

BELIEVING VS. KNOWING

by Shlomo Katz

Hamaayan / The Torah Spring
Edited by Shlomo Katz
Contributing Editor: Daniel Dadusc

Ki Sisa

Volume XIII, No. 21
18 Adar 5759
March 6, 1999

Today's Learning:

Pe'ah 6:11-7:1

Orach Chaim 61:11-13

Daf Yomi: Yoma 61

Yerushalmi Sukkah 12

Our parashah relates that as part of Moshe's prayers following the sin of the golden calf, he prayed (33:18), "Show me Your glory." Hashem answered him, "You will not be able to see My face, for no man can see My face and live."

R' Chaim "Brisker" Soloveitchik z"l (1853-1918) explains this in light of Rambam's teaching (based on Yevamot 49b) that all of the prophets "saw" Hashem through many "curtains," while Moshe saw Him through only one curtain. Moshe's request here, explains R' Soloveitchik was that that last curtain be removed. Hashem refused. Why?

Also, Chazal teach that Moshe attained 49 of the 50 levels of understanding that exist. However, he never attained that last level. Why?

R' Soloveitchik explains that the mitzvah of emunah/faith presumes that there is something beyond man's understanding. If man could see G-d, there would be no room left for faith. Man need not "believe" in that which he already "knows." Moshe, too, was commanded to believe in Hashem, and he therefore could not be allowed to "see" Hashem. (Quoted in Torat Chaim p. 87)

"Moshe pleaded before Hashem . . ." (32:11)

The gemara (Berachot 32a) teaches that following the sin of the golden calf, Moshe prayed for the Jewish people until his bones were burning. R' Meir Simcha Hakohen of Dvinsk z"l (died 1926) explains:

Chazal say that Moshe's grandson, Yonatan, was a priest to an idol. Thus, as Moshe prayed that the Jewish people be forgiven for their idolatry, his bones, his body from which his grandson would come, were burning with shame.

On the other hand, this very fact gave Moshe's prayers added credibility, for Hashem had said (in verse 10), "Let me destroy them and make you a great nation." If Hashem offered to make Moshe into a great nation despite the failings in Moshe's own family, He could similarly overlook Bnei Yisrael's faults. (Meshech Chochmah)

"On the day pokdi/that I make an accounting, u'fakadeti/I shall account against them for their sin." (32:34)

Rashi explains: Hashem agreed not to destroy Bnei Yisrael at that moment in retribution for the sin of the golden calf. However, He declared that whenever the Jews would sin in the future, they would suffer a portion of the punishment that they (or their ancestors) should have received for the sin of the golden calf.

R' Ayeh Leib Zunz z"l (rabbi of Plock, Poland and a prolific author; died 1830) offers an additional explanation of this verse, based on two other meanings of the Hebrew root "pkd": "to remember" and "to appoint." He writes as follows:

Before the First Temple was destroyed, the prophet Yirmiyahu foretold that the exile would last for 70 years. The gemara (Megilah 12a) states that the reason that Achashvairosh made a feast (as told at the beginning of Megilat Esther) was that, by his calculations, the 70 years were over, and the Jews had not been redeemed. The gemara teaches that although the redemption was not in fact due when Achashvairosh thought - he erred by beginning the count from the wrong event - that year was a propitious time for a partial redemption. [Thus, the wicked Vashti was killed at that time.]

From time to time, history reaches a point which is an auspicious moment for the final redemption to occur. However, because the ultimate redemption will spell the destruction of the yetzer hara,

Hashem has given the yetzer hara permission to "defend" itself by trying to prevent the redemption. Thus, whenever one of these propitious times nears, the risk that the Jewish people will commit a grave sin becomes greater. For example, at the time that the redemption should have occurred by Achashvairosh's calculations (and which was a time of partial redemption, according to our Sages), the Jews sinned by partaking from Achashvairosh's feast. Instead of a meaningful redemption occurring, events unfolded which led to Haman's rise.

This is the meaning of our verse, writes R' Zunz. "On the day pokdi/that I remember [the Jewish people and Am prepared to bring the redemption], u'fakadeti/I will appoint [the yetzer hara to bring] sin upon them." (Melo Ha'omer: Esther 1:3)

Pesach Thoughts

At the end of the Pesach Seder, we sing the song "Chad Gadya," the enigmatic story of "the kid that father sold [some say: 'bought'] for two zuz." R' Mordechai Twersky, the Maggid of Chernobyl z"l (died 1838) explained this song as follows:

The word "gadya"/"kid" is related to "haggadah"/ "statement." "Chad gadya, chad gadya," refers to two statements, specifically, the first two of the Ten Commandments: "I am Hashem" and "You shall not have other gods." These two statements encompass all of the mitzvot; "I am Hashem" encapsulates all of the positive commandments, and "You shall not have other gods," all of the negative commandments.

