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Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The Jewish people are about to experience centuries of exile and eventual slavery in Egypt. They are certainly in danger of being destroyed both physically and spiritually. The rabbis taught us that by not forgetting their original names, by not completely becoming Egyptian in deed as well, the hope of the Jewish people to be redeemed and freed never died out. The names of their ancestors reminded them of their past and of the commitment of God to redeem them from their bondage and afflictions.

This experience of Egyptian exile imbedded within the Jewish world the importance of remembering our original names. For it was the existence and use of those names that prevented their extinction as a special and eternal people. Thus, in the introduction to the book of Shmot, the book of bondage and redemption, is the list of names of the sons of Yaakov, an eternal reminder of who the Jewish people really are.

Over the centuries, the Jewish people have continually struggled to retain their identity and sense of continuity through their names. In the Ashkenazic world it became customary to name children after deceased ancestors. This became a deeply emotional bond in families, ultimately leading to children being given multiple names to commemorate more than one ancestor. In the Sephardic tradition names are given to honor living grandparents and relatives. But, there also the sense of continuity and purpose is stressed in the granting of those names.

In more modern times Jews were given secular names as well to be used in general society. However, over the last few decades the use of exclusively Jewish or Hebrew names has become in vogue once again. So apparently there is a great deal involved in a name. Even in the non-Jewish world, the use of biblical names remains quite popular and widespread. People hunger for a connection to their past and such traditional, biblical, family names seem to provide a sense of immortality and continuity that flashy “cool” names cannot provide.

Names can therefore be an anchor to one's own self-worth and purpose in life. The Torah's insistence on recording the names of the sons of Yaakov – the eventual tribes of Israel – highlights this important fact of life and family to us. Perhaps this is what Midrash meant when it taught us that one of the causes of the redemption of Israel from Egyptian bondage was “that they [the Jewish people] did not change their names [from Hebrew ones to Egyptian ones.]”

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

[CS – late breaking dvar torah]

[from: **Rabbi Yissocher Frand** <ryfrand@torah.org>

to: ravfrand@torah.org

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Parshas Shemos

Dissension and Lashon Harah Undermine the Zechus of the Klal

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: # 1320 – Sitting Next to Someone Who is Davening Sh'moneh Esria –Is it Permitted? Good Shabbos!

1. Dissension and Lashon Harah Undermine the Zechus of the Klal

The Medrash says in the beginning of Sefer Shemos that Moshe saw the tremendous suffering that Klal Yisrael was experiencing. Moshe asked: What is the aveira (sin) of the Jewish people – more than any of the seventy nations – that they should need to endure such back-breaking labor? In effect, he asked a question which was a form of the age-old mystery of tzadik v'rah lo. (Why do the righteous suffer?)

Later, the pasuk relates that Moshe went out amidst his brethren and saw the fight between the Egyptian and the Jew: “He looked here and there and saw there was no man, and he smote the Egyptian.” (Shemos 2:12) Subsequently, Moshe went out on the second day and saw two Jews fighting. He asked the attacker: “Why are you hitting your fellow man?”

to which the accused asked, “Who made you officer and judge over us? Are you going to kill us like you killed the Egyptian?” The pasuk then says: “Moshe was very fearful and he said, “So now the matter is known.” (Shemos 2:13-14)

The simple interpretation is that Moshe's statement “So now the matter is known” is that Moshe was alarmed that his killing of the Egyptian, which he thought was done in total secrecy, had become public knowledge, and the matter would eventually get back to Pharaoh, who would take punitive action against Moshe. However, Rashi brings a Medrash that Moshe's statement “So now the matter is known” is an answer to his earlier question. Moshe said that he now understood why the Jews in Mitzrayim were experiencing such a terrible exile and suffering: I now realize that there are “dilturin” (talebearers and squealers) amongst the Jewish people.

The Sefas Emes raises a question: Yesterday, Moshe had a question for which he had no answer: How could it be that Klal Yisrael is worse than all the seventy nations of the world? Why do they need to suffer so much? The next day he sees that they speak lashon harah and he claims, “Now I understand their exile and suffering! The Sefas Emes asks: How does this simple observation answer Moshe's incomprehensible theological problem?

The Sefas Emes answers that the point of the Medrash is to emphasize the tremendous severity of the aveira of lashon harah. Perhaps the Sefas Emes is saying that when Klal Yisrael functions as a tzibbur (united people), then, Moshe could not understand why they should be worse than any other nation. However, Moshe observed, “When I see that they speak lashon harah, then something happens – they no longer have unity and they cease to function as a tzibbur.”

Initially, Moshe was looking at the phenomenon of the Jews' suffering from the perspective of the concept of “Kol Yisrael arevim zeh l'zeh.” He could not understand the suffering because Klal Yisrael as a nation has so much zechus (merit) – why would they be suffering so much? But once Moshe realized that they spoke lashon harah – that destroys the unity of Klal Yisrael. Once that happens, the Heavenly decree is not directed at a tzibbur anymore. Hashem sees a bunch of individuals rather than a unified and holy people.

Dissension forfeits the status of a klal (community), which in turn forfeits the zechusim (merits) of the klal, such that the question “Why is Klal Yisrael suffering so much?” cannot be asked. They become just a bunch of individuals. Anything can happen to an individual. Once they are reduced to the status of individuals, the principle of ‘tzadik v'rah lo’ – as incomprehensible as it may seem – can be invoked to ‘explain’ suffering that we cannot quite understand. However, the principle of ‘tzadik v'rah lo’ does not apply to a tzibbur. The Torah promises “And it will be if you will hearken to the mitzvos that I command you... you will have rain, everything will be good, you will gather in your crops, etc., etc.” As a nation, if you do the mitzvos, I am going to take care of you! Righteous individuals may suffer but not the nation as a whole, when it is righteous!

2. The Zechus of Na'aseh V'nishma

In Parshas Shemos, Hashem says: “And now, behold! The outcry of the Children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. And now, go and I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall take My people, the Children of Israel, out of Egypt.” (Shemos 3:9-10). What is Moshe's reaction? “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take the Children of Israel out of Egypt?” (3:11). When we hear that expression “Who am I to go before Pharaoh?” How do we understand it? Simply, we interpret it as “I am not up to the job. I am not worthy for this job. I don't have the skills for the job.” In other words, Moshe is saying “Mi Anochi? — The problem is ME.” However, Rashi interprets differently. Rashi explains Moshe's question as Mah zachu Yisrael she'ya'aseh lahem nes? “What zechus do THEY have that a miracle shall be done for THEM?”

The Sefas Emes comments on this apparent “switch.” “Mi anochi?” implies that the problem is with ‘me’. I am not worthy. But then Chazal

come along and say that Moshe is really saying that THEY are not worthy! What kind of zechus do THEY have that I should be able to take them out? So whose problem is it? Is it the problem of Moshe Rabbeinu or is the problem of the meritless nation? This is the question raised by the Sefas Emes.

The Sefas Emes answers with a beautiful interpretation: Moshe Rabbeinu wanted his brother Aharon to take the Jews out of Mitzrayim. Besides the fact that Aharon was older and Moshe was concerned about giving proper respect to his older brother, the Sefas Emes adds that Moshe knew that he and Aharon had two different types of nefashos (souls). The shoresh haneshama (root of the soul) of Aharon was chessed (kindness). He was the ohev shalom v'rodef shalom – the person who always tried to make peace amongst quarreling parties. He was beloved by everyone. When Aharon died, he was mourned by kol Beis Yisrael (the entire House of Israel). For lack of a better term, he was the “nice guy” – therefore everybody loved him. That was his shoresh neshama.

Moshe's shoresh neshama was not chessed. It was Torah. It was mishpat. He is the law giver. “I am the judge. I am the dayan. My shoresh neshama is the principle of “Yikov hadin es hahar” (Let justice penetrate through the mountain). That is why Moshe Rabbeinu said “Listen, Klal Yisrael is not worthy to go out based on the principles of din (justice). But if You (Hashem) have someone who represents chessed – someone who treats everyone nicely even though they may not be worthy of it – in his zechus, he can be the leader qualified to take an undeserving Klal Yisrael out of Mitzrayim.

