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Reframing how we see Life's Poisonous Snakes

TIFERES SHLOMO ON THE PARSHA

And Aharon will be gathered to his people

When the Torah records the passing of Aharon, it does not use the word וימת "and he passed away". Rather, the Torah employs the euphemism of being "gathered to his people".

A similar description is used for the passing of the Avos. Instead of saying that they passed away, the Torah writes that they were gathered to or would lie with their fathers.

How we can use this term in relation to Avraham whose people and fathers were idolatrous pagans.

When a Tzaddik passes away, their absence and departure is only to the physical eye, that we can no longer see them. Even after their passing, their spirit remains with us, hovering over and looking after us.

This is alluded to in the words בהייהם ובמותם לא נפרדו "n their lifetime and in their death, they were not separated". Just as they prayed for and protected the Jewish people whilst alive, in their passing, they did not become separate, remaining connected to us.

Whilst the verse quoted above does not mention the passing of Aharon, a later verse teaches – ואהרן יאסף ומת שם "and Aharon will be gathered and pass away there".

The extra word "there", teaches that only "there" on Hor Hahar would Aharon die. But afterwards he would live on and continue to protect the Jewish people and remain with them.

When the Torah says that Aharon, or other Tzaddikim will be "gathered to their people", it is not referring to their forebearers. Rather it refers to *their* people, Bnei Yisroel, teaching that that even in their passing, they will be gathered to and forever present with the Jewish people.

As punishment for complaining about the Manna, the Jewish people were punished with an invasion of poisonous snakes. They turned to Moshe, who davened to Hashem on their behalf.

Hashem told Moshe to make a snake and raise it on top of a pole in the middle of the camp. Anyone who was bitten by a snake should look up at this snake. If they would do so, they would be healed and live.

Rashi quotes the Mishna which emphatically teaches that this snake was not the source or cause of life or death. Rather, if they would look upwards towards Heaven in Teshuvah, surrendering their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they would be healed.

This Mishna raises a number of questions;

1. Why does the Mishna stress the idea of looking upwards? On the contrary, our sages teach that when one prays, whilst and their hearts should be directed Heavenwards, their eyes should look downwards.
2. If the healing came, not as a result of looking at the snake, but rather by looking towards Heaven, why was it necessary to make this snake at all?
3. If a trigger was needed to cause the Jewish people to look upwards, why did it have to be in the figure of a snake?

Tin Likutei Torah, the Alter Rebbe raises these questions and gives a fascinating insight on the deeper meaning of this episode. It carries a powerful and practical lesson for strengthening our Emunah when we face difficulties and challenges in our lives.

Everything comes from Hashem; Not only those things that are openly and tangibly good and holy, but even those things in our world which seem negative or are antithetical to Kedusha. They too come from Hashem, who is the ultimate Good.

The Zohar explains that even the Yetzer Hara and Satan come from a holy source. At the same time as our sages teach that Satan "set his eyes on the Beis Hamikdash and destroyed it", they also teach that the Satan acts Lshem Shamayim.

Down here they appear as negative forces that oppose Hashem, seeking to challenge and obstruct us in our Avodah. But in truth, they are Shluchim of Hashem, sent to test us. Hashem's intention, and indeed the intention of the Yetzer Hora itself, is that we overcome its temptations.

The same is true with all forms of challenge, negativity and adversity that we may face in our lives.

The Kabbalists describe two levels of reality; the revealed world (Alma De'isgalya) and the hidden world (Alma De'iskasya). In its source - the G-dly reality of the hidden world - everything is good. When it flows down into the revealed world of our reality, for reasons we do not and cannot understand, this goodness can manifest in a negative form.

The Gemara tells the story of the great sage Nachum Ish Gamzu. He was given this name because he would always say 'Gam Zu Letovah', this too is good. When faced with challenging and even life-threatening situations, Nachum's incredible faith led him to see that it was truly good.

Through defining his reality by the way things are in their source, Nachum with his Bitachon was able to affect a change in status, so that the hidden goodness was not just theoretical but became tangibly revealed in this world, as he successfully elevated the challenge to its G-dly source. As a result, whatever challenges he faced, would become revealed as the ultimate goodness and blessing.

This is the message of Moshe's snake. The Jewish people were plagued with poisonous snakes of negativity and adversity. The snake raised up on a pole told the Jewish people not to 'judge by what their eyes saw' and focus on the negative presentation of the snakes 'on the ground'.

