



Parashat Emor - #279

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On the Haftarah... The People's Cohain [Yechezkel 44:15-31]

Aside from holidays, the Cohanim would only work in the Temple for two weeks a year. So what was their role during the rest of the year?

"But the Cohanim, who are Levi'im, descendants of Tzadok, who faithfully carried out the duties of My Temple when the Children of Israel went astray from Me, are to come near to minister before Me. They are to stand before Me to offer sacrifices of fat and blood, declares Hashem, G-d. They are to enter My Temple and to come near My table to minister before Me and perform My service" (Yechezkel 44:15-16).

There are four fundamental positions among the Nation of Israel: King, Sage, Prophet, and Cohain. Compared to the well-defined public roles of the other three, the Cohain seems to have been secluded in the Temple - away from the concrete reality which surrounds us. The fact that the Cohanim wore distinct clothing only further separated them from the rest of the Nation. "When they enter the gates of the inner court, they are to wear linen clothes. They must not wear any woolen garment while ministering at the gates of the inner court or inside the Temple. They are to wear linen turbans on their heads and linen pants around their waists. They must not wear anything that makes them perspire" (ibid. v. 17-18).

But when we continue reading, we see that the next verse points out that this is not so: "When they go out into the outer court to the Nation, they are to take off the clothes they have been ministering in and are to leave them in the sacred chambers, and wear other clothes, so that they do not mingle with the Nation in their special garments" (ibid. v. 19). At the time of the Divine service in the Temple, the Cohain would

separate himself and wear the appropriate uniform for his special role. But immediately after completing his task and leaving the confines of the Temple's walls, he would not be different in appearance from the rest of the Nation.

Do not think that the Cohain was only a "man of the Temple." The Divine service was not quantitatively the largest part of his life. Each Cohain would, in addition to the holidays, serve only two weeks a year in the Temple. And even on the holidays, he was on standby in the event that there was extra work to perform. The Cohanim and Levi'im would spend the remainder of the year traveling throughout the length and breadth of Israel teaching Torah. They served as the spiritual guides of the Nation, providing personal and communal counsel. They therefore were also involved in rulings in the area of Halachah. The Cohanim did not wait until people turned to them - rather they went out to the Nation. A few times during the year, when people visited the Temple on the holidays, they saw the Cohanim in their full glory in their impressive clothing. The meetings with the Cohanim outside of the Temple may have been more frequent, but meeting them at the Temple was qualitatively the greatest experience (see Orot, Orot Ha-Techiya 4-5).

The Cohain did not own land, have a profession, or items to sell. He dedicated himself day and night to teaching. He would travel around and make a livelihood from the tithes (Terumot and Ma'asrot) which each Jew would separate from his produce for the Cohanim and Levi'im.

It is interesting to point out that when the movement to return to Zion began more than 120 years ago, there were all types of people who became concerned about the material concerns of the Nation of Israel – in politics, agriculture, industry, etc. – while others saw Judaism as a theoretical religion. Two extremes emerged: on the one side were great Torah scholars aspired to have the religion completely detached from this world; on the other side were secular thinkers who recommended a solely intellectual Judaism.

This dilemma was not new. The spies, sent by Moshe Rabbenu, refused to enter the Land. They did not fear a military defeat, but rather a spiritual decline. When they describe the Land as one "which devours its inhabitants" (Bemidbar 13:32), they are voicing their fear that the Nation would become pre-occupied with daily existence and lose its spiritual bearings.

But we must ask: How can we ensure a religious and spiritual existence when we are involved in the day-to-day material reality? An individual might be able to detach himself from the physical world, exist on the minimum amount necessary, and dedicate himself to learning Torah and Divine service, but this is impossible for an entire Nation. What then is the solution? It is the Cohanim, who are in constant contact with the Nation and are responsible for its spirituality. This is explained by Maran Ha-Rav Kook in his book "Orot". He used a parable of a man who wants to

cleave to Hashem not through the physical but through his mind, spirit and heart. When his thoughts are dedicated to Hashem, they illuminate his entire body. The same applies to human society. In the merit of the Cohanim, who dedicate their lives to Hashem, the entire Nation takes a part in the spiritual reality (Orot, Orot Ha-Techiya 4).

When the Nation met the Cohanim in the Temple – the very men from whose rulings, teachings, and counsel they have benefited – there is no need to describe the sublime spiritual experience that occurred!

