

Parashat Naso, 5772, 2012:

*How to Perform the Mitzvot*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlainmah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Our *parasha* is the source for one of the most dramatic and stirring acts in the entire

*Tefilah* (Prayer) experience: *Birkat Kohanim* (the Blessing of the Kohanim):

The L-rd spoke to Moses saying:

Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: This is how you shall bless the children of Israel, saying to them:

“May the L-rd bless you and watch over you.

May the L-rd cause His countenance to shine to you and favor you.

May the L-rd raise His countenance toward you and grant you peace.”

They shall bestow My Name upon the children of Israel, so that I will bless them.

(*Sefer Bamidbar* 6:22-27, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

*Chazal* (Our Sages of blessed memory) were sensitive to every nuance of language that appears throughout the *Tanach* (the Hebrew Canon of Scripture). The verse “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: This is how you shall bless the children of Israel, saying to them,” offers a telling example of our Sages insightful analysis of the phrase “saying to them” (“*amore lahem*”). They note that the word “*amore*” (“saying”) is spelled in its complete grammatical form (*maleh*, with the Hebrew letter “*vav*”), rather than in the more usual form (*chaser*, without the Hebrew letter “*vav*”). *Midrash Tanachuma* (Buber) *Parashat Naso* section 18 finds deep and abiding significance in this seemingly minor grammatical change:

[*Amore*] is spelled *maleh* in the phrase “*amore lahem*” (“speak to them,” i.e. to the *Kohanim*). The reason why you [the *Kohanim*] should bless the Jewish people is not merely because I [G-d] have told you to do so [as if this act was some kind of onerous chore.] Therefore, you should not bless them as if you were forced to do so (Hebrew-

Greek *b'angaria*) and in a rapid [unthinking and automatic] fashion. Instead, you [the *Kohanim*] should bless them [the Jewish people] with complete intention (*b'kavanat halev*) in order that the blessing should totally encompass them (*she'tishlot habrachah bahem*). This is why the Torah writes: “*amore lahem*” [in the *maleh* form].

Rashi (1040-1105), the Prince of Torah Commentators, summarized the above source in the following manner: “The word ‘*amore*’ is written in its full form [i.e., with a “*vav*”], indicating that they should not bless them hastily or in a hurried manner, but with concentration and with wholeheartedness.” (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

I believe that an essential aspect of our relationship with Hashem and His Torah, as well as with our fellow man, may be readily derived from the *Midrash*'s and Rashi's analysis of the phrase “*amore lahem*.” In addition, it appears to me that *Chazal*'s statement speaks to our ethical and moral behaviors in the broadest possible terms. Moreover, it seems to me that the deeply *kavanah*-filled manner in which the *Kohanim* are told to approach blessing the nation, serves as a “*binyan av*” (a “general rule”) for all of our mitzvot-based actions.

To illustrate the above idea, let us briefly focus on one of the most difficult to fulfill of all commandments, *kibud av v'ame* (honor your father and mother). The following well-known vignette depicts the true extent of this mitzvah's obligation:

R. Eliezer [himself] was asked: To what extent is honoring one's father and mother to be practiced? He answered: Go forth and see how a certain idolater of Ashkelon, Dama the son of Nathina by name, acted towards his father. He was once approached about selling precious stones for the ephod [one of the High Priest's unique garments]. at a profit of six hundred thousand [denarii] (R. Kahana's version is eight hundred thousand); but the keys were lying under his father's head-pillow, so he would not disturb him! ... In a subsequent year a 'red heifer' was born in his herd, and some of the Sages of Israel called on him. Said he to them: From what I know of you [I am aware] that if I were to demand of you all the money in the world, you would give it to me, but all I ask of you now is that money that I had lost because of my father! (*Talmud Bavli, Masechet Avodah Zarah*)

23b-24a, translation, *Soncino Talmud* with my emendations for readability. Compare the original source in *Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 31a* )

*Chazal*'s inclusion of this story in no less than two places in the Talmud speaks volumes. Just as we saw in the passage from the *Midrash Tanchuma*, our Sages were trying to teach us a *derech hachaim*, a pragmatic approach to fulfilling the Torah. Clearly, if the non-Jew, Dama the son of Nathina, who was not commanded to observe this precept, could act with such pure respect for his father, all the more so are we obligated to do so. Let us analyze exactly what Dama did. It is crucial to note that he did not get angry, frustrated or react in any negative way whatsoever – even though he potentially could have lost a major fortune. He was driven by the obligation of honoring his father; that was his prime imperative. He did not act as if this was a burden. Most importantly, this was not a dry formalistic obligation in his mind. Instead, his most heartfelt desire was to fulfill this responsibility in the most holistic possible sense - both in regard to its content and intent. He was successful and, therefore, achieved greatness. Then, too, since he conquered his passion for immediate financial gain, he was rewarded with the birth of a *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer) and the ability to sell it for the same price that he would have received for the precious stones for the ephod.

In reality, whether we are *Kohanim* about to publicly bless the Jewish people, or we are standing privately by our parent's bedside, the manner in which we are obligated to fulfill the mitzvot is the same. We must invest every mitzvah gesture with every fiber of our being. We must make certain that the action we are about to undertake represents the highest standards of which we are capable. We must strive to invest each commandment with the full potential inherent therein. As such, a mitzvah must never become a burden,

or something to be done “in a hurried manner.” Instead, as the Midrash and Rashi teach us, each mitzvah act should be viewed as a unique and meaningful opportunity to serve Hashem “with concentration and with wholeheartedness.” With G-d’s help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to achieve this level of Torah observance. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).

My audio *shiurim* on *Tefilah and Haskafah* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sp5vt3>

\*\*\* I have recently posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here:

<http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

\*\*Follow new postings on my Twitter accounts: @theRavZatzal and @Torahtech613.