Feedback welcome
scan to share your thoughts

Pre-order the Torah Is Geshmack sefer
$25 · free U.S. shipping · scan the code
Full details on the last page

The mission of **Torah Is Geshmack** is to bring out the richness and enjoyment of Torah for everyone, and in doing so bring them closer to Hashem.

פרשת שמיני תשפ״ו

A Fatal Closeness

Dovid Kopel

Just when כלל ישראל (*the Jewish people*) first sees that Hashem truly dwells among them, everything seemingly collapses.

The whole day is building toward this moment. The עבודה (*service*) is performed. משה and אהרן bless the people. And then:

> וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה׳ וַתֹּאכַל עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ (ויקרא י:ב)...

A fire comes forth from before Hashem and consumes the קרבן (*offering*). And כלל ישראל responds in the most beautiful way possible:

> וַיַּרְא כָּל־הָעָם וַיָּרֹנּוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם (ויקרא ט:כד)

They see. They sing out. They fall on their faces. Joy and awe together. The inauguration of the משכן (*Tabernacle*) has succeeded. The שכינה (*Divine Presence*) is here.

And then immediately everything turns.

נדב and אביהוא bring their מחתות (*firepans*). They place fire inside. They place קטורת (*incense*) on top. And then the תורה says:

> וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מַחְתָּתוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֵן אֵשׁ וַיָּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קְטֹרֶת וַיַּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה׳ אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם (ויקרא י:א)

And again:

> וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה׳ (ויקרא י:ב)

The exact same phrase.

That is not incidental. The same fire that a moment earlier signified closeness, acceptance, revelation — now becomes consuming judgment.

It is almost like the attraction and repulsion of magnets: the same force can either draw or repel, depending on orientation. So too the אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה׳. When man approaches through the path Hashem commanded, the Divine fire signifies רצוי (*acceptance*). When man approaches through a self-fashioned path, that very nearness becomes unbearable.

If the first day of the משכן had been only joy, we might have misunderstood the meaning of Hashem dwelling among us. We might have thought that closeness means only inspiration, uplift, the feeling of being near. So on the very first day, Hashem teaches something deeper: yes, He

wants closeness — but closeness has a form, closeness has law, closeness has the גדרים (*boundaries*) of תורה.

What exactly was the sin here?

The פסוק (*verse*) is very exact. First it tells us what they did:

> וַיִּקְחוּ… וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ… וַיָּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קְטֹרֶת (ויקרא י:א)

They took, they placed fire, they placed קטורת.

But then the תורה adds another phrase:

> וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מַחְתָּתוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֵן אֵשׁ וַיָּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קְטֹרֶת וַיַּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה׳ אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם (ויקרא י:א)

That is already not just narrative. That is the תורה's judgment.

It is as though the פסוק first tells us the physical sequence and then defines it for us. They were not merely arranging pans. They were being מקריב (*bringing near / offering*) before Hashem. They were attempting קירבה (*closeness*). And the תורה says: the form that קירבה took was אש זרה.

Not קטורת זרה.

אש זרה.

The fire itself was the vehicle of approach.

That is the frightening depth of the פרשה (*section*). Their longing may have been for closeness, but the medium through which they sought that closeness was פסול (*disqualified*). And because the medium was פסול, the act never arrived at קרבן-status in the normal way. It did not become a proper קרבן that could be consumed upon the מזבח (*altar*).

And that is why the next פסוק is so exact.

It does not tell us what happened to their קטורת.

It does not tell us whether their offering was accepted or rejected.

It does not say that the fire consumed the incense.

It says:

> וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה׳ וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמֻתוּ לִפְנֵי ה׳ (ויקרא י:ב)

It consumed them.

And only then:

> וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה׳ וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמֻתוּ לִפְנֵי ה׳ (ויקרא י:ב)

They died before Hashem.

The offering is almost not the story. They are.