Rav Aviner on... In Honor of Rabbi Akiva

[Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah – Acharei Mot-Kedoshim 5773 – translated by R. Blumberg]

Question: I am a counselor in the “Bnei Akiva” Religious Youth Movement. At our weekly Shabbat meeting someone brought in a new book with shocking material about Rabbi Akiva. The book describes a dark, turbid relationship with his wife, whom he abandoned for twenty-four years, and her quarrelsome relations with his third wife. It describes his tragic mistake in the Bar-Kochba Revolt, in which he, so to speak, removed G-d from history. It describes his rejection of the traditional/conservative approach to the Torah and his inventing the idea that one can interpret the Torah however one wants, so to speak removing G-d from the Torah. And other terrible things as well. We who walk in the pathway of Rabbi Akiva, obviously could not accept these things. Are we right, or are there seventy approaches to the Torah?

Answer: What all of those accusations have in common is that they have no source. They are not from the seventy legitimate approaches to the Torah but from the seventy-first, which is outside of the Torah. They are inventions, but what is worse, they constitute gossip and slander of the most heinous sort.

It is true that Rabbi Akiva wed before he met Rachel at age forty, for the Rabbis teach that he went off to learn the alphabet together with his son (Avot DeRabbi Natan 6). That son later became Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha (see *Seder Ha-Dorot*, s.v. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha). Yet it is clear that his first wife had passed away, for we know that the Sages of the Mishnah married only one wife, and Rabbi Akiva lived 120 years, which is a very long life. It thus turns out that after Rachel’s death, he married his third wife, who had previously been married to Turnus Rufus and had converted (Nedarim 50b, see Rashi and Rabbenu Nissim).

Yet as far as quarreling, nothing like that happened. It’s just plain libel. Likewise, he did not abandon his wife to learn Torah. Rather, as is well-known, she sent him off out of her love for the Torah, and she gave up everything for his sake.

Moreover, throughout all of the years, Rabbi Akiva’s wife lived with his mother, working for her friends. Half of her salary she would use herself, and half she would send to Rabbi Akiva (Avot De-Rabbi Natan, Addendum 2 to Version 1, Chapter 8). Yet one can see that slander is nothing new. Already back then there was a person in her neighborhood “who would verbally embarrass and humiliate her, saying, ‘Look at this foolish woman who relented on the glory of her father’s house, went and got herself married to the very lowest of the low. Not only that, but she leaves herself open to ridicule by claiming that he studies Torah’” (ibid.).

Rabbi Akiva does not represent a deviant stream of thought, removed from the House of Study. Quite the contrary, he represents the mainstream within the House of Study, the root of all other streams. As Rav Kook wrote in his letter to Bnei Akiva, which begins, “To those dear to my heart, Bnei Akiva,” all the streams of thought within the Oral Torah derive from that great ocean, the all-encompassing Torah of Rabbi Akiva (*Ma’amarei Ha-Re’eiya* 202).

There he also points out the “supreme holiness” that includes “loving Torah to the point of sacrificing one’s life amidst infinite suffering” (ibid.).

In addition, the Bar-Kochba rebellion includes no rebellion against G-d, but only fulfillment of G-d’s commandment. As Rav Kook writes, “Rabbi Akiva’s special trait, reawakening now during the flowering of our redemption and providing us with an everlasting light, was His enthusiasm and self-sacrifice to bolster every vision of redemption and rebirth for Israel and its Land. And precisely because that vision failed in his day, and Bar-Kochba fell, and together with him Israel as far as its national liberation, we are certain that the truth of Torah from his holy lips will have its day, and that day is fast arriving. Suffering will not twice befall us. Not in vain has Israel waged a war of survival and victory up until this very generation.” (ibid.)

In other words, the Bar-Kochba rebellion failed, but the principle that we bear an obligation to foment a war of liberation was correct. It is by dint of this that we will be aroused when the time comes, and then we will succeed. That time is now. And indeed, Israel’s War of Independence, our own Bar Kochba revolt, succeeded, is succeeding and will succeed.

As far as the relationship between Rabbi Akiva and Rachel, here the slander exceeds all bounds. Every schoolchild knows that the story of Rabbi Akiva and Rachel is the most marvelous love story in all our Rabbinic literature. Rav Kook, as well, highlights it in his introduction to Song of Songs as a “natural, pure love” (Olat Re’eyah 2:4).

Ha-Gaon Ha-Rav Aharon Heiman wrote a powerful work “*Toldot Tana'im Ve-Amora'im*” [history of the Mishnaic and Talmudic sages]. Yet although it was a work that was total erudition and total Torah, when it came to Rabbi Akiva, he could not restrain his amazement, both from Rabbi Akiva’s personality and from the love story between him and his wife:

“When he was herding the sheep of the wealthy Kalba Savua, the latter’s lovely daughter Rachel saw how humble and virtuous he was and fell in love with him. She revealed to him her love, making clear that she was ready to wed him, but only on condition that he leave her father’s sheep and go study in yeshiva.

