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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Shemini

Life is sometimes filled with contrasts and contradictions. The author of the ethical tract Paths of the Righteous points out, for example, that love can be the greatest virtue when expressed appropriately or the greatest vice when expressed inappropriately (Gate 5). Parents can love their children and that love can be indispensable to developing self-esteem and good character. But when parents fail to correct and reprimand their children because they love them too much to punish them, then their love will ultimately prove harmful. Similarly, love of money can engender healthy competition among people. But that same love of money may compel a competitor to adopt dishonest means of making money. The same powerful emotion can yield diametrically opposite results.

This insight was noticed long before it was articulated by the moralist author of Paths of the Righteous. In juxtaposed passages, the Torah gives an example of how the same thing can be the source of opposite reactions. The investiture of the priests to serve in the Tabernacle was completed on the eighth day. At that time, the altar was used for the first time in the performance of the sacrificial rites on behalf of the people. But the inaugural offering was not consumed by fire ignited by human hands. Fire came forth "from before God" (Leviticus 9:24) to consume the sacrifice. This supernatural fire was cause for rejoicing. Two verses later (Leviticus 10:2) Scripture narrates another case of fire coming forth from God. However, this second case was cause for lamenting. Committing a serious offence, Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's eldest sons, were burned to death. In the first case, divine fire brings excitement. In the second case, divine fire brings only bereavement. It was the same divine fire that caused opposite reactions.

One chapter later, the Torah seems to emphasize the point, stating that when water touches seeds it makes them susceptible to impurity (Leviticus 11:38). But when water is applied to the impure, it relieves impurity (Leviticus 14:8, 9). The same water that can putrify can also purify. The same element can cause opposite results.

What seems to emerge from all of this is that everything in life is potentially beneficial or harmful depending upon circumstances alone. Every element, every emotion, every action can be the source of opposite results. This certainly makes things mysterious if not outright confusing. But that is the nature of life.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Allen has been serving Beth Tikvah Synagogue, Toronto, Ontario for more than 21 years.

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