

Life After Life

The first of our two Parshios in this week's double header focuses in great measure on the service of the Kohain Gadol (High Priest) in the Bais Hamikdash. (Even much of the second half of the Parsha, which does not seem related explicitly to Yom Kippur, constitutes the Torah reading for Yom Kippur afternoon.) But you would never know that from the name of the Parsha, "Acharei" or "Acharai Mos" ("After" or "After the death of"), taken from the first words of the Parsha.

Read in context, we can see the connection of these words and the rest of the Parsha. Back in Parshas Shmini, Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aaron, "approached too closely" before Hashem and lost their lives, as we "[spoke](#)" about them. And, therefore, in this Parsha, Hashem tells us that while what Nadav and Avihu had done, was not to be done again, but there is a proper way of "approaching" an entering into the holiest space in the universe. The proper approach, by the right person, at the right time, and in the right way, is not only permissible but is commanded to happen every year on Yom Kippur. And with this introduction, the Torah then goes on to spell out in detail what the Kohain Gadol is supposed to do on this holiest day of the year to bring atonement for himself, for his fellow Kohanim and for the entire Jewish people.

But we are still left with that nagging question: Couldn't the opening verse have been phrased slightly differently, so that the words chosen to name the Parsha would have been about atonement, about Yom Kippur, about Aaron, and so on, and the promise of a new year to come. Why "After the death?"

One of the victims of the current pandemic was R. Yisroel Friedman, a Rosh Yeshiva and important person in the world of Lubavitch. He was known for his scholarship, insightfulness, very sharp wit, and boundless kindness done discreetly. Recently, a former student of his, related that there was a time when he was employed for a period of several months. Somehow, R. Yisroel got wind of his situation and approached him with the following observation: "Where I come from they say that a person needs to worry about what will be after 120; until 120 is supposed to be G-d's worry." He then handed him a personal check for \$,3000 and told him not to worry about repaying it until he is back on his feet again and feels able to do so.



Maybe that is the message of the name of the Parsha. Be focused on what comes after life, rather than obsessing over trivial details of the circumstances of living in this world. Whether we earned a dollar more or a dollar less matters much less than whether it was earned honestly. And, after 120 the size of the estate left behind will not matter at all (other than the Tzedakah distributions) but the kosherness of it will loom very large.

That is a message which we can derive by looking at the two words “Acharei Mos” and stripping them of any external context. What then remains is the exhortation to think about what comes after life. This works even if the Parsha is referred to with the single word of “Acharei,” - “after.” But as a name of a Parsha, it is much better to find some link between the name and the Parsha which bears the name. So, let’s consider this a little further.

As noted in our discussion of Parshas Shmini, the deaths of Nadav and Avihu seemed to disrupt a great celebration. Hashem had chosen to rest His presence in the Mishkan built by the Jewish people, demonstrating the permanent bond between them, and that the sin of the Golden Calf had been forgiven. On that the day the Shechina was visibly present to all of the people. This is certainly an occasion of great joy. In the midst of the festivities it suddenly becomes apparent that proximity to Hashem’s presence is dangerous and can cause death if one is not careful. Now, maybe we are not so celebratory of that revealed manifestation of the Shechina. Maybe we back away a little, and maybe wish that the Shechina back away from us. This is not a happy ending or a good state of affairs.

And perhaps that is what this week’s Parsha, with its seemingly less than joy-instilling title, is coming to resolve.

Last week, as I was writing up the speech, I read through part of a book about R. Mendel Futerfas, the legendary Chosid. He was sentenced to eight years of hard labor in the gulag for his “counter-revolutionary” activities. In subsequent years, after he was able to leave the Soviet Union, he would often tell stories of his experiences and discuss the lessons that he derived from them. Once, at a farbrengen, he spoke about how a Chosid needs to be creative and resourceful in living his life as a Chosid should, despite challenges. To illustrate this he shared the following anecdote:

Once, when he was in a labor camp in Siberia, the announcement was made that a ship had arrived in the harbor and strong volunteers were needed to tie the ship to the pier



and unload the cargo. Feeling up to the task, he volunteered for this work detail. They spent hours carrying heavy loads off the ship. At one point he slipped off the gangplank and fell into the water. His fellow prisoners/workers immediately rushed to pull out him of the water and dry to him off and warm him up. When the work was done, his co-workers commiserated with him on his bad luck to have fallen into the icy water.

As he ended this story with his face beaming with obvious satisfaction, the listeners looked at him perplexedly. What was the point of that story? What lesson was he trying to teach? After a long period of silence in which it was obvious that the listeners did not understand, R. Mendel exclaimed, "What! You don't understand? After many months, I finally managed to immerse in a Mikveh!"

Let's go back and reread the story, only putting quotation marks around the word "slipped," and knowing what we know now. Instead of a seemingly pointless story about an almost trivial unpleasant occurrence, it is now a story about the dedication and commitment of a Chosid to live his life as a Chosid even in a most hostile environment and even with regard to aspects which are not actual Torah requirements, without regard for creature comforts. (How he kept Shabbos and kosher and put on Tefillin are stories for another time.)

Sometimes we read a story once (or experience something) and form an initial impression. It may be necessary to be told, "You missed the point of the story (or the occurrence). Here is another tidbit, and now read it again." It is understandable that one could read the events of Parshas Shmini and come to the conclusion that closeness to Hashem and the Shechina is not a good thing. Our Parsha tells us that those conclusions, while understandable reactions, are not correct. There is a proper way of coming close to Hashem, and when it is done right, one receives atonement and blessings for the coming year. The Torah is telling us to look past the deaths of the sons of Aaron. They started on a certain path but were unable to bring it to fruition and remain alive in this world. That was a necessary step, but an incomplete step. As Moshe told Aaron in Parshas Shmini that this was a sanctification of Hashem. Now, here in our Parsha the plan unfolds and we are shown the right way to do it, and bring life and blessing.

We are during the days of Sefira, a period of mourning for the students of Rabbi Akiva who died during this time. On Lag B'Omer we celebrate the fact that it came to an end. Many ask what is the cause of celebration? Presumably, it came to an end because there were none left. What is there to celebrate? Many answers are given. One of them



is that Rabbi Akiva did not give up. He found five new students and with them reestablished the knowledge of the Oral Law. He saw the many years he had invested in learning and teaching Torah and gathering together and teaching many thousands of students until they died, not as an exercise in futility, but as a steppingstone to the next stage of preserving Torah. "Acharei Mps" after the deaths of so many students, Rabbi Akiva saw past that.

(Speaking of Lag B'Omer, be on the lookout for the announcement of our special Lag B'Omer celebration this year.)

We can apply this message to our current situation as well. We are experiencing a cessation of life as we know it and of normal activity. We mourn the loss of life and the suffering of those who were ill and those who are still not fully recovered. We see economic devastation staring us in the face. But we are reading the story for the first time, and don't get it....yet. Soon, we will get that missing piece and we will see Hashem's grand plan with the coming of Moshiach NOW!