“I – the man of truth and justice – am not the appropriate one to take undeserving Jews out of Mitzrayim.” Mah zechus yesh lahem (What merit do they have)? as Rashi says. It is not going to work! However, Aharon – the man of kindness and mercy – is the appropriate leader for this task. He will be able to take them out even if they are not deserving of such!

How does Hashem answer this challenge from Moshe? “For I will be with you – and this is the sign for you that I have sent you: When you take the people out of Mitzrayim, you will worship G-d on this mountain.” (3:12) Hashem responds to Moshe: You are worried that they don't have the zechusim? You are worried that you are the man of justice and they don't have the zechusim? They DO have the zechusim: How do they have the zechusim? It is because they are going to leave Mitzrayim and accept the Torah, saying the words “Na'aseh v'nishmah.” That is their zechus. So even though you are the ish hamishpat and even though you are the ish hadin, nonetheless Klal Yisrael will have the needed zechusim, based on their future actions.

The obvious question is that it has not happened yet. Is Hashem extending credit for what will be but has not yet transpired? This is sequentially inappropriate!

The answer, says the Sefas Emes, is that with Klal Yisrael you do not need to worry about sequence because who on earth says “Na'aseh v'nishmah” (we will do and then we will hear)? Who on earth says “I will write the check and then you fill in the amount!”? Nobody does that! Since Klal Yisrael exhibits this attribute of doing things out of sequence, that itself is a zechus and midah k'neged midah – correspondingly – I can judge them, not by what is happening now but by what will be in the future. Such is the zechus of Na'aseh v'nishmah. With this zechus, I can pay them now and then they will earn that payment in the future.

The Sefas Emes references a beautiful Medrash. The pasuk says, “Like the fruitful fragrant apple among the barren trees of the forest, so is my Beloved among the gods...” (Shir HaShirim 2:3). The Medrash comments “Just as with the apple tree the fruit emerges before its leaves, so too Israel uttered first ‘we will do’ before ‘we will hear.’” Klal Yisrael is like the apple tree. Although usually a fruit tree gives out the blossom and then comes the fruit, an apple tree reverses that sequence. The Medrash notes that so too the Jewish nation reversed the normal sequence and committed themselves to action (na'aseh) before even hearing the instructions (nishma).

Apropos to this attribute, the Ribono shel Olam says “I am not judging them like they are now (while still in Mitzrayim). I am judging them like

they are going to be (at Har Sinai) and therefore they have that zechus already.

This is a tremendous lesson regarding how we need to view people. It is a lesson for parents, for teachers, for Rabbeim, and for any person who leads others: Don't judge people by how they are just now. Try to project how they can be in the future.

Last weekend (January 2017), I was at a convention for a wonderful organization called Partners in Torah. This organization makes ‘shiduchim’ between people who are frum and at least know somewhat how to learn and Jews who are in far off places who have some desire to pair up with a Torah learning partner. They have found such people in far-flung places like Whitefish, Montana and even in Saudi Arabia – ALL over the place! These phone or Zoom “Chavrusas” inspire both of these “partners in Torah” and certainly increase the religious observance of those who are being exposed to Torah study for the first time in their lives. Many even become Shomer Shabbos and more. Over 70% of such dispersed and often-unaffiliated Jews increase their mitzvah observance in some way by virtue of the fact that they have a once-a-week hourly Torah learning phone conversation with a religious Jew who lives in Boro Park, Baltimore, or Lakewood. It is an amazing thing – someone in Arkansas and someone in Monse are learning b'Chavrusa!

There were several hundred people at this convention. They were made up of heimeshe people; people with streimlach (worn by Chassidic Jews on special occasions), people with black hats and people with kipot serugot (knitted yarmulkas) – all of whom were F.F.B. – frum (Torah observant) from birth. Then there were also people there who had ‘become frum.’ They looked like the above-mentioned frum people but if you spent a little time with them, you could detect right away that these people were Baalei Teshuva. And then there were people there who were literally ‘right off the boat.’ These people may have had long hair. One fellow wore a yarmulka on Shabbos but on Motzai Shabbos he already took off his yarmulka. There were men with earrings, the whole gamut.

You might look at some of these people and ask yourself: What is going to be with this person? You think this fellow has no connection to the life of a Ben Torah. But this is the kind of person who may be wearing a black suit and be groomed like a typical Yeshiva bochur a year from now. This is the koach (strength) of Na'aseh v'nishma. That is the koach of “You shall serve Elokim upon this mountain.” (Shemos 3:12).

The Ribono shel Olam is telling Moshe Rabbeinu something that perhaps Moshe needs to know as a leader of the Jewish people: Don't look at them now. Look at what can be. Hashem says to already credit them with the zechusim.

Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld was one of the grandfathers of the Baal Teshuva movement. There is a beautiful book about him called Reb Shlomo: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld (Judaica Press; 2008) His koach – this was in the 1960s – was that he was able to look at a person (many of whom were hippies or high on drugs or whatever) and he would not see the person who was sitting in front of him but he would see what could be with this person. That is the koach of “You shall serve Elokim upon this mountain.” and that is what Hakadosh Baruch Hu told Moshe.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion...A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117 0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2023 by Torah.org. Permission is granted to redistribute, but please give proper attribution and copyright to the author and Torah.org. Both the author and Torah.org reserve certain rights. Email copyrights@torah.org for full information. Torah.org: The Judaism Site Project Genesis, Inc. 833 Smith Ave., Suite 225 Baltimore, MD 21209 <http://www.torah.org/learn@torah.org> (410) 602-1350]

**Who Am I?
Shemot
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

Moses' second question to God at the Burning Bush was, 'Who are You?'. He asks God in the following way:

"So I will go to the Israelites and say, 'Your fathers' God sent me to you.' They will immediately ask me what His name is. What shall I say to them?"

Ex. 3:13

God's reply, Ehyeh asher ehyeh, wrongly translated in almost every Christian Bible as something like "I am that I am," deserves an essay in its own right.[1]

Moses' first question, though, was, *Mi anochi*, "Who am I?"

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" said Moses to God. "And how can I possibly get the Israelites out of Egypt?"

Ex. 3:11

On the surface the meaning is clear. Moses is asking two things. The first: who am I, to be worthy of so great a mission? The second: how can I possibly succeed?

God answers the second. "Because I will be with you." You will succeed because I am not asking you to do it alone. I am not really asking you to do it at all. I will be doing it for you. I want you to be My representative, My mouthpiece, My emissary and My voice.

God never answered the first question. Perhaps in a strange way Moses answered himself. In Tanach as a whole, the people who turn out to be the most worthy are the ones who deny they are worthy at all. The Prophet Isaiah, when charged with his mission, said, 'I am a man of unclean lips' (Is. 6:5). Jeremiah said, 'I cannot speak, for I am a child' (Jer. 1:6). David, Israel's greatest king, echoed Moses' words, 'Who am I?' (II Samuel 7:18). Jonah, sent on a mission by God, tried to run away. According to Rashbam, Jacob was about to run away when he found his way blocked by the man/angel with whom he wrestled at night (Rashbam to Gen. 32:23).

The heroes of the Bible are not figures from Greek or any other kind of myth. They are not people possessed of a sense of destiny, determined from an early age to achieve fame. They do not have what the Greeks called *megalopsychia*, a proper sense of their own worth, a gracious and lightly worn superiority. They did not go to Eton or Oxford. They were not born to rule. Instead, they were people who doubted their own abilities, who became heroes of the moral life against their will. There were times when they felt like giving up. Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah and Jonah reached points of such despair that they prayed to die. But there was work to be done – God told them so – and they did it. It is almost as if a sense of smallness is a sign of greatness. So God never answered Moses' question, "Why me?" but over time the answer revealed itself.

Still, there is another question within the question. "Who am I?" can be not just a question about worthiness. It can also be a question about identity. Moses, alone on the mountain, summoned by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, is not just speaking to God when he says those words. He is also speaking to himself. "Who am I?"

There are two possible answers. The first: Moses is a prince of Egypt. He had been adopted as a baby by Pharaoh's daughter. He had grown up in the royal palace. He dressed like an Egyptian, looked and spoke like an Egyptian. When he rescued Jethro's daughters from some rough shepherds, they went home and told their father, "An Egyptian saved us" (2:19). His very name, Moses, was given to him by Pharaoh's daughter (Ex. 2:10). It was, presumably, an Egyptian name (in fact, 'Moses', as in 'Ramses', is the ancient Egyptian word for "child". The etymology given in the Torah, that Moses means "I drew him from the water," tells us what the word suggested to Hebrew speakers). So the first answer is that Moses was an Egyptian prince.

