BS”D

Parshas Tetzaveh 5778

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*Torah study and prayer can reconcile us with G-d just as sacrifice can.*

A Cohen Like an Angel of G-d

This week’s Torah portion deals with the vestments of the Cohen Gadol (High Priest) as well as the garments of the ordinary Cohanim. It also describes in detail the seven-day inauguration period of the Cohanim.

There is much said in the Midrash Rabbah of this portion about the role of the Cohen. The Midrash (38:3) quotes the passage from Malachi (2:7). “For the lips of the Cohen guards knowledge, Torah is sought from his mouth, for he is an angel of the L-rd of Hosts.”

To be a legitimate leader, the Cohen must be a Torah scholar. Then he is like an angel. A Cohen who is not a student of Torah will be rejected in the future world, as Hosea says (4:6), “Because you have rejected [Torah] knowledge, I will reject you as My priest.”

The Midrash states that the word *kavod* (honor) appears for the first time in the book Divrei HaYomim 1 (4:9) (the last Biblical book that recounts briefly the history of the world and the Jewish people and at more length the history of the Davidic dynasty) in conjunction with Yaavetz (see ibid 4:9). Yaavetz was a Torah scholar; therefore honor was due him. Similarly, the High Priest’s garments that bestow honor because of the Torah knowledge of the Cohen, as is stated (Malachi 2:6), “The Torah of truth was on his lips.”

We know that the sages taught that Torah learning and prayer can be a substitute for the priestly sacrifices. Listen to how the Midrash puts it (38:4):

“The Jewish people say to G-d, ‘Master of the Universe, if the king sins, he brings a sacrifice. If the High Priest sins, he brings a sacrifice. What about us?’ G-d answers, ‘There is indeed a sacrifice brought on behalf of the entire community if they sin’ (See Vayikra 4:13 – 21).

But we are too poor to bring a sacrifice,’ they say. (This alludes to after the destruction of the Temple.)

‘All I ask of you are words of Torah, and I will forgive your sins,’ G-d replies. ‘Take words with you, and return to G-d.’ (Hosea 14:3) Words are referring to words of Torah.

‘But we don’t know the words of Torah!’ the Jews reply.

‘Cry and pray to Me, and I will accept you just as I accepted your fathers in Egypt when they cried out to Me,’ G-d replies.”

Thus, according to the Midrash, Torah study and the cry of prayer can reconcile us with G-d just as sacrifice can.

The Midrash (ibid) cites Mordechai as an example of the efficacy of prayer:

The Midrash comments on the passage in the Book of Esther (6:12), “And Mordechai returned to the King’s gate.” This took place right after the turning point of the Book of Esther. Haman, upon being asked by King Achasverosh about how to honor one who has pleased the king, overreached himself. Assuming that the king meant him, he said that such a man should be paraded on the king’s own horse through the streets of Shushan and acclaimed as a favorite of the king. To Haman’s shock, the king asked him to honor Haman’s arch-enemy Mordechai and take him through the streets proclaiming that this is the reward of one favored by the king.

Mordechai merited this, the first step in his deliverance and the deliverance of the Jewish people because he prayed constantly.

After Mordechai’s triumphant ride, the Book of Esther says (6:12), “Then Mordechai returned to the king’s gate.” The Midrash explains, “Mordechai returned” means that Mordechai remained himself. He did not allow the honor bestowed upon him to go to his head. He returned to what he was and what he had been doing. He returned to pray.

The Midrash expresses the same thought in its interpretation of another passage: “G-d will inflict those curses upon your enemies and haters who persecuted you. You will return and heed the voice of G-d. (Devorim 30: 7,8)

The final victory has come. G-d has vanquished the enemies of Israel. And what does Israel do? They return. They return to prayer and repentance because prayer is not only for when you are in trouble. Prayer to G-d is always.

In summary then:

The role of the Cohen is to reconcile the people with G-d, to bring them closer to Him. But to do that, he must himself be a man of G-d, a man of the Torah. When there is no Holy Temple available, we can bring ourselves closer to G-d by “words,” the words of Torah, an intellectual closeness; and the words of prayer, a closeness of the heart.

In either the case of Torah or prayer, these activities must be ongoing. You never finish studying Torah, and you never finish praying. A person must be in a constant state of connection to G-d. His mind must always be turning to G-d through Torah, and his heart should always be speaking and singing to G-d through prayer. The consciousness of the Torah he studied and the prayer he prayed accompany the Jew throughout his day even in his non-sacred activities such as work and eating and even sleeping. The individual who practices these activities is one whose mind and heart are always in tune with G-d. He is always returning to Him and is thus never separated from Him.