

Seasons of Nobility
Sermons on the Festivals



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Rabbi Aaron Levine

SEASONS OF NOBILITY
SERMONS ON THE FESTIVALS

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*In loving memory of
Sarah Levine*

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Foreword

Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine was a quintessential gentleman and scholar, embodying the values of Torah virtue and ethical behavior that he taught in his classes and writings. He was a world-renowned economist who served as the Samson and Halina Bitensky Professor of Economics at Yeshiva University, and as the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Judaism and Economics*. His published works, including *Free Enterprise and Jewish Law*, and *Case Studies in Jewish Business Ethics*, are considered classics in the domain of Jewish business ethics and law.

In addition, Rabbi Levine served as the Rabbi of a synagogue in Brooklyn for many years, during which time he inspired his congregation with homilies on the Torah portion of the week and on the Festivals, providing timely commentary on the topics of our times. As the grandson and namesake of the Reisher Rav, a preeminent Polish scholar who was the author of *Ha-Derash ve-ha-Iyyun*, a masterful collection of insights into the Torah, Rabbi Levine adroitly continued his family tradition of extracting penetrating ideas and lessons from the weekly Torah portions.

This book, edited with love by his family, is a compilation of Rabbi Levine's sermons on the Festivals that he delivered in his synagogue. Each essay is a self-standing gem, offering timeless wisdom in both scholarly and succinct fashion. Rabbi Levine's penchant for academic precision, combined with his reverence for the word of God, enabled him to convey an authentic Torah *Weltanschauung* for the complex political

Foreword

and socioeconomic challenges of the modern age. We are now all able to be beneficiaries of these pithy pearls of perspicacity.

The Talmud (*Hagigah* 15b) teaches us: 'אם דומה הרב למלאך ה' צבקות יבקשו תורה מפיהו ואם לאו אל יבקשו תורה מפיהו, "if the Rabbi resembles an angel of God, then learn Torah from his lips, but otherwise do not learn Torah from his lips." One only had to gaze at Rabbi Levine's countenance to recognize the face and demeanor of an angel. Those of us who were privileged to be his students can attest that he was a man who occupied a special plane of holiness. This book, endowed with the beauty of the words that once emerged from Rabbi Levine's lips, is similarly blessed with the sanctity of his spirit.

It is thus with great pleasure that we present this important volume in homiletics as the latest installment in the RIETS Press series. We are of course indebted to our indefatigable executive editor, Rabbi Daniel Feldman, as well as to the past and present visionaries and architects of the RIETS Press, former Presidents Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm and Richard M. Joel, President Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman, Rabbi Zevulun Charlop, and RIETS Dean Rabbi Menachem Penner. It is through their herculean efforts on behalf of the Yeshiva that we continue to imbibe the fruits of YU and RIETS scholarship.

Rabbi Yona Reiss
Director, RIETS Press

Preface

With deep gratitude to Hashem, we present this volume of sermons of our dear father, Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine, *zt"l*.

A renowned authority on Jewish business ethics, Rabbi Dr. Levine was the Samson and Halina Professor of Economics at Yeshiva University. A paragon of *Torah u-madda*, he published widely on the interface between economics and Jewish law, particularly as it relates to public policy and modern business practices.

Rabbi Dr. Levine was also a distinguished pulpit rabbi, toiling tirelessly in the rabbinate for nearly thirty years. In his sermons, he would urge his congregants to seize nobility, to leap toward greater achievement in religious observance and refinement of character. In his personal conduct, he was the very embodiment of those ideals.

This volume is a selection of Rabbi Dr. Levine's sermons on the Festivals, transcribed from his manuscripts dating from 1982 to 2011.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Rabbi Yona Reiss for including this volume in the works published under the auspices of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University, and for his eloquent and meaningful Foreword. To Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman, we express our sincere appreciation for his enthusiasm toward this work and his steadfast devotion in shepherding it through the publication process.

Preface

To Matthew Miller, Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Tomi Mager, Ita Olesker, and Shira Finson of Maggid Books, we extend a special note of thanks for their thoughtfulness, dedication, and professionalism in bringing this book to publication.

Rabbi Dr. Levine was born on the second day of Passover and passed away on the first day of Passover. On Passover, we observe the mitzvah of *haggadah*, the telling of the story of the Exodus, so that we can feel as if we ourselves had gone out of Egypt. As Rabbi Dr. Levine noted, “We are bidden to somehow leap the generations and touch the lives of our ancestors, to make the biblical figures come alive and vicariously feel their pain and triumph, to feel the birth pangs of a nation of Hashem.”

May the recounting of these sermons strengthen our Jewish identity and commitment to the Torah, connecting us not only with our father, the author of this work, but with the previous generations, back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Family of Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine, *zt”l*

Rosh Ha-Shanah

To Dumbfound the Satan

September 28, 1984

During the course of the year, the Satan assumes the role of prosecuting attorney in the Heavenly court. No transgression, however small, goes unnoticed by him. No less than stern justice is demanded for each offense.

