

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Ki Sisa

“AND MOSHE SAID: ‘DEDICATE YOURSELVES TODAY TO HASHEM, FOR EVERY MAN HAS OPPOSED HIS SON AND HIS BROTHER; THAT HE MAY BESTOW UPON YOU A BLESSING...’” (SHMOS 32:29)

How can this pasuk say that the Levites killed, “their son”?

But they didn’t actually do it!

These are the treasures of greatness that await us if we focus our energies

AFTER THE SIN of the Golden Calf, Moshe told the tribe of Levi to kill all those that had actually committed the sin of idolatry. The Levites followed Moshe’s command and killed approximately three thousand of their fellow Jews. Rashi explains that Moshe told the Levites that since they killed their, “son and brother,” they merited to become the *kohanim* that serve in the Mishkan and in the Beis HaMikdash. However, if we look a few verses earlier, (ibid. 26) the Torah relates that not a single Levite was involved in the Golden Calf (see Rashi). If so, the Sifsei Chachamim asks, how can this *pasuk* say that the Levites killed, “their son”? (Rashi on pasuk 27 explains that the “brother” refers to a brother from the same mother, who had been married to a different father that was a Yisrael.) The Sifsei Chachamim answers: the *pasuk* is telling us that the Levites were so completely dedicated to this holy task - of defending Hashem’s honor - that they would have even killed their own son, if the situation had required it.

How can the tribe of Levi become *kohanim* based on the merit of an action that they didn’t really do? True, they would have even killed their own children if they needed to, but they didn’t actually do it! How can you earn reward for a *mitzvah* that you didn’t actually perform? Let us assume I am walking to daven in shul, to learn in the *beis medrash* or to do a *chesed* to a neighbor, and it’s a sunny spring day outside. As I walk effortlessly in the beautiful weather, I imagine myself on a freezing winter day, fighting my way through a raging blizzard, plowing through 3-foot-high snow drifts. Will I truly receive the reward for doing the *mitzvah* with such self-sacrifice when I did not really expend that effort? How could the Levites get rewarded for just participating a non-existent scenario?

The Levites understood Moshe’s command to require more than just imagining a theoretical situation. The tribe of Levi internalized the importance of their mission, and developed within themselves such a high degree of dedication for this *mitzvah*, that they were ready, willing and able to kill, not only their brothers, but even their own children. They went forth with such zeal, such absolute commitment to defend Hashem’s honor, that there was no question how they would have acted if presented with such a choice. Even though they did not need to act on that higher level of dedication, they nevertheless merited becoming *kohanim* because of this lofty peak of inner greatness that they had scaled. We, too, can develop and deepen our enthusiasm for *mitzvos* and our resolve to perform them under the most difficult and challenging circumstances, and thereby earn the reward for achieving these higher levels of dedication. Despite the beautiful weather, we can be credited with staggering feats of overcoming obstacles and hardships if we work on ourselves to love Hashem’s *mitzvos* with fiery passion. These are the treasures of greatness that await us if we focus our energies, as we say every day in *Sh’ma*, “To love Hashem with all your heart and all your soul.”