God’s will. One of the ways to find the balance is to observe these laws of forbidden foods, which include

rational prohibitions as well as prohibitions that we do not understand. In this sense, this unit in our parasha represents an archetype for many different areas of the Torah, guiding us in observance of the mitzvot and the service of God. Translated by Kaeren Fish



Understanding the Shemoneh Esrei

Shiur #01: Introduction: Tefilla

By Rav Ezra Bick

Based on: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-01-introduction-tefilla>

Shiur #01: Introduction: Tefilla

This course will concentrate on the text of the Shemoneh Esrei, with 2 objectives:

- 1) to analyze the text, understand the nuances implied in its formulation, enhancing both our appreciation and experience of prayer;
- 2) to uncover the philosophical principles implicit in the different sections of the Shemoneh Esrei, on the assumption that in fact many basic beliefs of Judaism are given expression in this most central prayer.

But first, what is meant by stating that the Shemoneh Esrei is the central prayer, and what does that tell us about the nature of prayer in Judaism? Prayer is a complicated institution about which whole books have been written, and this course is only about the text of the Shemoneh Esrei. But we must start by clarifying a few points about what is tefilla – prayer – in general.

1. "Tefilla" = Shemoneh Esrei

The word "tefilla," in Talmudic literature, refers to the subject of our course, the Shemoneh Esrei. Thus, the Shemoneh Esrei is the prayer par excellence. Other parts of the prayer service – the recitation of the Shema, the introductory psalms, the morning blessings – are additions, prefaces, or have no intrinsic connection, to the Shemoneh Esrei.

The text of the Shemoneh Esrei was formulated by the Sages. According to the Rambam (contra the Tosafot), tefilla is a Biblical precept, so I am not claiming that prayer is defined by reciting the Shemoneh Esrei. However, in practice, the Sages chose this prayer as the means to fulfill one's obligation to pray. Hence, understanding its structure and contents is essential to understanding the Sages' take on prayer.

2. Geula and Tefilla

One classic example of the tefilla=Shemoneh Esrei usage of the Sages is a statement that appears in Berakhot 4b which I would like to analyze, as it offers an important insight into the nature of tefilla in general and Shemoneh Esrei in particular. It also introduces our topic for the course, since it refers to the commencement of, or context for, Shemoneh Esrei.

R. Yochanan said: Who is destined for the future world? - one who says "geula" (the blessing "Ga'al Yisrael" – Who redeems Israel) right before the tefilla of Arvit (Shemoneh Esrei of the evening prayer). [This clearly applies even more so to Shacharit, the morning prayer]. This statement defines a halakhic necessity not to interrupt between the berakha of Ga'al Yisrael and the Shemoneh Esrei. Thus, although one can interrupt the recitation of the Shema to answer to Kedusha, not so between geula and tefilla. Some even prohibit answering amen to the berakha of geula when recited by the chazan. Redemption (geula) must be the staging ground, as it were, for the Shemoneh Esrei.

R. Yona of Gerona (Berakhot, ad loc.) did not question this halakha itself, but rather the extravagant praise and reward granted to one who fulfills it. Is this recitation enough to guarantee the world-to-come? This is his answer:

The reason he merits such a great reward is because when God redeemed us and took us out of Egypt, it was so that we should serve Him.... In the blessing of Ga'al Yisrael, we mention the kindness that the Creator did for us. AND TEFILLA IS SERVICE ("avoda")... (Bava Kama 92b). Therefore, when one mentions the exodus from Egypt and immediately prays, he shows that just as a slave who has been bought by his master must obey his master's commands, so too he recognizes the goodness and redemption which the Creator redeemed him, and that he is His slave and serves Him. And since he recognizes that he is His slave as a result of the fact that He redeemed him, and fulfills His will and commandments, it follows that he will merit the world-to-come as a result.

3. Avoda

Rabbeinu Yona's answer is based on tefilla being the supreme expression of service of God. In English, prayer is often called service, but that needs definition. Rabbeinu Yona explains that service means the way a slave obeys his master, and thus "geula" – the recognition that

God took us out of Egypt and granted us our personalities as free men – is the basis of “avoda,” for we belong to God by virtue of the exodus.

