BREAKING THE TIME BARRIER

by Nechama Stampler

Breaking the Time Barrier {1}

You shall guard the matzos...You shall not eat any chametz. In all your dwellings you shall eat matzoh.

Rashi: R. Yoshiah says, "Don't read this as âmatzos,' but as âmitzvos.' Just as we must not allow matzah to become leaven, so too we do not allow mitzvos to leaven. Rather, if the opportunity to perform a mitzvah presents itself, perform it immediately.

Maharal: There is no question that the pasuk refers to matzah alone. It instructs us to guard against the process of chimutz, of leavening, that occurs when dough is left standing. No mention is made of mitzvos, or approaching them with alacrity and zeal. Yet there is more subtlety in this pasuk than initially meets the eye. The Torah does not express itself as directly as it might , and we need to know why. Were the Torah only interested in conveying a recipe for kosher matzah baking, it should have stated "Guard against chimutz." The seemingly unnecessary stress on the word "matzos" can only indicate that we need to find some secondary meaning through a derashah. Chazal settle on the commonality of leavening between matzos and mitzvos, and understand that the Torah means to banish both of them.

If we are to see this as more than a play on words, we must strive to find the connection between two items that do not appear to us to be related at all.

This should not be difficult. The prohibition against allowing matzah to become chametz, and the instruction to perform all mitzvos at the first available opportunity are both reflections of a common truth: things of transcendent worth and value transcend the limitations of time.

The Torah forbids chametz on Pesach. According to a different approach to the "guarding" in our pasuk that is cited earlier by Rashi, the Torah demands that we not allow dough that is intended for matzah to become chametz. (In other words, it is unacceptable to simply determine what has become chametz and discard it. Rather, we are told to guard the matzah dough from the mishap of leavening. If we see the signs of incipient chimutz, we are to arrest the process, by cooling down the dough in cold water.) The reason, in both cases, is to recall that our forefathers were so hurried at the time of the Exodus, that there was no time for the dough to become chametz and rise. As the Haggadah relates, "Because the King of Kings, HKBH, appeared, there was insufficient time for their dough to rise."

Clearly, the two are causally linked. The "appearance" of Hashem - G-d as it were displaying Himself - means that tarrying and delay are impossible. Physical processes take time to unfold, whether a small or large amount of time. Actions or processes directly attributable to Hashem, however, are never limited by time, or by any other limitation of the physical world. They take place instantaneously, and with great power. Geulah, the redemptive power set into motion by Hashem's direct intervention, is not a physical thing. It belongs to the realm of sechel, of things that are, rather than things that do. They are a priori; they are true as a matter of being, rather than becoming.

So are mitzvos. As the unmediated Word of G-d, they should strike us as different from, elevated above, all the events, choices and occurrences of ordinary human experience. They should move us to respond differently than we do to other demands of life. They ought to transport us to a place where we mimic Hashem's transcendence of time. The requirements of time ought not to give us pause or slow us down. To whatever extent we can act as if time did not happen, we should react to a mitzvah with instant zeal.

Unlike other transgressions, says the gemara, {1} those who desecrate His Name are often punished quickly, rather than after a lengthy grace period. The reason for this is similar. Chilul Hashem differs from other transgressions. It is an offense against the lofty level of His very Essence, rather than against elements of the reality He created. While all the latter are part of the world of space and time, the former is not. As an offense to the Timeless, things connected to it are also timeless. The punishment that must ensue its violation takes place without the delay that accompanies the Divine response to other aveiros.

The flip side of this is that there are some mitzvos that by their nature are above time. For this reason, the Torah instructs us according to Chazal to see the avodah of Pesach as fresh and new, as if it were given to us recently. {2} The exodus occurred only because Klal Yisrael was able to attach itself to the lofty level of geulah, which as we said before, is a construct that transcends the limitations of ordinary existence. Because this madregah transcends time itself, it is available to us as if it were with us anew, in fresh form. For this reason as well, we are instructed {3} to see ourselves each year as if we ourselves were leaving Egypt at that moment. Geulah - and the mitzvos memorializing it - are by nature transcendent, and allow us to experience the "past" in the present.

1. Kiddushin 40A
2. Mechilta, cited in Rashi Shemos 13:10
3. Pesachim 116B
