

Parashat Shemini 5772 – Interpret, You Shall Interpret

Rabbi Michael Safra

Shabbat shalom. I want to invite you to open your *humashim* to p. 635.

Most rabbis don't particularly love putting together sermons for these early *parashiyyot* in Leviticus. There are a lot of details about the sacrifices that most of us don't understand very well. The parts that we do understand from Parashat Shemini include an explication of the laws of Kashrut – everybody's favorite commandment – and the narrative about Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu who offer a strange fire in the newly-consecrated Tabernacle and are killed instantaneously. Not the easiest passage to explain.

So with an introduction like that, who's ready to listen to what I have to say?!?

I want to look at a short episode of 5 verses, beginning with verse 16 on the bottom of p. 635:

Then Moses insistently inquired, **דרש דרש משה**, about the goat of sin offering, and it had already been burned! He was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's remaining sons, and said, "Why did you not eat the sin offering in the sacred area? For it is most holy, and He has given it to you to remove the guilt of the community and to make expiation for them before the LORD. Since its blood was not brought inside the sanctuary, you should certainly have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded."

So Moses, the political leader of the people, has a disagreement with Aaron, the High Priest and religious leader; and he takes it out on Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu. The normal procedure for a sin offering is that the priests were supposed to eat it – modern scholars think it has something to do with the animal absorbing the sins and impurities of the people, and then those sins being obliterated when the priests consume the animal in a state of purity. But instead of eating this sin offering, the priests burnt it entirely. And Moses is angry.

Look back at verse 10 for a moment and notice the small note in Hebrew just below the text: "חצי התורה בתיבות", במסורה מסומנת, the Massorah – the 9th century apparatus that painstakingly

preserves every detail of the scriptural text – notes that these words “דרש דרש, Moses Inquired” (or more literally “he surely interpreted”) these words represent the exact midpoint of the Torah.

(A quick note to anyone trying to read the rest of that note in Hebrew. The editors of Etz Hayyim add “ולא אמת היא”, it isn’t really true that this is the midpoint, which may be technically correct but it makes no difference because the point is that these words “דרש דרש, he surely interpreted” are tagged as the midpoint, and that is significant.)

Continuing with the Torah text:

And Aaron spoke to Moses, “See, this day they brought their sin offering and their burnt offering before the LORD, and such things have befallen me! Had I eaten sin offering today, would the LORD have approved?” וישמע משה וייטב בעיניו, And when Moses heard this, he approved.

In his most comprehensive commentary, Professor Jacob Milgrom offers several pages of explanation that are appropriate for another time. But I just want to notice that Aaron responds to Moses’s criticism and says, “I know that what I did was a different from the usual prescription for sin offerings, but I had a reason that had something to do with the fact that I just lost two children.” And when Moses heard this, he approved of the change.

What an amazing sequence! Moshe Rabeynu, Moses the Teacher, Moses the Law-giver gets into a *halakhic* argument with the priest; he says he did it wrong. And the priest disagrees. And the teacher relents, essentially admitting that interpretations evolve and even experts may not understand as well as they think.

And the whole sequence hinges on the words “*darosh darash* – Moses inquired.” Moses didn’t just rebuke; he wanted a better understanding. The 19th century Hassidic Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum comments that these words encompass the exact midpoint of Torah to teach an important lesson. With all that Moses already knew after learning the entire Torah – as it were – from the mouth of God Himself, he was still only half way there. To quote the Talmud, “שיחת תלמידי חכמים צריכה לימוד”, the deliberations of scholars require examination” because the true scholar understands that he hasn’t attained anything, he hasn’t mastered anything, as it all requires further examination.

Beware of the “expert” who claims to have figured it all out.

Recently someone sent me a sermon by Rabbi Mitchel Wohlberg of Beth Tefiloh Congregation in Baltimore – known to be a dramatic and thought-provoking speaker. Its theme is appropriate for this Shabbat before Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel Independence Day.

Having just returned from the AIPAC conference, he talked about the experience of hearing one expert speaker after another about how bombing Iran is a “no-brainer”. The threat from Iran is serious; and we’ve all seen the reports that a strike may indeed be coming. But Rabbi Wohlberg – known to be hawkish on Israel – warned against following anyone who thinks the solution is obvious or easy.

He quoted an article from Assistant Secretary of State and President Emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, Leslie Gelb, in which Mr. Gelb revealed what he called “the deepest, darkest secret of the foreign policy class. Even though we sound like we know everything ... we know very little.” They are interpreting unknown variables just like everyone else.

Many of Israel’s strongest supporters have tried to make it sound like a military strike would be easy or have resigned themselves to a belief that it is inevitable. But at the same time, other leaders – the previous head of the Mossad, Meir Dagan; the previous head of Shin Bet, Yuval Diskin, the previous Chief of Staff of the IDF, Gabi Ashkenazi; and, according to a recent poll, 58% of the Israeli public have spoken out against a strike. Beware of simple solutions to difficult, complicated problems. And don’t fall into the trap of assuming that one group of experts loves Israel more than the other. **דרש דרש**, Let us examine, let us interpret, let us have faith in our friends and allies so that if a strike does become inevitable we will know that all avenues were explored, all options were exhausted, all strategies have been examined and this is the best choice left.

The challenge of **דרש דרש**, Moses’s experience of examining an issue and discovering that perhaps he was wrong, applies in religious spheres as well.

On Thursday I had a parking lot conversation with a student leaving the Context class – an intensive adult education class that is focusing on the Talmud and the interpretive methods of the ancient rabbis. She was very upset because she walked away with this feeling that the Rabbis were playing hard and loose with the text in order to make it say what they wanted to say. And to a certain extent she was right, except for 2 caveats:

1. The Rabbis didn’t invent anything. They weren’t sitting around a table making up new rituals, even if they were actively interpreting text to make it fit rituals they knew; and
2. There is no such thing as a text free of interpretation. Anyone who claims they have the true meaning of scripture – like the Karaites of the 9th century – is really just substituting their interpretation for that of the Rabbis. The Rabbis played with the text, to be sure; but it is impossible to have an interpretation-free approach to a living document.

דרש דרש, You shall surely interpret. This is the central feature of Torah.

Beware of anyone who claims to already understand. Beware of the fundamentalist who claims to *know* he is doing God's will because his teacher told him this is how it has to be. Beware of the one who wants to discount centuries of interpretation that came before us; and of the one who thinks we have no authority to interpret into the future. דרש דרש, Interpretation is the central feature of Torah and the *halakhic* process.

In Israel it seems that people are just coming to understand that there are different ways to interpret Torah. The ultra-Orthodox rabbis who control the religious institutions in Israel do not have all the right answers. Theirs is not the only authentic way to live Torah. And as they are becoming more and more restrictive in their understanding of the way things have to be – who can use a *mikveh*, who can perform a wedding, how many other rules you can force a restaurateur to follow before you grant that the food he is preparing is *koshe*, who can determine what being Jewish means – more and more Israelis are looking for other options. We have a responsibility to support pluralism in Israel. It is not just about Conservative rabbis having equal status. It is about דרש דרש, the centrality of interpretation, which necessarily implies a plurality of understandings. This is the essence of Torah.

Reasonable people will disagree about questions of peace and security, maintaining a just society, and how to interpret Torah or Jewish law; and the authenticity or validity of their interpretations is not only measured by whether we agree with them.

Let us learn from the humility of Moses and avoid quick solutions to difficult problems. Relish the process of argumentation and coming to understand the points of view of the other. And even after a decision is made, may we maintain the courage to accept that we may not always be right. Shabbat shalom.