The second was that he was a Midianite. For although he was Egyptian by upbringing, he had been forced to leave. He had made his home in Midian, married a Midianite woman - Tziporah, daughter of a Midianite priest - and he had been "content to live" there, quietly as a shepherd. We tend to forget just how many years he spent there. He left Egypt as a young man and was already eighty years old at the start of his mission when he first stood before Pharaoh (Ex. 7:7). He must have spent the overwhelming majority of his adult life in Midian, far away

from the Israelites on the one hand and the Egyptians on the other. Moses was a Midianite.

So when Moses asks, "Who am I?" it is not just that he feels himself unworthy. He feels himself uninvolved. He may have been Jewish by birth, but he had not suffered the fate of his people. He had not grown up as a Jew. He had not lived among Jews. He had good reason to doubt that the Israelites would even recognise him as one of them. How, then, could he become their leader? More penetratingly, why should he even think of becoming their leader? Their fate was not his. He was not part of it. He was not responsible for it. He did not suffer from it. He was not implicated in it.

What is more, the one time he had actually tried to intervene in their affairs – he killed an Egyptian taskmaster who had killed an Israelite slave, and the next day tried to stop two Israelites from fighting one another – his intervention was not welcomed. "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" they said to him. These are the first recorded words of an Israelite to Moses. He had not yet dreamed of being a leader and already his leadership was being challenged.

Consider, now, the choices Moses faced in his life. On the one hand he could have lived as a prince of Egypt, in luxury and at ease. That might have been his fate had he not intervened. Even afterward, having been forced to flee, he could have lived out his days quietly as a shepherd, at peace with the Midianite family into which he had married. It is not surprising that when God invited him to lead the Israelites to freedom, he resisted.

Why then did he accept? How did God know that he was the man for the task? One hint is contained in the name he gave his first son. He called him Gershom because, he said, "I am a stranger in a foreign land" (Ex. 2:22). He did not feel at home in Midian. That was where he was, but not who he was.

But the real clue is contained in an earlier verse, the prelude to his first intervention. "When Moses was grown, he began to go out to his own people, and he saw their hard labour" (Ex. 2:11).

These people were his people. He may have looked like an Egyptian but he knew that ultimately he was not. It was a transforming moment, not unlike when the Moabite Ruth said to her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi, "Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth was un-Jewish by birth. Moses was un-Jewish by upbringing. But both knew that when they saw suffering and identified with the sufferer, they could not walk away.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik called this a covenant of fate, *brit goral*. It lies at the heart of Jewish identity to this day. There are Jews who believe and those who don't. There are Jews who practise and those who don't. But there are few Jews indeed who, when their people are suffering, can walk away saying, This has nothing to do with me.

Maimonides, who defines this as "separating yourself from the community" (*poresh mi-darchai ha-tibbur*, *Hilchot Teshuva* 3:11), says that it is one of the sins for which you are denied a share in the world to come. This is what the Haggadah means when it says of the wicked son that "because he excludes himself from the collective, he denies a fundamental principle of faith." What fundamental principle of faith? Faith in the collective fate and destiny of the Jewish people.

Who am I? asked Moses, but in his heart he knew the answer. I am not Moses the Egyptian or Moses the Midianite. When I see my people suffer I am, and cannot be other than, Moses the Jew. And if that imposes responsibilities on me, then I must shoulder them. For I am who I am because my people are who they are. That is Jewish identity, then and now.

[1] I expand on this within my books *Future Tense* and *The Great Partnership*.

The Power of Blessings and Curses

Revivim Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

The power of blessings is greater than the power of curses * A parent's blessing for their child has a particularly strong impact * Parents should strive to bless their children, especially before their death * The Torah prohibits cursing someone, wishing for their death, illness, or other

misfortune * In principle, it is allowed to curse a wicked person who has sinned against you * However, due to the danger, it is preferable not to use curses * Despite the fact that curses have the power to cause harm, it is better not to fear them

Q: We learned in this week's Torah portion, Parshat Vayechi, about Jacob's blessings to his sons, and to Ephraim and Manasseh. From this, we see that blessings have power. But one could ask: since all blessings come from God, if it is God's will to bless someone, they will be blessed, and if it is not His will, they will not be blessed. What, then, is the value of the blessings of the righteous, or the parents?

A: Since God created man in His image, He granted man's speech the power to influence events in this world, and in the higher realms. Therefore, a curse from a person can harm, and a blessing from a person can cause goodness.

When a person sins, their status is damaged, but their situation is often still undecided. When someone curses them, the curse targets the flaw within them, and may tip the balance. On the other hand, when a person performs mitzvot, they accumulate merits, but often, their situation remains in balance. When they are blessed, a path is opened for God's blessing to descend upon them. Blessing (in Hebrew, bracha) indicates 'adding' and 'abundance', while a curse (k'lalah) signifies 'reduction', and 'deficiency'.

The power of blessings is greater than the power of curses, as our Sages said: "A good measure is always greater than a measure of punishment" (Sotah 11a).

The Blessings of Noah, Isaac, and Jacob for Their Children

A parent's blessing for their children has a particularly powerful effect, and when the parents are righteous, their blessing has an even stronger influence. This is why the curse that Noah pronounced upon his son Ham and his grandson Canaan, as well as the blessing he gave to Shem and Japheth, had an effect on them, and their descendants. As it is written: "And he said, 'Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.' And he said, 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and may he dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant.'" (Genesis 9:25-27).

Similarly, when Isaac, our father, was about to bless his eldest son Esau, his mother Rebecca feared that the blessing would be given to one who was not worthy of it, and she instructed Jacob to receive the blessing that was truly meant for him. Even after Isaac discovered that he had been tricked and blessed Jacob, he understood that his blessing had already taken effect on Jacob (Genesis 28:1-6).

Likewise, when Jacob, our father, blessed the sons of Joseph, he carefully placed his right hand upon Ephraim, as he had the divine insight that Ephraim, the younger one, would surpass Manasseh (Genesis 48:14-20). And just before his death, Jacob was careful to bless his sons in the appropriate and specific manner for each one, as it says: "And he blessed them, each according to the blessing he gave them." (Genesis 49:28).

Parents' Blessings

Not only do special righteous individuals have the power to bless their children, but all parents have a unique power to bless their children. Since parents raise their children with love and care, and with the intention to improve their lives, they act as a channel for the blessing to flow to their children. Therefore, their blessing carries significant weight. Furthermore, because they gave birth to their children, it was decreed from Heaven that they be the conduits of blessings for their children.

Because the blessings of parents have special power, many parents have the custom of blessing their children before significant events, such as weddings, entering school, military service, receiving a job, or traveling abroad. Many parents also bless their children on Friday night, as this is a special time for blessings, when the Shabbat enters with peace for Israel, and even the accusers are silenced, bringing joy and serenity, and blessing is added to the world.

Many parents also bless their children and grandchildren on the eve of Yom Kippur, when the heart is open to repentance, and in general, the

blessing they give their children and grandchildren encourages them to return to repentance, and strengthen their commitment to the Torah and mitzvot (Mateh Ephraim 589:2; Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 143:16).

Blessing Parents before Their Death

It is also fitting for parents to strive to bless their children before their death, as before a person dies, their soul is freed from the bonds of the body and is purified, and therefore, they have additional strength to bless (Sforno, Genesis 27:2; Radal). Our Sages also said: "You find that the righteous bless their children at the time of their death, as Isaac said to Esau, 'I will bless you before the Lord, before I die.' Therefore, when Jacob fell ill, Joseph took his two sons and brought them to his father to be blessed" (Tanchuma Vayechi 5).

Since a blessing said before death has great influence, parents who bless their children before their death are showing kindness to them. Even the children who come to their parents to receive their blessing before their death are repaying their parents with kindness, as they demonstrate their desire to continue their parents' legacy (Ma'avar Yabok, Emerei No'am 28).

What Is a Blessing?

