

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Devorah *bas* Mendel Yitzchok *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

The Extent of Sensitivity

PARSHAS KORACH 5776

(The following is based in large part on a passage from the sefer K’motzei Shallal Rav, Bamidbar 17:2.)

It was the aftermath of the tragic spectacle. Korach had led a band that rebelled against the authority of Moshe and challenged the role of his brother Aharon, who officiated as the High Priest. The matter was put to a test, as a group of 250 of Korach’s followers were to offer incense in fire-pans before Hashem, as would Aharon. The one whose offering was accepted by Hashem would emerge as the chosen one. The entire issue was resolved when Korach’s company was swallowed by the earth, and the group of 250 were burned alive by a fire that descended from Heaven.

With the matter settled, Hashem informed Moshe that the fire-pans – having been utilized for sacrificial purposes – were now sanctified and were to be treated as such. Hashem thus issued instructions that these fire-pans should be collected and dedicated to adorn the holy altar. As the *passuk* states: וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר, אָמַר אֶל־אֶלְעָזָר בְּרֵאֱהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וְיָרַם אֶת־הַמִּחֹת מִבֵּין וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר, אָמַר אֶל־אֶלְעָזָר בְּרֵאֱהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן, וְעָשׂוּ אֹתָם... צְפוּי לְמִזְבֵּחַ כִּי־הֵקְרִיבָם לִפְנֵי ה' וַיִּקְדָּשׁוּ – “And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: ‘Say to Elazar the son of Aharon the Kohein, and he should lift up the fire-pans from amidst the conflagration... And they should be made... into a covering for the altar, for they were used for service before Hashem and have become sanctified’” (*Bamidbar 17:1-3*).

What is somewhat curious about this directive is the person to whom it was addressed. We might have assumed that the task would be given to Aharon; after all, he was the legitimate High Priest, as had just been clearly demonstrated in a most public way. Why, then, was Elazar charged with this mission instead?

Let us turn for insight to an episode that occurred at a much later date. While seemingly unrelated, we shall see that this event actually sheds much light on our very subject.

Replaced at the Helm

It is not at all unusual, in the course of a given Mishnah, for a sage to quote a teaching in the name of another. What is somewhat unique about the following passage is that the sage not only cites his source, but even makes reference to the date and event on which he received this teaching. The Mishnah in Yadayim (3:5) states:

אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן עֲזַאִי, מִקַּבֵּל אֲנִי מִפִּי שְׁבַעִים וּשְׁנַיִם זָקֵן בְּיוֹם שֶׁהוֹשִׁיבוּ אֶת רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה בְּיִשְׁבֵּיהָ...
בְּיִשְׁבֵּיהָ...

“R’ Shimon ben Azzai said: I have received (a teaching) from the mouth of seventy-two elders on the day on which they seated R’ Elazar ben Azaryah as (head of) the yeshivah...”

The exact halachic subject that R' Shimon had been discussing (relating to the laws of ritual impurity) does not specifically pertain to our current discussion. What concerns us now is the event that he referenced – the installment of R' Elazar ben Azaryah in the position of Nasi (chief sage of the Rabbinic court).

The details of this well-known episode are recorded in the Gemara in Berachos (27b). The incident involved the protagonists Rabban Gamliel – who had been officiating as Nasi – and R' Yehoshua, a sage who voiced dissenting viewpoints regarding certain halachic issues. Actually, there had been a series of incidents, as Rabban Gamliel each time would insist that R' Yehoshua conform to his view. For example, it happened one time that they disagreed as to the setting of the date of Yom Kippur; Rabban Gamliel was of the opinion that it should fall out on a certain day of the week, while R' Yehoshua contended that the morrow was the proper day. Rabban Gamliel demanded fealty in this matter; and so, he commanded R' Yehoshua to perform forbidden labor on the morrow – the day which, according to R' Yehoshua's calculations, was the real Yom Kippur (*Rosh Hashanah* 2:9).

The Gemara relates that the other sages felt that the time to take action had come, and they relieved Rabban Gamliel of his post. This raised a most pressing issue: who would take Rabban Gamliel's place as Nasi? While the most obvious candidate might have been R' Yehoshua, the sages decided against this option. Since he was the antagonist, his election, they felt, would constitute too much of an affront to Rabban Gamliel. And so they settled on another, more neutral choice – R' Elazar ben Azaryah. Such were the events behind his installation to the post of Nasi.

No Offense

In his commentary to the Gemara in Berachos, the Me'iri draws the parallel between these two (seemingly) disparate events. On display in the above narrative is the care exercised by the sages to prevent unnecessary insult. The decision had been rendered that Rabban Gamliel was to be replaced; all the same, it need not be done in a way that would increase his anguish. And it is for this very reason, the Me'iri explains, that it was Elazar and not Aharon who was tasked with collecting the fire-pans. Since Aharon was a principal player in the Korach episode, his selection in this instance would have added unnecessary insult to the vanquished party. And so Hashem chose Elazar to do the deed instead.

The Me'iri's comments are most remarkable – and quite illuminating. For, in essence, there exists a fairly blatant difference between the two instances. While it was deemed necessary for Rabban Gamliel to step down, this does not diminish the fact that his inherent stature and spiritual level far surpassed anything we could possibly imagine. It stands to reason, then, that his honor was still regarded and treated with care. But in the case of our *parshah*, these were miscreants who rebelled against Moshe and incurred a punishment of death! Nonetheless, the Me'iri contends, the situation still called for caution and sensitivity. Even in this instance it was necessary to avoid the possibility of insult.

The lesson is striking and obvious. If only we would be as mindful in our daily dealings with our fellow man!