

THE IMPORTANCE OF SIMCHA

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. The Uniqueness of the Jew

The Torah states, "You shall take the first fruit (Bekurim) of the ground that you bring in from your Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose to make His Name rest there." The verse is referring to the mitzvah of Bekurim (Bekurim - from the same word as Bachorim (first born) which is the Positive Commandment to bring the first of the newly ripened fruits of one's crop (of the Land of Israel) to the Temple Mount for Hashem. At the Temple Mount the Bekurim are given to the Kohane who is the only one qualified to partake of these holy fruits. At the time of the Bekurim ceremony, the one who brings the new fruits must declare his gratitude to Hashem for the land that was given to him which produced these fruits. Subsequently prostrating himself before Hashem to indicate his subservience and recognition of who Hashem is.

Rabbeinu Bachya in his introduction to the Portion of Ki Savo elucidates and expands on the concept of Reishis (first) which is central to the ritual of Bekurim. Firstly, Rabbeinu Bachya states that the Jewish people themselves are referred to as Reishis (first) - "The Jews are holy to Hashem as they are the equivalent of the first tithe of the wheat (Reishis Tevuasa)" Since the Jewish people are themselves the Chosen People (Reishis), they must acknowledge the Reishis of existence (Hashem from who all existence emanates. The manner of acknowledging Hashem is through the ritual of bringing the Bekurim (first ripened fruits) which are the Reishis (first), to the location that is Reishis (the most special location from which all existence emanated) [The Temple Mount], and giving it to the Kohane (who is Reishis- the most special of the tribes who was chosen for the service of Hashem). Rabbeinu Bachya is saying that there is a single thread, which weaves through the entire Bekurim ritual that reflects the characteristic of Reishis.

The Torah is revealing to us that anything which reflects the characteristic of Reishis has an innate holiness and special status because it mirrors that same characteristic of Hashem- who is the beginning of everything. The reason for this is that anything that shares a common characteristic with Hashem can be associated with Him. The basis for all relationships is commonality. The Bachor (the First Born) innately shares the trait of being the first, since he is the child that opened his mother's womb- "Kadosh Me'Rechem". Therefore the Bachor is holy. Initially the Bechorim were the ones meant to be the Kohanim (priests), the ones designated to officiate in the Temple. However, because all of Klal Yisroel including the Bechorim were involved with the Chet Ha'Aigel (Golden Calf)

they became tainted and were no longer qualified. The Tribe of Levy did not participate in the Chet Ha'Aigel. The Kohane (who is the most special of the Tribe of Levy) assumed the status of Reishis (unique and one of kind). Thus, qualifying themselves as being the officiants of Hashem because of their commonality with Him (being unique and one of a kind).

The Midrash tells us that the letters of the word "B'Hebarom" are the same letters as Avraham. The word "B'Hebarom" which means "And He (Hashem) created them (existence)" has the same letters as Avraham to indicate that he is the beginning of a new existence within creation. The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that Avraham was the first human being to refer to Hashem as "Master" (Adni). The commentators point out that although Adam had referred to Hashem as "Master" (Adni) it was only because he was the handiwork of G-d and therefore recognized Hashem as the Master. Avraham on the other hand was born into a pagan world, where G-d's existence was unknown to mankind, and despite that he was able to recognize that G-d is the Master. According to this understanding Avraham possessed the characteristic of Reishis - being the first to recognize Hashem through his own understanding. This is why Hashem refers to Avraham as, "My beloved" because he possessed this commonality with Hashem.

Reb Meir Simcha z'tl cites a verse that refers to Avraham as the "Navone" (Perceptive and insightful) and Yitzchak and Yaakov are referred to as "Chacham" (One who is a repository of knowledge). Reb Meir Simcha z'tl explains that Avraham is referred to as Navone because he was able to perceive G-d's Omnipotents despite the lack of His obvious presence. However Yitzchak and Yaakov were initially made aware of G-d's presence through the teachings of their father and were only able to advance their own spiritually on that foundation. Therefore they are referred to as "Chacham". Therefore we see that the reason why the Jewish people have a special relationship with Hashem, unlike any other nation, is because we share a commonality with Hashem in that He and the Jewish people are both Reishis. There is a Positive Commandment to "Cleave to Hashem - Bo Sidbuk ". The Gemara asks - How could one cleave to Hashem who is fire? The Gemara answers that a person who marries his daughter to a Talmud Chacham or gives of his possessions to the Talmud Chacham cleaves to Hashem through the Torah Sage. The reason why a Talmud Chacham is considered special is because of the wisdom that he possesses which is the Torah itself - the Wisdom of Hashem - Reishis. The more we perfect and value our uniqueness as Jews, the Chosen People of Hashem, the more we will have relevance to Hashem - the ultimate Reishis.