A blessing that a person gives to another in their presence, contains a prayer to God, along with preparing the recipient to receive the blessing. When the person being blessed hears the blessing, their heart opens to accept it, and the blessing they receive becomes a conduit through which Divine abundance can flow to them. Therefore, a blessing combines both prayer, and spiritual action, to determine the future (see, Sefer Ha'Ikarim 4:19).

A Blessing between People

Even a blessing from one person to another has influence. As our Sages said: "Never let the blessing of an ordinary person seem insignificant to you, for two great leaders of the generation blessed them, and it was fulfilled. These are David, and Daniel" (Megillah 15a).

The power of a blessing is so great, that it can save from destruction. As it is written: "And the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name be famous in Israel.'" (Ruth 4:14). Our Sages explained that, thanks to this blessing, many generations later, the descendants of David were saved when Athaliah arose to destroy them (Ruth Rabbah 7:15).

Likewise, our Sages instructed that all participants in a circumcision should bless the infant: "Just as he entered the covenant, so may he enter into Torah, marriage, and good deeds" (Shabbat 137b).

Prohibition of Cursing

It is prohibited by the Torah to curse someone, wishing for their death, illness, or other misfortune. Even if the person does not hear the curse, it is still forbidden to curse, as it is written: "You shall not curse the deaf" (Leviticus 19:14). Two reasons are given for this prohibition: First, a curse corrupts the soul of the one who curses, filling them with negative traits such as hatred, anger, and vengeance (Maimonides, Book of Commandments, Negative Commandment 248).

Second, a person is created in the image of God, and one of the main expressions of this image is the ability to speak. Thus, a person's speech has power in both this world, and the Heavenly realms. Therefore, when one curses another, they harm them in this world, and cause accusations to arise against them in the Heavenly realms (Sefer HaChinuch 431; Zohar, Section 3, 85:1).

The Harm of Cursing

Generally, a person is judged according to their actions, not according to the curses cast upon them. Therefore, usually, when someone acts righteously, curses do not harm them, as it is said: "A curse without cause, will not come to rest" (Proverbs 22:6). However, in times of danger, if a person has a flaw, even if they are righteous, the curse may target that flaw, and amplify negative judgments against them (see, Zohar, Section 1, 175:1; Menorat HaMaor 20; Ohr HaChaim BaMidbar 23:8).

Our Sages also explained in the Mishnah (Makkot 11:1) that those who kill accidentally and need to flee to a city of refuge, are only freed when the High Priest dies. The mothers of the High Priests would provide food and clothing to the accidental murderers, so they would not pray

for the death of their sons. Our Sages asked: “What does it matter if they pray, for a curse without cause will not come to rest?” Our Sages answered that even the High Priests had some measure of guilt, as they did not pray enough for their generation to avoid accidental murder. This shows that a curse can harm even those who have not sinned, particularly when their flaw is connected to the reason they were cursed.

Curses Generally Return to the One Who Curses

In principle, it is permitted for a person to curse a wicked person who has sinned against them (Sanhedrin 85a). We also find that Prophets and Sages cursed those who sinned against them. However, because of the danger, it is better to avoid using curses. When a curse is not fully justified, it may return to the one who uttered it. Our Sages said (Sanhedrin 48b) that it is better to be among the cursed, than among those who curse. This was demonstrated when King David cursed Joab, the son of Zeruiah, for killing Abner, the general of Israel’s army, and hindering the process of uniting the tribes of Israel under David’s rule. David said: “I am innocent, and my kingdom is innocent, before the Lord forever from the blood of Abner ben Ner. May the curse fall upon the head of Joab and all his family, and may there not be a man cut off from the house of Joab who is a leper, or who holds a weapon, or who falls by the sword, or who lacks bread.” (2 Samuel 3:28-29). Our Sages said: “All the curses that David placed upon Joab were fulfilled in the descendants of David.” This means that when his descendants sinned, the curse of David came back to haunt them, and caused them to be punished.

Should One Fear Curses?

Although curses have the power to cause harm, it is better for a person not to fear them, because the more one fears them, the greater their harmful effect will be. Rather, one should strengthen themselves to follow the ways of God, for this is the most beneficial thing for protection from curses. As God commanded Israel in the section where all forms of sorcery are prohibited: ‘You shall be wholehearted with the Lord your God’ (Deuteronomy 18:13), and through this, you will be attached to life, and saved from all sorcerers and their curses.

Furthermore, when a person knows that the curses directed at them are unjust, it is appropriate for them to strengthen their faith that these curses will turn into good, and will not harm them. The more they strengthen themselves in this belief, the more it will indeed be so. Not only that, but the curses themselves will fall back upon the head of the one who uttered them, as it is said: ‘A curse without cause will not come to rest’ (Proverbs 26:2). The commentators explain there that if the curse is unjust, it returns to the head of the one who cursed (Rashi, Ralbag, and Metzudat David).

And thus, the Meiri (on Proverbs 26:2) wrote that a wise person should not fear rebuking someone for fear of being cursed, because ‘God will turn the curse into a blessing for him,’ and the curse will return to the one who uttered it.”

Parshat Shemot: Women and the Exodus

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

“And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob; each individual and his house came.” (Exodus 1:1)

The book of Exodus opens with a throwback to that which we already know from the last portions of the book of Genesis: the names of Jacob’s children and the seventy Israelite souls – the Jewish households – who came to Egypt. Why the repetition?

The great commentator Rashi attempts to explain that “even though Jacob’s progeny were counted by name previously, the names are here repeated to show us how beloved they were...” (Rashi ad loc.). However, these first few verses of the book of Exodus are actually a prelude to the enslavement in Egypt, the tragedy of the first Jewish exile. I understand a loving recount when times are joyous but I find such mention superfluous when we are facing suffering and tragedy.

What is more, Pharaoh makes a striking distinction between males and females when he orders Jewish destruction: “And Pharaoh commanded

his entire nation saying, every male baby born must be thrown into the Nile and every female baby shall be allowed to live.” (Exodus 1:22)

Pharaoh was apparently afraid to keep the Israelite men alive, lest they wage a rebellion against him; he seems to be fairly certain that the women will marry Egyptian men and assimilate into Egyptian society. However, logic dictates a totally opposite plan. Fathers often love and leave without having had any influence upon their progeny; indeed, many individuals don’t even know who their biological fathers are! Offspring are far more deeply attached to the mother in whose womb they developed and from whose milk they derive nourishment. Genocide might have been much easier for Pharaoh had he killed off the women and allowed the men to continue to live.

I would argue that although our Bible understands the critical importance of women – we have already seen how Abraham is the first Jew because he is the first individual who is introduced together with his wife who has her own name and identity – Pharaoh is totally oblivious to the pivotal role women play in the development of a nation. The Midrash on the first verse of Exodus – that we thought superfluous – provides an original meaning to the words “individual and his house”: “When Israel descended to Egypt, Jacob stood up and said, ‘These Egyptians are steeped in debauchery.’ He rose up and immediately married all of his sons to women.”

The Midrash is intensifying an oft-quoted statement in the Talmud, “I always call my wife ‘my house’” – since the bulwark of the home is the woman of the house. As the Jewish nation emerged from a family and family units are the bedrock of every society, it is clearly the women who are of extreme importance.

Pharaoh was blind to this. Apparently, he had no tradition of matriarchs like Sarah and Rebecca who directed the destiny of a national mission. For him, women were the weaker sex who were there to be used and taken advantage of. Hence Pharaoh attempts to utilize the Hebrew midwives as his “kapos” to do his dirty work of actually murdering the male babies on the birthstools. To his surprise, the women rebelled: “And the midwives feared the Lord, so they did not do what the king of Egypt told them to do; they kept the male babies alive” (Exodus 1:17).

It goes much further than that. The Midrash identifies the Hebrew midwives as Yocheved and Miriam, mother and sister of Moses and Aaron. The Midrash goes on to teach us that their husband and father Amram was the head of the Israelite court, and when he heard Pharaoh’s decree to destroy all male babies, he ruled that Israelite couples refrain from bearing children. After all, why should men impregnate their wives only to have their baby sons killed!? Miriam chided her father: “Pharaoh was better than you are, my father. He only made a decree against male babies and you are making a decree against female babies as well.”

Amram was convinced by his daughters’ words – and the result was the birth of Moses, savior of Israel from Egyptian bondage.

