

A Rebuilding Year

Emor 5781

I'd like to share with you a question I've been struggling with for a few days now. Certainly I have noticed it before, but it resonated with me more this year because of the difficult week we have experienced in our community. Two of our members were sitting shiva for loved ones, and our broader community was rocked by the sudden and tragic passing of baby Gavriel Simcha Epstein. So many of us came to cry with Kayla and Binyamin and their families- even people who do not know them or Rav Bentzi and Batya well. On Thursday, we marked the shloshim for David Abramson, of blessed memory, who was tragically taken from us too soon. With each experience, the mourners and their families told me the same thing: that the presence of community and the ability to mourn with them was a tremendous source of comfort, without which they would have experienced great difficulty.

At the beginning of this week's Torah reading, we are presented with the unique laws governing the conduct of the Kohen Gadol, who is elevated from among his brethren and bound by an extensive list of restrictions (Vayikra 21:10-13):

וְהַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל מֵאַחֵיו אֲשֶׁר-יִוָּצֵק עַל-רֹאשׁוֹ | שָׁמֹן הַמִּשְׁחָה וּמֵלֶא אֶת-יָדוֹ לְלִבָּשׁ אֶת-הַבְּגָדִים אֶת-רֹאשׁוֹ לֹא יִפְרֹעַ וּבְגָדָיו לֹא יִפְרָם:

The priest who is exalted above his fellows, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been ordained to wear the vestments, shall not bare his head or rend his vestments.

וְעַל כָּל־נִפְשׁוֹת מֵת לֹא יֵבֵא לְאַבְיוֹ וּלְאִמּוֹ לֹא יִטְמָא:

He shall not go in where there is any dead body; he shall not defile himself even for his father or mother.

וּמִן־הַמִּקְדָּשׁ לֹא יֵצֵא וְלֹא יַחַלֵּל אֶת מִקְדָּשׁ אֱלֹהָיו כִּי יָגֵר שָׂמוֹן מִשְׁחַת אֱלֹהָיו עָלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה:

He shall not go outside the sanctuary and profane the sanctuary of his God, for upon him is the distinction of the anointing oil of his God, Mine the LORD's.

A regular Kohein is obligated to become ritually impure for his immediate relatives, such as his parents. He is not allowed to serve in the Beit HaMikdash in a state of mourning, and while his dating pool is somewhat limited, he is permitted to marry a widow. The Kohein Gadol, on the other hand, is prohibited from leaving the Beit Hamikdash even to follow the funeral procession for his parents- let alone becoming impure for them. He is obligated to serve when he is an *onein*, between the death and the burial of a loved one, and he is prohibited from marrying a widow. Of course, he is prohibited from engaging in any displays of mourning.

So this is the question I've been struggling with: If the ability to mourn is a source of comfort, and the presence of community a source of strength, why is the Kohen Gadol denied it? Surely he is a human being too, one who feels loss acutely? Shouldn't he be offered the opportunity to to mourn like anyone else?

In pondering this question, I thought of three possibilities:

1. Duty Calls

The first possibility is, simply, that the Kohen Gadol must be above a regular human being's need to mourn. As Rav Ovadia Sforno explains, the Kohen Gadol must recognize that the position he has been privileged to occupy obligates him to place the sanctity of the Mikdash even above the honor accorded to a deceased person, even if that person is his parent. The show must go on, and as the custodian and embodiment of Jewish holiness, the Kohen Gadol must do his job, regardless of whether it is convenient or comforting.

This explanation is unsettling, but still instructive. Our lives are so full of professional, personal, financial and familial obligations that we turn to our religious lives for comfort; when it imposes demands upon us and requires prioritization, we recoil. The life of the Kohen Gadol teaches us that the obligations of a religious life may rankle, may seem counterintuitive and perhaps even unfair or cruel- but they are obligations nonetheless. It is a challenge to think of our religious lives in this way, but a religion that places no demands on

its adherents is no religion, and has no meaning or purpose. It should be no surprise that, while I agree with this explanation, it left me cold. The life of the Kohen Gadol is so lonely and circumscribed; is he really expected to deny every human emotion in the service of a higher ideal? If so, what can we even learn from him and his life?

2. He Doesn't Need It

A second answer occurred to me after looking in the commentary of the great kabbalist Rav Moshe Alshich, student of the Arizal in Tzefat. Remarking on these few verses, the Alshich points out that the Kohen Gadol lived a life marked by loneliness, to be sure- but especially by tenuousness. Elevated from among his brethren for his wealth, wisdom and work, he was constantly mindful that his lofty status could be revoked at any moment. Should he experience a blemish of any kind, he would have to suspend his work temporarily at best, and possibly permanently. Every year, on Yom Kippur, he would enter the Holy of Holies and perform a day-long ritual of extreme complexity with the highest of stakes; failure to perform even one procedure properly and in the correct order would result in instantaneous death. We engage in displays of grief and mourning at the passing of a loved one, because these rituals help us confront the fragility of life, the loneliness of loss and the inevitability of our mortality. Yet the tenuous, lonely and circumscribed life of the Kohen Gadol makes him

intimately aware of all of these realities. The Kohen Gadol does not mourn a loved one; confronted with his mortality at all times, *he doesn't need to*.

