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Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Acharei Mos



How Does One Internalize the Loss of a Tzaddik?

Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk zt'l (on the Portion of *Achrei Mos*) cites the Jerusalem *Talmud* that asks, “Why does the *Torah* juxtapose the passing of the sons of Aaron to the *Yom Kippur* service?” The *Gemara* answers, “Just as *Yom Kippur* atones for sin so too does the passing of the *tzaddik* (righteous person) atone.” The *Gemara* continues, “Why does the *Torah* juxtapose the passing of *Miriam* to the *parah aduma* (the Red Heifer used in removing the spiritual contamination of the dead)? Just as the *parah aduma* atones, so too does the passing of the *tzaddik* atone.”

Why does the *Torah* juxtapose the passing of Aaron to the breaking of the stone tablets containing the Commandments (*Luchos*)? This is to indicate that just as the breaking of the *Luchos* was painful to *Hashem*, so too is the passing of the *tzaddik* painful to *Hashem*.” *Reb Meir Simcha* explains, “What is the significance

of each of these comparisons? Seemingly, they are redundant. Evidently each juxtaposition teaches us something different.”

Reb Meir Simcha explains that *Yom Kippur* is a day in which G-d is most receptive to one’s penitence. It is a time of G-d’s willingness to forgive (*Ais Ratzon*) - *Hashem’s* forgiveness/mercy.” Thus, when the *Torah* juxtaposes the passing of the sons of Aaron to the service of *Yom Kippur* it is to communicate to us that just as *Yom Kippur* brings about intense *Ais Ratzon* so too does the passing of the *tzaddik* bring about a willingness on *Hashem’s* part to be forgiving. However, if a person does not value the significance of *Yom Kippur* and does not wish to maximize the benefit of the day, then *Yom Kippur* does not bring about atonement.

To the contrary, it is a detriment to the individual. Identically, the way one maximizes the benefit of the *Ais Ratzon*, which comes about because of the

passing of a *tzaddik*, is to value and appreciate the *tzaddik* who had passed away. If one does not value that *tzaddik* or (subsequently) his absence, then the individual does not benefit from that special moment.

Regarding the juxtaposition of the passing of *Miriam* and the Red Heifer, *Reb Meir Simcha* explains that the sprinkling of the ashes of the Red Heifer (together with the water) brought about *tahara* (purity). Doing *teshuvah* (repenting) brings about *tahara*. The passing of the *tzaddik* arouses one's conscience and causes him to introspect and do *teshuvah*. The individual will say to himself, "If the *tzaddik* who is a special person ultimately falls victim to death, I, who cannot be compared to the *tzaddik*, must definitely make corrections." This realization will bring about stirrings of *teshuvah* within the individual, which causes *tahara*. However if one does not come to this realization then the passing of the *tzaddik* does not have that affect.

Regarding the breaking of the *Luchos* (Tablets), *Reb Meir Simcha* explains that we find that there are two types of *tzaddikim*: one who is a righteous person in the absolute sense and one who is considered a *tzaddik* only relative to his peers. For example, *Lot* did not wish to live in proximity to his uncle *Avraham* (at the time of the destruction of *Sodom*) because by living so close to his uncle he would have been considered a *rasha* (evil person). However, if *Lot* were removed from that location he would be considered a *tzaddik* relative to the *Sodom* community.

Reb Meir Simcha explains that if the generation of the *tzaddik* does not heed his words and example, prosecution will be brought upon that generation because compared to the *tzaddik*, the generation is classified as evil. Thus in order to avoid bringing about prosecution on the Jewish people, *Hashem* takes the *tzaddik*. As a result, Jewish people can be classified as righteous, relative to the nations of the world.

The Sinai experience was considered the marriage of Jewish people to *Hashem*. The *Torah* itself was regarded as the marriage contract. *Moshe* broke the *Luchos* because the Jewish people's participating in the Golden Calf was the equivalent of a bride who had committed adultery under the *chupah* (marriage canopy). Thus, by breaking the *Luchos* (the marriage contract), the Jewish people would be considered as unmarried and thus would not be classified as *rashaim* (evil people).

Therefore, the *Torah* juxtaposes the breaking of the *Luchos* to the passing of *Aaron* in order to communicate to us that just as *Hashem* was pained with the breaking of the *Luchos* (in order to guarantee the survival of the Jewish people) so too He is pained by the passing of the *tzaddik* for the sake of the Jewish people. Therefore, it is incumbent upon every Jew to take advantage of the moment of the passing of a *tzaddik* to relate to and understand the significance of the loss. It should arouse within oneself stirrings of *teshuvah* because only then will one be the beneficiary of the *Ais Ratzon*.