2. The Value of Focus

The Torah states that when one brings the newly ripened fruits (Bekurim) he must make a declaration and say, "An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather. He descended to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there became a great nation - great, strong, and numerous. The Egyptians mistreated us and afflicted us, and placed hard work upon us. Then we cried out to Hashem, the G-d of our forefathers, and Hashem heard our voice and saw our affliction, our travail, and our oppression. Hashem took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm,

with great awesomeness, and with signs and with wonders. He brought us to this place, and gave us this Land, a Land flowing with milk and honey. And now, behold! I have brought the first fruits of the ground that You have given me, O Hashem!" After making this declaration, the one who brought the new fruit prostrates himself before Hashem as a sign of his negation of self in the presence of Hashem.

Rashi cites the Chazal that explain that the declaration of the Bekurim indicates that he is not an "ingrate" because he acknowledges that the source of all his blessing is Hashem. It is interesting to note that the obligation of tithing the dough (Chalah), grains and produce (Terumah), and other tithes were implemented immediately upon entry into the Land. However, the mitzvah of Bekurim only became an obligation after the Land was conquered and divided - when the Jewish people were "settled in the Land". If one is obligated to show his appreciation to Hashem through the bringing of the Bekurim and acknowledge the cause of his blessing then why does the obligation of Bekurim only come about when the Jews were "settled in the Land"?

The answer is- that it is in order for a person to be able to focus on and internalize the value of being a beneficiary of the Blessing of Hashem, one needs to be in a state that is without distraction. When one is settled in his own life, he is able to have the clarity of mind to internalize that the source of all blessing in his life emanates from Hashem. Therefore the Torah only obligated the Jews to bring Bekurim after they were "settled in the Land" because it was only then where they were free of distractions.

One of the blessings of the Amidah (Silent Prayer) is the prayer for the restoration of justice - "Restore our judges as in the earliest times and our counselors as at first; remove from us sorrow and groan; and reign over us -You Hashem, alone..." Rabbeinu Bachya in his commentary in the Book of Bereishis asks - what relevance does removing us from sorrow and groan have to restoring justice? Rabbeinu Bachya answers- if one is consumed with his own sorrow and pain, he will not be able to appreciate the advice of the judges and counselors. This distraction would also interfere with one's capacity to appreciate the value of Hashem's supreme reign. Therefore we ask Hashem to remove the distraction caused by our sorrow and pain in order to be able to fully benefit from the restoration of justice. Rambam states in Hilchos Deos (The Laws of Conduct), "One should have in mind that his body should be complete and strong in order to dedicate himself to the service of Hashem. For it is impossible to understand and contemplate wisdom if one is hungry or sick, or if any of his limbs are in pain." Rambam explains that it is impossible for one to be able to understand or contemplate wisdom fully if one is distracted by any physical ailments. One must be free of health challenges in order to appreciate Hashem and His wisdom.

If we acknowledge Hashem as being the Master of the Universe and the benefactor of all existence, and that we are the beneficiaries of His Beneficence, then why do we not feel beholden to Hashem for all that we have received from Him and all that we continue to receive? The answer is that we are distracted by the challenges and responsibilities of life. After Adam sinned by eating of the Tree of

Knowledge, Hashem cursed him and all mankind, "Through suffering shall you eat of the ground...By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread..." Firstly, since man must take the initiative to be responsible for his own physical existence, one tends to believe that his level of success and existence is due partially to his own efforts. Additionally, once man was cursed - "by the sweat of his brow, he shall eat bread" - he became distracted because of the degree of effort which is needed. Thus causing him to loose focus. Consequently he is not able to internalize the reality of Hashem's blessing.

