

Toronto Torah

YU Torah MiTzion Beit Midrash Zichron Dov

Parshiyot Shemini/Parah

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לזכר ולעילוי נשמת אבינו מורינו ר' משה בן דוד שלמה ז"ל

Purifying the Impure?

Ezer Diana

In delineating the rules of purity and impurity, the Torah warns us very strongly to avoid defiling ourselves by eating or otherwise coming into contact with the carcasses of *sheratzim*, literally "creeping creatures" [singular: *sheretz*]. (Vayikra 11:29-38, 41-44) Not only that, but the *sheretz* gained special status as the paradigm of uncleanness in the Talmud (Taanit 16a):

"Rabbi Adda bar Ahavah said: A person who holds a sin in his hand, and confesses but does not repent for it, to what is he compared? To a person who holds a [dead] *sheretz* in his hand - even if he immerses in all the water in the world, his immersion will be ineffective."

This uniformly negative view of the *sheretz* makes a talmudic story very hard to understand. The Talmud tells us of a distinguished student who was able to come up with 150 reasons to "purify" the *sheretz*, and it even explains one of his reasons. (Eruvin 13b) Why is coming up with reasons to oppose the Torah's ruling seemingly a good thing? And there is a bigger issue still: another talmudic passage tells us anyone joining the Sanhedrin must be able to demonstrate that they, too, can find ground to purify the *sheretz*! (Sanhedrin 17a) What could possibly be the reason for this? The Torah explicitly prohibited the *sheretz*, so why would we want a student or judge to permit it?

1: The student may be right

According to Rabbeinu Tam (cited in Tosafot to Eruvin and Sanhedrin *ibid.*), the student and judge meant to prove only that a *sheretz* would not cause impurity if an olive-sized piece were transported, and this may have basis in traditional sources. The ability to permit a *sheretz* in this way simply indicates detailed knowledge and halachic acumen. However, other commentaries raise technical halachic questions against this approach, and reject it.

2: The skill may be useful

Rabbi Menachem Me'iri (Sanhedrin 17a) understands this as a more practical consideration. Under very extreme and nuanced circumstances, a Sanhedrin is permitted to change a law for a short period of time. In such a case, it may be helpful to provide some sort of support from the Torah. For that reason, this ability to show that something truly prohibited seems to be permitted may be useful. [See Me'iri there for further details on the parameters of this ruling.]

3: The student resists temptation

Rabbi Meir Abulafia (Yad Ramah to Sanhedrin *ibid.*) explains that the ability to find a creative way to purify the *sheretz* is not what is important. Rather, a Torah student who can explain why a *sheretz* should be considered ritually pure is now left with a choice: to follow their own reasoning, or follow the halachic process. The scholar who has the ability to not act on their own logic is one who is fitting to serve on the Sanhedrin.

Rabbi Abulafia's characterization of this person as one who is able to overcome a challenge can be further split into two tests: the logical, and emotional.

One test is to see a Torah ruling which seems illogical, even by the Torah's standards. Certain laws relating to purity and impurity may very well fall into this category! In fact, one of the more challenging details of ritual purity, which we read about in Parshat Parah this Shabbat, is that a person who purifies another becomes impure himself as the result of the process. Yet, despite not being able to understand counterintuitive rules such as these, a Sanhedrin must be able to rule according to the law, even if it doesn't make sense.

However, there is more than just logic in the way of rendering the correct decision. **A scholar who comes up with their own reason to permit something has somewhat of an emotional connection to the case, what we might consider a personal bias.** They put in hours of their time to study, and came up with their own personal novel approach, which they think they may even be able to justify within Torah. To vanquish that inner voice is something that is very hard to do, but required before one can issue a Torah-true ruling. This will help them also conquer outside biases, and follow the Torah mandate of being true, honest, unbiased judges.

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Summary

Following the “Shoftim Cycle”, after the death of Ehud, the Jews sin. As punishment, G-d gives them over to Yavin, King of Canaan, and his general, Sisera. When the Jews cry out to G-d, He sends them a prophetess, Devorah, who acts as a judge and/or advisor (see Tosafot, Niddah 50a s.v. *kol*). She enlists a man named Barak as a general, to draft an army from Naftali and Zevulun to challenge the Canaanites.

Barak insists that Devorah accompany him, which she reluctantly does, though warning him that due to his insistence that she come along, he will not be responsible for the central victory – rather, it will be a woman who will strike the decisive blow. Barak leads a successful battle which drives the Canaanites to flee. Sisera attempts to hide in the tent of Yael, the wife of Chever HaKeni, who had been allied with the Canaanites. Yael invites him in, offers him wine, and then, while he sleeps, drives a tent peg through his skull, fulfilling Devorah’s prediction.