Perhaps the importance of women protectors of the household and guardians of the future of Israel is hinted at in the “anonymous” verse, “And a man from the house of Levi went and took a daughter of Levi” (Exodus 2:1). Why are the two individuals – Amram and Yocheved – not named? You will remember from the book of Genesis that it was Levi together with his brother Shimon who saved the honor of the family of Jacob by killing off the residents of Shechem, a gentile people who stood silently by while their leader raped and held captive Dina, daughter of Jacob. When Jacob criticizes them on tactical grounds, they reply, “Can we allow them to make a harlot of our sister?” With these words Chapter 34 of the book of Genesis ends; Levi and Shimon have the last word.

Moreover, we know from Jacob and his family that it is the wife who gave names to the children. Even more than Amram and Yocheved, true credit must go to the mother of Amram and the mother of Yocheved. Each of these women gave birth to children in the midst of black bleak days of Jewish oppression. Despite the slavery and carnage all around one mother gives her son the name Amram, which means “exalted nation”; the other mother gives her daughter the name Yocheved, which means “glory to God.” These two women were seemingly oblivious to the low estate to which Judaism had fallen in Egypt; their sights were

held high, upon the stars of the heavens which God promised Abraham would symbolize his progeny and the Covenant of the Pieces which guaranteed the Hebrews a glorious future in the Land of Israel. These two proud grandmothers from the tribe of Levi merited grandchildren like Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

Pharaoh begins to learn his lesson when Moses asks for a three-day journey in the desert; Pharaoh wants to know who will go. Moses insists: "Our youth and our old people will go, our sons and our daughters will go – our entire households will go, our women as well as our men." (Exodus 10:8)

A wiser Pharaoh will only allow the men to leave; he now understands that he has most to fear from the women. And so Judaism establishes Passover, the festival of our freedom, as being celebrated by "a lamb for each house," with the women included in the paschal sacrificial meal by name no less than the men. And so the women celebrate together with the men – the four cups, the matza and the Haggadah – the Passover Seder of freedom.

Shabbat Shalom

While Moshe Rabbeinu attended to the sheep, what rules applied to his own meals?

Eating Before Feeding Your Animals

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: Coffee and the concierge

"Was Noach permitted to have his morning coffee before he brought all the animals breakfast?"

Question #2: Dog's best friend

"I would like to eat an apple. Must I first feed Fido?"

Question #3: Fish on Shabbos

"On Shabbos, may I make kiddush before I feed the fish?"

Introduction

Considering Moshe Rabbeinu's responsibilities to his "flock" provides an opportunity to discuss the ruling of the Gemara (Berachos 40a; Gittin 62a) that one may not eat without first feeding his animals. This is based on the Torah's statement in the second paragraph of Shema, And I will provide grass in your field for your animals, and only subsequently does the Torah say, and you will eat and be satisfied (Devarim 11:15).

Analyzing the mitzvah

There are numerous questions about this mitzvah:

Is this required min hatorah or miderabbanan?

Are we forbidden to eat only a full meal, or even just a snack?

May I quench my thirst before I provide water or feed my animal? In other words, does the prohibition apply only to eating or also to drinking?

Does this mitzvah apply on Shabbos and Yom Tov?

These and other questions will be addressed in the course of this article.

Torah or rabbinic?

Let us start with a basic question: Is the obligation to feed my animals before I eat min hatorah or miderabbanan?

A prominent early acharon, Rav Yaakov Reischer (Shu"t Shevus Yaakov 3:13), rules that, although the Gemara cites a pasuk as the source for this halachah, it is required only as a rabbinic mitzvah, and the pasuk is an allusion, what Chazal call an *asmachta*. Although I have seen authorities quoted as holding that the requirement is min hatorah (see, for example, *Sedei Chemed* Volume I, page 40), I have not yet found anyone who rules this way clearly. Quite the contrary, the Rambam (*Hilchos Avodim* 9:8) states that feeding your animals before you eat is an exemplary way to act, but is not required.

Of course, this leads to another question: How can the Rambam rule that feeding your animals before you eat is merely an exemplary act, when the Gemara prohibits eating before you feed your animals? The Nishmas Adam (5:11) raises this question, answering that the Rambam, presumably, had a variant text of the Gemara, and suggests what he thinks that text was.

A full meal or a snack?

Are we forbidden to eat only a full meal before feeding our animals, or are we prohibited to eat even a snack?

This question is subject to a dispute among early authorities, which appears to be based on how one reads and understands the pertinent passage of Gemara. The two times the Gemara cites this mitzvah in our published editions, it quotes varying and conflicting passages. In Berachos, the Gemara reads, It is prohibited to eat before you provide food for your animals, whereas in Gittin the passage reads, It is prohibited to taste [food] before you provide food for your animals. In Chazal's lexicon, eating usually implies a full meal, whereas *te'imah*, tasting, implies a snack. Thus, the text in Berachos (eat) implies that the prohibition is limited to eating a full meal, but that one may eat a snack even though he has not yet fed his animals. On the other hand, the version in Gittin (taste) implies that even a snack is prohibited. However, I found variations on the Gemara texts, including versions in both places that prohibit tasting, and versions in both places that only prohibit eating. Most significantly, both the Rif and the Rosh, two of the most preeminent authorities, state in their comments to the passage in Berachos that tasting is prohibited. It seems that they prohibit even snacking prior to feeding one's animals, which is also implied by the Beis Yosef (*Orach Chayim* 167).

The two major commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch seem to dispute whether one may snack prior to feeding one's animals -- the Taz (167:7) expressly permits snacking before feeding your animal, whereas the Magen Avraham (167:18) implies that it is prohibited.

An in-between meals snack

Some authorities endeavor to resolve the inconsistency between the two Talmudic versions of the text. The Nishmas Adam suggests that the two versions are not contradictory. It is prohibited to eat a meal without feeding your animal first, and that one who is planning to sit down to a meal may not taste anything of the meal without first feeding his animals. However, it is permitted to eat only a small snack prior to feeding your animals, when that is all one intends to eat. This approach is how the Nishmas Adam concludes in his magnum opus, the *Chayei Adam* (5:11), where he implies that one may eat a snack before feeding one's animals.

The Nahar Shalom (167:4) answers the contradiction in the two texts in a similar fashion, ruling that when it is meal time, one may not eat even a snack, out of concern that he'll forget to feed his animals. If he starts eating between meals, one may eat a snack without feeding his animals first. This approach is also quoted by the Kaf Hachayim (167:52) as definitive halachah. However, the Shevus Yaakov, the Kesav Sofer (Shu"t Orach Chayim #32) and the Mishnah Berurah (167:40) all prohibit eating even a snack before feeding one's animals.

At this point, we can address one of our opening questions: "I would like to eat an apple. Must I first feed Fido?"

According to the Taz, the Chayei Adam, the Nahar Shalom and the Kaf Hachayim, one may eat an apple or some other snack before feeding his dog, although the Nahar Shalom and the Kaf Hachayim permit this only when it is not meal time. On the other hand, many other authorities prohibit eating even a snack without first feeding one's animals.

Is instructing enough?

The Nahar Shalom and the Kaf Hachayim also contend that if the owner commanded his servants to feed the animals, he may begin his meal. Since his instructions will be obeyed, he does not need to worry that his animals will go hungry. However, other authorities do not record this lenient ruling (see *Mishnah Berurah*).

Drinking before feeding

Is it permitted to drink before one feeds the animals, or is the prohibition limited to eating?

Based on the Torah's description of how Rivkah greeted Eliezer, the Sefer Chassidim (#531) makes a distinction between eating and drinking. The Torah teaches that Eliezer asked her for a little bit of water, and she answered him, I will serve you water and also your camels. The Sefer Chassidim asks how Eliezer could drink without first providing the camels with water. He concludes that although one may not eat without first feeding one's animals, it is permitted to drink. This conclusion is quoted by many later authorities (Magen Avraham 167:18; Birkei Yosef 167:6; Mishnah Berurah 167:40; Shu"t Har Tzvi 1:90),

although several others (Pri Megadim, Mishbetzos Zahav 167:7; Shu"t Kesav Sofer, Orach Chayim #32) dispute it. The Pri Megadim rules that when the animals are thirsty, one is required to water them before one may drink. He contends that Rivkah offered the men to drink first, because the camels were not as thirsty. This was because the camels had been drinking roadside water that people would consider too dirty to drink. I will share with you that I also do not know how the Pri Megadim knows to make these assumptions.

