

BAR/BAT MITZVAH: A RE-ENACTMENT OF "KABOLAS HATORAH"

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Guest Contributor: Abraham M. Jeger, Ph.D.

(An earlier version of this D'var Torah was developed in honor of my son, Yudi, who presented it at his Bar Mitzvah.)

With the advent of each Bar/Bat Mitzvah, a new "Kabolos HaTorah," "Acceptance of the Torah," takes place. Part of the daily blessing recited on the study of Torah, "Birchas HaTorah," is the blessing of "asher bochar bonu mikol hoamim, venoson lonu es toraso; boruch atoh hashem, nosen hatorah," "That You have chosen us from amongst the nations, and gave to us His Torah, Blessed are You G-d, who gives us the Torah." Numerous commentators have pointed to a change in tense within this Bracha/blessing. The word "venoson," "and gave" is expressed in the past tense, while the conclusion of the Bracha, with the word "nosen," "gives," changes to the present tense. What is the message in this shift of tenses?

A well-known response is that there is really no contradiction. The Torah was originally given on Mt. Sinai -- a past event -- while at the same time it continues to be given to every Jew in every generation who accepts the Torah. Thus, with each new Bar/Bat Mitzvah who willingly accepts the Torah, there is a fulfillment of "nosen HaTorah" in the present tense.

Because when a young man or woman reaches the age of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, he or she becomes obligated to follow the precepts of the Torah, it is appropriate to discuss a pivotal aspect of Kabolos HaTorah, "Acceptance of the Torah," namely, the notion of "Na'aseh VeNishmah". Literally, the phrase "Na'aseh VeNishmah" is translated to mean, "we will do, and we will hear." It is said to capture the essence of Kabolos HaTorah, as it reflects the ultimate commitment, conveyed spontaneously, by our forefathers during the revelation at Mt. Sinai.

With this phrase, the nation of Israel was compared to the angels, who stand ready to act, before even hearing the command. Likewise, our forefathers made the commitment to perform Hashem's will and adhere to His commandments prior to receiving any knowledge about the details inherent in the demands to be placed upon them. This was perceived to be such an anomaly that the Talmud (Tractate Shabbos; 88a) relates a dialogue between the sage, Rovah, and a Tzedukki, a Sadducee, who labeled the Jews as an impulsive people. His argument was that the Jews should have first listened to what Hashem had to offer, and then consider whether they wished to accept it or not.

Rav Yosef Ber Soloveitchik (1820-1892) in his *Sefer Bais Haleivi* (D'rashos section) expounds on this challenge from a halachic perspective. He cites the Rambam (Maimonides) in *Hilchos Mechirah* (Laws of Sales; 11:7) who states the following: "ha'mechayev atzmo b'davar sh'eino katzuv, ein ha'chiyuv chal olov k'lal." This means that if a person obligates himself to purchase something which is not demarcated, something imprecise, then the deal is off. Similarly, if one commits himself, in a general manner, to do anything that another person will request of him, then the obligation is null and void. The reason being that since at the outset one has no way of knowing what the other person will demand, it is considered to lack precision.

If so -- asks the Bais Haleivi -- how could our forefathers in the desert have committed themselves to accepting the Torah, before obtaining full knowledge of all its detailed commandments? He answers as follows:

Even the Rambam, who presented the above p'sak (legal edict), agrees that one can sell himself into slavery, and thereby obligate himself to do whatever his master will demand -- despite the fact that at the outset he lacked the knowledge of specific tasks which may later be requested of him. How is this different from the previous case? The rationale is that when one offers himself as a slave, the transaction is qualitatively different than committing oneself to an isolated obligation. The person is basically "makneh es gufo" -- he offers his entire body to his master. It then follows automatically that certain specific behavioral obligations must be performed.

Likewise, when our forefathers uttered the words "Na'aseh Ve'Nishma," they surrendered their entire beings to Hashem. An automatic consequence of this lofty subjugation was a self-imposed obligation to adhere to any Commandments that Hashem would require of them. It was a total "kinyon haguf," "acquisition of one's body," -- parallel to the sale of a slave.