Paying attention to biblical puns

Tanach clearly disapproves of Barak’s lack of willingness to fight without Devorah. While Devorah’s criticism states this explicitly, the narrative also provides a pointed wordplay to deepen the censure. Instead of using a common word to describe Sisera’s head when Yael kills him, it uses a less common word, writing that she drove the peg into his temple, **b’rakato**. This word, with different vowels, begins with the name of Barak, whose glory was stolen in that moment.

Subversive Sequels

Judy Klitsner wrote a fascinating book called *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other* (Maggid Books, 2011). Her central thesis is that Tanach contains multiple stories that complement each other through their seeming tension in order to provide more complex pictures of reality and theology. What is given in one text is often subverted in another to provide a more nuanced lesson.

One central example is the dialogue between Devorah and Barak. The assumption here is that men should be the heroes in military and quasi-military situations, and having a woman responsible for the victory is abnormal. Yet, Klitsner notes, when one places this story in conversation with *Megilat Esther*, a more complex vision emerges. While the Persian perspective is that women should be subservient to their husbands, the narrative itself tells a different story. Starting in the fourth chapter, Esther is the main force behind the plan to save the Jews, both commanding Mordechai and manipulating Achashverosh and Haman to achieve victory. And, unlike in the book of Shoftim, *Megilat Esther* does draw attention to this role reversal. Thus, Klitsner argues, a full picture of the roles of men and women in similar situations needs to take into account both biblical narratives, and create a holistic perspective.

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Law of the Land: Police Entering Dangerous Situations

Rabbi Elihu Abbe

May one risk one’s life to save another individual? May one risk one’s life to protect the public? If one’s profession involves protecting the public, is he governed by different guidelines than a private citizen? These are all very pertinent questions for the police force in the State of Israel.

Rabbi Asher Weiss, in his *Minchat Asher* responsa, addresses three possible scenarios involving saving an **individual** from harm (Vol. III, p. 412):

- The first scenario is where the rescuer will be placing himself into the same degree of danger as the potential victim. In such a case, most authorities forbid the rescuer from risking his life.
- The second scenario is where the rescuer faces a real danger, but not one that is equivalent to the danger facing the potential victim. It is considered praiseworthy, but not obligatory, to endanger oneself to save the victim.
- In the third scenario, the danger to the rescuer is minimal. In this case, it is an obligation to save the victim.

On the other hand, when the lives of **many** people are at stake, it is even permissible to sacrifice one’s own life to save them. Rabbi Weiss bases this ruling on the grounds that the lives of many are more valuable than the life of one individual. He points out that the Talmud forbids murder, even in a case where it is necessary to save one’s life, since, “Who is to say that your blood is redder than your fellow’s?” (Sanhedrin 74a) Rabbi Weiss argues that it is logical to maintain that the “blood” of many is, indeed, “redder” than the blood of one individual.

One might have argued that there is no obligation to endanger one’s life for a mitzvah. However, there is debate regarding mitzvot which **inherently** involve danger:

- The *Sefer haChinuch* (Mitzvah 425) rules that there was no obligation to endanger one’s life to conquer the seven idolatrous nations which used to reside in the Land of Israel.
- However, the *Minchat Chinuch* (ad loc.) argues that war is inherently dangerous, and therefore, danger cannot provide an exemption.

Rabbi Weiss quotes support for the position of *Minchat Chinuch* from Rabbi Moshe Sofer. He then extrapolates from the case of war to anyone who fills a communal role that involves danger, such as policemen or firemen; by nature of their position, they have a responsibility to risk their lives to save others.

Interestingly, the permissibility of endangering oneself for one’s profession applies even for those who are not protecting the public. In the context of an employer’s obligation to pay workers on time, the Torah says of the employee, “for [his salary], he puts his life on the line.” (Devarim 24:15) The Talmud describes how workers climb dangerous ramps and trees, and risk their lives for their work. (Bava Metzia 112a) While the Talmud mentions this as a reality, without necessarily endorsing it as appropriate, Rabbi Yechezkel Landau understands that the Torah intends to permit workers to take such risks. (*Noda b’Yehudah* 2:10) However, in a responsum addressing hunting for sport, Rabbi Landau points out that while the Torah permits endangering oneself for one’s livelihood, it is forbidden to endanger oneself for sport.

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Biography

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter

Rabbi Baruch Weintraub

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir was born to the Rothenburg family in Magnuszew, Poland, in late 1799. His father, Rabbi Yisrael, was the local Rabbi, and a follower of Rabbi Yisrael Hopstein, the Maggid of Kozhnitz. His family was descended from the famous and distinguished Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg (the Maharam).