But precisely because R. Yona identifies the service of God with servitude, Shemoneh Esrei appears to be an inappropriate vehicle to express this. Where in this prayer do we state that we will obey God, follow His mitzvot and submit to His will? R. Yona, in linking service to geula, derives service from God’s ownership of those whom He redeemed from slavery. Indeed, service based on ownership should be expressed in obedience. But how is the attitude of servility expressed in Shemoneh Esrei? On the contrary, we mostly ask for God to grant our wishes; in other words, to serve us, in a sense. Shemoneh Esrei, which consists mostly of requests, expresses OUR will, not God’s. How is this the attitude of a slave who has been acquired by the act of redemption?

The answer is found, I think, in understanding the true nature of the servitude of God, as expressed in tefilla. A slave is expected to obey His master’s will, because he lacks his own. But this is only one aspect of a broader negation of the slave’s self. A slave lacks his own future, purpose, property and independence. The aims and goals of his life derive from his master. Everything he has comes from his master. In a word, he is totally DEPENDENT. The ultimate meaning of slavery is total dependence.

There is a crucial difference between human bondage and the service of God. A human master has selfish goals. If he defines the meaning of the slave’s life, then the slave’s only goal is the welfare of the master. But God has no selfish goal for us to serve. His goal is the good of Man. By deriving our goals from God, by seeing in Him the source of all our happiness and the aim of all our endeavors, we acquire a higher goal – that which the Torah calls “the image of God.” Slavery to man exploits the slave. Service of God fulfills man by giving him meaning.

How is tefilla, turning to God in supplication and request, a service of God? He who prays declares that his only source for his good is God. “Ein lanu ela Avinu she-bashamayim” – We have no one other than our Father in heaven. Just as a slave knows that his only source of food is his master, that the direction in his life will come from his master, so the servant of God turns only to God to fulfill his needs. The mitzvot of God, unlike the commands of the slave-owner, give divine transcendent meaning, to the life of the servant of God. Is there anywhere else man can turn to satisfy his thirst for a mission, for significance, for the means to survive? He who prays answers in the negative.

It is therefore not surprising that the central defining element of tefilla is “tachanunim” – supplication, request – rather than hymns of glory and psalms of praise. We serve God by declaring that He is the only address for our needs. What we lack – which is everything – can be satisfied only by Him, who is everything. It is the angels’ job to sing in the heavenly court; our job is to serve. We serve by stating: Without You I am nothing, therefore I turn to You for everything listed in the Shemoneh Esrei – wisdom, forgiveness, health, redemption, sustenance, justice, etc. And where did we learn to view God as the master of our fate and the source of our lives? From the exodus, when He redeemed us from being slaves to exploitative man, granting us the freedom and value of accepting His values and His munificence for ourselves.

In sum, the content of tefilla, of the Shemoneh Esrei, is primarily requests. The technical halakhic term is “bakashat tzerakhav” – requesting one’s needs. The meaning of this activity is service, placing ourselves before God as dependent totally on Him. By turning to Him for our needs, we state that we can obtain nothing from anyone else. As we shall see, the “needs” of man include both physical and spiritual values, all derived from the Master to the servant.

4. Trust

R. Yona offers another answer to the question about geula and tefilla. The answer is different than the first, but underlying it is the same idea about looking to God as the only source which can satisfy our needs. He writes:

When one mentions the redemption from Egypt and prays immediately afterwards, he shows that he trusts in God for his prayer, since he requests his needs from Him. For one who does not trust Him will not request anything from Him.... So now, when one mentions that redemption where our forefathers trusted in God and He saved them; and then he immediately prays, it is clear that he also trusts in God to answer him, just as He answered the Jews when they trusted in Him. That is why one mentions that redemption (geula) and prays immediately. And trust (“bitachon”) is the foundation of faith and fear of God, so he will merit thereby the world-to-come.

R. Yona offers 2 suggestions as to what should underlie tefilla, based on the connection to geula – service (avoda) or trust (bitachon). As we have seen, the 2 ideas are closely related, for service of God also involves turning to Him as the source of all that help us. Understanding this, we can now begin our analysis of the text of Shemoneh Esrei itself.

Next shiur we shall begin with the introductory verse of the text: Before the Shemoneh Esrei appears a single quote from the Book of Psalms. “HaShem sefatai tiftach.... God, open my lips, and my mouth shall utter Your praises.” That shall be our text next time. If you have a chance, look up the gemara which is the source for reciting this verse – Berakhot 9b, “Heikhi matzi samikh... ki-tefilla arikhta dami.”

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