

פרשת אמור תש"ד Finding Meaning Through Sacrifice

This week only served to remind us of the gruesome roller coaster ride that is מדינת ישראל. On one hand, we witnessed a stunning victory for the communities of יהודה שומרון ועזה. Through steady public pressure, intense positive campaigning and a dedicated passion for ישראל, a tiny percentage of the Israeli population somehow convinced a large majority of Likud party members to vote against Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan. At the same time, on the very same day, they and we paid a heavy, heart-breaking price in the gruesome, grotesque murders of the Hatuel family, first shot off the road from afar, and then, systematically gunned down at point blank range. The Jewish people this week mourn the deaths of the pregnant Tali Hatuel, age 34, Hila, 11, Hadar 9, Roni 7 and Meirav 2. I found it painful to even look at their pictures, to imagine those horrible moments of terror in the hearts of those precious, beautiful children.

But this is not the first time we've seen these types of pictures. Just last week we watched the heart-wrenching story of the הר-מלך family. In a terrible instant, a terrorist with a Kalashnikov tore a family apart forever. We can't see an end, and we can't see a solution. So we wonder: is it really a good thing that the religious Zionist camp won that vote this week? Would it not have been better if they didn't live in the heart of Gaza with their families and small children; and we – the Jewish people wouldn't suffer such terrible, painful, sickening losses? And, seeing the painful price, we here in America wonder about one more thing. We wonder how families can live together their children in such dangerous places, exposing themselves, their families and their children to such overt, terrifying danger.

When an individual poses asks a question, there are two ways to answer that question. I can acknowledge the question, agreeing with the premise of the question, and present an answer. Or, I can suggest that the entire question is based on a mistaken premise – a misconception and misunderstanding. In this way, the question never gets off the ground. What about our question – our inability to understand the life choices the Jews in יהודה שומרון ועזה make? Are we posing important, legitimate questions that demand answers? Or, perhaps the shortcoming lies not in them, but in us. Perhaps our inability to understand their lives demands not answers to our questions, but a reevaluation of ourselves; of our values; of we who ask the questions in the first place.

Usually, when I get my lunch ready, I have the radio on in the background. When I do mindless tasks like washing the dishes or making tuna fish, I like to feel like I'm doing something productive. For some reason on Thursday I had no patience for Rush Limbaugh, so I decided to listen to the Parshah Shiur of Rav Moti Alon from Israel this week. I want to share with you just a small piece of the Torah he taught, because it carries a critical message for us as we try to comprehend the terrible events of this past week.

One of the fundamental mitzvos that the Torah commands us in this week's פרשה is the mitzvah of קידוש ה'. At the very end of a long laundry list of commandments for the כהנים, the Torah turns to the rest of the Jewish people.

וּשְׁמֵרְתֶם, מִצְוֹתַי, וְעֲשִׂיתֶם, אֹתָם: אֲנִי, יְהוָה. לֹב וְלֹא אֶתְחַלְלוּ, אֶת-שֵׁם קֹדְשִׁי, וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי, בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: אֲנִי יְהוָה, מִקְדָּשְׁכֶם. הַמוֹצֵיא אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, לְהֵיוֹת לְכֶם לְאֵל הַיָּם: אֲנִי, יְהוָה.

And you shall keep My commandments, and do them: I am HaShem. And you shall not profane My holy name; but I will be hallowed among the children of Israel: I am HaShem who hallow you that brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your G-d: I am HaShem.

Rashi wonders: what does the Torah teach us by telling us וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי – “and I will be hallowed?” How does God want us to bring about His sanctity in the world? Listen to Rashi's frightening answer: מסור עצמך וקדש שמי – “give yourself over [to be killed] and sanctify My name. You might have thought that this refers only to the individual. Therefore, the Torah says – “among the Children of Israel.” And, Rashi adds, when a person gives himself over, ימסור את עצמו על מנת למות – he must give himself over in order to die. Don't expect any miracles.”

Rambam, who lists the mitzvos in order of importance, counts this mitzvah of קידוש ה' as the ninth mitzvah in the Torah – right before the mitzvah of קריאת שמע. We all said שמע this morning. Yet, according to Rambam, understanding this mitzvah of self-sacrifice and inculcating its value into our lives carries more weight than saying שמע every day. The Torah commands us to give our lives in death at the hands of our enemies for the love of God and for our faith in Him.

What about וחי בהם – “and you shall live by them?” Rav Alon notes that the Torah gives us the commandment of וחי בהם in the very specific context of the עריות. Before listing the various sexual relationships prohibited in the Torah, God tells us וחי בהם – “and you shall live by the words of Torah.” Yet, halachah teaches us that the Torah commands us to give up our lives for עריות – for specifically these mitzvoth. So why tell me וחי בהם in the context of mitzvos that I have to die for? Says Rav Alon, וחי בהם is not an absolute. Rather, only a community that understands that there are red lines beyond which we cannot cross – even when the price is heavy and terribly painful – only that type of community can use the principal of וחי בהם. But in a community where the value of life supersedes all else, and has become the only and the greatest value, that community has robbed life of any greater meaning, and no longer has the right to utilize the principal of וחי בהם.

On the very next פסוק in our Parshah, God tells us that He is, הַמוֹצֵיא אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם – the God who took us out of the Land of Egypt. Rashi continues on his theme asking, “why did God take us out of Egypt?” – על מנת כן – in order that we give ourselves over to be killed. God redeemed us as a people so that we could give our lives for קידוש ה' – to sanctify God's name.

That's it? That's why God took us out of Egypt – so that we could be killed by the Romans and Greeks and Crusaders and Nazis and Palestinians? So we could be sanctify God's name by dying in Mainz and Treblinka and in the junction in the Gaza Strip? In a very real way, the answer is yes.

Jewish life only carries value when it represents something that you're willing to give your life for. In a very real way, God wants us to understand that Judaism is a matter of life and death. Of course God wants us to live. Of course He wants us to learn and keep and promote the Torah. But when push comes to shove, would we risk our lives for God? Would we give our lives for the Jewish people? Because that's the level of commitment that God demands from us, His people. And that depth of commitment; that self-sacrifice is an ethic that we here in America simply do not understand. We, born into a culture of self-fulfillment, self-indulgence, and self-worship, have integrated these values into our collective personalities. We, who grew up more closely aligned to the credo of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” than to ושמרתם את מצוותי – really do not understand the self-sacrifice of בני ישראל בתוך בני ישראל. So we wonder and ask, “Is it really worth it? Do they really need to be there?”

But, instead of wondering about them, we really need to ask ourselves, “What's wrong with us?” Even if we're not there now; even if we ourselves don't take the risks; why don't we appreciate the value of מסירות נפש – to be willing to give ourselves to something greater than our own personal fulfillment and happiness? Do we really want our children to think that there's nothing worth sacrificing ourselves for? Do we really want them to think that there's nothing worth dying for?

Martin Luther King once said, “A man who won't die for something is not fit to live.” What made him, and the people living in Yesha understand an ideology we cannot? We must begin to live our lives and teach our children the understanding that there is a line beyond which we do not cross. We must understand that the Torah demands that we live our lives for something greater than ourselves, and our needs, and our wants. We must appreciate the bravery, courage, dedication – the מסירות נפש of the men and women and children who really do understand that כלל ישראל is greater than any one of them. We must support them personally, emotionally and financially. And we must continue to pray on their behalf so that their willingness to give of themselves on our behalf remains just that – a willingness that with God's help and watchful eye never again becomes a reality.