The language seems redundant — and that is exactly what forces the question. If the תורה had only said "וימותו," we would know there was punishment.

If it had only said "ותאכל אותם," we would know there was consuming fire.

By saying both, the תורה tells you that this was not just death, and not just fire — it was a consuming encounter with Divine closeness that resulted in death.

Earlier, on the מזבח, the fire consumes the קרבן. Here, the fire does not consume what they brought. It consumes the bringers themselves.

And perhaps that is the whole point.

Their פסול was not simply a flaw in an offering. It was a פסול in the קירבה itself. The path inward was not the path Hashem had commanded. And therefore the קרבן did not arrive. They did.

That sounds terrifying — and it is. But maybe it is also exactly what משה says next to אהרן:

> הוּא אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה׳ לֵאמֹר בִּקְרֹבַי אֶקָּדֵשׁ וְעַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָעָם אֶכָּבֵד (ויקרא י:ג)

This is how closeness works.

Not that the rules become more lax the closer one is to Hashem.

The opposite.

The closer one is, the more exact holiness becomes.

בקרבי אקדש means: through those nearest to Me, My קדושה (*holiness*) is made manifest.

וְעַל פְּנֵי כָל הָעָם אֶכָּבֵד means: before the eyes of all the people, My כבוד (*honor*) is revealed in its full weight.

This is not just consolation. משה is not saying, "Do not be upset." He is saying: understand what happened. The first day of the משכן had to teach not only that Hashem is near — but how Hashem is near.

And that makes אהרן's silence all the more awesome.

> וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אַהֲרֹן הוּא אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה׳ לֵאמֹר בִּקְרֹבַי אֶקָּדֵשׁ וְעַל פְּנֵי כָל הָעָם אֶכָּבֵד וַיִּדֹּם אַהֲרֹן (ויקרא י:ג)

He was silent.

Not because pain is unreal.

Not because questions are forbidden.

But because at that moment, he understands that this was not abandonment. This was not Hashem turning away. They died לפני ה׳. In His presence. In closeness. The tragedy is not that Hashem did not want them. The tragedy is that closeness to Hashem is so real that it cannot be entered except through the vessels He gives.

And here is the יסוד (*foundation*) the פרשה is teaching. Yiddishkeit is not the religion of "whatever feels meaningful to me." A מצוה (*commandment*) is not whatever I decide is a good deed. קדושה is not self-expression. The way to Hashem is not the path that feels most spiritual to the individual, but the path Hashem commanded: תורה and מצוות. That is what it means to be an עבד ה׳ (*servant of Hashem*), and that is what makes קירבה real.

But that does not mean feeling spiritual is unimportant. Feeling uplifted in עבודת ה׳ (*service of Hashem*) is a beautiful thing. The problem is not spirituality. The problem is emptiness. A חלל is a פסול כהן (*disqualified* כהן), one whose קדושת כהונה (*priestly holiness*) has been emptied out. That is why the word carries the sense of a void. And that is exactly what we do not want: not closeness,

but empty closeness; not yearning, but vapid yearning; not fire, but fire with no substance. Feeling spiritual is wonderful, but it is not what defines the act. Sometimes a person does a מצוה and simply is not feeling it, and he still does it, because he is an עבד ה׳. That is not a contradiction to עבודת ה׳; that is עבודת ה׳. The greater challenge is often the inverse: when a person feels deeply moved, uplifted, and close, but the substance is missing.

I once heard of a great Rav who was approached by a woman who said she wanted to wear a טלית because she felt it would be spiritually meaningful. The Rav told her, "Try davening with a four-cornered garment and then come back and tell me how it feels." She did, and later returned and said, "Rabbi, it was incredible. It was such a spiritual experience." He answered her, "But that was not a מצוה. That was just a garment without ציצית." His point was simple and piercing: what she wanted was the feeling of spirituality without the substance of מצוה. But that is not what Yiddishkeit is about.

