

Shimini 2015

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, April 18, 2015

It's been a great day of celebrations here this morning in shul, and I am so glad we are all together for it. Mazal Tov again to all our simcha families. I'm going to give a short sermon here, and what I really want to do is build on the two lovely D'vrai Torah our b'not mitzvah gave. It's interesting to me that because we have two b'not mitzvah, we had two talks, and even though they were on the same Torah portion they were on two totally different topics. One was on the deaths of Aaron's son's Nadav and Avihu, and one was on Kashrut - two topics that don't seem to have anything to do with one another. In fact, if you did not know they were on the same Shabbos, you'd likely never have guessed that they were in the same Torah portion. But they are - and I'd like to suggest why that is.

You know of course today we are here for simcha with three great families - but I have also been with each of these families when life was pretty bad as well. It happens. We always hope for the best, but as much as we plan things can sometimes go wrong, and it stinks, and it hurts, and it leaves us hurting and disillusioned. So how do you pick up the pieces? How do you go on when life throws you a curve ball and you or a loved one strike out? What do you do when suffering comes your way like it did for Aaron's family in the first half of the Torah portion? Well, I think part of the answer comes from Molly and Maddie's D'vrai Torah. What do you do, what do WE do at those challenging times?

Well, for one thing we lean on community. There is tremendous power in knowing that we are never alone when we are part of a spiritual community. And we have lots of opportunities to join in community - from book clubs, to sports teams, to civic organizations. But a spiritual community is different. This community is based on a shared sense of core values, Jewish values. Many of them are so deeply entrenched in our lives that we don't even realize they are there. "Of course you pay a shiva call - of course you come for a misheberach..." But people without spiritual community don't know what we ourselves tend to take for granted.

But what truly bonds us in community is a shared commitment to a way of life, a daily sense of purpose and belonging. And that's where Kashrut comes in. The Rabbis of the Talmud speculate and say, in essence, "You know, at the end of the day, Gd does not care what we eat. No, the purpose of keeping kosher is to feel part of a team, part of a community, part of a People." It really is a case of "you are what you eat." And remember, it is not an "all or nothing." When you don't eat certain foods because you are a Jew you are making a strong statement - I am part of a People. And that People - your People are your support system. So when you keep Kosher you are connecting with a People, you are building community, a community that will be there for you for simcha and for sadness, too. And I think that's why these two topics were seamed together in this week's portion.

There is one more thought I'd like to leave you with. You've got to have a plan. When life falls off the rails, either big time, or even just a little, you need a plan for getting back on. And it needs to be not just a thought, but an action plan. You need the discipline to restore your own sense of purpose and meaning. You need a way to take back control. And it makes so, so much sense to start that with the most basic of needs, with eating. And I think that too is a reason these sections of Torah are joined. Life is going to hit the skids, it happens. Sometimes it's beyond

your control, sometimes it is through mistakes you yourself make. It happens. Keeping kosher is offered as an action plan. Take control of your life by eating like a Jew.

It's interesting to note that this Torah portion does not use the word "Kosher." It uses "Tahor" which means pure. The first time the word kosher appears in the Bible is actually in the Megillah of Esther, (Chapter 8:4-5.) The scene is when Esther pleads before the king Ahashverus on behalf of the Jewish people. The king holds out his golden scepter towards Esther. Esther stands and says in v.5 "If I have won your favor and my proposal seems right to your majesty let an order be written stopping Haman." The phrase for "seems right" is "Kosher." In other words, a "Kosher" plan is a good action plan that makes sense. Esther is trying to stop the chaos as the future of the Jewish People seems out of our own control. You take back control of your own life by acting in a way that defines you as the person you want to be. When you make mistakes, when you are the victim of circumstance, don't shry "gevult" don't throw in the towel, don't despair, act like a proud Jew, behave like a proud Jew, a creation of Gd Almighty. That's why these two portions are sewn together.

We all make mistakes, we all suffer from the unexpected - it's gonna happen and we can't always control it. But this portion reminds us that we can always control our response to adversity, either by rising higher or by falling down. We have been given the gift of being part of a people. We have been given the opportunity to join in community. We have been given the chance to ennoble ourselves and to grow in soul. But it takes meaningful investment on our parts - and our sacred Tradition shows us that we will get back far more than we put in when it comes to growing in soul.