

Moshe said to the assembly, “This is the thing that Hashem commanded to be done.” (8:5)

Rashi explains that Moshe Rabbeinu was telling the people that anointing Aharon and preparing him to serve as Kohen Gadol was not his own “idea.” He was following the instruction of the Almighty. Moshe was concerned that the people might suspect that he was acting either on his own behalf or on the behalf of his brother Aharon. He mitigated their concerns. While this may have “calmed” the people, Chazal relate that Moshe was still worried that he might personally benefit from the honor of investing Aharon into the Priesthood. This would constitute me’ilah, unlawfully benefiting from this holy endeavor.

Hashem allayed his fears, saying that he had not trespassed the parameters of kedushah, holiness. Now Aharon worried that perhaps he was usurping his position and taking too much glory for himself. Once again, Hashem assuaged his apprehension concerning his ascension to the Kehunah Gedolah.

Horav Eliyahu Meir Bloch, z.l., explains that Moshe Rabbeinu was acutely aware of the pitfalls surrounding kavod, honor/esteem. He knew that he could reconcile whatever personal feelings he might have regarding the unprecedented honor he was receiving, but what about the people? Would they understand that he was only doing “his job” by performing Hashem’s command? Imagine what Moshe was thinking as he ministered to Aharon. He was worried that the people might think he was acting for personal aggrandizement!

What a lesson for those of us fortunate enough to be osek b’melech ha’kodesh, involved in holy Torah endeavors. To paraphrase Rav Elya Meir, “It is our obligation to be concerned that everything, every aspect of our holy endeavor, is for kavod Shomayim, the honor of Heaven, and not for personal glory. Even if this seems difficult, we should constantly try to focus our thoughts in such a manner that it pleases the Almighty.”

In his thesis on the function of the Priesthood and the Kohen’s attitude, Horav S.R. Hirsch, z.l., explains why the Kohen’s offering is entirely burnt; nothing of it is to be eaten. It is meant to concretize in the Kohen’s mind that he is not to hold his office for the sake of the material benefits that accompany it, but to view this material largesse merely as unavoidable. He needs the material sustenance for his existence, which is an essential component to his fulfilling the sacred purpose of his office. He is not to permit his service to be absorbed by his existence, but, rather, existence is to be “given up” as a Korban Olah, elevation/burnt offering, entirely to his service. He accepts nothing for himself. His happiest moment is dependent upon Hashem’s satisfaction with his life. He lives to serve.

In Pirkei Avos (1:13) Chazal say, “He who makes personal use of the crown (of Torah) chalaf, shall soon be gone.” In one of the later chapters (4:7), Chazal admonish us not to “use the Torah as a

hatchet with which to dig.” The comparison to a hatchet seems somewhat inappropriate, since a hatchet is not a digging tool. This, however, is precisely the Mishnah’s point. When one attempts to dig with a hatchet, or, similarly, when one exploits the crown of Torah for his own personal interests – while he takes inappropriate advantages in business or politics as a result of his position in Torah – he is misusing and damaging a precious tool.

The word chalaf, shall soon be gone, actually means change. The knife used to ritually slaughter an animal is a chalaf, since it transforms the living into the dead. The word is also used to describe a banker who changes money. Reb Yitzchak Bunim, z.l., explains that in a sense the same idea applies to the individual who takes personal advantage of the crown of Torah. One who misuses the Torah for his own personal interests is, in reality, exchanging spiritual values for mundane vanities; he is transforming the matter from which the World to Come is created into the evanescent currency of ephemeral benefit.

Chazal attribute the destruction of Yerushalayim to this form of abuse. They corrupted the law to suit their own personal needs, manipulating the Torah for their own purposes; they decided questions of halachah to their advantage. What we often forget is that, while it may seem to work for the time being, we will eventually face consequences for impugning the integrity of our spiritual position.