Rather, they should look upwards and see the snake as it exists in its source 'above'. If they would do so, they would realise that all in good and that there is no negativity and nothing to fear. They would be healed as the good became manifest.

We may not be on the level of Nachum Ish Gamzu and our challenges in this world may remain challenges. But we can all gain from trying to live with this perspective. We can find tremendous strength and peace by reframing how we choose to see things.

When we experience the snakes in our lives, we should 'look upwards' and meditate on this; Everything and every situation comes to us from Hashem. Hashem is absolute Good and from Him comes only good. So, this too is good. I may not see it, but I trust and believe that it is so.

In reward for this Bitachon, may Hashem remove all manifestations of negativity from our lives and transform our reality to reflect its 'source'. Then we will see the deepest blessing and goodness in a revealed and tangible way.

Can a Kohen go to the Grave of a Tzaddik?

Rabbi Yonason Johnson

The Parsha discusses the laws of Tumas Meis (impurity from contact with the dead) and the purification process of the Parah Adumah.

Impurity can be contracted from contact with a Meis, carrying a Meis, walking over graves or being in an Ohel (under the same roof) with a Meis. Additionally a Kohen is required to remain at least 4 Amos (approx. 2 metres) away from a grave or dead body. (If there is a wall of 10 Tefachim tall it is permissible to go up to 4 Tefachim away from the grave).

One of the Halachic questions debated throughout the ages is whether Tumas Meis applies to the bodies and graves of Tzaddikim.

The relevance of this Shaalah would be whether Kohanim are able to visit sites such as Maaras Hamachpeilah, Kever Rochel, the gravesite of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai in Meiron and the like.

The question arises because of a Midrash¹ that teaches that when Rabbi Akiva was murdered by the Romans, Eliyahu Hanovi took care of his burial, carrying him on his shoulder. Rabbi Yehoshua Hagarsi saw Eliyahu carrying Rabbi Akiva's body and asked how he was able to be involved in the burial if he was a Kohen? Eliyahu Hanovi replied "there is no Tumah with Talmidei Chachamim or their disciples".

But there are passages in the Gemara which suggest otherwise.

Pesach Sheini came about because a group of individuals who were impure from contact with the dead came to Moshe to complain why they should miss out on bringing the Korban Pesach. The Gemara² explains that these individuals were the bearers who carried the body of Yosef Hatzaddik. This indicates that the bodies of Tzaddikim do convey Tumah.

Elsewhere the Gemara³ teaches that Rabbi Benaah would mark graves, including the burial cave of the Avos. Rashbam and Tosfos⁴ explain that he did this in order that the Kohanim would know to stay away from them on account of Tumah, which applies even to the Avos.

How do we reconcile this with the Midrash quoted above?

Usually, we do not derive Halachic rulings from Midrashim⁵, especially when they are contradicted by the Gemara³. Nonetheless the Rishonim try to reconcile the teachings.

Tosfos⁶ (Rabbeinu Tam) explains that the reason Eliyahu Hanovi took part in the burial of Rabbi Akiva was because it had the status of a Meis Mitzvah.

Since those executed by the government were not allowed to be buried, no one else was able to take care of the Kevurah. A Kohen is allowed

to become impure for a Meis Mitzvah. His answer to Rabbi Yehoshua "there is no Tumah with Talmidei Chachamim or their disciples" was only said as a "throw-away" answer to push him off.

Ritva⁷ resolves the Midrash in a similar manner, that Rabbi Akiva had the status of a Meis Mitzvah. Unlike Tosfos, Ritva explains that this would be true even if there were relatives who could take care of the burial. This is because it is considered as the honour of a Nosi or other great Torah giant that everyone participate in the burial, even Kohanim.

But not all of the Rishonim take this view.

Based on the commentary of the Ramban⁸, we cannot say that Eliyahu's response was just a Dechiya. Were it not actually the Halacha, he would be issuing rulings which are not according to Torah. Further this would be a violation of Lifnei Iver (placing a stumbling block in front of the blind) as those who heard his ruling would believe that this is the Halacha and would act accordingly.

Rashba⁹ likewise attacks the position of Rabbeinu Tam that Eliyahu was merely pushing away Rabbi Yehoshua's question. This is also the position of Sefer Hachinuch¹⁰.

In his commentary on Parshas Chukas (Parshas Parah) Ramban writes clearly that the bodies of Tzaddikim do not cause Tumah. Impurity only applies to those who died on account of the "seduction of the snake". Tzaddikim who pass away with Neshikah (Divine kiss) do not cause impurity¹¹.