Another approach is that of the Chasam Sofer, who contends that when someone is offered food by a host, he may eat without first feeding his animals, since the host has no obligation to feed the guest's animals. This explains why Eliezer drank before watering his camels.

Yet another approach to explain Rivkah's actions is that she assessed that it was dangerous for Eliezer and his men not to hydrate themselves immediately, and that pikuach nefesh certainly supersedes the requirement to feed or water the animals first (Or Hachayim, quoted by Yad Efrayim on Magen Avraham 167:18).

A drinking problem

Why should drinking be permitted before one feeds one's animals when it is forbidden to eat, and, according to many authorities, even have a small snack? Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank (Shu"t Har Tzvi, Orach Chayim 1:90) provides two reasons for this distinction. First, suffering from thirst is far more uncomfortable than suffering from hunger, so the Torah did not require one to remain thirsty in order to make sure that the animals are fed. Second, the Torah forbade eating before feeding one's animals out of concern that once one gets involved in eating, he may forget to feed his animals. Drinking does not create this concern, since it takes less time and is not as involved as eating.

Is Shabbos different?

May one eat on Shabbos and Yom Tov before feeding one's animals? The Kesav Sofer rules that the prohibition of eating before one feeds one's animals applies only to eating a meal that does not fulfill a mitzvah, but that one may eat on Shabbos and Yom Tov before one has fed one's animals, since this eating fulfills a mitzvah. Not all authorities appear to accept this ruling.

Dog's best friend

Let us return to one of the questions we discussed above: "I would like to eat an apple. Must I first feed Fido?"

An anonymous questioner asked the great eighteenth-century halachic authority, Rav Yaakov Emden, whether one may eat before feeding his dog or cat. He responded that he does not know why his questioner thought that dogs and cats should be treated differently from any other of G-d's creatures. He suggests two reasons that might explain why the questioner thought that one may eat before feeding one's dog or cat. Each of these reasons requires an introduction.

Beheimah versus chayah

For certain laws, the Torah divides animals into two categories, beheimos and chayos. These two categories defy a clear translation in English, although often beheimos are called domesticated animal species and chayos are called wild species. Rav Yaakov Emden suggested that perhaps the questioner thought that the requirement to feed your animals before you eat applies only to species of animal that qualify as beheimah and not to those that are chayah, and that the questioner thought that both dogs and cats are categorized as chayos, thereby exempting the owner from the obligation of feeding his animals before eating. The Yaavetz does agree that both dogs and cats are categorized as chayos -- the Mishnah (Kelayim 8:6) quotes a dispute between Rabbi Meir and the Sages regarding whether a dog is considered a chayah or a beheimah. According to the Sages, the halachic conclusion, dogs are chayos, and the Yaavetz endeavors to demonstrate that cats also qualify as chayos.

However, the Yaavetz notes that the prohibition to eat before feeding your animals applies equally to beheimos and chayos. Although there are several areas of halachah in which there is a difference between kosher beheimos and kosher chayos, there is only one Talmudic source that discusses what halachic difference it makes whether a non-kosher animal is categorized as a chayah or as a beheimah. This source is a Tosefta (Kelayim 5:5) that discusses the above-mentioned dispute

between Rabbi Meir and the Sages whether a dog qualifies as a chayah or as a beheimah. The Tosefta asks, what difference does it make whether a dog is a chayah or a beheimah? The Tosefta explains that the difference applies to someone who gives all his chayos to his son, and we now need to know whether his dogs are included. According to the Sages, the dogs have now been given to the son, whereas, according to Rabbi Meir, they remain property of the father.

The Rash, one of the early Baalei Tosafos, adds another similar halachic difference that will result from the question as to whether a creature is a beheimah or a chayah. The case is where someone declared all his chayos to be kodesh, which means that they have all become property of the Beis Hamikdash. According to Rabbi Meir, since dogs are beheimos, in this situation his dogs will remain his property, whereas, according to the Sages, Fido and his buddies are now property of the Beis Hamikdash and require redemption.

Both the Tosefta and the Rash imply that the mitzvah of feeding your animals before you eat applies equally to beheimos and to chayos.

This Tosefta answers another question, which arises from a Mishnah (Kelayim 8:6) that states that a pig qualifies as a beheimah, whereas the elephant, the monkey and the arod, a type of wildass (very possibly the onager) are chayos. Since these are all non-kosher species, what difference does it make in halachah whether these species qualify as beheimah or as chayah? The answer is, what happens if Mr. Goldberg gave all the chayos in his personal zoo and petting farm to his son as a gift. Who owns the pigs, the elephants, the monkeys and the onagers? The halachah is that Mr. Goldberg still owns the pigs but he has given the elephants, the monkeys and the onagers to his son. (I will not delve into the question as to why Mr. Goldberg owned a pig, when this is forbidden. Perhaps a non-Jewish business contact gave him a present and he had not yet had the opportunity to sell it.)

Feed your workers!

Having established that the prohibition of eating before feeding one's animals applies equally to beheimos and chayos, the Yaavetz suggests another possibility why the questioner thought that dogs and cats might be excluded from the requirements of this mitzvah. Perhaps the requirement to feed your animal before you eat is because it is working for you, and the questioner thought that dogs and cats are not considered workers. According to this approach, one would be permitted to eat before feeding fish or canaries, since they are basically pension receivers, whereas one would be required to feed his carrier pigeons, cattle, sheep, goats, horses, donkeys and gaming falcons before eating. However, the Yaavetz rejects both suppositions of this approach.

First, he contends that both dogs and cats qualify as workers, dogs because they serve as loyal watchmen and cats because they clear the house of mice.

Second, the requirement to feed your animal has nothing to do with whether the animal works for you; once you are responsible for the animal, the rules of tzaar baalei chayim, not to cause an animal to suffer, require you to provide it with food. Thus, even pension-receiving animals are entitled to be fed, and the owner must attend to them before he is permitted to eat.

Man's best friend

So, is there any reason to treat dogs and cats differently from other animals?

Notwithstanding the Yaavetz's rejection of both of his suggestions why dogs and cats might be treated differently from other animals, he concludes that, although one is required to make sure that one's dogs and cats are fed, one is not required to feed them prior to his own eating. He presents the following novel suggestion: Since both of these species do not have difficulty finding food on their own, the responsibility to feed them does not lie so heavily on the owner to feed them before eating. The prohibition to eat before feeding your animals is restricted to animals that, once domesticated, would not be able to find food without the owner feeding them. The Yaavetz contends that only animals that have difficulty finding their own meals create an onus to the extent that their owner must go hungry until he provides them with victuals.

By the way, I found very few later poskim who quote this position of the Yaavetz as the accepted halacha.

Conclusion

Why are we required to feed one's animals before we eat? The Yad Efrayim (on Orach Chayim, Magen Avraham 167:18) suggests the following: One should always look at himself as unworthy to receive Hashem's bounty. Perhaps one's only merit to be fed is that we feed the animals that are dependent upon us. Thus, this mitzvah has a secondary goal – not only to teach us to be concerned about Hashem's creatures, but also to teach us humility.

from: Rabbi YY Jacobson <rabiyy@theyeshiva.net>

to: info@theyeshiva.net

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subject: The Burning Bush and the Tanya - Essay by Rabbi YY

The Inaugural Vision

The inaugural vision in which Moses was appointed to become the leader of the Jewish Nation and its eternal teacher, we should assume, contains within it the essence of Judaism.

Moses, shepherding his father-in-law's sheep in the Sinai wilderness, suddenly sees a blazing thornbush. "G-d's angel appeared to Moses in a blaze of fire from amid a thorny-bush," we read in Shemos. "He saw and behold! The bush was burning in the fire but was not consumed. Moses said to himself, 'I must go over there and gaze at this great sight—why isn't the bush burning up from the flames'". When Moses approaches the scene, G-d reveals Himself to him, saying: "Don't approach here. Remove your shoes from your feet, for the place upon which you stand is holy soil." He then speaks to Moses, identifying Himself as the G-d of your fathers," and charging him with the mission of leading the Jewish people to redemption.