The commitment of the Nation of Israel to observe 613 Mitzvos (commandments) is very different than that of a "Ben Noach" (non-Jew) who must observe 7 Mitzvos. The difference transcends the number of Mitzvos, and extends to the qualitative nature of the commitment. The obligation of a Ben-Noach to observe the 7 Mitzvos does not constitute a total subservience to Hashem. That is merely a limited set of demarcated obligations.

In reference to the Jews, the posuk in Yeshaya, Isaiah (41:8) states, "yisroel avdi atoh" -- "Nation of Israel, you are my servant." We are considered "complete" servants to Hashem -- representing a total subjugation of our beings to His service. This is what differentiates us from the nations, as the Mechiltah (Shemos 19:4) derives from the verse found near the giving of the Torah, "veheyisem li segulah mikol hoamim" -- "that you will be my most beloved of nations." The Mechiltah interprets this to mean "shetiyu kenuyim li ve'oskim b'Torah" -- namely, that you will constitute my possession, and study the Torah. It is indeed very appropriate that the Nation of Israel exclaimed "Na'aseh Ve'Nishmah" -- essentially offering their entire being for service to Hashem!

The Bais Haleivi points to several additional consequences which emanate from this analysis -- and

serve to differentiate the Nation of Israel from a Ben Noach. For example, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 74b) concludes that a Ben Noach is not mandated to sacrifice his life for a "Kidush Hashem" (sanctification of G-d). This follows from the position that the seven Mitzvos are purely an external obligation -- a "chiyuv" -- and not a "kinyan haguf." In contrast, Jews have a special commandment of "mesiras nefesh for Kidush Hashem"-- forfeiting their lives for the sanctification of G-d's Name. This is besides the 3 cardinal sins (idolatry, murder, & illicit relations) for which the ruling of "yehareg ve'al yaavor" (offering oneself for death rather than transgress) applies.

Another consequence of "Na'aseh VeNishmah" for the Nation of Israel is that the level of "kedusha" - holiness -- which their bodies reached is that of kedushas haguf, where their entire essence is holy. This is akin to holiness of the "korbanos" (the sacrificial animals) and the "kli shoreis" (the utensils used for conducting the Temple service) as opposed to a lower level of holiness -- namely, "kedushas domim" ("secondary sanctification). Therefore, the Medrash Rabboh in Parshas Bo explains that the Nation of Israel has the capacity to be "mekadesh the chodesh" (i.e., sanctify the new month) since they themselves were directly sanctified by G-d.

Finally, there is another Halachik difference between "kedushas haguf" and "kedushas domim." The Talmud (Tractate Meilah 19b) states, "ein moel achar moel be'mukdashim ela bi'behema v'kli shoreis bilvad." This means that violation of the holiness of a "korban" (sacrificial animal) or a "kli shoreis" (utensil of Temple service) through secular use does not detract from their very essence and any additional future violators will still be prosecuted as "moel be'hekdes" (violator of sanctity). This is not the case for items in the lower category of "kedushas domim", whereby a single instance of secular use withdraws it from the realm of "holiness" altogether, and any future violation is inconsequential.

Likewise, the nation of Israel can never lose its status in the domain of "kedushas haguf." This is exemplified by the dictum in Tractate Sanhedrin (44a) which states that, "Yisroel, af al pi sh'chotah, Yisroel hu" -- meaning, that a Jew who sinned is still a Jew. It does not matter how grave a sin, nor if his intention is to isolate himself from the nation of Israel, his withdrawal cannot take effect. The connection of "kedushas haguf" -- the primary sanctity can never be severed. A Jew who sins does not become a Ben Noach, where he would have to be misgayer (formally "convert" back to Judaism). Of course, he would still have to do "teshuvah" (repent for his actions), and Hashem would immediately accept the "teshuvah."

It is hoped that every Bar/Bat mitzvah will re-enact his/her unique and personal acceptance of the Torah. Furthermore, they should internalize the true essence of "Na'aseh venishmah" as articulated by our forefathers at Mt. Sinai!

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