Understanding Torah, to Revere it

We are currently in the midst of the *Yemei HaSefira* (The days of *Sefira*) which is a semi-mourning period. The *Gemara* tells us in Tractate *Yevamos* that during this time, 24,000 of *Rabbi Akiva's* students passed away within a thirty-three day period. *Rabbi Akiva's* students were the source of the spiritual illumination in the world. Within a thirty-three day period they all passed away from a plague. The *Gemara* explains that the reason why this tragedy occurred, despite their greatness in *Torah*, was because "They did not treat one another with the proper respect." How does one understand this?

The *Torah* tells us "You must teach your son (*Torah*)."
The *Gemara* explains that meaning of the word "son" does not mean child but rather "your student". A question is asked – if in fact the word "child" means "student" why did the *Torah* not write "student"? The answer given is – the only way that *Torah* can properly be transmitted between teacher and student is if the nature of the relationship between the teacher and the student is like a father and his son. Based on this principle, how do we understand *Rabbi Akiva's* lack of awareness of the shortcomings of his students? If in fact they did not treat one another with the proper respect how is it possible that *Rabbi Akiva* was not aware of this? The explanation given by the *Gemara* seems to be more difficult because of the spiritual stature of each of *Rabbi Akiva's* students. How is it possible for them not to treat one another with the proper respect? Evidently, it is clear that we cannot understand the passage of the *Gemara* on a literal level.

There is a Positive Commandment in the *Torah* to acknowledge a *Torah* Sage with the proper respect.

The question to ask is – what is proper respect? If, for example, there were two *Torah* scholars- one who is the leading Sage of the generation and another is of lesser status, it would be disrespectful to honor and acknowledge the leading Sage at the same level as one acknowledges the lesser scholar. The *Torah* Sage, who is at a particularly high spiritual level, must be acknowledged in a manner consistent with that level. Each *Torah* Sage must be afforded the proper respect vis-à-vis his level.

Every one of *Rabbi Akiva's Talmidim* was at his own special level. The shortcoming, which ultimately led to the demise of 24,000 *Talmidim*, was that they lacked the sensitivity to discern the various levels among their peers to accord each one his proper level of respect. Therefore *Rabbi Akiva* only seeing the proper respect accorded to each of his students was unaware of the subtleties in which they failed. A *Torah* Sage is more than a repository of knowledge. A *Torah* Sage is one who reflects his inner spirituality in his outward behavior. All of his *Torah* knowledge is synthesized and integrated into every aspect of his life.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin zt'l says in *Nefesh Ha'Chaim* that one must have a tremendous amount of reverence and respect when one is engaged in *Torah* study because he is studying the Word of *Hashem*. Similarly one should also conduct himself with reverence and respect during the reading of the *Torah*. The *Ramah* in his glosses says that although there is no obligation to stand during the reading of the *Torah*, it is admirable if one stands because the setting of the *Torah* reading is seen as a reenactment of Sinai (Just as at Sinai we stood in trepidation to hear the word of *Hashem*). If one, however, sits casually and does not conduct himself with the appropriate posture then this is considered disrespect. There are many levels, nuances, gradations of greatness to which we must be sensitive and act accordingly.

Taking Advantage of Opportunity

The *Torah* says, “*Hashem* spoke to *Moshe* after the death of *Aaron's* two sons, when they approached before *Hashem*, and they died.” Immediately after the *Torah* mentions the death of *Aaron's* two sons, the *Torah* describes the *Yom Kippur* Service. *Chazal* ask, why does the *Torah* juxtapose the death of *Aaron's* two sons to the Service of *Yom Kippur*? They

answer, to teach us that just as the day of *Yom Kippur* atones for our sins so too does the death of *tzaddikim* (righteous people). *Yom Kippur* only atones for one's sins in conjunction with *teshuvah* (remorse and a commitment to not repeat the sins, etc.).

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Zevachim* tells us that the term “*Kippur*” means to “wipe clean”. Since the *Torah* is equating the passing of the *tzaddik* with *Yom Kippur*, then just as *Yom Kippur* wipes clean one's sins so to the passing of the *tzaddik* wipes clean one's slate from sin. In addition just as *Yom Kippur* only atones in conjunction with *teshuvah* so to does the passing of the *tzaddik* atone in conjunction with *teshuvah*. When one experiences sufficient remorse for the past and makes a sincere and binding commitment to change for the future at the time of the death of the *tzaddik* he will be atoned from his sins as though he experienced *Yom Kippur* itself. How do we understand this?