The Poskim suggest that even Ramban's lenient position may be limited only to the actual burial of Tzaddikim but not visiting their graves.

The Gemara¹² teaches that on the day Rebbi (Rabbi Yehuda Hanosi) passed away the Kedusha of the Kohanim was nullified and Kohanim were allowed to become defiled. The Gemara indicates that it was only on the day of passing. This would fit with Ritva's explanation a Nosi has the status of a Meis Mitzvah, an allowance which only applies to the actual burial itself. Therefore even according to this view, one would not be able to rely on it to permit visiting Kivrei Tzaddikim.

Based on this Gemara, Rabbeinu Chaim Kohen (one of the Baalei Tosfos) said that were he present when Rabbeinu Tam passed away, he would have become defiled for his burial¹³. Beis Yosef questions this, since Rabbeinu Tam was not a Nosi. He concludes that Rabbeinu Chaim must hold that this allowance applies to any Godol Hador. The Beis Yosef notes that we do not follow this opinion.

The Raava" d¹⁴ has an interesting opinion. Nowadays since Kohanim are all impure anyway, there is no longer any prohibition on them becoming impure. This is also the opinion of the Sefer Mitzvos Gadol. Many understand this literally, that according to the Raavad there is no problem for a Kohein nowadays to become impure.

However the majority of Rishonim maintain that Tumas Meis remains in force today.

Noda Biyehuda and Chasam Sofer explain that the Raavad himself agrees that there is still a Biblical prohibition, only that it is not considered a punishable offense.

The vast majority of Poskim¹⁷ maintain that there is an Issur Gamur for Kohanim to visit the gravesites of Tzaddikim. Rabbi Shlomo Kluger writes that a Kohen who does so desecrates their Kehuna and cannot be called a Kohen. Even on the day of the burial itself we cannot be lenient nowadays. This is also the ruling of the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch¹⁸ that it is a mistaken practise and one must protest. This is especially so as it pertains to an Issur Torah.

A noted voice of dissent in the Minchas Elozor¹⁹ who writes that it is permissible for Kohanim to visit Kivrei Tzaddikim of their own Rebbe. However it is preferable to refrain from doing so as it may lead to Kohanim being permissive for any Rabbi or Talmid Chacham.

At the funeral of the Sfas Emes they asked the Avnei Nezer whether a Kohen was allowed to be involved with the Kevurah. He replied "Chas Veshalom"! He related that at the Levaya of the Kotzker Rebbe, the Chiddushei Harim screamed and protested at the those Kohanim who acted leniently.

In a letter²⁰, the Rebbe refers to a letter from the Alter Rebbe's brother, the Mahari"l concerning the fence which was erected around the Alter Rebbe's Tziyun in Haditch. In another letter²¹ the Rebbe writes that he is not pleased with the practise, noting that at the Ohel in Lubavitch there were markers to restrict Kohanim from approaching. The Rebbe continues to explain that at the Ohel of the Friedlike Rebbe a wall of 10 Tefachim tall was erected and that Kohanim may enter (as long as they stay 4 Tefachim away from the grave itself).

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| 1. Mishlei Parsha 9 also quoted in Yalkut Shimon. Known as the Midrash Asarah Harugei Malchus | 13. Tosfos Kesubos 103b |
| 2. Sukkah 25a | 14. Hilchos Nezirus 5:17 |
| 3. Bava Basra 58a | 15. Positive Mitzvah 231 |
| 4. Ibid. Also Ritva and Nimukei Yosef and Rif (Teshuvah 313) | 16. Yeshuos Yaakov OC 343:2. Mishna Lmelech Hilchos Avel Chapter 3. Shu"t Rabbi Akiva Eiger Mahadura Tinyana 18 |
| 5. Sefer Haeshkol | 17. Including Avnei Nezer (YD 468), Noda Biyehuda, Chasam Sofer, Shlomo Kluger (Tuv Taam Vedaas YD 2:231), Bikurei Yaakov (20). See Shu"t Yechave Daas 4:58 |
| 6. Bava Metzia 114b | 18. 202:14 |
| 7. Megillah 3b | 19. 3:64 |
| 8. Yevamos 61b | 20. Shaar Halacha uMinhag 3:150 |
| 9. Chiddushim 61a | 21. Ibid |
| 10. Mitzvah 263 | |
| 11. See also Kli Yakar Parshas Emor who writes likewise | |
| 12. Kesubos 103b | |