The תורה is teaching that true קירבה is not measured only by what one feels, but by whether that feeling is held within the form Hashem gave.

Hashem does not "get angry" in the childish sense and turn His back. He remains before us — we are לפני ה׳ — throughout the whole story.

They brought before Hashem.

A fire came forth from before Hashem.

Everything remains in the language of nearness.

And that may be the deepest lesson of all. Hashem loves closeness. He wants closeness. But because He wants it, He gives תורה. Law is not the negation of love. Law is the form love must take in the presence of Hashem.

And maybe this is not only the story of נדב and אביהוא. Maybe this is the human condition.

A person wants closeness. A Yid wants Hashem. We want warmth, revelation, transcendence, meaning. And so often we want the right thing in the wrong form. We want אמת (*truth*), but on our own terms. We want holiness, but without submission. We want the fire, but we want to choose the vessel.

And the תורה tells us: that cannot work.

The deepest human longing is holy. But if it is not realized within the גדרי התורה, then even holy longing becomes dangerous. The problem is not that man wants too much. The problem is that man wants closeness without accepting the way closeness works.

And perhaps this is why the משכן comes where it does in the תורה. If the משכן is, as many understand, the atonement for the חטא העגל (*the sin of the Golden Calf*), then the point becomes even sharper. The עגל was also a self-fashioned attempt to make Divine closeness visible in this world. And the משכן is Hashem's answer: yes, I will dwell among you — but only in the way I command. Only through the vessels I give. Only through the holiness I define.

And that is why it is so painful that this happens דווקא in אהרן's house. אהרן, who stood at the center of the עגל, now stands at the center of its תיקון (*repair*). The same man bound up with the disaster of self-fashioned nearness is chosen to serve in the place where true closeness is restored. But that repair is not cheap.

I would even say that in this incident, אהרן in some way bears some of the cost of his involvement in the עגל here. Not in a shallow sense of simple punishment, but in a much deeper and more painful way. The consequences of misframed קירבה are written into his own home. The one who was implicated in the disaster of a humanly fashioned closeness now learns, through the loss of his sons, that Divine closeness can only live within the exact form Hashem commands. We know he was well-intentioned, but his actions carried real consequences.

That is not incidental. It is seen here in plain sight.

The wound and the healing are bound together.

The same figure who stands at the center of the catastrophe stands at the center of the repair. And in his own family, the תורה writes with terrible clarity, that even after the עגל, even after forgiveness, even after the building of the משכן, closeness still cannot come on human terms.

And maybe that is where the idea that תשובה (*repentance*) precedes the world enters so powerfully.

If תשובה was created before the world, that means human failure is not an afterthought. רבונו של עולם built a world in which man will long, fail, misalign, and still be given a path back. The משכן is that path back. It is the place where a broken man can once again live לפני ה׳.

But precisely because it is the path back, it cannot be self-authored. The whole point of תשובה is not merely that man can return. It is that man returns by surrendering to the form Hashem gives him.

So why did it have to happen now?

Because if it had not happened now, we would have mistaken revelation for spirituality. We would have thought that Divine nearness means whatever makes me feel uplifted, whatever I decide is holy, whatever seems like a meaningful "good deed" to me. But Yiddishkeit is not defined by what makes me feel good. It is about רצון ה׳ (*the will of Hashem*). It is about being an עבד ה׳ and growing true קירבה in the way Hashem Himself outlined — through תורה ומצוות.

On the very day that כבוד ה׳ appears to כלל ישראל, Hashem reveals the whole truth: He is near, and therefore He is holy. He loves us, and therefore His nearness has form. He invites us inward, and therefore we dare not invent the path.

That is the ache of the פרשה.

And that is also its comfort.

The answer is not distance from Hashem.

The answer is not less longing.

The answer is to learn how closeness works.

May we be זוכה (*merit*) to find those paths of קירבה to Hashem that truly deepen our עבודת ה׳, not the paths that merely feel right to us, but the ones Hashem Himself has placed before us through תורה ומצוות. And may we recognize those opportunities, embrace them fully, and through them grow ever closer to Hashem.

