

THE SMALL BANG

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Bereishis

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Today's Learning:

Mo'ed Kattan 3:9 - Chagigah 1:1

Orach Chaim 328:35-37

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Nazir 11

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Bava Metzia 13

Shabbat Bereishit, the Shabbat on which the Torah-reading cycle is begun anew, seems rather low-key after the excitement of completing the Torah on Simchat Torah. R' Moshe Avigdor Amiel z"l (1883-1946; Chief Rabbi of Antwerp and Tel Aviv) explains this phenomenon as follows:

The last verses of the Torah state: "Never again has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moshe [as evidenced] by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of Israel." Rashi explains that this refers to the Giving of the Torah. Asks R' Amiel: Was the Torah given only before the eyes of Israel? Does not the midrash teach that while the Torah was being given no bird chirped anywhere in the world, no ox mooed, no angels sang "Holy, Holy," the sea did not move, and no person spoke?! In short, the Torah was given before the eyes of the entire world!

The answer is as follows: The Sages further interpret the middle of the Torah's last verse ("that Moshe performed") as a reference to the breaking of the luchot. Thus, the end of verse must refer to

the second time the Torah was given, after the luchot had been broken. It's true that the Torah was given with lightning and thunder, and that the entire world was aware of the event, but that was only true of the first luchot, which did not last. In contrast, the permanent giving of the Torah was only before the eyes of Israel.

[The above is a manifestation of the Sages' dictum: "Blessing is found only in that which is hidden from the eye."] The beginning of the Torah is quiet and mysterious -- "the earth was astonishingly empty" (Bereishit 1:2). The end of the Torah is exultant -- "And this is the blessing that Moshe, the man of G-d, bestowed" (Devarim 33:1). That which starts quietly ends in exultation; however, that which begins with loud proclamations (like the first giving of the Torah) ends ignominiously. (Hegyonot El Ami Ch. 56)

"The snake said to the woman, 'Even if G-d said, "You shall not eat of any tree of the Garden".' " (3:1) Why is the snake's statement not a complete sentence? R' Nachum Kaplan z"l ("R' Nachumke of Horodna"; see page 4) explained:

It was once common that when the community needed to raise money for some need, the community's elders would announce in a town meeting that every family must donate the equivalent of its expenditures for one Shabbat. If any family did not donate the required amount, that family's food would be deemed to be non-kosher, in which case, that family itself would be unable to eat its own food.

This method of fundraising was, of course, possible only so long as people observed the mitzvah to obey the sages, and only so long as people took seriously the elders' edict that food which was in fact kosher should be considered non-kosher (even by its owner). Therefore, this system ceased to function when people no longer had complete faith in the elders.

Thus, if someone wanted to oppose the elders' decree, he did not have to challenge the elders openly. It was enough for him to weaken people's faith in the elders, perhaps by raising his eyebrows when the elders spoke, perhaps by winking at his neighbors mockingly, or perhaps by uttering a half-question, "Even if the elders did say, 'It's not kosher'?" He did not even need to finish his thought, and the "So what?!" could remain unspoken.

This is why the snake's question went unfinished. He did not dare to challenge G-d openly, but even his half-question was enough to sow doubts in Chava's mind. (Quoted in Torat Gavriel)

The snake's question may also be translated as follows: "Did, perhaps, G-d say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the Garden'?"

R' Gavriel Wolf Margolis z"l (see page 4) explains the above verse based on verse 6, where we read, "The woman perceived that the tree was good for eating." How did she know?

Verse 1 reflects the cunning of the snake in asking whether Hashem had in fact prohibited eating the trees of the Garden. Chava responded (in verse 2) that Hashem permitted eating the fruits of almost all trees and prohibited eating the fruit of one tree, i.e., the eitz ha'daat / tree of knowledge. The implication was that, as for the trees themselves, Adam and Chava were permitted to eat these if they chose.

To prove her point, Chava proceeded to break off a piece of the eitz ha'daat and chew on it, just as the snake had hoped she would. According to one opinion in the midrash, the eitz ha'daat was an etrog tree, a tree whose wood, Chazal say, has the same taste as the etrog fruit. This is how Chava knew "that the tree was good for eating," and how the snake caused her to eat of the tree's fruit also. (Torat Gavriel)

"Have you eaten of the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?" (3:11)
The midrash says that Adam answered: "I did eat, and I would eat again!" How can this be understood?

