

THE MATERIAL OF SPIRITUALITY

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

There is a discussion in the tractate of Pesachim (68b) concerning our obligation to rejoice on the holidays. There, the Talmud states "Rav Eliezer said: A man has nothing else [to do] on a festival except either to eat and drink or to sit and study. Rav Yehoshua said: Divide it: [devote] half of it to eating and drinking, and half of it to the Bais HaMedrash. Now Rav Yochanan said thereon: Both of them deduce it from the same verse. One verse says (Devarim 16), "a solemn assembly to Hashem your G-d," whereas another verse says (Bamidbar 29), "a solemn assembly shall be to you." Rav Eliezer holds: [That means] either entirely to G-d or entirely to you, while Rav Yehoshua holds, Divide it: [Devote] half to G-d and half to yourselves."

The Talmud then turns from a general discussion to a specific one: "Rav Elazar said: All agree with respect to Shavu'os that we require [it to be] 'for you' too. What is the reason? It is the day on which the Torah was given."

The Admor from Koznitz (in Sefer Avodas Elazar) notes that the Talmud is telling us that there is a specific commandment to rejoice in a physical manner - by eating and drinking - on Shavu'os. Why is that the case? The Talmud says "because it is the day on which the Torah was given." The day on which the Torah was given, on first blush, appears to be the one of the three pilgrimage festivals - the Shalosh Regalim - that celebrates something solely spiritual. On Sukkos, we commemorate the physical protection Hashem provided the nation of Israel during their sojourn in the desert. On Pesach, we commemorate Hashem redeeming the nation from harsh and bitter servitude. Physical expressions of rejoicing on these holidays seem appropriate. However, what "physical" aspect of the giving of the Torah is there to celebrate? Why, according to the Gemora, is the requirement for celebration in a physical manner given?

The evil inclination, the Yetzer HoRa, in general, has stronger sway over a person the more one is entrenched in the material aspects of this world. For this reason, the "test" of a wealthy individual in this world is greater in some respects than that of the poor individual. In the fourth chapter of Pirkei Avos, we find that Rabi Yonasan said "all who fulfill the Torah in penury will, in the end, fulfill the Torah in wealth." We see that a person who, despite his need for sustenance and proper focus on providing a living for himself and his dependants, still sets aside the appropriate time and abilities to learn Torah, will eventually not be faced with the challenge of time. He will have ample sustenance. He will have what is needed to comfortably provide a living. Only, after first learning Torah with the challenge of poverty, can he then be challenged in another way - resisting the drive to amass more

material wealth at the expense of Torah learning. The learning of Torah, and dedication to do such, is always a battle.

On Shavu'os, we demonstrate that we are prepared for all aspects of this battle. Of course, we accept the "spiritual" aspect, and we are prepared to learn even if the food we have on the table is not exactly what is desired or needed. But, on Shavu'os, we rejoice in a physical fashion as well - we eat and drink. We show that, even when we have the material comforts provided for, we still accept the Torah, and we are up to the challenge of showing it the honor and accord due, by engaging in proper Torah study. In truth, the fact that we are provided with this challenge allowed the nation of Israel to receive the Torah in the first place.

The Talmud in Shabbos (88b) relates an incident: " Rav Yehoshua ben Levi said: When Moshe ascended (to receive the Torah), the ministering angels spoke before Hashem, 'Master of the Universe! What business has one born of woman among us?' He said to them 'He has come to receive the Torah,'... Hashem said to Moshe 'Respond to them with an answer,'... Moshe said (to the angels). . is there an Evil Inclination among you? Immediately, they conceded to Hashem."

The angels, because they had no Evil Inclination, because they had no drive for the material, were not able to receive the Torah. The Torah, as the Gemora in Baba Basra (16a) says, is the antidote to the Evil Inclination. The Torah was given to us to study and to follow. Fulfilling these dictates is not an easy task, as the Evil Inclination uses all weapons in his arsenal to prevent us from engaging in our assignments, let alone completion thereof. Yet, this battle is really what Torah is all about. As the angels do not have this impediment, they did not get the Torah. Mankind, specifically, the nation of Israel, did get the Torah.

It is because of the very fact that we are material creatures that we received the Torah. It is therefore appropriate that we celebrate this special occasion with the very assets that allowed it to occur - with the material, with the physical. We celebrate by eating and drinking. We illustrate our ability to take the material and mundane in this world and use it for a spiritual and holy purpose - despite the urgings of the Evil Inclination otherwise. Shavu'os, as the Talmud says , has to be "for you" because it was the day the Torah was given, the day on which physical beings accepted a gift that only they could get. It was a day on which physical beings accepted the task to take the physical in their lives and channel it to holiness.

The channeling of the physical to holiness is not without danger. There is a tendency to become focused on the "spiritual" aspects of the challenge - those commandments that concern our relationship with G-d. However, as we all know, those commandments concerning the relationship between us and our fellow man are of extreme importance and cannot be ignored or downplayed. The Admor concludes that, perhaps, when Rav Elazar said that everyone agrees that Shavu'os is a holiday with the requirement that it be "for you," his focus was on "us" as a people, together. On the holiday when we celebrate the giving of the Torah, we must be careful to realize that the

commandments concern us, as a community, as a series of relationships. Shavu'os must be a holiday with an accent on the "us," the way we treat one another. That is what the Torah commands, and what the Torah demands.