The *Rambam* states in *Hilchos Teshuvah* (The Laws of Atonement) that there are many sins, which require the day of *Yom Kippur* itself in order to bring about full atonement- even though the person may have done the proper *teshuvah* prior to *Yom Kippur*. *Yom Kippur* completes the atonement process because on that day the Attribute of Mercy of *Hashem* is so overwhelming that one's spirituality is fully rehabilitated. However, during the rest of the year when the Attribute of Mercy is not at this most advanced level, *teshuvah* alone cannot fully rehabilitate the person. Therefore one must wait until *Yom Kippur* for full atonement.

The *Shalah HaKadosh* asks, if *Yom Kippur* is the holiest day of the year then why if one violates the day is one only subject to *koreiss* (spiritual excision) and not liable for the death penalty as when one violates the *Shabbos*? One would think that violating *Yom Kippur* would at least have the same degree of severity as *Shabbos*. The *Shalah HaKadosh* explains that the Attribute of Mercy is so overwhelming on *Yom Kippur* that even though the person deserves to be punished with death, the Mercy of *Hashem* does not allow this. Through the juxtaposition of the death of the sons of *Aaron* to *Yom Kippur* the *Torah* is teaching us that just as the Attribute of Mercy (*Rachamim*) at the most advanced level is in place on *Yom Kippur* and therefore atones for all of our sins (with the proper *teshuvah*) so too is the *Rachamim* of *Hashem* is at that advanced level the *tzaddik* passes away.

The *Rambam* states that during the year one needs to pray within the context of a *minyán* (quorum) in order for his prayers to be heard by *Hashem*. However during the Ten Days of Penitence (between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*) *Hashem* will even listen to the supplications of an individual. The *Gemara* in *Rosh Hashanah* bases this on the verse, “One should seek Him (*Hashem*) when He is to be found. Call to Him when He is Closest.” During the time of *Yom Kippur* and the Ten Days of penitence *Hashem* is the closest to us because his Attribute of Mercy is so overwhelmingly present. By juxtaposing the death of *tzaddikim* to *Yom Kippur*, the *Torah* is telling us that just as during the Days of Penitence *Hashem* is attentive to the prayers of an individual so too with the passing of the *tzaddik Hashem* listens to the prayer of the individual.

Unfortunately, we have had many great *tzaddikim* pass away recently. The passing of these unique and spiritual individuals pains us all; however, we must take advantage of the special level of *Rachamim* that exists at these moments. Just as we call out to *Hashem* on *Yom Kippur* when He is the closest to us so too when the *Tzaddik* passes away we should call out to *Hashem* to save the Jewish people.

Keeping the Conduit to Hashem Open

The *Torah* states, “With this shall *Aaron* come into the Sanctuary (the Holy of Holies)...” Once a year the High Priest would enter into the Holy of Holies (the location where *Hashem* dwells) on *Yom Kippur* to perform the Service of *Yom Kippur*. The *Yalkut (Midrash)* explains the words, “With this...shall *Aaron*” means that the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies with “bundles of *Mitzvos* in his hand.” In order for the High Priest (*Kohen Gadol*) to be in the presence of the *Shechina* (The Divine Presence) in the Sanctuary, he needed to have many merits to make him qualified and effective.

The *Yalkut* lists the many merits with which the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies: *Torah*, Circumcision, *Shabbos*, the merit of Jerusalem, all the Tribes of the Jewish People, *Yehudah* (Kingship), etc. It is clear that the *Kohen Gadol* needed to have many merits to go before the Divine Presence. Given all of the requirements for carrying out such an awesome task, one would think that the *Kohen Gadol* needed to enter into the Holy of Holies to bring about atonement for the sins of the Jewish people.

It would be understandable that such a difficult service was required to atone for the transgression of *Shabbos*, dietary laws, etc. However, the *Torah* tells us that the High Priest did not enter into the Holy of Holies to atone for those sins. Rather, the *Kohen Gadol* entered into the Holy of Holies and stood before the Divine Presence to atone for the possibility that someone may have entered into the *Mikdosh* (Sanctuary) in a contaminated state or someone may have eaten *Kodshim* (Sacrificial food) while being in a contaminated state, which is forbidden.

Why is the atonement for these infractions (contaminating the *Mikdosh* etc.) seemingly more involved and weighty than the atonement for all the other sins? All the other sins of the Jewish people are atoned for through the goat that was thrown down the mountain, *Azazel*. The process of atonement, which involves *Azazel* sequentially, comes only after the *Kohen Gadol* has performed the Service in the Holy of Holies to atone for the possibility of contamination of the *Mikdosh* or the eating of *Kodshim* in a contaminated state. How do we understand this?

