

Parashat Shemini 5777, 2017:

*Teaching the Mesorah*

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 bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The untimely and supernatural death of Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, is one of the focal points of this week's *parasha*. Following this narrative passage, we are met with two *pasukim* (verses) that define the *kohan*'s role outside of the *Avodah* (Ritual Service) in the *Beit HaMikdash*:

[In order that you will be able] to distinguish between the holy and profane and between the ritually impure and pure, and [so that you may] instruct the children of Israel regarding all the statutes which the L-rd has spoken to them through Moshe. (*Sefer Vayikra* 10:10-11, this and all Bible translations with my emendations and brackets, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

As these verses clearly indicate, the *kohan* has two crucial functions in addition to the *Avodah*; namely, he is both a *posek* (halachic decisor) and an educator for the entire nation.

The *Sifra*, the halachic *Midrash* on *Sefer Vayikra*, is one of the earliest sources to analyze our *pasukim* (verses):

**To distinguish between the holy and profane:** this refers to the monetary values of different individuals that they voluntarily desire to donate to the *Beit HaMikdash*. **Between the ritually impure and pure:** This refers to the various levels of ritual purity and impurity. **And [so that you may] instruct the children of Israel:** These are the decisions (*ha'ho'raot*) in all legal matters. **Regarding all the statutes:** These are the hermeneutic principles through which halachic conclusions are derived. **Which the L-rd has spoken to them:** These are the *halachot* that were given to Moshe that were not written directly in the Torah (i.e. *halacha l'Moshe mi'Sinai*, Rashi's explanation as found

in *Talmud Bavli, Kritot* 13b). **Through Moshe:** This is the actual text of the Torah. (Parashat Shemini, 40:9, translation and brackets my own)

In my estimation, the *kohan's* role as *posek* is rather clear. He, like all *poskim*, is obligated to render a halachic decision in those areas wherein he has authoritative expertise. The French Tosafist, Rabbi Isaac ben Joseph of Corbeil *zatzal* (d. 1280), opined that this act should be counted as one of the *Taryag Mitzvot* (613 Commandments, see *Sefer Mitzvot HaKatan*, 111). While the vast majority of authorities disagree with this view, all maintain that it is incumbent upon the *talmid chacham* (Torah sage) to issue conclusive rulings whenever his knowledge and experience allow him to do so. As the Rambam (1135-1204) rules: “A sage who is worthy of rendering halachic judgments and refrains from doing so holds back [the spread of] Torah and places stumbling blocks before the blind.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah* 5:4, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

We are now ready to explore the *kohan's* obligation as an educator for the entire nation. My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, is widely considered to have been one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s greatest Jewish educators. We are fortunate that he wrote and spoke about this constitutive aspect of his life on a number of occasions. In the main, the Rav discusses two aspects of the teaching experience, namely, the responsibility of the educator, and, indeed, all Jews, to serve as exemplary role models, and the role of the rebbe in ensuring the continuation of the *Mesorah* (authentic Jewish religious tradition).

In what I believe to be a very self-reflective statement, Rav Soloveitchik outlined his vision of the Jew as an educator to the world:

The job of teaching is not fulfilled merely by writing books; it is accomplished by setting an example. That is exactly our task – *kiddush shem shamayim*, sanctifying G-d's name...it means that a Jew, in his daily living, in his human relations with his fellow man, should be honest and sincere, and – I wish to emphasize – should act with dignity. (This, and the following quote, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Festival of Freedom: Essays on Pesah and the Haggadah*, Rabbis Joseph B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler, editors, page 146, underlining my own)

At this point, the Rav's emphasis regarding the obligation of every Jew to be a teacher to the world is reminiscent of Yeshayahu's famous message to our people "...I will make you a light of nations, so that My salvation shall be until the end of the earth." (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 49:6)

If a Jew commits a crime or a misdeed, he is violating the assignment given him, namely, to teach – and every Jew can teach. Perhaps only the philosopher or the scholar can intellectualize, but Judaism is a living discipline, and therefore, the simplest and most ignorant Jew can teach.

In the Rav's worldview, the second role of the Torah educator is to transmit the *Mesorah* to new generations:

The Jew of the *Mesorah*...has a capacity to live in retrospection. Revelation and tradition erase the bonds of time. Distance in time is rendered irrelevant for him. Thousands of years have elapsed, but he walks back and forth from antiquity to modern times...Upon this phenomenon of an historical continuum was founded the *Mesorah*, conceived as an historic stream of Jewish spirit whose tributaries of past, present and future merge into each other. (This and the following passages, Rabbi Abraham R. Besdin, *Man of Faith in the Modern World: Reflections of the Rav*, adapted from the Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Volume II, pages 20-23, underlining my own)

In sum, the Jew of the *Mesorah* lives beyond time. Ancient sources, as interpreted by the leading scholars of the past and present, excite his imagination and soul as if they were

the immediate product of his own time. Time is not a boundary; it is, instead, a bridge to ultimately understanding Hashem's holy Torah.

We become Jews of the *Mesorah* by studying with, and learning from, masters of the *Mesorah* – for they, like the *kohan*, in the *Beit HaMikdash*, are the authentic educators of the entire nation. The Rav describes his personal experience as just such an educator, in the following autobiographical vignette:

The Rebbe introduces the guests [i.e. the great scholars of earlier generations] to his pupils, and the dialogue commences. The Rambam states a *halakah*; the Rabad disagrees sharply...Some students interrupt to defend the Rambam, and they express themselves harshly against the Rabad as young people are apt to do. The Rebbe softly corrects the students and suggests more retrained tones...Rabbenu Tam is called upon to express his opinion, and suddenly, a symposium of generations comes into existence. Young students debate earlier generations with an air of daring familiarity, and a crescendo of discussion ensues.

At this juncture, the Rav reveals the definitive goal of great Jewish education:

All speak one language; all pursue one goal; all are committed to a common vision; and all operate with the same categories. A *Mesorah* collegiality is achieved, a friendship, a comradeship of old and young, spanning antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times...this merger of identities will ultimately bring about the redemption of the Jewish people...The Messianic realization will witness the great dialogue of the generations...Thus, the “old ones” of the past continue their great dialogue of the generations, ensuring an enduring commitment to the *Mesorah*.

May we be *zocheh* (merit) to experience this “historical continuum” and “merger of identities” as Jews of the *Mesorah*, and may the ultimate redemption of the Jewish people come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: [reparashathashavuah.org](http://reparashathashavuah.org)

They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

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 <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.