Dovid Kopel · TorahIsGeshmack.com

Visit the site

Join our WhatsApp



For contact inquiries or if you wish to sponsor an issue, please email **dovid@torahisgeshmack.com**

Dedicated anonymously

לז״נ דוד יוסף בן שלום ונחה דבורה בת אסתר ואשר לעמל חיים בן דוד יוסף

TorahIsGeshmack.com

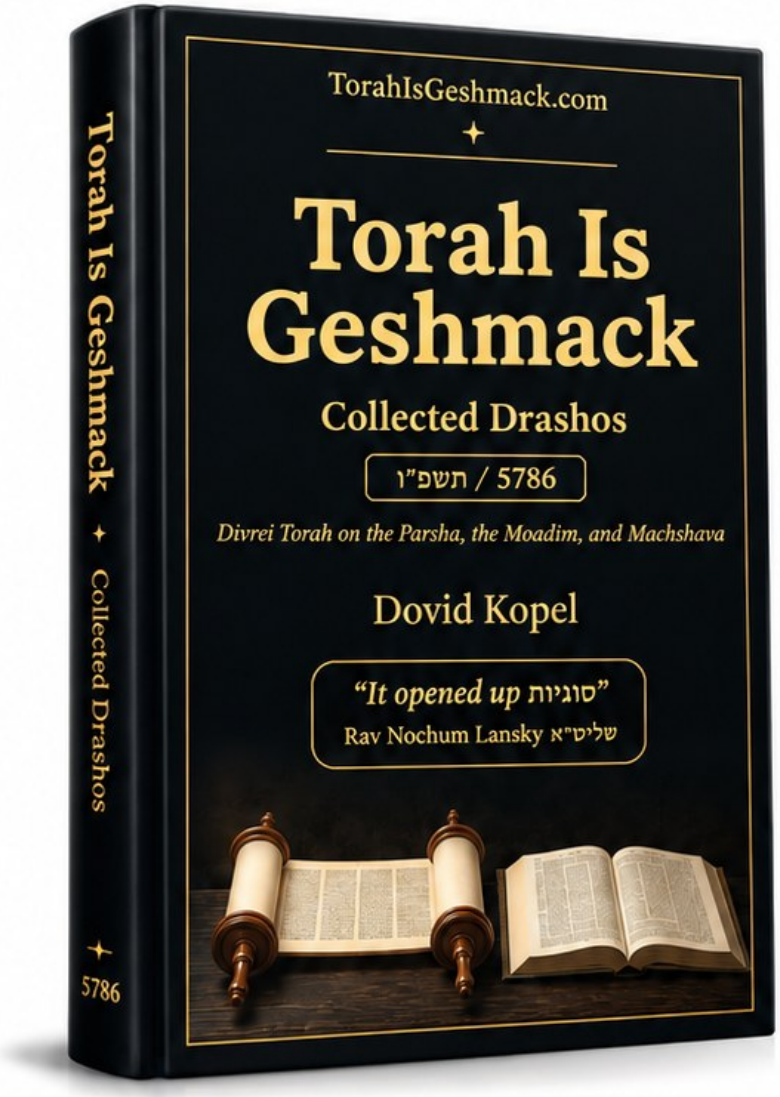
Torah Is Geshmack

Close To Torah

Collected Drashos

תשפ"ו / 5786

Divrei Torah on the Parsha, the Moadim, and Machshava



"It opened up סוגיות"

Rav Nochum Lansky שליט"א

PRE-ORDER: $25

Free U.S. shipping | Baltimore drop-off

SCAN TO PRE-ORDER

form.jotform.com/262865600851056

Divrei Torah on the Parsha

Inspiring Drashos on the Moadim

Thoughtful Machshava

Hope to be available by חנוכה

I learn Torah, and it's geshmack.