As was common in his time, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir married at the age of 13. He and his wife, Feigele, had tragically lost many of their children in infancy. A well-known legend tells us that Rabbi Yitzchak Meir saw his decision to leave the Maggid of Kozhnitz's son, Rabbi Moshe Elyakim, as the reason for his personal woes. Eventually, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir became a *chassid* of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk. He later became a relative of the Kotzker Rebbe through marriage, when Rabbi Menachem Mendel married Feigele's sister, Chaya Lipszyc.

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir was known as a great Torah scholar and one of the most important halachic authorities in his time. His commentary on the Talmud, *Chiddushei HaRim*, is widely studied to this day. Aside from his role as a teacher and a halachic authority, he was also involved in communal matters. He mediated between the Jews and the local government, and headed the *Rabbi Meir Baal HaNes* charity, which helped struggling families in the Land of Israel. He became involved in local politics, and supported the Polish "November Uprising" in 1831 against Russia. When the uprising was eventually crushed, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir had to change his last name in order to escape the governor's wrath. From then on, he was called "Alter".

After the passing of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk in 1859, many of his followers looked to Rabbi Yitzchak Meir as their Rebbe. Rabbi Yitzchak Meir moved to Góra Kalwaria, known in Yiddish as "Ger," and founded his Chasidic dynasty there. Today, Ger is one of the largest Chasidic sects in the world.

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir passed away on the 23rd of Adar, 1866.

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Torah and Translation Because G-d Said So

Rabbi Y. M. Alter, Chiddushei haRim to Parshat Shemini

Translated by Rabbi Baruch Weintraub

ויאמר משה זה הדבר אשר צוה ד' תעשו וירא אליכם כבוד ד' (ויקרא ט:ו) – זה הדבר' הוא מדריגה גדולה כמו שמצינו "מוסיף עליהם משה שנתנבא ב'זה הדבר'" (רש"י במדבר לב). וכל הענין הוא רק מפני "אשר צוה ד'" – שנעשה מפני שצוה. וזה טוב מאד, אפילו עוד יותר מזה "וירא אליכם כבוד ד'".

ונוסח הברכה כך הוא 'אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו' – העולם נברא כאמור "בדבר ד' שמים נעשו וברוח פיו כל צבאם" (תהלים לג,ו), וצויו הוא גדול מזה. יש משליך הכל ורוצה דוקא לבקש את שלו; ובאמת הוא גראבקייט (=גסות, בורות) להשליך דבר ד' אשר צוה ולבקש את שלו – שישבור חומות ובלבד לעשות כמצוה...

ומצוה הוא לעשות אופן הרצון בכל נפש וחיותו ובכל הבריאות שלו, בזה יעשה להיות המצוה בהן, וזה מהראוי להיות מהודר.

וזה הוא הפשוט, ומסתמא יש אנשים שיודעים לכוון הכוונות, אבל אנחנו נעשה בפשוט כאשר צונו מפני הציווי.

ויקריבו וגו' אש זרה אשר לא צוה אותם (ויקרא יא) – יש ללמוד מזה דעיקר עשיית המצוה בכח הציווי, וזה למעלה מכל הכוונות, שהרי נדב ואביהוא שהיו גדולי עולם והיה להם כוונות ויחודים במעשיהם, אף על פי כן מצד שלא צוה אותם נעשו. קל וחומר במידה טובה מרובה, המקיים המצוה לעשות ציווי הבורא, אף על פי שאינו יודע כלום, חשוב ככל הכוונות.

And Moshe said: This is the matter Hashem has commanded, you shall do, and the glory of Hashem will appear to you (Vayikra 9:6) – 'This is the matter' is a high level [of prophecy], as we find: "Moshe is above [other prophets], as he prophesied, saying: 'This is the matter.'" (Rashi to Bamidbar 30:2) And [the prophetic message] is only [valid] because 'Hashem has commanded' – we shall do it because He commanded it. That is very good, and even better – [do it] so that 'the glory of Hashem will appear to you.'

That is indeed the formulation of the blessing, 'Who sanctified us with His *mitzvot*, and commanded us.' The world was created [with speech], as it is said, "By the word of G-d, the heavens were made, and with the breath of His mouth, all their hosts." (Tehillim 33:6), and a *mitzvah* is even greater than this [creative speech]. There are those who discard all of this [*mitzvot*], and instead, seek only for themselves. In truth, it is crudity to discard the word of G-d that He commanded, and to look after oneself. One should tear down walls for the sake of fulfilling *mitzvot*...

[T]he commandment is to do His will with all of one's soul, vitality, and strength. Through this, the *mitzvah* will become part of them – and that is the optimal way [to do *mitzvot*].

This is the simple approach. Presumably, some people can concentrate on the [mystical] meaning of *mitzvot* – but we must do *mitzvot* simply because we are commanded.

