

PERSONAL COVENANT

by Shlomo Katz

Hamaayan / The Torah Spring
Edited by Shlomo Katz
Volume XII, Number 18
16 Adar 5758
March 14 1998.

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Ki Sisa

Perhaps one of the most difficult incidents to understand in the Torah is the story of the golden calf. Not 40 days had passed since Hashem's awesome revelation on Har Sinai, and Bnei Yisrael, or some of them, appear to be worshiping idols!

The commentaries offer a number of interpretations that attempt to lessen the gravity of Bnei Yisrael's sin. R' Yehuda Halevi z"l (11th century) observes that only 3,000 people, about one-half of one percent of Bnei Yisrael, participated in the golden calf. Moreover, the golden calf was not idolatry. Imagine, he writes, that someone among us wants to become closer to Hashem, so he builds a building that looks like a synagogue and concocts a new service which is performed in that building. While his actions might not be what the Torah prescribes, we would at least understand what motivated him.

Similarly, Bnei Yisrael had no intention of worshiping idols; they intended only to introduce a new way to find G-d. It was wrong, and those who participated died for it, but it was not idolatry. Only because the calf was similar to idolatry and because the concept of using physical objects in worship is foreign to us is Bnei Yisrael's act so difficult to understand.

(Kuzari Part I, para. 97, quoted in Torah Sheleimah Vol. 21 p.209)

R' Menachem Kasher z"l (20th century) elaborates: Immediately following the Aseret Ha'dibrot/Ten Commandments, we read, "You shall not make with Me gods of silver . . ." Why is this prohibition, which was mentioned in the Aseret Ha'dibrot, repeated?

The midrash explains that this is, in fact, a new prohibition. The second of the Ten Commandments prohibits making "other gods," while the verse, "You shall not make with Me," prohibits making representations of G-d Himself. The golden calf was a transgression only of this latter prohibition, which is much less stringent.

Moreover, R' Kasher argues (based on proofs that are beyond the scope of this space), the prohibition of making representations of G-d had not yet been taught when the golden calf was built. Only because Bnei Yisrael, especially Aharon, should have known better were they punished.

(Torah Sheleimah Vol. 21 p.207)

"Because it is a sign [of the covenant] between Me and you . . ." (31:13)

A number of poskim/halachic authorities have dealt with the question: Should Shabbat begin throughout the entire world at the same time, specifically at sunset in Eretz Yisrael, or should each person observe Shabbat according to sunset where he finds himself?

R' Ben Zion Meir Chai Uziel z"l (see page 4) writes in the name of Radvaz z"l (16th century): As the above verse states, Shabbat is a sign of the covenant between Hashem and each Jew individually. Accordingly, each Jew observes Shabbat according to the local time where he is.

A proof of this, Radvaz states, is the fact that Hashem gave Moshe the mitzvah of Shabbat at the place called Marah, which is at a different latitude than Eretz Yisrael. Hashem wanted to teach that

wherever a Jew finds himself on Shabbat, he observes Shabbat according to the time of sunset at that place.

R' Uziel adds: If Hashem did not intend each Jew to observe Shabbat according to the "times" where one finds himself, how could Jews throughout history have observed Shabbat? Certainly they did not have the means to calculate when sunset would occur in far-off Eretz Yisrael!

Just as we observe Shabbat at different times in different places, so Hashem made each creation appear in different places at different times. For example, light did not appear all at once throughout the world. Rather, light appeared first at some longitude and gradually made its way around the planet. Similarly, when it was already Shabbat on one side of the earth, Hashem was still "creating" on the other side.

R' Uziel cites a number of sages, among them R' Avraham ben Chiya z"l (see page 4) who note that Shabbat is never postponed for any reason. This is because the time of Shabbat is directly tied to the progress of creation. If so, argues R' Uziel, Shabbat must begin at the time that creation ended in each different place.

