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It's What You Do, Not What It Is

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Shmini

It's What You Do, Not What It Is

Good Shabbos!

Every time there is another school shooting or public attack involving guns, especially in the United States, where it's still legal to own and even carry a lot of guns (at least depending on which city and state you're talking about), the debate over gun control erupts all over again.

Some argue that the root of the problem in the United States is simply because it's very easy to get guns in the United States—and that the moment they put limits on acquiring firearms, everything will change; just collect all the firearms from the citizens and the epidemic of gun violence in the country will stop.

But as is the case with everything, the issue of gun control has its parallel in the Torah. And that, of course, brings us to everyone's favorite movie of all time, Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark

Now, as you surely all need no reminding, Indiana Jones in the movie searches for the biblical Aron, the Ark of the Covenant so that the Nazis don't get to it first and use its supernatural power to control the world.

But the really interesting thing is that the idea for the movie was based on a true story recorded in the Tanach.

During the era of Ayli the High Priest, when the Aron was in the Mishkan (Tabernacle) in Shiloh, the Jewish Nation was locked into a prolonged war with the Pelishtim (Philistines) and was unable to defeat them in combat. Then they remembered that during the era of Yehoshua (Joshua), several hundred years earlier, the Aron HaBris (Ark of the Covenant) would be carried in front of the camp and cause them to win every battle—and now, since they were in a very tough situation, they decided, without Ayli's permission, to bring the Aron out from the Mishkan in Shiloh and take it to the battle front so that it would bring about victory.

So when the Aron was brought to the front lines, the entire crowd roared with enthusiasm—"and the earth shook," as the Tanach tells us. They all believed that the Aron would save them. Even the Pelishtim, who had also heard the news, were very shocked—and so they organized a hasty draft and bolstered their ranks to win the battle. And indeed, in the fighting the next day, the Pelishtim won! Not only that, but Ayli's two sons Chofni and Pinchas were killed in the fighting—and the Aron fell into Pelishti hands.

So the Pelishtim took the Aron back to their territory—but every place the Aron was kept, it sowed retribution. Disease and death broke out every place everywhere the Aron went.

At first, the Aron was brought to the temple of Dagon, a false god, in the city of Ashdod. But when the Pelishtim there saw what havoc erupted because of the Aron, they sent it over to Gass, another Pelishti city. But there, too, the Tanach tells us that “G-d’s Hand was a very great upheaval in the city, and it smote the people of the city from children to adult.”

So then, we are told, the Aron was dispatched to the Pelishti city of Ekron—but then, “the Ekronim cried out, saying, ‘They released upon me the Ark of the G-d of Israel to kill me and my nation!’ ” So the people of Ekron were terrified of the Aron.

Well, after seven months of having the Aron, the Pelishtim decided to return it to the Jewish Nation. So the Aron was brought to the Jewish city of Beit Shemesh—but there, too, even among Jewish people, calamity broke out. The Tanach tells us, “And the people of Beit Shemesh were smitten for they had seen the Ark of the L-rd.” What had happened is that the Beit Shemesh people had actually removed the cover of the Aron and looked inside (like the German “High Priest” does in Indiana Jones), and they were therefore stricken (Metzudas Dovid)

So ultimately, the Aron was brought to the house of Jew named Avinadav, where he and his son Elazar protected the Aron, as Shmuel I, chapters 5-7 tells us.

And that brings us to the Haftarah that we read for this week’s Torah portion of Shmini.

In the Haftarah, we read about how the Aron has been resting safely in the House of Avinadav for 20 years—until King David comes along and begins his reign in Jerusalem and decides to bring the Aron up from the House of Avinadav to Jerusalem.

So King David comes along with a brand-new wagon, puts the Aron on the wagon—and marches at the head of a procession of 30,000 men accompanying the Aron back into Jerusalem with song and dance. But then, at the last minute, it looks like the Aron is going to fall off the wagon—so Uza, Avinadav’s son, grabs onto it so that it doesn’t slip off (because the oxen had stumbled). But then, a great calamity happens—“and G-d’s Wrath flared against Uza,” and he dies immediately on the spot.

The Aron has struck again.

King David himself laments the tragedy and says, “How will I bring the Ark of G-d to me?” And so King David decides to not bring the Aron directly to Jerusalem but rather, to “park” it for a time in the house of a Levite by the name of Oved-Edom the Giti.

Now Uza died, the commentators tell us, for several reasons: 1. The Aron was meant to be transported by hand, not on a wagon; 2. Only Levites were permitted to physically handle the Aron, and Uza was of the Tribe of Yehudah; and 3. It was forbidden to make direct physical contact with the Aron—it could only be touched once it was covered in its packing cloths.

However, while the Aron was in the house of Oved-Edom, a “revolution” took place—“And G-d blessed Oved-Edom and his entire house.” The blessing, we are told, manifested itself in the form of Oved-Edom’s wife, and all her daughters-in-law, giving birth to male children and not only that, but G-d also blessed them with wealth and with everything good. So when King David heard about that, he decided again to bring the Aron up to Jerusalem—but this time, the right way. This time, the Levites carried the Aron the way it was meant to be transported (Shmuel II:6).