In order for one to be able to recognize and internalize the value of Hashem's blessings, one needs to maintain a continuous level of clarity and focus. This clarity is gained and reinforced by: reciting the Birchas HaMazon (Grace after Meals)- which identifies the source of our satiation, by reciting the Amidah (Silent Prayer)- three times a day [morning, afternoon, and evening] which causes us to understand that we are truly need. The blessings prior to eating gives us a cognizance that in whatever way we benefit from this existence is through the blessing of Hashem. By limiting the distractions in our daily lives we are able to focus and appreciate Hashem's blessings.

3. Joy- an Integral Part of One's Function

The Torah states, "It shall be that if you hearken to the voice of Hashem, your G-d, to observe, to perform all of His commandments that I command you this day, then Hashem, your G-d, will make you supreme over all the nations of the earth. All the blessings will pursue you and overtake you, if you hearken to the voice of Hashem, your G-d...But if you do not hearken to the voice of Hashem, your G-d, to observe, to perform all of His commandments and all of His statutes that I command you today, then all these curses will pursue you and overtake you." Meaning, if one adheres to the Torah, he will have endless blessings, but if he does not then endless curses will pursue him and overtake him.

The Torah continues, "All these curses will come upon you and pursue you and overtake you, until you are destroyed...because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, with joy (simcha) and goodness in your heart, when everything was abundant." This verse seems to contradict the earlier verse. This verse states that the reason why the curses will pursue you and overtake you is because you did not serve Hashem with joy of heart when everything was abundant. The previous verse stated that the reason why the curses will pursue you and overtake you is because you did not heed the Word of Hashem- which is unrelated to one's joy of heart. How do we reconcile the two verses?

If one is experiencing abundance and blessing in his life why does one not do everything within his power to acknowledge and serve Hashem? The answer is- that this is only an indication that the performance of the mitzvah is not something that he wants to do, but rather something that he feels he must do as an obligation. He is only fulfilling the mitzvos because Hashem is demanding it of him. If one does not understand the value of doing the Will of Hashem, then he will not serve Hashem with joy in his heart. As a result of this burdensome feeling, it is just a question of time before he will

become fatigued and disinterested in the mitzvot. In fact the basis for not heeding the Word of Hashem is only because one did not serve Hashem with Joy when everything was abundant. If one feels privileged and appreciative for all that Hashem has given him, even if one would not be obligated, one would be motivated to bring pleasure to G-d

We are currently in the month of Elul. It is cited by many of the commentators that the word "Elul" is an acronym for "Ani L' Dodi V'Dodi Li - I am to my beloved as my beloved is to me." During this month Hashem is closer to the Jewish people than any other time of the year and it is easier to be more spiritually sensitive during this time period. "I am to my beloved", means if one takes the initiative to become close to his beloved (Hashem), then Hashem (the beloved of the Jewish people) will assist His beloved to become closer to Him. The word Elul, as an acronym, indicates if we relate to Hashem as our beloved then He responds to our initiative as His beloved. However, if one sees mitzvot only as obligations and not as a privilege (as one would feel when he serves his beloved), then Hashem does not respond.

Before we recite the Amidah (Silent Prayer) we recite a verse from Tehilim (Psalms- the Words of King David). We say, "Hashem open my lips and allow my mouth to utter Your praises." The question is- why do we need to ask Hashem to give us the ability to speak - to utter His praises- when speech is a natural function of human being? The answer is- the words which one articulates are only considered praises of Hashem if one truly feels and internalizes what he is actually saying. We ask Hashem to give us that sense of appreciation so that when we stand before Him, we should truly utter His praises. It is only when one feels privileged to be a servant of Hashem that he experiences true joy - when he engages in audience with Hashem.

We must pray to Hashem to give us the ability to recognize and appreciate the value of being a member of the Chosen People.

4. What is the Essence of the Torah?

The Torah states, "If you will not be careful to perform all the words of this Torah that are written in this Book, to fear this honored and awesome Name: Hashem, your G-d, then Hashem will make extraordinary your blows and the blows of your offspring..." It is evident from this verse that the cause of the tragedies that will befall the Jewish people is not their failing to keep the Torah itself, but rather the non-performance of the mitzvot is an indication that the people do not fear and revere the awesome Name of Hashem, their G-d.

