

EVERY JEW IS A SPARK

by Shlomo Katz

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Ki Tissa:

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Today's Learning:

Nedarim 3:9-10

Orach Chaim 397:6-8

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Gittin 38

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Sanhedrin 29

A large part of this week's parashah is devoted to the incident of the golden calf. The Torah relates that when Moshe came down from Har Sinai and saw what the Jews had done, he threw down the luchot / tablets and broke them.

What was Moshe thinking? asks R' Shimon Shkop z"l (died 1940). Did he contemplate that the Jews would henceforth be without a Torah?

The gemara (Eruvin 54) states that had the first luchot not been broken, one who studies Torah would never forget what he had learned. This was not a good thing, Moshe felt after he saw the golden calf, but a recipe for disaster. If one could read the Torah once and never forget it, one could easily amass vast Torah knowledge and use it for improper purposes. And, the resulting chillul Hashem / the desecration of G-d's Name would be much greater because the sinner would be a Torah scholar.

Moshe preferred a world where one had to struggle to learn in the first place, and then had to review and practice in order to retain what he had learned. In this way, when a person deviated from a Torah lifestyle, he would begin to forget what he had learned.

The gemara (Nedarim 38) teaches that Moshe became rich from the scraps that were left after the luchot were engraved. R' Shkop explains that this was intended to answer the people's fear: If Moshe changed the world so that one now has to struggle over Torah learning, when will people earn their living? From Moshe's experience we see that G-d can find ways to support us, and even to make us rich, while we devote our time to Torah and mitzvot. (Sha'arei Yosher, Introduction)

"This they shall give - everyone who passes through the census - a half shekel of the sacred shekel."
(30:13)

Rashi records that Hashem showed Moshe a coin of fire and said to him, "Like this they shall give." What does this mean?

R' David Halberstam of Krashnov z"l (1818-1893; second son of R' Chaim Halberstam of Sanz) explains: Moshe Rabbeinu was exceedingly humble, and he said of himself (Shmot 16:7 and elsewhere), "What are we?" He could not understand why Hashem would count men, considering how insignificant men are.

This is why Hashem showed Moshe a coin of fire. Fire cannot exist unless it is joined with a medium. Similarly, every Jew is a spark of fire; alone, he is nothing, but when he is part of a group or a society, his power is enormous.

Alternatively, fire symbolizes the power of tzedakah. The midrash records that when Hashem said to Moshe (Shmot 30:11), "Every man shall give Hashem an atonement for his soul," Moshe asked, "How can one redeem his soul? Is it not written (Tehilim 49:9), 'Too costly is their soul's redemption'?"

Hashem answered, "It is not as you think; 'This they shall give'." Such is the power of tzedakah. (Darchei David p. 59)

"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." As Hashem offered to make Moshe into a great nation despite the failings in Moshe's own family, He can similarly overlook Bnei Yisrael's faults. (Meshech Chochmah)

Thirty Days Before Pesach

"The wise son - what does he say? 'What are the testimonies, statutes and laws that Hashem, our G-d, has commanded you?'

You shall instruct him in the laws of Pesach, that one may not eat anything after eating the Pesach sacrifice." (The Pesach Haggadah)

Numerous commentaries observe that the wise son's question appears in the Torah (Devarim 6:20). There, however, the question is given a different answer, i.e., "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt . . ." Why does the Haggadah not offer the same answer given by the Torah?

Also, the Haggadah condemns the wicked son for saying, "What does this service mean to you?" Why then is the wise son not criticized for asking: "What are the testimonies . . . that Hashem, our G-d, has commanded you?"

R' Yechiel Michel Schlesinger z"l (1898-1949; founder of Yeshivat Kol Torah) answers: The response which the Torah gives the wise son ("We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt . . .") was used by the Haggadah previously in response to the Four Questions. The reason for this is that we assume that a son who asks such discerning questions is a wise son. However, there is more to the Torah's answer to the wise son than simply, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt." Indeed, the verses continue with an injunction to teach our sons G-d's laws: "Hashem commanded us to perform all these decrees . . ." Thus, the Haggadah really is giving the wise son the answer which the Torah itself gives.