On Rosh Ha-Shanah, we do something special to disarm the Satan, to silence his accusations. What do we do? We blow the shofar twice – once before *Shemoneh Esreh*, and once again after. How does this dumbfound the Satan? The hasidic master R. Pinhas ha-Levi Horowitz explains it by picking up on *Rashi's* statement that the performance of a mitzvah twice displays that we love mitzvot.¹

Now, we are told, for one who repents out of fear, his intentional sins are converted into accidental sins, but for one who repents out of love of Hashem, his intentional sins are converted into merits.² By

1. R. Solomon b. Isaac (*Rashi*, France, 1040–1105), *Rashi to Rosh Ha-Shanah* 16b, s.v. “kedei le-arbev.”

2. *Yoma* 86b.

performing the mitzvah of shofar twice, we demonstrate an attitude that we cherish mitzvot. The Satan then fears that if he dares mention some sin, Hashem will transform it into a merit. He therefore chooses silence.³

May I be permitted to add to this charming idea. Fully knowing that we show maximum reverence for a mitzvah at its outset, the Sages cleverly structured the mitzvah of shofar in a manner that the *reshut*, the “optional part,” is first, and the *hovah*, the “obligatory part,” is later, in accordance with the opinion of the *Ran*.⁴ We maneuver the Jew to treat the *reshut* as a *hovah*.

Moreover, there is another view in the *Rishonim* that the first set of *tekiot*, the *tekiot de-meyushav*, is the primary part of the mitzvah.⁵ If this is so, the learned person is thoroughly confused about which part is voluntary and which is obligatory. He is forced to treat everything in the same manner. Treating a *reshut* with the same urgency, enthusiasm, and awe as a *hovah* signifies that we love mitzvot!

The obligations that fall our way can be divided into *hovot*, inescapable obligations that cannot be delegated; mitzvot, obligations that can be delegated; and finally *reshut*, the whole realm of *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*, “beyond the letter of the law.” Now, it is the work of the Satan to chill the Jewish soul with the weapon of *maḥar*, “tomorrow,” to drag

3. R. Pinhas ha-Levi Horowitz (*Ba'al ha-Haftla'ah*, Germany, 1730–1805), *Panim Yafot*, Leviticus 5:26, s.v. “*mi-kol asher ya'aseh le-ashmah vah*.”

4. R. Nissim b. Reuben Gerondi (*Ran*, Spain, 1320–1376), *Hiddushei ha-Ran*, *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 16b. Two sets of shofar blasts are sounded on Rosh Ha-Shanah. The first set, the *tekiot de-meyushav* (lit., “the blasts that are sounded while sitting”), are sounded before or during the personal *Shemoneh Esreh* Prayer. The second set, the *tekiot de-me'umad* (lit., “the blasts that are sounded while standing”), are sounded during the communal *Amidah* service. The universal custom, however, is for the congregation to stand during the first set of blasts as well.

5. See R. Isaac b. Jacob Alfasi (*Rif*, Algeria, 1013–1103), *Rif to Rosh Ha-Shanah* 34a and Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Shofar* 3:12 (noting that the number of blasts sounded during the second set is limited to avoid inconveniencing the members of the community as they had already fulfilled their obligation to hear the shofar during the first set of blasts). See also R. Solomon b. Abraham Adret (*Rashba*, Spain, 1235–1310), *Hiddushei ha-Rashba*, *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 16a; R. Yom Tov Ishbili (*Ritva*, Spain, ca. 1250–1330), *Hiddushei ha-Ritva*, *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 16b and 34a.

down the mitzvah and *hovah* to *reshut*, shifting in time, place, and person all the mitzvot.

We can counteract this only by rearranging the letters of the word *maḥar* (מחר) to *romah* (רמח), a spear, and channel the *reshut* and mitzvah to the realm of *hovah*. This is the mindset of one who loves mitzvot.

I would submit that there is no area in our lives where the battle between *romah* and *maḥar* is more intense than in the area of attending to the needs of the community. It is here that we can easily delude ourselves into thinking that anything beyond minimum participation belongs to the realm of *reshut*. The man who regards the work of the community as a labor of love, something that he can never have enough of, something that he cherishes, is the true hero of the spirit. For him, our Sages say, “His righteousness endures forever” (Psalms 111:3). Why? Because such a man silences the Satan.

On this awesome day, when we recall the most difficult trial of our Forefather Abraham, the *Akedah*, let us take note that Hashem called to Abraham by enunciating his name twice, an expression of *ḥibbah*, “love.”⁶ Abraham responded with a great act that conferred merit for all time. Let us today merit *ḥibbah* with *ḥibbah* from everlasting merit.