It is a perplexing story. Firstly, what was the symbolism behind the vision of a burning bush? G-d has made numerous appearances in the Torah till this point. Yet never was it in a burning bush not being consumed.

Second, why did G-d tell Moses not to approach the bush? What would be wrong with him coming closer?

Third, what does G-d mean when He says, "The place upon which you stand is holy soil?" Why was the actual earth upon which he was standing holy? The burning bush was holy, for G-d was present in the flame, thus Moses was standing in a holy place. But why the emphasis on the actual sand and earth?

Interpretations abound. Today I will present a profoundly moving insight on the matter.[1]

The Thorns in the Fire

Since this revelation was the genesis of Moses's appointment as the leader of Israel who would transmit the Torah to Israel, this vision captures one of the common dilemmas in the life of the Jew and indeed of every searching human being.

One of the great challenges of any sincere person striving to grow spiritually is that even when he or she manages to ignite a fire in their soul, the fire never consumes the thorns present in the psyche. The passion is aglow, the heart is aflame, the ecstasy is ablaze, but the thorns refuse to be sublimated in the flame. Toxicity and anxiety take over. A person may be in the midst of sincere prayer to G-d, but suddenly a most ugly thought or craving will flare up in his brain. You may be experiencing a most happy moment in life, but suddenly the most obnoxious emotion surfaces in your heart. Even in our most potent fires, the thorns abound. Even in our most intimate, subtle, refined, joyous, spiritual experiences, we confront irrational fears, demons, and traumas. They often surface to the conscious in the most least expected moments.

The story of the burning bush which would not consume the thorns embodies the duality in every heart. On one hand, we experience a desire to be good and moral. But then, at other times, we are mundane and careless, overtaken by beastly tendencies, selfish impulses, and ugly emotions. What is worse, these polarities are often experienced in such close proximities with each other. In the morning, I may be infused with a sense of awe, wonder, splendor, amazement. At those times, I am

inspired, motivated to serve G-d, to pray, to learn Torah, to engage in mitzvos, good and holy deeds. Barely several hours—sometimes minutes—pass, and boom! The sublime ecstasy withers away. This spiritual person suddenly has a hard time refusing a slice of pizza, a particular website, or a terrible angry impulse.

When my heart is idealistic, I say to myself, "I really love this. It's great. Life is beautiful. I wouldn't give this up for anything in the world." And then, it's all gone. The whole spiritual high is naught. I am reduced to a small, petty, ridiculous, fearful, depressed, and angry creature.

Doubt

This dichotomy is one of the main factors causing people to give up on living a meaningful and joyous life. The tension is too deep, and I can't be a hypocrite.

Moses, the first and greatest Jewish teacher, approaches the thorn bush. He has one question: "Why does it not get consumed?" If the fire is real, why does it not consume the thorns?! How is it possible, Moses wonders, that if a person's spirituality is authentic, it has no bearings on his or her thorns? Unless of course, the fire was a delusion.

G-d responds: "Remove your shoes from your feet because the place upon which you stand is sacred soil." These words revolutionize our approach to the enduring struggle. Holiness lies in the very place upon which you stand. Don't wait till you reach your own psychological utopia; rather, the very place where you stand is holy; a relationship with G-d does not mean that you are darkness-free, thorn-free, struggle-free. You must encounter the holiness in your present situation.

Then G-d continues to tell him: "I am the G-d of your father." I am present in the midst of this thorny bush. I am in this flame, even though the thorns have not been eliminated.

The Tanya

It took another three millennia for the message to be articulated lucidly. This notion, one that has brought comfort and healing to millions of soul-climbers, is one of the central themes of the Tanya—the magnum opus of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad, known as the Alter Rebbe (1745-1812), whose passing 210 years ago, in 1812, will be marked on the 24th of Teves.

The theme is captured in the very name of the book.

The Alter Rebbe termed this work with a very original and beautiful name: Sefer shel Bananim, which means The Book of the Intermediate People, or the Guidebook for the Ordinary Person.

Who is the banuni? Who is this prototype the Alter Rebbe places in the vortex of his great work? The banuni is a person who possesses in a conscious way a duality—not like the tzadik, who has achieved moral perfection. The banuni operates on two levels of consciousness, his life dichotomized between two souls: The "reptilian brain," an insecure and self-centered consciousness, focusing on survival and fast comfort, and a Divine, transcendental soul, aligned with the infinite depth and purpose of existence. His life constitutes a struggle between these two perceptions of the self and the world.

Here is the Tanya's profound idea—all based on that vision of the burning bush: "Remove your shoes from your feet because the place upon which you stand is sacred soil." Never doubt the potency and authenticity of your inner holiness and Divinity, just because there are ugly thoughts still lingering in your brain. Never allow your external animal self to dictate and take control of the narrative of your life. The toxic voices are here to help you crystallize who you really are; each of them coming to make you grow and become the human being you are capable of becoming.

G-d does not want you necessarily to become the tzaddik, the toxic-free person, free of every last coping mechanism born the terror of feeling alone in a scary world. Not everyone can attain the spiritual perfection of the tzadik. But not everyone must achieve that state. The hero of the Tanya is the banuni: he opens up a door for every human being in every situation and on every level, to find his or her own place among those who are striving to soar on high—to connect and become true servants of G-d.

The banuni is not the individual who always wins, but he is also not the human being who is defeated. He is the individual who fights daily to

uncover the truth of his own infinite depth; the clamor of his efforts is exquisite music to the Divine ear.

The Alter Rebbe termed his work the *Sefer shel Bananim* because he was attempting to address who we are rather than who we are not. He was attempting to make Judaism, to make the Divine path, real; to make it intimately close ("karov elecha")—to you, to me, to us, people for whom the world seems no less real than G-d, maybe even more real. To human beings to whom materialism is as powerful as spirituality, maybe even more powerful.

Many previous books of Jewish ethics and spirituality aim to elevate and inspire man toward the ideal of the tzaddik, 'the perfectly righteous individual.' But there is a problem. Some people indeed can become truly righteous, the rest of us give up, or we become fake. Hence, the value and contribution of the Tanya. With it, the Alter Rebbe brought healing and hope to millions.

I would say that the entire Tanya is based on that single passage G-d told Moses: "for the place upon which you stand is holy." Wherever you are, you can find holiness and develop a real relationship with the Almighty. Even as your thorns do not disappear and do not forfeit their sting in the flame of your soul, never doubt the truth of your core identity, as a Divine ambassador in this world. Serving G-d does not mean becoming sacred; it means having the courage to fight for truth even amidst thorny foes that crave to undermine you.

Moses wants to approach the fire. We all want to transcend our conditions and become Divine. So G-d says, no! You must realize that holiness is where you stand today! You may have lots of earth and gravel—but that itself is holy. You were given the mission to light a candle of truth and hope in a space of darkness and hopelessness. Your inner darkness is waiting to be transformed. To be a Jew means to know that just as in math we have the Asymptote, a line that continually approaches a given curve but does not meet it at any finite distance, we may feel that we never reach the full truth. Yet, wherever you are in life, you can become a conduit for the infinite and bring heaven down to earth.

[1] Based on *Degel Machane Ephraim* Parshas Shemos. This Chassidic work was authored by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim, the Rabbi of Sedlikov, Ukraine (1748-1800). His mother was Udel, the daughter of the Baal Shem Tov. He is interred near his grandfather in Medzhebutz, Ukraine. It is also interesting to note that the Alter Rebbe said, that the path of the Baal Shem Tov was based on this inaugural vision of Moses, cf. this essay: <https://www.theyeshiva.net/jewish/6126/essay-shemos-souls-on-fire>

Shemot: The Inner Trait of Goodness

Rav Kook Torah

When Moses expressed his doubts as to whether the people would believe he was indeed God's messenger, God gave him a sign to prove his authenticity — but a sign which implied displeasure in Moses' lack of faith in his people.

What was the sign? Moses' hand temporarily became white with tzara'at (leprosy). A miraculous sign, to be sure, but tzara'at is an affliction that defiles — a clear indication that Moses was being chastised.

