

The High Priest and Our Struggle with Work-Life Balance

I.

The beginning of the Yom Kippur story, the story of the extraordinary service we read about and reenact today, begins a whole week before Yom Kippur, as we read in the very first Mishnah of Tractate Yoma, the tractate that narrates this singular day:

שבעת ימים קודם יום הכפורים מפרישין כהן גדול מביתו ללשכת פלהדרין (משנה יומא א/א)

Seven days before Yom Kippur (that is to say, the day after Rosh Hashanah!), they would remove the High Priest from his home and confine him to the Temple to prepare for the Yom Kippur service (Mishnah Yoma 1:1)

Perhaps we can say that the High Priest had a little bit of a work-life balance issue that week.

“Seven out of ten American workers struggle to achieve an acceptable balance between work and family life, reports a new study published in American Sociological Review, funded by the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That number has been climbing over time.”¹

7 out of 10. And if you ask me, at least 2.5 out of the other 3 are lying – they have the problem, too, but they don’t want to admit it!

Balancing our needs to work and our commitment to values beyond the home on the one hand – with home life and presence, and being a person fundamentally about family, on the other, is one of life’s biggest challenges almost at any age and stage. Especially in New York.

And beyond work-life balance, I think we also struggle with the “life” part at a more basic level. Sometimes it’s not even that we can’t be present at home and be with family in the way we want to. Sometimes it’s even that we just don’t want to. What is that about for us?

Responsibility to family isn’t always easy or enjoyable – and here I don’t mean just a spouse or children, if we are so fortunate, but – as I look around the room at some of my role models in family values – I also mean our responsibilities to care for parents, for siblings, for other relatives whose needs make very real demands on our lives. They make demands that were it not for the value drilled into us of “family first”, we might not do the exceptional things we do to be there for those loved ones. It’s very hard sometimes.

And so I marvel at the people in this community – many whom I know and many other whom I don’t – who visit ailing parents every day, who are tireless advocates for their children, who rearrange their lives

¹ <http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/06/your-work-life-balance-should-be-your-companys-problem/>

to be home for dinner, not to miss a soccer game, or to take a sick sibling to special treatment centers for weekly therapy.

It is amazing – and it is not easy.

When prospective converts tell me about what draws them to a traditional Jewish life, they almost always begin with “the emphasis on family” – something that the vision of our lives set out by the Torah seems to truly elevate, in the way Shabbat and Yom Tov and honoring parents and educating children but us in a mindset of family-focusedness.

And they’re right. Yahadut, Judaism, is, in so many ways, all about family.

So why does the Torah demand of the High Priest, in some sense the paradigm of the Jewish role model, to leave his family for an entire week before Yom Kippur? And if the demands on Aaron to separate from family were severe, what about Moshe, whom rabbinic tradition told us spent long phases of his life as a Jewish leader utterly distant from his wife and children?

If the story of the Akedah on Rosh Hashanah tells us that we might be asked to give up our children, is the teaching of the Avodah service that we read this morning, and that we will re-enact this afternoon, that to serve God at the highest level we need to leave our families?

Is this a core message of this holiest day of the year?

Yes – and no.

II.

Let’s focus our attention for a moment on the way the Torah describes the service of the Kohen Gadol in the Torah reading from this morning:

ויקרא טז/ו: וְהִקְרִיב אֶהָרֵן אֶת פֶּרֶךְ הַחֲטָאתָ אֲשֶׁר לוֹ וְנִכְפַּר בְּעֵדוֹ וּבְעֵד בֵּיתוֹ:

And Aharon will bring forth his bull and atone for himself and his bayit – his house. (Lev. 16:6)

Twice more in the next dozen verses describing the service does the Torah remind us that Aharon’s service is *ביתו ובעדו* and then *ביתו ובעדו* and then *ביתו ובעדו* – for himself and his household, and for himself, his household, and the entire assembly of Israel.

Why does Aharon offer an atonement sacrifice for his family? What does his personal life have to do with his professional – even more, his national – responsibilities?