While it is not my intent here to write love stories, we can well imagine how the daughter of the most prominent member of his people, raised in the lap of her father’s wealth, made a decision to abandon all that glory and to wed someone who was the lowest of the low, a poverty-stricken ignoramus, much older than she, with a son from a previous marriage. She doubtless knew in advance that if her father found out, he would banish them both.

We can be certain as well that this great union was not formed overnight. Akiva, the shepherd, knew very well how risky would be his first steps for the gentle soul of his master’s daughter. What great doubts he must have entertained, lest he fail in his studies, and regarding how they would support themselves while he studied. He could not decide what to do, whether to heed his beloved Rachel, or to desist.

He saw a spring, with a hollow stone sitting on top, and when he asked who had made the hole, he was informed that water dripping constantly on the stone had made the hole over time. Rabbi Akiva concluded, ‘If water can engrave stone, then all the more so can Torah be engraved on my heart.’ He immediately decided to fulfill his beloved’s wishes, and consented to wed her, and they were secretly betrothed.

Yet when her father heard that it had really happened, not only did he banish Rabbi Akiva from his home, but he banished Rachel as well, and disowned her of his possessions. Yet not only did she not recant, but in the middle of the winter she married Akiva the shepherd, the poverty-stricken ignoramus, and they both lived in a straw storage house, without a pillow under their heads. The straw would get entangled in her beautiful hair, and he would remove it. He told her, ‘If G-d allows me to become wealthy, I will make you a Jerusalem of Gold to wear on your beautiful head.’”

As far as Rabbi Akiva, himself, here is what Rav Heiman writes about his personality: “When we set out to write the history of this remarkable man, no matter how deeply we probe, and no matter how astounded we become, we will never come even half way towards discovering the heights of his greatness. Yet Divine Providence, which decreed that our Temple should be destroyed and its glory removed, brought us the cure before the illness in the person of Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef, who saved the Nation’s soul from total destruction. He was blessed by G-d

with neither lineage, nor wealth nor wisdom, for he was an ignoramus and a herdsman, the son of converts, and already on in years. Yet due to a great and precious woman, his fortunes turned around, and he became one of the heads of the wise men of the generation, who brought wisdom to his own teachers, and gained enormous wealth. At the end of his life, he became the head of the entire generation, and he produced tens of thousands of students. From this we see how the crown of Torah is greater than the crown of the priesthood or kingship. The crown of priesthood was granted by inheritance to the descendants of Aaron, the crown of kingship was granted by inheritance to the House of David, and no king from the royal line could have a non-Jewish parent. Yet the crown of Torah is an inheritance to everyone.”

As for yourselves, members of the precious Bnei Akiva movement, be strong, study Torah to bring honor to our great master Rabbi Akiva, and continue to follow in his path.

Shut She'eilat Shlomo - Questions of Jewish Law

Sneezing in Halachah

Blessing Someone when Learning Torah

Q: Should one say "La-Beriyut" if someone sneezes while they are learning Torah?

A: The Gemara in Berachot (53a) says: "In Beit Rabbi Gamliel, they did not wish the sneezer 'marpe' in order not to interrupt their Torah study." And this is the ruling in Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh De'ah 246:17). Some says that this standard is only relevant to previous generations who never lifted their heads out of their holy books to say anything unrelated to Torah. Since today we interrupt our studies for other matters, he rules, we may also do so to wish the sneezer well (Prisha quoted in Taz #6. Aruch Ha-Shulchan #33). And others say that we should still refrain, lest it have a negative effect of encouraging people in the Beit Midrash to interrupt their learning for all sorts of idle discussion (Taz ibid.). It is therefore proper to be strict (Shut She'eilat Shlomo 1:101).

"La-Beriyut" in the restroom

Q: Is it permissible to say "La-Beriyut" in the restroom?

A: Yes, but one should make sure not to say "For Your salvation I do long, Hashem" (Bereshit 49:18), for those who have the custom, since it is a Torah verse (see Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 85:2. And others rule that one should not say "La-Beriyut" in the restroom based on Rama, Orach chaim 3:2 and the commentaries there that one should not speak in a restroom. The booklet "Sneezing in Halachah", p. 55. Although one can make a distinction between saying "La-Beriyut" and talking in general).

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