



**RABBI AARON**

Editor, Torah Tidbits

**GOLDSCHIEDER**

# Sustaining Faith

**T**umat Kohanim. It is among the most enigmatic laws in the Torah. We are familiar with this practice today: A *kohen* stands outside the funeral home or does not enter a cemetery for a burial, other than for his closest of kin. Why is a *kohen* restricted from coming in contact with a dead body?

Torah commentators attempt to offer an explanation. Many propose that the spiritual purity implanted in the *kohen* must not be contaminated by the defilement of death. However, such esoteric explanations are difficult to grasp.

The famed Rebbe of Ishbitz, Rabbi Yosef Mordechi Leiner zt"l (1800-1854) in his stunning work, *Mei Hashiloach*, endeavours to unpack the mystery and find relevance for us in our own lives. (ספר מי השלוח, חלק א, פשרת אמר, ד"ה אמר אל כהנים)

The parsha opens with Aharon the High Priest confronting death. Death is one of life's most devastating and jarring events. Contact with death can cause a crisis of faith. Even believers may

despair of the meaning of their existence. Doubt creeps in concerning the truth of a benevolent God.

The Torah is exceedingly concerned that the pure faith of the *kohanim* remain safeguarded.

**While the positive aspects of God's providence may not be evident, one can never lose faith**

Indeed, it is they who exemplify the backbone of *emunah*. The *kohen* represents the bedrock of belief in the Almighty. It is they who assure the people of Israel that God is behind everything that happens and that nothing in life happens by chance. Every detail of one's life is directed by God.

However, there is a paradoxical danger in such a worldview which can even lead to a decline in faith. One who possesses strong belief may ask, "How can one have faith in a God who is responsible for incomprehensible suffering?" For this reason God addressed the *kohanim*: Do not become 'defiled' by being in the presence of



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death. 'Defilement' in this case also alludes to the notion that one's faith not become weakened, or even lost, when questioning God's actions.

"מזהיר הקב"ה לכהנים היינו לעובדי ה', לנפש לא יטמא בעמיו, היינו שלא יהיה להם תרעומות על מדות דינו של הקב"ה" (מי השלוח פרשת אמר)

The *kohanim*, the repository of faith and the teachers par excellence of the nation must limit first hand engagement with death which can result in having a grievance with God, says the *Ishbitzer Rebbe*. Certainly they must interact directly with death when attending to the death of their closest family members, however, apparently the Torah is concerned that they not be overwhelmed with the sadness or anger that such traumatic encounters evoke.

How does one avoid feelings of despair in the face of darkness and pain? There is no simple answer. The Rebbe of *Ishbitz* himself acknowledges that in times of crises, and in particular when confronting death, a heavy strain is placed on one's heart and soul. At such times we strive to somehow hold strong to *bitachon*; trust in God.

Reb Shlomo Carlebach (1925-1994) was enamored with the intriguing thought of the Rebbe of *Ishbitz*. He taught this piece from the *Mei Halshiloach* in this way: "When you see a corpse, you can't help but be angry with God. 'Why did He have to make it that way? That that's the door you have to go through? It's terrible.' Now the *kohen* is supposed to be the gentle teacher of the people, so if he is

angry with God, he'll have a real bad time talking about God because what will show will be his anger. Reb Shlomo the added this: "Ever since the Holocaust we are all like priests who have become contaminated by death. It's hard for people who are looking for a loving, living God to find him among the angry voices." ('The Jew and the Lotus', Rodger Kamanetz, p.157).

Reb Shlomo, who lived in the post Holocaust years, was commenting on the spiritual challenge that young people were facing raised by their elders who had witnessed first hand the atrocities and mass murder of Jews.

The *Ishbitzer's* opening teaching on *Parshat Emor* acknowledges the emotional pain we suffer at the death of a loved one, as well as the spiritual malaise it wreaks on our fragile souls. Trust in God and feeling His closeness which once came easily are suddenly impaired.

The Rebbe of *Ishbitz* adds a critical addendum to this delicate discussion. He quotes a striking comment made in the *Zohar* (*Vayikra 88b*): This law of the *kohanim* is presented using two words *Emor* and *ve'amarta*. Employing a double language suggests that this was spoken to the *kohanim* in "a whisper." (This is based on the fact that the word '*amar*' in contrast to '*daber*', is a softer language; and the repetition here, therefore, connotes 'a whisper'). Even in the midst of the harshet 'evil', God's faithful must hear a whisper, reminding

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them that while the positive aspects of God's providence may not be evident, one can never lose faith.

It is fascinating to examine the Rebbe's teaching through the prism of two distinct daily prayers.

