

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

Chanukah 5770

Speak to Aharon and say to him: “When you kindle the lights, the seven lights must shine toward the face of the menorah.” (Bamidbar 8:2)

Rashi quotes the Midrash: Why was the command to light the menorah juxtaposed to the story of the offerings brought by the princes of each tribe? Because when Aharon saw the dedication of the Mishkan by the princes, he felt bad that neither he nor his tribe were included in this dedication. Therefore the Holy One, blessed is He, said to him: By your life, yours is greater than theirs, for you will light and clean the menorah.

The Ramban asks: Why did Hashem comfort Aharon with the menorah, and not with the incense or any of the other offerings brought by the kohanim, not to mention the service of Yom Kippur, which only he could do? He answers that the reference is not to the lighting of the menorah in the Temple, but to the lights of Chanukah, which continue to be lit even after the destruction of the Temple. Hashem promised Aharon that He would make miracles through his descendents, the Hasmoneans, and that the Jewish people’s salvation at that time would be credited to them.

Rabbi Yaakov Teitelbaum (1897-1969, rav in Kew Gardens) points out an apparent contradiction in Aharon’s feelings. On the one hand, we find that on Aharon’s first day officiating as kohen gadol, Moshe said to him, “Approach the altar and make your sin offering and your burnt offering...” (Vayikra 9:7). Rashi explains: “Aharon was embarrassed and afraid to approach. Moshe said to him, ‘Why are you embarrassed? For this you were chosen.’” At the same time, we find here that Aharon was upset that he was not bringing offerings like the princes of the other tribes.

He resolves this by saying that Aharon was indeed afraid to officiate, due to his role in the sin of the golden calf. The Ramban on Vayikra 9:7 says that Aharon fulfilled the verse in Tehillim 51:5, “And my sin is always before me.” He constantly thought about the golden calf, and when he looked at the altar with its jutting corners, it reminded him of an ox or a calf. But Moshe told him, “Hashem has forgiven you and chosen you as kohen gadol.” Still, when Aharon says that he was not given a role in the dedication of the Mishkan, he was worried that perhaps his descendents would one day repeat his mistake. After all, as Chazal say, “The deeds of the fathers are a model for their children.”

The Torah (Shemos 32:1-5) tells the story of Aharon’s sin in great detail. Ordinarily, the Torah conceals the identity of people who stumbled in sin. The Torah tells us that a man was caught gathering sticks on Shabbos (Bamidbar 15:32). When Rabbi Akiva stated that this man was Tzelafchad, his colleague rebuked him for revealing what the Torah wished to conceal (Shabbos 96b). So why does the Torah describe Aharon’s sin so openly? Clearly the Torah wants us to learn that even a great person such as Aharon could make such a mistake.

What exactly was Aharon's mistake in making the golden calf? When the people came to Aharon and demanded that he make an idol, Aharon reasoned, "If I refuse, they will kill me and then commit idolatry anyway. I will only be adding the sin of bloodshed to their sin, and for that bloodshed they may never get atonement. Furthermore, if I don't do it, someone else will do it in a worse way. Let me do it and use my wisdom to save the people from sin. I will get them to put off their worship of the calf till tomorrow, by which time Moshe will return."

This was what is called "aveirah lishmah" (a sin for a noble purpose), a compromise made on behalf of the Torah. Regarding such compromises, Scripture states, "He who praises a compromiser blasphemes Hashem" (Tehillim 10:3). The Gemara (Sanhedrin 7a) says, "This verse refers to the making of the golden calf." Rashi says: "Aharon made a compromise in his mind and rationalized the making of the calf."

Hashem did not accept Aharon's rationalization: "Hashem was very angry at Aharon, and would have destroyed him" (Devarim 9:20). Despite his good intentions to save the Jewish people from sin, Hashem sentenced him and his children to death, and if not for Moshe's prayer this sentence would have been carried out fully. The Torah writes the entire story, using Aharon's name explicitly, in order to teach us that even great people can fall on the stumble block of compromise.

When the princes dedicated the altar and Aharon was excluded, he feared that although Hashem had forgiven him personally, his descendants would one day repeat his mistake of making compromises with sinners. Therefore Hashem told him about the Hasmoneans, who would put their lives on the line to wage war against the Greeks and overcome their anti-Torah decrees. The Hasmoneans were a small minority – most Jews felt that there was no choice but to compromise the Torah and live peacefully under the Greeks. The Hasmoneans swam against the current and refused to give up an inch of the Torah. Therefore, when they lit the menorah, they refused to use defiled oil, although technically there would have been grounds to permit it. They used the only clean oil in existence, and Hashem made a miracle to show that He approved of their approach. When Aharon saw that his descendants would fight for Torah in an uncompromising way, he was comforted.

When lighting the menorah, we bless Hashem "Who made miracles for our fathers, in those days, at this time." This is because the uncompromising attitude displayed by the Hasmoneans applies in our time just as much as it did then. (Kol Yaakov, pp. 46-47)

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