The *Torah* tells us that *Hashem* dwells in amongst the Jewish people even if they are in a contaminated state. If this is the case then why is it such a high priority for the *Kohen Gadol* to perform the Service in the Holy of Holies to atone for the possible contamination of the *Mikdosh*? Evidently, if this infraction must be atoned, it is clear that although *Hashem* dwells amongst the Jewish people our relationship with Him is diminished to some degree.

The *Torah* states, “Make for Me a *Mikdosh* so that I shall dwell in your midst.” Meaning the *Mikdosh* itself was the conduit through which *Hashem* related to the Jewish people. Then just like a pipeline needs to be free and clear of obstructions in order for it to be an effective conduit, so too does the *Mikdosh*. If the *Mikdosh*, which is the link between *Hashem* and the Jewish people, is contaminated then it is diminished in its effectiveness as a conduit. If we are able to clear the conduit and make it fully functioning then all of the other issues can be addressed. Therefore the priority for the *Kohen Gadol* was to atone for the contamination of the *Mikdosh* and the eating of the Sacrificial Food in a contaminated state.

Every day we pray for the rebuilding of *Bais HaMikdosh* (the Temple) and then we ask *Hashem* to give us

a share in His *Torah*. Since the *Mishna* tells us that the studies of *Torah* is equivalent to all of the other *Mitzvos* combined, then why do we not first ask for a share in *Hashem's Torah* and then to have the *Bais HaMikdosh* rebuilt? The answer is that one cannot have a proper share in *Torah* without a full relationship with *Hashem*, which comes through the *Bais HaMikdosh*. In order for us to have the capacity and the clarity to truly understand *Torah* we first need to have the *Bais HaMikdosh* speedily rebuilt in our time.

Torah– The All Encompassing

The *Torah* tells us that once the *Mishkan* was established, one was no longer permitted to bring a sacrifice outside of the *Mishkan*, as one was previously allowed to do. Once the Temple was built, if one needed atonement he was only permitted to bring the sacrifice within the context of the Temple. The *Midrash* states, "G-d said to the Jewish people, 'As long as the Temple stands, when you bring sacrifices within it, they will give you atonement.' How is one atoned if the Temple no longer stands? One needs to engage in *Torah* study, because its words are the equivalent of the sacrifices. As the Prophet states, 'Take to you the words (of the *Torah*) and you will return to G-d.'

The *Torah* is equated to every type of sacrifice. During the time of the Temple, they had poured wine libations on the altar, so too is the *Torah* compared to wine. As it states in Proverbs, 'You shall drink the wine which I poured.' They had brought bread on the altar, so too is the *Torah* compared to bread. As it states, 'What is the bread of the Jew? It is the *Torah*.' As they brought oil to the altar, so too is the *Torah* compared to oil. As it states, 'Your garments should always be white and oil should not be lacking from your head.' (Meaning one should always be engaged in *Torah* study)." Presently, that we no longer have the Temple, the only way one can achieve atonement is by engaging in *Torah* study, which is the equivalent of all the sacrifices.

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Menachos* tells us that, although we do not presently have the Temple, one may bring about the equivalent atonement of the sacrifices by reciting the portions of the *Torah* that pertain to those sacrifices. As it states, "We shall pay oxen with our lips..." The *Gemara* explains the verse to mean that when one recites the portion of the sin offering it is considered as if he brought the sin

offering. The same is true for every offering, which one would bring if the Temple had stood. The *Gemara* is addressing bringing about the equivalent spiritual results of the particular sacrifices by reciting the corresponding passages relating to those sacrifices.

However, the *Midrash* is referring to the study of the *Torah*, regardless of the text, as being the spiritual rehabilitative method to fully reinstate the Jew. Since the *Torah* itself is the basis for all existence, as it is stated in the *Midrash*, "He gazed into the *Torah* and created the world." Every aspect of existence is energized and solidified through the study of *Torah*. Consequently, when one studies *Torah*, one re-establishes existence and its spirituality as it was intended to be. As the Prophet Jeremiah states, "If not for My covenant, which is in effect day and night, the statutes of heaven and earth would not be put in place." The *Gemara* in Tractate *Nidarim* explains that "the Covenant" is referring to the study of *Torah*, which must be in effect continuously in order to maintain existence. Thus, if one sufficiently engages in *Torah* study with proper intent (for its own sake), he will be able to bring about re-instatement/atonement of any spiritual shortcoming because everything is rooted in the *Torah* itself.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