6. Genesis 22:11; *Rashi* ad loc.

The Relevancy of the *Akedah* on Rosh Ha-Shanah

October 4, 1986

Perhaps there is no episode in the Torah that is given such prominence as the *Akedah*. It is both daily fare and the highlight of Rosh Ha-Shanah.¹

As great a trial as the *Akedah* represented for our Forefather Abraham, we know that the test will never be given to another mortal. Human sacrifice is an abomination, and there can be nothing further from the divine will than this.² So how can we relate to the *Akedah* today?

The *Akedah* is a story of how a great man dealt with contradiction. Hashem promised Abraham, “through Isaac offspring will be considered

1. The biblical account of the *Akedah* is recited daily during the Morning Prayer and is the Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah.

2. Deuteronomy 12:30–31; Jeremiah 19:5.

The Relevancy of the Akedah on Rosh Ha-Shanah

yours” (Genesis 21:12). From Isaac would emerge a nation as numerous as the stars of the firmament and the grains of sand on the seashore.³

Now Hashem says, “Bring him up there as an offering” (Genesis 22:2). This is a contradiction! What is to be of the future? What became of the promise?

Indeed, the element of divine contradiction explains why the trial of the *Akedah* was the most difficult trial, qualitatively different from the others, as the other trials did not have an element of divine contradiction.

Did the contradiction crush Abraham and paralyze him? No. He handled it brilliantly.

On one of the holiest of days, Rosh Ha-Shanah, a day on which we do not make explicit confessions of sin, we read the *Akedah* as a gentle but powerful reproof. We ask ourselves, how do we measure up in handling contradiction, inconsistency, and conflict of interest?

Every day, we pray, “Remove the Satan from in front of us and from behind us.”⁴ What does this mean? When we want to perform a mitzvah, the Satan gets the better of us and convinces us that on the scale of priorities, the mitzvah is either very low or zero. But if we somehow manage to overcome him and perform the mitzvah, the same Satan drums in us a sense of great accomplishment, as if we need not perform any more good deeds the rest of our lives. So great is our accomplishment that we were fully *yotzei*. We seem to be very comfortable with the contradiction. We have no problem living with this.

Then we are transported to one of the most compassionate moments in Jewish history. It is the eloquent plea of the Prince of the Tribe of Judah that the Viceroy of Egypt release his brother Benjamin. Although the evidence is overwhelming that Benjamin pilfered the Viceroy’s goblet, and there is really nothing to say in his defense, Judah pleads, “How can I go up to my father if the youth is not with me?” (Genesis 44:34). The old father will simply pine away from the anguish of being separated from his precious child.

It is then that Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” (Genesis 45:3). “But his brothers could not answer him”

3. See Genesis 22:17.

4. Evening Prayer (paragraph beginning with “*Hashkivenu*,” “lay us down to sleep”).

(Genesis 45:3). Our Sages see in Joseph's revelation a poignant reproof. *Oy lanu mi-yom ha-din*, "woe unto us from the Day of Judgment."⁵ What is the reproof? The *Beit ha-Levi* explains that Joseph was saying to his brothers, if you are so noble and you care so much for the welfare of the delicate old man, you should know that I am Joseph, and is it possible that Father is still alive? How could Father have survived the twenty-two-year separation? Why did you not think of the torture that you would cause our father when you sold me into slavery?⁶ Inconsistency is the greatest reproof for every individual, for there is no answer. "But his brothers could not answer him."

Perhaps the greatest application of the *Akedah* is in the realm of interpersonal relations. The *haftarah* of today is no coincidence. Rachel accomplished in the realm of *bein adam le-ḥavero* what Abraham accomplished *bein adam la-Makom*.

When Manasseh placed an idol in the Sanctuary, Hashem, according to Tradition, decided to destroy the Temple and exile His people. Thereupon, all the great personalities in Jewish history pleaded to Hashem to rescind the decree, but to no avail. Our Matriarch Rachel then pleaded to Hashem, "Your mercy extends beyond any mortal. Jacob worked seven years only for the right to marry me. But when my father Laban substituted Leah for me, I assisted the deception and gave her the passwords so that she should not be put to disgrace."⁷

On this very holy day, we can feel a sense of exuberant national pride that despite all the pogroms, persecution, and holocausts that our people have endured throughout the generations, we have survived and flourished in our religious beliefs, hence withstanding the test of the *Akedah* as a nation. But we must transfer the pride to a reaching out to our fellow Jew, capturing the spirit of Rachel, who did not allow conflict of interest to push aside her sister.

5. Genesis Rabbah 93:11.

6. R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (*Beit ha-Levi*, Belarus, 1820–1892), *Beit ha-Levi al Derush u-Milei de-Aggadata* (Jerusalem, 1985), *Va-Yiggash*, p. 62.

7. *Rashi* to Jeremiah 31:14; R. David Kimhi (*Radak*, Provence, ca. 1160–ca. 1235), *Radak* to Jeremiah 31:14, s.v. "ki einenu"; Lamentations Rabbah, *petihta* 24.