Rav Moshe Shternbuch, rabbi in Johannesburg and now among the leading haredi rabbis in Israel, writes in his Torah commentary Taam Vadaat:

לימוד מוסר הוא לאדם שקודם ידאג לחנך עצמו ובני ביתו בדרך התורה ויראת ה' טהורה ואח"כ יתפנה לכלל ישראל

These verses, the inclusion in the holiest day of the year's atonement service for the whole nation of a special sacrifice and a special confession for the Kohen Gadol's family, is to teach us a מוסר – less of priority of values that is not easily learned – that first we must focus our attention on our families, and then turn to our responsibilities to nation, to profession, to the greater world.

Jerry Seinfeld has a cute – but profound – routine, in which he asks: “Why do people that work in offices have pictures of their family on their desk facing them? Do they forget that they're married? Do they go, ‘5:00. Time to hit the bars... Hold it a second. I got a wife and three kids. I better get home. I completely forgot.’”

Even when we are at work, and Judaism and Torah wants us to work, to serve, to improve the world, even if it means making some sacrifices in our complete presence for family – even when we are at work, we are supposed to have a consciousness that our ultimate orientation is toward being at home, towards ביתו – our homes and our families – whether spouse, children, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins – whoever they are.

If this is true, by the way, then how tragic is it that for so many of us, instead of being drawn towards home even when at work, we are drawn toward work even when we get home. It is hard to put away our smart phones, our email, and be present with family even in the hours we set aside for it.

At so many levayot, so many funeral services, that I attend, I am amazed to hear described as people who put family first, people who I know worked long, hard hours, often not seeing their family much during the week or on weekends. And yet, they are called people who valued family above all.

I learn from this that in part, while hours matter, that valuing family is an orientation, an attitude. We can work long, hard hours, but have our hearts fundamentally in our בית, in our home, and make the time with family count, and send that message of family first.

But we can also spend plenty of hours with our loved ones but not actually be with them.

We can work long, hard hours, but make the time with family count. Or we can spend plenty of hours with our loved ones but not actually be with them.

III.

This is a struggle I understand. It is a struggle I live. Especially this year – my first year as a parent.

I think about, and talk about, and value above all, my family. But do I show it? Do I put my phone away during dinnertime, bath time, bedtime? Am I fully present when I am home?

Do I call my parents enough – who are caring for my ailing aunt? Do I stay in enough contact with my sister? My aunts? My all too few cousins? With the precious hours of life we are granted, do we really prioritize our families?

Of course, family is complicated. We don't all have family, and some of us have very hard family circumstances. But for so many of us, there is room to do more for and with our families.

The Torah understands, and recognizes, the need to go to work – even for 7 whole days straight in the case of the Kohen Gadol. The Torah validates our need to separate from family. But what it says to us on Yom Kippur is that our fundamental value, our orientation, must always be ביתנו – our homes – first.

Now remember the first Mishnah, the words with which we opened. Seven days before Yom Kippur the Kohen Gadol is separated מביתו – from his home.

What does the very last Mishnah about the Yom Kippur service, six chapters later, say? After the Kohen Gadol finishes the Yom Kippur service and the daily afternoon service, and atonement is complete, and he emerges radiant and joyous as we will sing in a little while:

הביאו לו בגדי עצמו ולבש ומלווין אותו עד ביתו (משנה יומא ז/ד)

They bring him his personal clothes, he puts them on, and the people accompany him עד ביתו – back home. (Mishnah Yoma 7:4)

What a poignant moment. The same nation on whose behalf we have asked the Kohen Gadol to separate from his family for a week in order to serve on our behalf, we now bring him home. We validate, we celebrate, that the ultimate destination is our home.

I am not sure I can explain exactly why this should be true.

Why is family first? Why not ideals, values, service to the most needy and most vulnerable? Why are blood relations so special?

At some level, it is an inarticulable truth.