Rabbeinu Yona writes in his work Shaarei Teshuvah (The Gates of Repentance) and in his commentary on Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers), that all of the mitzvot of the Torah are "parparaos (appetizers)" to yiras shamayim (Fear of Heaven (Hashem)). Meaning, just as the appetizer is not intended to sate the person but rather to stimulate his appetite to give him the capacity to benefit from the entrée, so too is the value of all the mitzvot of the Torah vis-à-vis yiras shamayim. The intrinsic value of the mitzvot is not only the performance of the mitzvah for their own sake, but it is

also a demonstration and an expression of one's yiras shamayim (fear of heaven). When one observes the Shabbos, tefillin, dietary laws, etc. one is demonstrating his yiras shamayim because the only reason why he is adhering to any of the mitzvos is because of his fear and reverence of Hashem. The performance of mitzvos is therefore a proclamation of one's fearing the Honored and Awesome Name of Hashem.

However, if one chooses to compromise or even abandon the Torah it is an affront to the Honored and Awesome Name of Hashem. It is an expression of arrogance and brazenness stating, "I could not care less." The verse refers to Hashem as "your G-d", indicating that He has a close personal relationship with every Jew - He is not a stranger to the Jews. In fact, the Mishnah in Tractate Shabbos refers to the Jewish people as "princes - sons of kings". Because of our special relationship with Hashem we are truly considered royalty. The Torah tells us that when G-d took the Jewish people out of Egypt He had said, "You are my subjects, exclusively Mine" to infer that a Jew is not permitted to allow himself to become a subject of another subject (another human being). Thus it is not permitted to sell himself into slavery. If a Jew would understand who he truly is he would not sell himself as a slave.

The Midrash on Shir Ha'Shirim (Song of Songs) interprets one of the opening verses to mean, "The words of the Sofrim (the Rabbis) are more beloved (to Hashem) than the wine of Torah." Indicating that Hashem values rabbinic enactments to a greater degree than the Divine Word- (the Torah itself). Rabbeinu Yonah explains that the reason the rabbinic enactments (which are promulgated as fences) are valued by Hashem to a greater degree than the Torah itself is because through the adherence to the Rabbinic fence one is demonstrating a greater degree of yiras shamayim. The basis for a Rabbinic fence is human frailty. Because of the vulnerability and lack of continuous cognizance, there is a concern that one may violate the Torah law; therefore, the Chachamim (Rabbis) legislated the various fences to address all conditions so that the Torah law should not be violated. Since the essence of all mitzvos is one's demonstration of yiras shamayim, then how much more so is one's adherence to Rabbinic enactments a demonstration of yiras shamayim.

One is not permitted to transport an object four cubits in public domain on the Shabbos. The Rabbis prohibited the blowing of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah if it should fall out on Shabbos because of their concern that one may not be proficient in the blowing of the Shofar and he may transport the Shofar through public domain to a teacher (to be taught how to blow properly). The concern of the Rabbis that the Shabbos may be violated (even in the context of a mitzvah) was sufficient reason to suspend the Torah obligation of blowing the Shofar. This is the reason why the enactments of the Rabbis are more beloved to Hashem than the Torah law itself.

The Torah states, "Cursed is the one who does not uphold the Torah." Rabbeinu Yona points out that the Torah does not state, "cursed is the one who 'violates' or does not keep the Torah", but rather one who "does not uphold the Torah." If one accepts the Torah in its entirety and acknowledges that he is fully obligated in every aspect of its mitzvos, but he fails in adhering responsibly to its precepts,

he does not deserve to be cursed. However, if one selectively accepts laws of the Torah (even if by selection he accepted all of them except for one), this person is classified as one who is not "upholding" the Torah. He deserves to be cursed. A Jew is Hashem's subject and the mitzvos are the dictates of his Master Hashem. If one says to his master, "I am subservient to you in all aspects of my life except for one area", he would be considered a rebellious subject and deserve being put to death.

Accepting Hashem's Torah on a selective basis is the ultimate in brazenness and arrogance. It is an affront and a desecration of the Awesome and Honorable Name of Hashem, who is the King who coronates all kings. If a Jew would understand that he is of princely status and he is part of G-d's Chosen People (The Creator and Master of the Universe), then he would understand and revere the awesomeness of his master. It would not be possible to transgress the Torah because of he would understand how privileged he is to do the Will of Hashem. Through the study of Torah, may we all come to understand the value of ourselves as Jews and the specialness of being part of the Jewish People. Then we will merit the blessing of "Blessed is he who upholds the Torah."