The *Torah* states, "*Hashem* spoke to *Moshe* after the death of *Aaron's* two sons, when they approached before *Hashem*, and they died." The *Midrash* cites a verse from *Koheles* (Ecclesiastes), "King Solomon writes, 'Whatever happens to all, happens to all... (there is no differentiation between the righteous person (*tzaddik*) and the evil one (*rasha*)) Whatever happens to the pure person happens to the contaminated person...' King Solomon had gazed throughout the generations upon the righteous and the evil. He saw that what the evil person deserves comes upon the righteous...*Avraham*, who was a righteous person who introduced G-d to the world had the same predicament as *Nimrod*, the evil one who initiated the building of the tower of *Babel* and attempted to remove G-d from this world. Just as *Nimrod*, the evil one died, so too did *Avraham* die.

This is the ultimate evil of existence...King David, who built the Temple reigned for forty years and then died. *Nebuchadnezzar* (the Babylonian emperor) who

destroyed the Temple reigned for forty years and then died. We see once again that the ultimate fate of the righteous and the evil is identical. *Nadav* and *Avihu* (the sons of *Aaron*) brought the incense and were struck down by G-d. Similarly, the leaders of the congregation of *Korach* also brought incense (in their fire pans) and were struck down by G-d. 'This is the ultimate evil under the sun.'

Why does King Solomon consider these examples as the ultimate in evil in the world? It is a fact that every person who is born will ultimately die? It is true that *Nadav* and *Avihu* met a similar fate as the congregation of *Korach*; however, the two are not comparable. The death of *Nadav* and *Avihu* was the ultimate Sanctification of G-d's Name, as *Moshe* had said to his brother *Aaron*, "Through those who are closest to Me I will be sanctified." However, the death of the 250 leaders who had brought the incense offering were destroyed because they desecrated the Name of G-d. Why does King Solomon equate the two?

One of the blessings that G-d had given to *Avraham* was, "The families of existence will bless themselves through you..." *Rashi* cites *Chazal* who explain, "People will bless their children by saying, 'You should be like *Avraham*.'" Why is this considered such a blessing for *Avraham*? If *Avraham* were seen by mankind in a special light, they would choose to emulate his beliefs and values. Consequently, he would reap all the merit for their accomplishments. His influence would go beyond his own limited ability. All the other blessings, which *Avraham* had received such as wealth, fame, and children in a certain context, are considered secondary to this blessing.

This is the basis for the concept, which is stated in Proverbs "The memory of the *tzaddik* is for blessing." When one mentions a *tzaddik*, he must do so in the most illustrious manner. He must extol his attributes. This is because if the *tzaddik* is seen by the world as someone who is special he will be emulated. Mankind will be influenced positively through the mention of

the *tzaddik*. In contrast, King Solomon states, "The name of the evil should rot." When evil is perpetrated, it should be condemned and have no representation. It should go into oblivion so that it should not be a position even to be considered.

King Solomon realized that the demise of the *tzaddik* is that of the *rasha* – the fate of both of them is the same - ultimately both will die. This is the "ultimate evil under the sun." The evil to which King Solomon is referring is not the physical passing of these two individuals. Rather, just as the evil that was perpetrated by the *rasha* will be forgotten, identically the representation of the good that was brought about through the devoutly righteous will be forgotten and no longer have any positive effect.

The true "evil under the sun" is that people will only remember that the *tzaddik* died just as the *rasha* died. They will not recall or mention the differentiation between *Avraham* and *Nimrod*. Identically, regarding King David and *Nebuchadnezzar*, the Babylonian Emperor. All that will be recalled is that both of their reigns were forty years and then they died. Not many people have the ability to discern between the *tzaddik* and the *rasha* because the true value of the righteous is not appreciated. The death of *Nadav* and *Avihu* was the ultimate *Kiddush Hashem* (Sanctification of G-d's Name), while the death of the congregation of *Korach* was because of a Desecration of G-d's Name.

However, people will view both instances in a similar manner- both the *rasha* and the *tzaddik* were struck down by G-d, rather than appreciating the true difference between them. G-d created existence only to glorify His Name. G-d's Glory is achieved and disseminated through the *tzaddik* and the way he lives his life. However, if the actions of the *tzaddik* are glossed over because of his death, he will be seen no differently than the *rasha* who no longer exists. This is the ultimate evil under the sun because what could have been perpetuated is concealed.



Yad Avraham Institute