This explanation, too, left me wanting. After all, even those who deal with loss and change regularly are not exempt from mourning when suffering a bereavement! Why should the Kohen Gadol?

3. Service=Comfort

Permit me, therefore, to offer one final suggestion. In order to understand the rules restricting the mourning of the Kohen Gadol, we need to understand who he is- and who made him that way. In the times of the Beit Hamikdash, young Kohanim were reared in special areas totally separated from even the slightest possibility of ritual impurity. The investment of time and effort on the part of a Kohen's parents in his spiritual success and ascent was indescribable. The Mishnah in masechet Makkot describes how the Kohen Gadol's mother would bake cookies and send care packages to people in cities of refuge, who would earn their freedom upon the Kohen Gadol's passing. Mrs. Cohen's judiciously timed and generously laden care packages could, perhaps, sway those confined to these cities **not** to pray for the death of her son. When these parents are so thoroughly devoted to their son and so proud of what he does and represents, the best way for the Kohen Gadol to mourn their loss is to do his job; continuing to serve the people in his lofty capacity would surely provide the Kohen Gadol with a measure of comfort, as he knows that that is exactly what his loved

ones would want of him. It is in service, in the continuation of holiness and enhancement of spirituality, that true comfort is to be found. In truth, this is the message of Lag Ba'Omer, that we celebrated yesterday. When we think about this day, we think about the conclusion of the plague that decimated the ranks of Rabbi Akiva's students, who were unable to treat one another with respect. But it's the second half of the story that is less remarked upon- and equally instructive. After Rabbi Akiva lost all his students, he traveled to the south of Israel and started another yeshiva- this time, a smaller one, with only five students: Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Eleazar ben Shammua, Rabbi Yose ben Chalafta and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai- the other central figure in the Lag BaOmer narrative. In the aftermath of an unspeakable tragedy that decimated his Yeshiva and killed his students, Rabbi Akiva found comfort in rebuilding both. It is Rabbi Akiva's model that has inspired so many great Jewish leaders throughout history. This past Thursday, the 32nd day of the Omer, was the anniversary of the liberation of the Klausenberger Rebbe, Rav Yekusiel Yehuda Halberstam zt"l, from Dachau. The Rebbe had lost everything in the Holocaust. His wife, 11 children and all his chassidim were murdered, but the Rebbe never gave himself time to grieve. He became the unofficial Rabbi of the DP camps in Feldafing and Föhrenwald, and immediately began the task of rehabilitating survivors and rebuilding his community, creating schools for hundreds of orphan girls, finding them matches and officiating at their weddings. The historian Yehuda Geberer once spoke to someone who was a Yeshiva student in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath in the late 1940s, after the Rebbe settled in Williamsburg, who related a remarkable story. He had been sent by his parents from Seattle to Torah Vodaath, and was among a select group of yeshiva boys who were called in and asked by one of the Rabbis if

they could do him a favor. A newly-arrived Chassidic Rabbi named Rabbi Halberstam was holding his first “tish” in the United States. The Rabbis were fairly certain that it would be poorly attended, and wanted to show this Chassidic Rabbi some respect, so they asked these boys to attend. They went- and were the only ones there. But that Rebbe spoke as if the room was packed, and he outlined his vision. He would establish a community in the United States, including Yeshivos and girls schools. He would then establish a community in Israel, to recreate the glory of Sanz. He would establish a hospital that ran according to Jewish Law, and that treated all life as sacred- the only way to counteract the evil that the Nazis perpetrated with their dehumanization. He would establish learning programs to make sure as many people as possible mastered the entire Talmud. And he himself would remarry and build his family anew. As he was speaking, these boys were convinced that his words were the ravings of a madman, whose mind was ravaged by the traumas of the Holocaust. But ***every single thing the Rebbe envisioned actually happened-*** in Williamsburg, Boro Park and Union City, New Jersey, through the establishment of Kiryat Sanz in Netanya and Laniado Hospital, and the creation of Mifal Hashas, a comprehensive learning program exactly as he described- and through the seven children he and his wife were blessed with. Might it have been healthier to allow himself time to confront his loss? Maybe, but for the Rebbe, the ultimate comfort was continuing the work he had begun.

There are no words to describe the magnitude of the loss of a loved one- especially under tragic circumstances. But while we have no vocabulary, we have an instruction manual. When the loss seems overwhelming, we look to the unique protocols of the Kohen Gadol,

instructing him to channel his loss into getting up the next morning, lighting the lamps and continuing the essential work he does, and that sustains all of us. May we know from no more sorrow, and may we continue to good work, in the happiest of circumstances.