And on the fact that G-d blessed the house of Oved-Edom, the Mechilta commentary tells us something very interesting: “[The Nation of Israel] said, ‘This Aron is punitive! It struck the people of Beit Shemesh, it struck Uza!’ And so G-d made it that the Jews would know that the Aron was a source of blessing, as the verse states, ‘And the Aron dwelt in the house of Oved-Edom, and G-d blessed Oved-Edom.’ ”

Essentially, G-d wanted to show that the problem here was not the Aron—not that the Aron was an “Ark of Punishment” like the Jews wanted to say it was and blame it for all their woes. And so G-d showed them that the very same Aron can also bring great blessing, as it did to the house of Oved-Edom, and that it all depends on our behavior.

But the Ark isn’t the only thing that has two sides to it depending on our behavior. We find the same concept with the Ketoress, the sacred Incense that was offered up each day in the Mishkan and later, in the Beis Hamikdash. And we find one side of Ketoress in this week’s Torah portion.

In this week’s Parshah, we read about the Chanukas HaMishkan, the Dedication of the Tabernacle. The Torah then tells us that in the middle of the great celebration, “Aharon’s two sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took their firepan and put fire in it and place incense upon it, and brought before the L-rd a strange fire that had not been commanded them. And a fire came forth from before the L-rd... and they died before the L-rd” (Vayikra 10:1-2). What basically happened there is that Nadav and Avihu brought unauthorized Ketoress and as a result, lost their lives.

In the Book of Bamidbar, in the Parshah of Korach, we read a similar story: 250 men who joined Korach claimed that they wanted to be Kohanim Gedolim (High Priests), too—why just Aharon?

So Moshe Rabbeinu suggested to them, “Do this: Take firepans for yourselves... and put fire in them and place incense upon them tomorrow before the L-rd, and the man whom the L-rd shall choose shall be the holy one; you have taken too much upon yourselves, sons of Levi!” Moshe Rabbeinu also warned them, “For the one He chooses will survive, and the rest of you will perish” (Midrash Tanchuma 5, Bamidbar Rabbah 18:8, quoted by Rashi, Bamidbar 16:6). And indeed, that is what happened in the end: “And a fire came forth from the L-rd and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who had offered up the incense” (Bamidbar 16:35).

So the very next day after the grim event, the Jewish Nation was already complaining against Moshe and Aharon: “You have killed the people of the L-rd!” (Bamidbar 17:6)—because of you, they all died. And as a result of that complaint, another epidemic broke out immediately among the Jewish Nation—and then, Moshe says to Aharon, “take the firepan and put fire upon it from on the altar and set incense, and walk quickly to the congregation and atone for them.” And that’s what Aharon did: “And Aharon took... and he ran to the midst of the congregation and set the incense... and he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped.”

So the Rebbe says something wonderful: “Why [was the plague stopped] with incense?” Because the Jews had been complaining and rumbling against the incense, saying that it was poison—Nadav and Avihu died because of it, and the 250 men of Korach were burnt to death because of it. So G-d said, ‘You’ll see that it will stop the plague, and that it is sin that is the cause of death.’ ”

So it's the same thing as with the Aron—here with the incense, too, it was easy for the Jewish Nation to blame something else other than themselves and their own behavior. And so G-d showed them that it was not the incense that was the problem but rather, on the contrary—the plague was stopped by the incense.

And yet another place we find this concept in the Torah is right after the Exodus from Egypt.

In the Book of Shmos, in the Parshah of Beshalach right after the Splitting of the Reed Sea, we are told that the Children of Israel arrive in a place called Refidim, where there is no water to drink. And immediately we are told that the first thing the Jewish Nation does is complain. They complain to Moshe Rabbeinu, “Give us water and we will drink!” and they immediately start whining, “Why did you bring us up from Egypt...?” And then, we read: “And G-d said to Moshe, ‘Pass in front of the congregation, and take in your hand the stick with which you struck the river, and go... and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come forth from it.’” And Rashi says something very interesting: “What are we taught by ‘with which you struck the river’? because the Jewish Nation was saying about the stick that it's only for punishment—the Pharaoh and Egypt were stricken with several plagues by it, both in Egypt and at the Reed Sea, and so we are told, ‘with which you struck the river’—for them to see now that it's even for good!” (Shmos 17:5).

So again we have the same story—here, the Jewish Nation blamed the stick for only bringing about punishment, but G-d showed them that Moshe's stick can save the entire nation from drought. And as the Rebbe quotes from the Midrash, Moshiach will come with Moshe's staff.

So the lesson, my friends, is this: sometimes it seems that something only brings bad news—only punishment, problems, trouble, or worse. But if we put in effort, even just a little, it's likely that we'll merit discovering that the “Arons,” the “incense” and even the “stick” in our lives all bring about redemption and solution, too.

And that's especially true for our personal lives. Sometimes something will happen to us that we're sure is some sort of divine punishment—for example, we lose our job. But if we're patient, we very well may notice that in the end, it was the fact that we lost our job that motivated us to start our own business—and succeed way beyond whatever we were succeeding at when we were working for someone else.

Or, for another example, a person may slip and fall and suffer a serious injury. She may be depressed that this has happened to her—only to clearly realize later that because of going to the hospital for treatment of that injury, the doctors “discovered” a completely unrelated condition that's far worse, but which is only in a very early (and treatable) stage. Essentially, then, it's the slip and fall injury that saved her very life.

And so let us hope and pray, my friends, that very soon—as the Midrash quoted by the Rebbe says—the same staff that Moshe Rabbeinu used to bring forth water from the rock be in the hand of Moshiach, and that with that staff, he take us out of exile, speedily in our days, amen! (Toras Menachem Vol. 27, pg. 330.)

Good Shabbos!