What are the Torah and the Haggadah teaching us with this two- part answer to the wise son? That before we begin educating our children about the commandments and instructing them concerning halachah, we must provide them with a historical background: "We were slaves," and Hashem took us out of Egypt, from servitude to freedom. It is due to this salvation that we are obligated in the mitzvot - to accept them, study them and fulfill them.

When is the time to begin teaching children the laws which they must observe? The Haggadah tells us: Immediately after you have finished teaching that Hashem took us out of Egypt, seize the moment and teach the laws.

R' Schlesinger adds: It is also clear from the context of the verses in Devarim, Chapter 6, where the above verses appear, that the Torah is speaking to the generation that was led by Yehoshua into Eretz Yisrael. This is the generation whose members received the Torah in their own youth; some

even stood at Har Sinai. The "wise son" being spoken of is the child of that generation. Thus, when he says, "What are the testimonies . . . that Hashem, our G-d, has commanded you?" he is not being disrespectful; he means it literally, for Hashem did command his father. (Haggadah Shel Pesach She'al Avicha Ve'yaggedcha)

Introductions . . .

This week, we conclude the introduction to Sefer Hachinuch, a 13th century encyclopedia of the 613 mitzvot.

Now, know this! We have a tradition from our Sages that the number of mitzvot that apply for all time, which were included in the Torah that was given to us by Hashem, may He be elevated, is 613. Whether those which we are commanded to do or those which we are warned not to do -- they are all called mitzvot. Those which we are commanded to do total 248, and those which we must not do total 365. Some of them are obligations of all Jews, male and female, in every location and every era. Some are the obligations only of yisraelim, in every location and every era, but not of kohanim or levi'im. Some are the obligations only of levi'im. Some are the obligations only of kohanim, in every location and every era. Some are the obligations only of the king of Israel. Some are the obligations only of the entire tzibbur / community. Some of them are obligations only in a certain place and a certain era, for example, in Eretz Yisrael, but only when most Jews live there. Even in a given place, there are differences among certain mitzvot between men and women and between yisraelim, kohanim and lev'im. From among these, some are affirmative obligations to be fulfilled constantly, for example, loving Hashem and fearing Him. Some are affirmative obligations that must be done at specific times, and not before then, for example, sukkah, lulav, shofar, refraining from work on the holidays, and reciting shema, all of which have set times either during the course of the day or of the year. Some of them, one is never obligated to do unless he finds himself in circumstances which require that mitzvah to be done. For example, even if you will say that paying a worker in a timely manner is a distinct mitzvah, certainly one is not obligated to hire workers merely in order to fulfill this mitzvah. There are a few others like this, as we will explain with G-d's help in connection with each mitzvah.

One of the mitzvot, the principle and foundation upon which all others rest, is the mitzvah of studying Torah, for by studying, one will know the mitzvot and will observe them. This is why the Sages established to read one portion of the Torah in the place where people gather, i.e., the bet kneset. This is in order to awaken the heart of man regarding the Torah and the commandments every week, until the Torah is completed. We have heard that most of Israel does this on an annual basis. . .

It is my intention to write down some indication of the roots [i.e., the reasons] for each mitzvah. Those which are set out clearly in the verses themselves, I will copy as is. For those that are concealed, I

will write what I have heard from wise men and what I understand. I do not think or decree that I will ascertain the truth in every case, for who am I? A worm and not a man! [based on Tehilim 22:7] . . . I am not lacking the knowledge that ants cannot carry the same load as camels, and a child who does not know how to say a berachah [a common Talmudic expression] cannot expound regarding the Heavenly chariot. Nevertheless, my great desire to dip my staff into the honeycomb of the mitzvot [based on Shmuel I 14:27] forced me to enter this forest which has no limits . . .

Sponsored by Bobbi and Jules Meisler in memory of father Irving Meisler a"h

Professor and Mrs. Gilbert J. Ginsburg on the bar mitzvah of grandson Elazar Ginsburg

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