

SHEMINI (LEVITICUS 9:1-11:47)

Aaron's Students

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Some Mitzvahs are easy to fulfill. Some take a little more work. It is easy to be happy on Purim. A little wine, a little singing, and you are well on your way to enjoying an uplifting experience. Sitting with one's family at the Seder, discussing words of Torah and celebrating our freedom, it is easy to fulfill the Torah's Commandment of "... *You must rejoice on your Holiday...*" (Deuteronomy, 16:14) There is a Mitzvah to help a bride and groom celebrate. It's easy to be happy when you are happy. Even some unhappy Mitzvahs are relatively easy. We are required to mourn the destruction of the Temple on Tisha B'Av, As well, we are supposed to focus on all of the holocausts our People have endured from time immemorial. When we think about all the misfortunes our nation has endured, it is "easy" to be sad. When a loved one passes away, there is a Mitzvah to mourn. It is "easy" to be sad, when you are sad. The hard part is when G-d expects us to be happy when we are inclined to be sad, and to be sad when we are inclined to be happy. ----- It should have been the happiest day of Aaron's life. But that's now how it worked out. Aaron and his four sons were designated to be the Kohanim-Priests of Israel. They were given specific instructions as to how to conduct the Temple Service. Unfortunately, two of the sons, Nadav and Avihu, had some original ideas of their own: *Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, placed fire on it, and placed incense on it. They offered an unauthorized fire before G-d, that He had not commanded them to offer. Fire came forth from G-d and burnt them, so that they died before G-d.* (Leviticus, 10:1-2) Now, instead of celebrating the elevated status of his four sons, he was about to begin mourning for two of them. But that, too, was not to be: *Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Elazar and Ithamar, "Do not allow your hair to grow and do not tear your clothes* (both traditional expressions of mourning) ... *Do not leave the entrance to the Tabernacle... for the oil of G-d's anointment is upon you;" and they carried out Moses' bidding.* (Ibid, verses 6-7) Aaron's heart told him to cry, but his obligation told him to continue to conduct the Temple Service. Aaron, an uncompromisingly faithful servant of G-d, accepted G-d's Divine Judgment and went about his Mitzvah business. That's what the Torah sometimes requires us to do. But nobody said it's easy. Aaron's devotion to G-d was almost superhuman. But we are not Aaron. I remember attending the funeral of a very dear friend that took place on a Friday afternoon. As a non-relative, I had no Mitzvah to express mourning, but that didn't take away the pain. Even had I been a mourner, the advent of the Sabbath would have interrupted the Shivah period. That, too, didn't take away the pain. I wish I had had the strength to do otherwise, but that Friday night I cried into my chicken soup. -----

----- When the calendar doesn't "get in the way," the Jewish system

of mourning works pretty efficiently. Immediately upon the death of a loved one, the relative is exempt from all positive Commandments. (The “Thou shalt”, as opposed to the “Thou shalt not” that still apply.) He doesn’t pray, recite blessings before he eats, or study Torah. He is busy with funeral arrangements, plus the fact that he is caught up in the intense grief of the moment. In fact, one is not supposed to try to console a mourner before the funeral. The pain is too great; it won’t work. During the seven-day Shivah period, friends come to visit and offer their good wishes. The family are given time to absorb what has happened before they re-enter their day-to-day lives. There is a thirty-day period of less intense mourning, and finally, for departed parents, a twelve-month period of still less intense mourning. Sometimes the system is “short-circuited.” Major holidays bring about the early conclusion of mourning periods. The Mitzvah of “...*You must rejoice on your Holiday...*” requires that mourning be curtailed. If someone dies during Passover or Sukkos, the funeral, of course, takes place as soon as possible, but Shivah doesn’t begin until after the holiday. If Shivah has already begun before the holiday, the holiday ends it. -----

Sam was a man who placed great emphasis on helping others. He was active in many projects on behalf of the Jewish community. Sam was the type of person who could be described as fulfilling Hillel’s advice in the Talmud to “... be one of Aaron’s students; loving peace, pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them to Torah.” Among his favorite Mitzvahs was arranging various religious services at his neighborhood nursing home. Sam spoke to a friend of mine several days before Passover. This friend, who lives in the nursing home, is confined to a wheel chair. He had recently returned from surgery in the hospital and was busy getting his room ready for Passover. Sam told him that he would provide him with Matzahs for Passover. (Lest you make the mistake of assuming that providing Matzah is not a big deal, it is important to remember that there is Matzah and there is Matzah. Many people eat only hand-made Shmura Matzah that is produced under the strict supervision of someone whom they personally know and trust. Sam assured the young man that he would take care of the fellow’s Matzah needs.) Sam never had the chance to make good on his promise. Around 8:30 on Monday morning, the Eve of Passover, Sam commented to someone in the synagogue that he wasn’t feeling well. He went out to his car and collapsed in the driver’s seat. By the time someone came to speak to him in his car, he was dying. Sam’s funeral was scheduled immediately. The family returned from the cemetery about 15 minutes before midday. The festive status of the Eve of Passover begins at midday. The rabbi made it clear that they were not to sit Shivah after midday. (Midday, in religious legal terms, is defined as halfway between sunrise and sunset; this time of year, that’s about 1:00 p.m.) That was it -- 15 minutes of Shivah. They had to remove their torn garments, put on their shoes, and prepare for the holiday! How painful! How would they manage? How would they get through it? That night was the Seder! How would they sit at a Seder without their beloved husband and father while the grief from his sudden death was so fresh and so raw? How could they fulfill the Mitzvah of “...*You must rejoice on your Holiday...*” in the face of such pain? -----

----- At around 3 p.m. Monday afternoon, two hours after Sam’s funeral, my friend had a guest. It was Sam’s son. “Here,” he said. “My father wanted you to

have these Matzahs.” Aaron’s heart told him to cry, but his obligation told him to continue to conduct the Temple Service. Sam’s son’s heart, I am sure, told him to cry, but his obligation told him to carry out his father’s good deeds. It is easy to be happy when you are happy, but it is agonizingly difficult to be happy when you are sad. Aaron’s devotion to G-d was almost superhuman. No, we are not Aaron. But some of us, like Sam and his son, are his students! Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

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