What themes are embedded in the central prayer of the *Amidah*? The primary prayer begins with the blessing of the Patriarchs who initiated the three *tefilot*. The next blessing, known as '*gevurot*', takes us to the end of history and the culmination of the destiny of man. At that time, the Resurrection of the Dead will occur, demonstrating the enormity of God's might, His *gevura*, and his total mastery over every detail of creation. Remarkably, we find in that single paragraph the term *techiyat hameitim*, resurrection, repeated five times.

During prayer, when we stand in the presence of God we find ourselves face to face with our own faith. We affirm the capability of God to resurrect the dead. This statement is meant to infuse the worshipper with faith and conviction. The specter of death is terrifying. Each day these words come to assuage us and to bolster belief, 'a whisper' from the Almighty, so to speak. We must stretch our ears to hear the message from above.

Following the opening three paragraphs of the *Amidah* the *kedusha* is recited. These holy words can only be recited only with a *minyan* present. At this time we sanctify God publicly.

Clearly this passage contains lofty concepts.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt"l addressed the deeper meaning contained in the *kedusha* prayer.

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## There is a challenge to embrace God from the perspective of adversity, at times of tragedy

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The daily *kedusha* draws from the words of different prophets. It opens with the words of Isaiah who saw the Master of the Universe in the Temple when the *kohanim* performed the service and the *levi'im* sang their song. It was a time of blessing and success. Everyone could see the resting of the Divine Presence, *Hashra'at HaShechina*, and angels calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy...the whole world is filled with His glory" "קדוש קדוש קדוש... מלא כל הארץ כבודו" (Isaiah 6:3). Ezekiel's prophecy, on the other hand, was a time of *hester panim*, hiding of the divine face. The word of God came to Ezekiel not in Israel, but in exile; he was in mourning, he was a prisoner of war. Standing on the banks of the river Chebar (Kevar), he saw a fierce wind come from the north, a great cloud, and a blazing fire, instead of *kohanim* and *levi'im*, he beheld war and destruction. He does not declare that "the whole world is filled with his glory," that every detail bears witness

to the Holy One. Rather, God is hidden. Ezekiel hears a voice of a great rushing say: “Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place” (Ezekiel 3:12).

”ברוך כבוד ה' ממקומו”

Sometimes we experience the Holy One present and perceptible in this world. At other times, we must search for him at great length. There are times when the Divine Presence is not evident. At such times we say, ‘His glory is blessed from *His* place’, wherever it may be. (‘The Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur’, p.125-127)

The *Kedusha* concludes with the words: *Yimloch Hashem Le’olam...* “The Lord will reign forever. He is your God, Zion, from generation to generation, Halleluyah.” This concluding verse, a verse from Psalms, perhaps, is illustrative of the whisper from heaven that the Rebbe cites. A call to affirm God’s goodness and truth, even when hidden from our view.

It is much easier to feel God’s immanence on a miraculous occasion or happy event. King David expressed this joyful sentiment when he said: “To tell of your loving-kindness in the morning.” He identified the dawn or morning with the times in life when we easily feel Divine providence. But there is a challenge to embrace God from the perspective of adversity, at times of tragedy. This experience is identified as ‘night’ or ‘darkness’, and “...Your faithfulness at night” (Psalm 92).

A Chassidic tale. One day, chassidim came to tell the great Rebbe Nachman of Breslov of new persecutions against Jews in the Ukraine. The Master listened and said nothing. Then they told him of pogroms in certain villages. Again, the Master listened and said nothing. Then they told of slaughtered families, of desecrated cemeteries, of children who were burned alive. The Master listened, listened and shook his head: “I know,” he whispered, “I know what you want me to do - you want me to shout with pain, to howl with despair, I know, I know...but, I will not, you hear me, I will not.” And, after a long silence, he began shouting louder and louder and louder : “*Gevalt Yiden, zeit sich nit mayaesht!*” Jews, for heaven’s sake,, do not despair...*Gevalt Yiden*, Jews, do not despair. (Elie Wiesel, “Against Despair”, *Louise A. Pincus Memorial Lecture*)

We begin each day with the blessing: “who gives strength to the weary.” Beyond the strict sense in which the blessing refers to rejuvenation from slumber, this blessing, according to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook zt”l, is a metaphor for all the times in life when we face obstacles and crises. At such moments says Rabbi Kook, by the love of God there appears a current of spiritual energy renewing us with strength and infusing us with power (‘The Koren Rav Kook Siddur’ p.45, *Olat Re’iyah* vol. 1, p. 75)

May we merit to know and to feel this blessing. ■