And they brought... foreign fire, which He had not commanded them [to bring] (Vayikra 10:1) – We should learn from here that the crucial element in the performance of a *mitzvah* is the strength of [G-d's] command. This is more important than intense concentration [on mystical meanings]. Nadav and Avihu were among the greatest [people] in the world, and had [mystical] intentions and unifications in their actions. Nevertheless, because they were not commanded [to bring this fire], they were punished. It is even more obvious that when dealing with good deeds, which is greater, one who performs a *mitzvah* for the sake of fulfilling G-d's command – although he knows nothing [of its mystical meanings], it is considered as if he [had performed them] with concentration [on its mystical meanings].

Shemot 20:10 records the command, “You shall not perform any *melachah*” on Shabbat. The word *melachah*, as used in the context of Shabbat, refers to the tasks performed in the Mishkan. (Shabbat 49b; Bava Kama 2a) According to some commentators, it is limited to tasks involved in creating the Mishkan, not in its ongoing operation. (Meiri to Shabbat 73a)

All of these tasks, and tasks which have similar purposes or methods, are prohibited on Shabbat, as an outgrowth of the Torah’s instruction, “You shall perform no *melachah*.” *Sefer haChinuch* counts this as the Torah’s 32nd mitzvah.

Our sages have described many benefits associated with refraining from performing melachah on Shabbat, including:

- We are meant to spend Shabbat thinking about Hashem’s creation of the universe. (*Sefer haChinuch* #32)
- Shabbat commemorates our freedom from slavery in Egypt. A slave cannot rest; we are given a day of rest to show that Hashem made us into free people. (*Sefer haChinuch* #32)
- On Shabbat we cease creating in order to recognize that we are not unlimited masters of this world, to manipulate it as we choose. (Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Commentary to Shemot 20:10)

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Weekly Highlights: Mar. 30 — Apr. 5 / 23 Adar II — 29 Adar II

Time	Speaker	Topic	Location	Special Notes
שבת Mar. 29-30				
8:50 AM	Ezer Diena	Parshat Parah	BAYT	Pre-Shacharit
After hashkamah	R’ Alex Hecht	Parshah	Clanton Park	
Before minchah	Ezer Diena	Daf Yomi	BAYT	Rabbi’s Classroom
After minchah	R’ Mordechai Torczyner	Gemara Avodah Zarah	BAYT	Simcha Suite
Mon. Apr. 1				
10:00 AM	R’ Mordechai Torczyner	The Other Villains of Passover, Part 1 of 2	Beth Tikvah	
Tue. Apr. 2				
1:30 PM	R’ Mordechai Torczyner	Yeshayah: Chapters 14-15	Shaarei Shomayim	
7:15 PM	R’ Mordechai Torczyner	The Book of Yehoshua	129 Theodore Pl.	Note change in time
8:15 PM	R’ Elihu Abbe Ezer Diena R’ Alex Hecht R’ Mordechai Torczyner	Haggadah Night! Ten-minute Seder-ready Torah Thoughts	BAYT	Simcha Suite
Wed. Apr. 3				
7:30 PM	R’ Alex Hecht	Is Eliyahu at Our Seder?	Shaarei Tefillah	Special Topic!
7:30 PM	Ezer Diena	Ripped from the Headlines	BAYT	
Thu. Apr. 4				
1:30 PM	R’ Mordechai Torczyner	Shemuel: Chapter 9	49 Michael Ct.	Women
8:30 PM	Ezer Diena	Gemara Beitzah	<i>ediena@torontotorah.com</i>	Men, Advanced
Fri. Apr. 5				
10:30 AM	R’ Elihu Abbe	Kiddushin	Yeshivat Or Chaim	Advanced

For University Men, at Yeshivat Or Chaim

10:00 AM Sunday, R’ Aaron Greenberg, Gemara Shabbat

11:00 AM Sunday, Beit Midrash Rotation: Contemporary Halachah, Ezer Diena: Modern Shaatnez 2.0

8:30 AM Wednesday, Ezer Diena, Stories and She’eilot

8:30 AM Friday, R’ Mordechai Torczyner, Parshah

WOMEN’S BEIT MIDRASH

For University and Adult Women, at Ulpanat Orot, with Mrs. Eliana Abbe

9:30 AM Tuesdays: Sefer Devarim

9:30 AM Thursdays: Tefillah

Seder Boker for Adult Men

10:00 AM to Noon, Monday/Wednesday - R’ Moshe Yeres: Masechet Megilah and Eim haBanim Semeichah

10:00 AM to Noon, Tuesday/Thursday - R’ Moshe Yeres: Parshanut on Parshah and Pninei Halachah