R' Yissachar Ber Rotenberg z"l (1906-1986; the "Voydislaver Rebbe") explains: We have two holidays when eating is restricted - Yom Kippur, when no food may be eaten, and Pesach, when only certain foods are prohibited. One halachic difference between them is that on Pesach we are prohibited from possessing those foods which we may not eat, while on Yom Kippur, eating is prohibited, but there is no prohibition on owning, or even handling, food. Why?

The answer is that human nature is such that one will not accidentally eat on Yom Kippur merely because he sees or touches food, since all eating is prohibited. On Pesach, however, since most foods are permitted, one may accidentally eat chametz as well if it is readily available.

This is what Adam meant: "Since You permitted all the trees but one, it was inevitable that I would eat from it. Indeed, the danger of being near the tree is so great, that I am likely to eat from it again." (Yarbeh Torah)

More simply, R' Yitzchak Ze'ev Yadler z"l (late 19th century; Yerushalayim) explains that Adam was bemoaning the spiritual decline that he had caused by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. "Indeed, I ate, and in my low spiritual state, I am likely to commit the same sin again." (Tiferet Zion Vol. I, p. 270)

"Kayin said to Hashem, 'My sin is too great to bear'." (4:13)

R' Mattisyahu Solomon shlita (Mashgiach of the Lakewood Yeshiva) observes that among the tens of thousands of laws in the Shulchan Aruch, there is only one sin that is referred to as being "too great to bear." This is the sin of talking during the chazan's repetition of shemoneh esrei (O.C. 124:7). Why does this sin stand out?

R' Solomon explains: When we pray to Hashem, we are acknowledging that He is close to us, that He listens to us, and that He controls our fate. When the chazzan repeats the shemoneh esrei, he is making these same declarations as our representative. Thus, by talking during the chazzan's repetition, we are suggesting that we do not believe (G-d forbid) that He is close to us, that He listens to us, or that He controls our fate. (Heard from Rabbi Paysach Krohn shlita)

"And Hashem gave Kayin a sign" (4:15)

The Sages teach that the "sign" that Hashem gave Kayin was a pet dog. Why?

R' Yisroel Meir Hakohen z"l (the "Chafetz Chaim"; died 1933) explains: Hevel was stronger than Kayin, and when Kayin first attacked Hevel, the latter got the better of his attacker. Kayin begged for mercy, and Hevel released him, only to be attacked again and killed.

In short, Kayin failed to show gratitude to one who had been kind to him. In contrast, the nature of a dog is to show undying gratitude and loyalty, and it was so that Kayin could learn these traits that Hashem gave him a pet dog. (Quoted in Otzar Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot)

R' Nachum Kaplan z"l

("R' Nachumke of Horodna")

R' Nachumke, as our subject was universally known, was born in Bysgula, Lithuania in 1812 and studied in several yeshivot, including Volozhin. At age 21, he settled in Horodna and was offered the rabbinate of that town, but he declined it. Instead, in order to support his family while continuing to study, he agreed to serve as shamash of the Chevrah Shas shul.

As shamash, R' Nachumke served the Torah scholars who studied in the shul. He also was responsible for collecting and distributing charity and he became famed for his acts of kindness. Many hours each day were spent trudging door to door, and non-Jews as well as Jews benefitted from the funds under his care.

For a time, R' Nachumke headed a small yeshiva in Horodna, among whose students was the Chafetz Chaim (then 15 years old). The Chafetz Chaim later related:

The students of the yeshiva observed that R' Nachumke disappeared for a time each night, and no one knew where he went. The students followed him and discovered that he went to a certain empty shul.

One night, I [i.e., the young Chafetz Chaim] attended ma'ariv in that shul, and then, instead of leaving, I hid under a bench in the women's section. Soon after, I was locked in.

At midnight, the door opened, and R' Nachumke entered. He climbed up to the bima, reached into a

crate of worn out talitot, and removed a book. (Apparently, the book was a volume of kabbalah.) Suddenly, a fire surrounded R' Nachumke. I was about to scream, 'Help! Fire!' but I sensed that this was no earthly fire. I kept quiet, but I trembled so that I thought I would die.

It is reported that the Chafetz Chaim had a picture of R' Nachumke hanging in his house.

R' Nachumke also delivered weekly sermons to the people of Horodna, and these regularly attracted large crowds. When R' Nachumke died in 1880, he was accompanied to his final resting place by thousands. It is said that he expressed the hope to have three items in Gan Eden, one of them being a copy of R' Akiva Eiger's Talmud commentary.

R' Nachumke had 17 children, many of whom predeceased him. Among his sons-in-law was R' Gavriel Wolf Margolis (1847-1935), rabbi of Horodna, and later Boston, Massachusetts. (Source: Gedolei Ha'dorot p. 722)

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