Where in the world does Shabbat begin first, i.e., where does halachah consider the international date line to be? R' Uziel concludes (based on the works of the Ba'al Hamaor and Kuzari) that the date line passes through Eretz Yisrael itself. Chazal teach that Eretz Yisrael is where creation began, so that must be where Shabbat came first. Moreover, in the era before the calendar was composed, when the sanhedrin had to declare each new month when the moon was seen, the new month began first where the sanhedrin was, i.e., in Eretz Yisrael. Similarly, Shabbat should begin there first.

(She'eilot U'teshuvot Piskei Uziel Be'she'eilot Ha'zman No. 21)

[Ed. Note: There are a number of halachic opinions regarding the location of the international date line. Those traveling to the quarter of the globe east of Israel should consult a competent halachic authority.]

Pesach

Chazal designed the Pesach Seder to revolve around questions and answers. Indeed, the halachah states that if a couple has no children, the wife should recite the "Mah Nishtanah" section. And, if a person is all alone, he should ask himself the questions. Why?

R' Avraham Danzig z"l (author of the halachic compendium Chayei Adam) explains: We do so many of our mitzvot by rote, without giving them much thought, if any. However, the lessons of Pesach are the centerpieces of our beliefs as Jews, and are much too important to be done by rote. Therefore

Chazal required us to ask questions in order to slow us down and make us think.

Nor should the questions be limited to "Mah Nishtanah," Rav Danzig writes. When the gemara describes the seder, it says, "We pour the second cup, and then the son asks." Presumably the question that the son will ask is, "Why are you pouring a second cup of wine before washing for hamotzi?" which is not one of the questions in "Mah Nishtanah."

Moreover, Rav Danzig notes, a child could not ask the questions of "Mah Nishtanah" [unless he had been prepared beforehand]! One of the questions is, "Why on all other nights do we eat chametz and matzah, and tonight only matzah?" How can a child know at the beginning of the meal that we will eat only matzah? Perhaps, just as on all other nights we eat chametz and matzah, right now there is only matzah on the table, but soon we will bring chametz!

Rather, "Mah Nishtanah" is a set of more sophisticated questions, whose real meaning is, "Why will our actions tonight combine signs of slavery, such as eating matzah, and freedom, such as eating while reclining?" As for the children, they should be allowed to ask whatever questions strike them.

(Haggadah Shel Pesach Toldot Adam)

R' Shmuel Avigdor of Karlin z"l (19th century) observes that the question and answer format is not merely a creation of Chazal. It is a mitzvah de'oraita/Torah-ordained commandment, mentioned no fewer than four times in the Torah.

(Haggadah Shel Pesach Im Peirush Maharsha)

R' Avraham ben Chiya Ha'nassi z"l
12th century

R' Avraham lived in Barcelona, Spain. His work Hегyon Ha'nefesh, deals with morals and penitence, and contains original interpretations of Biblical verses. His work, Megillat Ha'megaleh, is devoted to calculating when mashiach will arrive.

R' Avraham also wrote a number of works on astronomy, including Tzurat Ha'aretz and Sefer Ha'ibbur. In the latter work, R' Avraham takes the position that the day begins where the easternmost settlement is, and that is the location of the international date line. (This view was quoted in this century by the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, R' Ben Zion Meir Chai Uziel, in his analysis of the same topic - see page 2.) [The location of the international date line has important halachic consequences. It should be noted that the International Date Line recognized by the world at large is an arbitrary international convention, and is not necessarily the location of the halachic line.] Sefer Ha'ibbur also was quoted by later works regarding what the correct year is.

R' Avraham was unusual among his contemporaries in using Hebrew, not Arabic, in his scientific

works. However, he was fluent in several languages and he translated several basic Greek texts from Arabic to Latin, thus making them accessible to Christian scientists.

R' Avraham was known as "Ha'nassi"/"The Prince" because of his influence in the royal court. (Sources: The Artscroll Rishonim, p. 76; She'eilot U'teshuvot Piskei Uziel No. 21; She'eilot U'teshuvot Maharalbach Nos. 142 & 147)

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