5. The Value of Being on Call for Hashem

The Torah states, "You shall not wear combined fibers of wool and linen together. You shall make for yourselves twisted threads on the four corners of your garments with which you cover yourself." The Torah tells us that one is prohibited from wearing a garment, which contains a combination of wool and linen (shatnes). The Torah juxtaposes the Negative Commandment prohibiting shatnes to the Positive Commandment of wearing tzitzis (fringes). If a man wears a four-cornered garment there is a Positive Commandment of attaching tzitzis to its corners. Chazal explain that the juxtaposition of the Negative Commandment of shatnes to the Positive Commandment of tzitzis teaches us a fundamental principle that if there is a conflict between a Positive and a Negative Commandment, then the Positive Commandment supercedes the Negative Commandment. For example, if one has a four-cornered linen garment one is obligated to attach woolen tzitzis dyed with techalis (special dye from the chalongon) to its corners. Although through this attachment one has created a garment which contains a combination of wool and linen one is nevertheless permitted to wear this garment in this state.

The Torah empowers Sanhedrin (the High Court of Israel) to sanctify time. It is through the mitzvah of the sanctification of the new moon which determines the Jewish calendar. The innate sanctity of every one of the festivals and other days of holiness are determined when the month begins. This determination was given to the Jewish people. The ramifications of being able to determine time in this manner are far reaching. The Ramchal in his work Derech Hashem (The Way of G-d) asks - what is the value of sanctifying time? Is the value limited to the specific time that is sanctified? Or is it that since within the realm of time there is sanctity and all time itself is interconnected then even the ordinary moment takes on an elevated level. The Ramchal explains that if a Jew observes Shabbos, which is a period of time that is sanctified by Hashem, then his weekday is connected to something

that is intrinsically holy. Consequently, even one's ordinary time is connected to holiness and thus elevated.

The Torah tells us that one has the mitzvah of attaching tzitzis to a four-cornered garment. If one attaches the tzitzis to such a garment, then he is elevating it because of its mitzvah value. If one's wardrobe includes such a garment, which represents mitzvah, then one's entire wardrobe is elevated because it has within it an item, which has relevance to doing the Will of Hashem. The Ramchal concludes that the Jew has the ability to elevate the mundane to a status of holiness by associating it with something that is holy - even if at that particular moment the mundane item is itself is not within a mitzvah context.

This principle applies to every aspect of our lives. Although much of our speech maybe ordinary; nevertheless, since the power of speech is invested in mitzvos such as the recitation of the Shema and the study of the Torah, all of our speech (even the ordinary) has special value. By utilizing one's speech to perform a mitzvah even one's speech in the context of business is elevated.

The Torah tells us that after the giving of the Torah at Sinai Moshe Rabbeinu was not permitted to cohabit with his wife, unlike all other prophets who were permitted to return to their conjugal responsibilities as the Torah states, "You (Moshe) remain with Me (Hashem) here." Unlike any other prophet, Moshe did not require any special degree of preparation to be able to communicate with Hashem. His level of prophecy was considered as "face to face" with Hashem. Hashem was continuously available to communicate with Moshe. No other prophet was at a level that special level because their physicality was not that receptacle of holiness as Moshe was. Moshe had to be continuously in a pure state so that the Divine Presence could come upon him at any moment. Therefore he was not permitted to return to his conjugal responsibilities because he would have become spiritually contaminated as a result of cohabitation.

The Gemara states a principal that if one comes upon a mitzvah he must perform that mitzvah without delay. Therefore a Jew must always be "on call", in a state of readiness, to perform a mitzvah at any given time when it presents itself regardless of the situation. In the morning, one must put on tefillin and declare his belief in Hashem. If a Jew is not engaged in a mitzvah activity he must interrupt whatever he is doing to perform a mitzvah when it presents itself to him. A Jew's perspective of life must be that he is always "on call".

If a Jew lives his life with this level of commitment that he is always "on call" then even at a time when he is not engaged in a mitzvah then his entire existence is dedicated to Hashem. Therefore, based on Ramchal, a person can elevate his entire existence, even the mundane aspects of his life, by being "on call". One may ask - Why did Hashem give us so many mitzvos which bind us in every possible way and restrict our behavior? The answer is that Hashem gave us the gift of mitzvos to allow us to sanctify every aspect of our being whether it be directly associated with the mitzvah or a mundane activity which is elevated because of our readiness to perform a mitzvah.

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