But if I had to put it into words, I would say that at a basic level it is simply about the fact that if we truly care about taking care of everyone, we must start with those closest to us. If everyone did that, a lot more of the world would be safe.

And at a fundamental level, we can only become ourselves when we make room for our homes, our families.

IV.

I believe the challenge of being truly there for family is one of life's biggest challenges – a worthy topic for our self-reflection on Yom Kippur.

But – even more – the centrality of family is actually tied to the most basic definition of teshuvah, what today is all about.

This is the extraordinary teaching of Rav Soloveitchik in his essays on teshuvah when he points out that the only place where a personal תשובה, using the word תשובה, appears in the whole Tanakh is with the prophet Shmuel, the prayed for lad of our Rosh Hashanah haftorah just a week ago.

Now we meet him as an adult, and the beloved judge of Israel, as we are told of his annual circuit:

(טז) וְהָלַךְ מִדֵּי שָׁנָה בְּשָׁנָה נֹסֵב בְּבֵית אֵל וְהִגְלָל וְהִמְצִיחַ וְשָׁפֵט אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת כָּל הַמְּקוֹמוֹת הָאֵלֶּה: (יז)
וּתְשֻׁבָתוֹ הִרְמִתָּה כִּי שָׁם בֵּיתוֹ וְשָׁם שָׁפֵט אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּבֶן שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה: (שמואל א פרק ז)

16 He would go annually in a circuit from Beth El to Gilgal to Mitzpah and judge Israel in all of these places. 17 but then he came back – תשובה – to Ramah, בית שם – כי שם ביתו – for there was his home. There he judged Israel and there he built an altar to God. (I Samuel Chapter 7)

Shmuel hardly knew his home! By the time he was weaned he was sent up to the Tabernacle in Shiloh never to come home again! But family is family, and a בית is a בית. It is at the core of our being.

The Rav writes:

"Samuel served as leader and judge in many different places, but the force of his leadership and judgment stemmed from Ramah, from his home... No matter how great a person may be, one cannot leave one's ancestral home..."

This is the secret of teshuvah, of repentance... [We are always] on the path to return and repentance... the circle may be very large, it may have an immense radius,... but ultimately... wherever we are going, we have to be going home. Teshuvah is about returning home, to our Bayit.

(Excerpts of Peli's translation, "On Repentance", pp. 89-91)

Where am I on that circle? Am I close to home or far from home?

Is my home in one place? Who is the family I am close to? Who is the family I am distant from that I need to return to?

Of course, the בית המקדש is also called a בית. And we must feel at home – and deeply connected to our workplaces. And in the Yom Kippur liturgy, as in many other places, the Jewish people is called בית ישראל – the House of Israel. And we must feel a special familial kinship with our Jewish brothers and sisters everywhere.

And indeed this is our Bayit, and it is our prayer that it is an inner house, a true family, and may we grow closer together and more responsible for one another in the coming year.

But as we relive, and join, the Yom Kippur Mussaf service in the coming hours, let us be aware that the Kohen, even as he was separated from his family to serve on behalf of the nation, his service began with atoning for his family. Family first.

And it culminated with the nation, for whose sake he left his home, dancing him back to his ultimate destination, his family, to be a husband and father and son and brother and cousin.

And let us feel challenged to recognize that everything begins with being present for, and caring for, our families. The easy ones and the hard ones. The easy parts and the hard parts. The easy times and the hard times.

As we strive to climb the heights of teshuvah, let us remember that we are actually traveling in a circle, and returning means returning home. If we have not done teshuvah at home, then we have not even begun.

And as we approach Yizkor, let us invoke the memory of those who founded our homes, who laid the groundwork for who we are and can be, who taught us that family was first, and gave us the grounding and confidence to journey out into the world, and in whose merit and honor we must always return home.

ותשובתו הרמתה כי שם ביתו – “his teshuvah, his return, was to Ramah – for his home was there”. May our teshuvah today, this Yom Kippur, in the model of the Kohen Gadol, in the model of Shmuel our great leader-

May our teshuvah bring us home.