Jewish Tribune – Achrei Mos

**A Book of Two Halves**

Sefer Vayikra is a book of two halves and the abrupt change takes place in the middle of our sedra, Achrei Mos.

The first 17 perokim of Sefer Vayikra all relate to the Mishkan. It covers topics such as korbonos, rules of kohanim, tumah and taharah, the dedication ceremony of the Mishkan and the avodah of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur.

Then, halfway into our sedra, from perek 18 onwards, Sefer Vayikra deals with a litany of miscellaneous topics starting with prohibited relationships and then “kedoshim tihiyu” to shemittah, erechin vows and much in between.

Notably, the phrase “Ani Hashem Elokeichem” appears over fifty times from perek 18 onwards and only once in the first 17 perokim of Vayikra.

Rav Menachem Leibtag gives the following wonderful explanation.

Some people may mistakenly think that the Shechina, the Divine Presence of Hashem, is limited to the Mishkan, Beis HaMikdash or even just our own shuls. This is not true. Hashem’s Presence and message must be disseminated into everyday life. Judaism is 24/7, 365 days a year. Yiddishkeit is less of a theology and more of a way of life.

To convey this idea, the phrase “Ani Hashem Elokeichem” is not needed in the first half of Sefer Vayikra as that primarily deals with the Mishkan. Even the one time it does appear in the first 17 perokim of Vayikra is in relation to Kashrus and not the Mishkan per se.

But when Sefer Vayikra moves on to cover a host of miscellaneous topics, the phrase “Ani Hashem Elokeichem” needs to be repeated over and over to remind us to bring Hashem into every aspect of our lives.

This is a message we need to convey and model to our children and students. To live a life of Torah, recognising that Hashem’s Presence goes beyond the walls of shul, and adhere carefully to halocha which demonstrates that HKBH is wholly integrated into our daily lives.

We are now well into counting the sefira and heading towards Shavuos. The Gemoro in Pesachim 68b tells us that, on Shavous, Rav Yosef would declare:

אי לא האי יומא דקא גרים, כמה יוסף איכא בשוקא

Were it not for this day (of Matan Torah), there would be many Yosefs in the market place.

Really? Would the great Rav Yosef just be an ordinary Joe in the street? Surely one of our greatest Amoroim, one of the greatest Sages at the time of the Gemoro, would have made his mark on society. Perhaps he would not have been Rav Yosef, but no doubt Professor Yosef or Dr Yosef or even CEO Yosef!

I think it was Rav Ruderman ztl, the founding Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Yisrael, Baltimore who asks this question. His powerful answer is not just pertinent to Shavuos but offers a critical life lesson.

Rav Yosef was noting that were it not for Torah, there would be many disparate aspects to his personality. There would be inconsistencies and contradictions. He would behave one way at home and another way at work and yet another way when socialising with his friends. He would be a different person when under pressure and when relaxing on holiday.

But that is not the Torah personality. A true “ben-Torah” is consistent in his actions. His behaviour is modified by the Torah he learns; there are no split personalities but a unified consistency.

That is what Rav Yosef was saying. Were it not for the day of Matan Torah, there would be many Yosefs in the marketplace. Just one person, but an inconsistent and hypocritical one. Now, through the Torah he had learned, there was one homogeneous individual.

And that is really the message of “Ani Hashem Elokeichem”. If there is a singular focus in our lives, everything we do pivots on that focus. We are not one person at home, and another at work; one person in shul and another on holiday. If we bring HKBH into our daily lives, then that gives the singular focus which creates the synthesis, harmony and indeed happiness.

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