The Sages noted a subtle discrepancy between the Torah's description of Moses' hand turning leprous and its subsequent return to normalcy. The first time, Moses took out his hand "and behold! his hand was leprous like snow" (Ex. 4:6). Then Moses placed his hand inside his robes a second time, and when he had "removed it from his chest, his skin had [already] returned to normal" (Exod. 4:7).

A careful reading of the text indicates that the two transformations occurred differently. The leprosy took hold after Moses removed his hand from his robe; but his hand reverted to its normal color even before he had taken out his hand, while it was still inside his robe. Why should there be a difference between the two?

From here, the Sages concluded, "The Divine trait of tovah [goodness] comes more quickly than the trait of puranut [suffering or punishment]" (Shabbat 97a).

What does this mean? Why should one trait be faster or better than another?

Transcending the Limits of Time

There is in fact an essential difference between these two facets of Divine providence. The attribute of tovah is the very foundation of the world. Divine goodness is the goal of all existence; it is united with the very source of life. For this reason, this trait transcends the restrictions of time and place. Even when it descends into our finite world, a reality bound by time and place, we may still sense its elevated, limitless source.

This is the meaning of the Talmudic statement, "The trait of goodness comes more quickly." The attribute of tovah reveals an inner light, free from the restrictions of time and place. Ezekiel described this phenomenon in his sublime vision of angelic creatures "running and returning, like rapid flashes of lightning" (Ezek. 1:14).

The trait of puranut is a different story. Puranut is not an intrinsic aspect of reality. It is ancillary and transitory. Its value is only to serve the good, to "refine the vessels" so that they will be able to receive the flow of Divine goodness in all of its abundance.

As a result, puranut is subject to the limitations of time and place, and its manifestation is delayed.

The True Nature of Israel

While Divine goodness is integrally connected to the inner essence of life, puranut relates to its superficial aspects. The more we distance ourselves from the true reality, the more our worldview becomes filtered through the lens of puranut. Seeing the world as a place of judgment and suffering is a perception emanating from distortions of the imagination. It does not focus on the true nature of reality, but on its external appearance.

Precisely here — as God taught Moses the true inner nature of Israel, beneath the cloak of outer appearances — the superficiality of puranut was unveiled. Moses' arm only looked leprous after it was exposed to the outside light. In the realm of true essence, there is no place for suffering and harsh punishments; this trait belongs to the realm of superficial appearances.

Moses' hand was restored to its original healthy state as soon as he placed it "inside his chest" indicating that the attribute of goodness reflects the inner essence of reality. It is connected to the root of creation, transcending all limitations of the finite universe. Therefore Divine beneficence is not restricted by the framework of time and "arrives quickly."

Eating Garbage

By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Earlier this week, I was standing right next to a large trash can in a public area when something startling happened. A seemingly put-together man walked up, removed the lid, and began to rummage. He found a half-eaten sandwich, pulled it out, and gobbled it down. He then reached back in, examined the soda bottles and cans that had been disposed of, and found one that still had soda left. He pulled it out and guzzled down the little ginger ale that was left in the bottle.

I am embarrassed to admit that my first reaction as I witnessed him literally eat garbage right next to me was to recoil with a sense of disgust and revulsion. Something was incongruous about the way he was dressed, the fact that we were in a public, visible place, and what he was doing. But not a moment later I caught myself and realized — how hungry must this man be to be willing to reach into a trash bin in front of many other people, pull out a half-eaten sandwich that was contaminated with garbage, and put it in his mouth. How thirsty must he be that he would grab a stranger's unfinished bottle of ginger ale covered in someone else's germs and gulp it down.

The world produces enough food to feed all of its 8 billion people, yet 822 million people, over ten percent, are malnourished and go hungry every day. Around 9 million people die every year of hunger and hunger-related diseases, yet over 1 billion meals are wasted every day. I am hardly the first to recognize and point out that we must do a better job of rescuing food and getting it into the hands of those who are

hungry. (There are amazing organizations attacking this issue, like Leket in Israel or Shearit HaPlate in some cities in America, but not every community yet has such programs in place.)

It should hurt to observe a simcha and look out at the shmorg and Chosson's tisch in which so much food is leftover, untouched, and will eventually be wasted, then find ourselves at the main meal in which many of the guests won't remain even though food was prepared for them and to consider how many could benefit from food that will go right into the trash. How much food is disposed of even after eating the Shabbos and Yom Tov leftovers a few more days? What happens to the food from Kiddush and Shalosh Seudos at shuls everywhere?

I wanted to help the man who had gone through the garbage but he was gone before I knew it. In that moment, I felt not only tremendous compassion for him, but enormous gratitude for myself and my family. If you have fresh and clean food to eat, if each time you are hungry you are able to satiate yourself, if you don't know what it means to have to rummage through garbage to put something in your belly, you are fortunate and blessed. If you were in a room with nine other random people from the greater world, the chances are one of them would be hungry and malnourished enough to eat food out of the trash and if it isn't you, be grateful, say thank you each and every day.

We are fortunate to have Torah and Halacha that is designed to make us mindful. A Beracha before and after we eat reminds us to be grateful to have access to fresh and clean food and to further express gratitude when our belly is full and our body is hydrated. Our rabbis teach that benefiting from this world such as by eating without first making a beracha is considered me'ilah, taking sacred and holy property for oneself. The Tosefta (Berachos 4:1) references a verse in Tehillim (24:1), "The earth is Hashem's and its fullness." If you take and benefit from the world without first paying with a "thank you," you have taken something holy and made it profane, you have desecrated something consecrated.

We don't need to wait for something extraordinary to say thank you. Each and every day, with each and every morsel of food, there is so much to appreciate, not take for granted, and be grateful for.

Last Shabbos, we hosted Michael Gottesman of Shlomit, Israel, a community on the border of Israel, Gaza, and Egypt. On October 7, as a member of the community's volunteer security team, Michael grabbed his weapon, put on his vest and helmet, and went to defend his family and his community. Shlomit wasn't infiltrated but the neighboring community of Prigan was and they desperately needed reinforcements. Michael and others answered the call, the only volunteer security team that defended a neighboring community, not only their own. They encountered a large group of terrorists that far outnumbered them and were much better armed.

Tragically, four of those heroic volunteers fell in that battle. Michael himself was shot. The bullet entered from his side, in the small area not protected by the ceramic vest. It pierced his lung, went through his kidney and spleen, exited his left side and shredded his upper arm. He fell to the ground bleeding profusely and understood there was significant damage to his internal organs. He calculated that he didn't have long to live and used what he thought was his last breath to say Shema and to declare the unity of Hashem's existence.

After finishing Shema, he found that he was still conscious, still alive but thought that for sure, now he only had moments to live, enough time to think or say one more thing. What should it be? In a conversation at our Shul he shared that after saying Shema, he looked up to the Heavens and said, "Thank you Hashem. Thank you for a beautiful life. Thank you for my amazing wife, my beautiful children, my friends and neighbors. Thank you for all that you gave me. If I go now, Hashem, I just want to say thank you for everything."

As he described what happened, I thought to myself, what a perspective and what an attitude. Instead of saying, "Why me, Hashem, how could you do this," while lying on the floor in a pool of his own blood, Michael chose to look at his life and to say thank you.

It took two hours to evacuate Michael and two more hours for him to be picked up by the helicopter and taken to the hospital. Miraculously, he survived, though he spent many months in the hospital healing and many surgeries to reconstruct his arm. He continues to need rehab three times a week. While his body will please-God heal, he will forever carry the emotional and spiritual injuries and trauma of that day. He lost close friends, almost lost his life, but never lost his sense of gratitude.

If he could express gratitude in that moment, can't we and shouldn't we express gratitude when everything is going well, when we have food to eat, a roof over our head, and air in our lungs? We don't need to wait until we think it is the last moment of our life to say thank you for our lives, the big and small, the ordinary and extraordinary.

When we wake up in the morning, the very first words we say are Modeh Ani, which literally means, "Grateful am I." Grammatically, it would be more correct to say "Ani modeh, I am grateful," but our rabbis understood that the first word on our lips cannot be "I." Instead, despite it sounding clumsy, we wake up saying "Grateful," and with that we set the tone for our day, an attitude of gratitude.

With each beracha you say, be mindful to feel grateful for the food you will eat and committed to enable all to never go hungry. Wake up with an attitude of gratitude and fill each day with a sense of "Grateful am I."

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