"That father sold" alludes to the Sages' teaching that the Torah is unlike any other acquisition. Ordinarily, when one sells an object, the seller's connection to the object ends. Not so, however, when Hashem "sold" us the Torah; He, our Father, sold Himself to us with the Torah. In other words, through the Torah, one connects himself to Hashem.

However, one who wants to come close to Hashem and His Torah must experience yearnings/kissufim for that goal. This is alluded to by the "two zuz," as those coins are made of silver/kessef.

Moreover, it is not enough to yearn for Hashem and His Torah. One must also hate evil, i.e., he must be a "sonai ra." This is alluded to by the cat (or weasel), referred to in the song as a "shunra." Of course, the yetzer hara will not stand by idly while a person attains these spiritual accomplishments. Rather, the yetzer hara, represented by the kalba/dog, will attack the shunra.

When the yetzer hara threatens to defeat a person, the surest way to prevail is to strengthen one's emunah/faith. This is the chutra/the staff on which one can lean and with which one can hit the dog, i.e., the yetzer hara. However, the yetzer hara is tenacious and does not give up easily. Thus, the nura/fire of the yetzer hara may burn the staff of emunah.

What should one do to protect himself? Study Torah, which is likened throughout Rabbinic literature to maya/water.

Our sages teach that the Torah can be an elixir of life if one studies it with the proper motivation, but it can be poisonous if one approaches it with the wrong intentions, for example, if one studies Torah so that he can attack Torah scholars on their own ground. The tora/ox that drinks the water in the song represents the animal that one can become if he misuses the Torah. [Ed. Note: The Aramaic word "tora," meaning ox, is related to the Hebrew word "shor," but is unrelated to the Hebrew word "Torah."]

The shochet who slaughters the ox represents one's slaughtering of the yetzer hara that caused him to act like an animal. However, the "angel of death" (who is one and the same with the yetzer hara) may slaughter the shochet, i.e., it may cause a person to act hypocritically. This is alluded to by the gemara's teaching that one who slaughters an animal on Shabbat is liable for the act of painting (i.e., painting the skin of the animal with the animal's blood). The word "tzavua"/"painted" also means "hypocrite."

In the end, however, Hakadosh Baruch Hu/The Holy One Himself will destroy the angel of death and the yetzer hara. (Likkutei Torah)

Letters from Our Sages

This week we present an excerpt from one of the most famous letter's in Jewish history, the Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon. R' Sherira (906-1006) was the dean of the yeshiva of Pumpedita, in present-day Iraq, and his book-length letter is a history of the Sages and of the formation of the Talmud. The recipient of the letter was R' Yaakov ben Nissim of Kairouan, in present-day Tunisia.

In the selection below, R' Sherira explains why the Mishnah cites only the few generations of sages beginning shortly before the destruction of the Second Temple in approximately 70 C.E. He also explains why there exist halachic disputes.

"As for your question, 'Why were the numerous sages of the earlier generations disregarded for those of the later generations?' - the earlier sages were not disregarded. On the contrary, their statements were studied and all their opinions were taught. [R' Sherira cites a proof for this from Pesachim 66a, where Hillel criticized certain colleagues for not having studied the opinion of two earlier sages.]

"This was the situation: the early sages were not known by their names, except for the nesi'im/political heads and the av bet din/chief justice because there were no disputes among them [and it was not necessary to report that "Rabbi so-and-so says such-and-such."] Instead, they knew clearly all the explanations of the Torah. They also knew the Talmud clearly with all its detailed discussions and inferences. [R' Sherira cites a proof from Bava Batra 134a which states that

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, the least great of Hillel's disciples, knew the entire Torah, including all of the discussions of the sages Abbaye and Rava, although Abbaye and Rava would not be born until approximately 300 years later.]

"As long as the Bet Hamikdash was standing, each one of the sages taught his students the explanations of Tanach, Mishnah and Talmud [although the Mishnah and Talmud were not yet in written form], using words which he composed for the occasion. The sages also would render halachic decisions for their students as they saw fit. Wisdom was abundant, and they were not troubled by other distractions. [During the five generations preceding Hillel, the first halachic dispute arose, and] only one controversy existed among those early sages. Hillel and Shammai themselves argued on only three points.

"When the Bet Hamikdash was destroyed, the sages moved to Betar, and when Betar was also destroyed, they dispersed in every direction. On account of all these upheavals, persecutions and disturbances, the students did not serve the sages sufficiently and disputes increased." ["To serve the sages" means to be an advanced student who is by the teacher's side constantly, even when formal studies are not in session. It is by being at the sage's side when he is at home or in the street that one learns how he rules on practical halachic questions presented to him.]

Copyright © 1998 by [Shlomo Katz](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ("lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah"), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Project Genesis](#) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page. Text archives from 1990 through the present may be retrieved from <http://www.acoast.com/~sehc/hamaayan/>. Donations to HaMaayan are tax-deductible.
