

SPIRITUAL CONNECTION AND ACTUAL OBSERVANCE

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Tazria

Spiritual Connection and Actual Observance

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Today's Learning:
Gittin 8:6-7
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Chagigah 14
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Pesachim 13

Our parashah begins with mitzvot associated with childbirth, including the commandment of brit milah, circumcising our sons on the eighth day after their births. Why is this mitzvah repeated here when it was already told to Avraham Avinu and recorded in Bereishit? R' Zvi Yehuda Kook z"l (rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Merkaz Harav; died 1982) answers as follows:

Rambam z"l writes (in his commentary to the last mishnah in Chullin chapter 7): "Know that the fact that we distance something or draw it close is only because Hashem commanded Moshe thus at Har Sinai, not because it was spoken to an earlier prophet [such as the Patriarchs]. . . We do not circumcise ourselves because Avraham circumcised himself and his household, but rather because Hashem commanded Moshe that we should do so just as Avraham did. . . This rule also is apparent from the Sages' statement that: '613 commandments [i.e., all of them] were given to Moshe at Sinai'."

However, says R' Kook, Rambam's explanation appears to be contradicted by a midrash quoted in Sefer Menorat Ha'maor by R' Yisrael al-Naqawa z"l (died 1391). That midrash quotes the pasuk (Devarim 33:4), "Moshe commanded the Torah to us, an inheritance to the congregation of Yaakov,"

and asks: "Have we been holding on to the Torah only since the time of Moshe? We have been holding on to the Torah since the time of the Patriarchs!"

In reality, there is no contradiction, R' Kook answers. Our spiritual attachment to the Torah does date back to the Patriarchs. However, that is not why we observe the Torah's laws. Rather, we observe the laws because Hashem commanded us at Har Sinai to do so. (Sichot R' Zvi Yehuda: Vayikra p.104)

From the Parashah . . .

"If a tzara'at affliction will be in a person, he shall be brought to the kohen." (Vayikra 13:9)

Rabbeinu Asher z"l (13th -14th centuries; Germany and Spain) observes that this verse begins and ends with the letter "nun" ("Nega . . . kohen"). This may explain why the prophet Elisha commanded the leprous Assyrian General Na'aman to bathe in the Jordan River. [Ed. note: See the haftarah for Tazria when this week's two parashot are separate.] The name "Na'aman" also begins and ends with the letter nun. Likewise, the verse which commands us to obey a prophet, i.e., Devarim 18:15 -- "Navi / A prophet from your midst, from your brethren, like me, shall Hashem, your G-d, establish for you - - to him shall you hearken / tishma'un" -- begins and ends with the letter nun. Finally, there is a verse mentioning the Jordan river which also begins and ends with the letter nun, i.e., Bemidbar 32:32 - "Nachnu / We shall cross over, armed, before Hashem to the land of Canaan, and ours shall be the heritage of our inheritance across the Jordan / Yarden."

(Peirush Ha'Rosh)

From the Haftarah . . .

"Four men, metzoraim, were outside the gate; each one said to his friend, 'Why are we sitting here until we die?'" (Melachim II 7:3)

R' Akiva Eiger z"l (1761-1837; leading Talmud commentator and halachic authority; rabbi of Posen, Germany) writes: A wise man asked me why these four men with tzara'at had been expelled from the city of Shomron when the Mishnah states that metzoraim must be expelled only from cities that had been walled at the time of Yehoshua bin Nun, who led Bnei Yisrael into Eretz Canaan. Shomron, in contrast, was a new city built by King Omri, as described in Melachim I (16:24): "Then he bought the mountain of Shomron from Shemer for two loaves of silver, and he built up the mountain, and he called the city that he built after Shemer, the master of the mountain of Shomron."

R' Eiger writes: I answered him that the Aramaic translation of Yonatan ben Uziel avoided this question by translating the quoted verse, "Then he bought the small city of Shomron from Shemer for two loaves of silver, and he built up the small city, and he called the metropolis that he built after Shemer, the master of the mountain of Shomron." In other words, according to Targum Yonatan,

Omri did not build a new city, but rather expanded an ancient city that apparently was already walled in the time of Yehoshua bin Nun.

(Tosfot R' Akiva Eiger: Masechet Kelim 1:7)

R' Meir Simcha Hakohen z"l (1847-1926; rabbi of Dvinsk, Latvia) offers another answer to the question that the "wise man" asked R' Akiva Eiger. [Shomron was the capital of the Kingdom of Yisrael, which had seceded from the Kingdom of Yehuda.] In an effort to legitimize their reign, the kings of Yisrael applied to their capital the same laws that applied to Yerushalayim.

(Meshech Chochmah)

R' Yehuda Cooperman shlita (founder and dean of Michlalah College for Women in Yerushalayim; editor of an annotated edition of the above- mentioned Meshech Chochmah) offers an additional answer:

Our Sages say that these four men were Gechazi, the former servant of the prophet of Elisha, and Gechazi's three sons. [We read earlier in Sefer Melachim that the Assyrian general Na'aman had leprosy and came to Elisha seeking a cure. Elisha cured him, but refused to take any compensation. Gechazi chased after Na'aman and told him that Elisha had changed his mind, thus obtaining gifts from the general under false pretenses.] When Elisha heard about Gechazi's chillul Hashem, he cursed Gechazi (Melachim II 5:27), "Na'aman's leprosy shall therefore cling to you and your children forever!"

Ramban z"l and others write that the tzara'at discussed at length in our parashah is not leprosy or any other medical condition, but rather is the physical manifestation of a spiritual illness. When a person contracted tzara'at, it was because G-d was sending him a message.

Therefore, observes R' Shimon Schwab z"l (1908-1995; rabbi of the Khal Adath Jeshurun / "Breur's" community in New York), there was no public health reason to isolate one who suffers from tzara'at. In contrast, we know that leprosy is considered a very serious risk to public health.

Ramban writes further that the tzara'at of our parashah is a manifestation of Hashem's special relationship with the Jewish People. A member of Klal Yisrael who has distanced himself from this special relationship may contract tzara'at as a warning. A gentile, like General Na'aman, could never contract tzara'at.

It follows, explains R' Cooperman, that Gechazi and his sons, who were cursed with "Na'aman's leprosy" were a public health risk. That is why they were expelled from Shomron, despite the fact that Shomron did not have a wall in the days of Yehoshua bin Nun.

(Notes to Meshech Chochmah [4th edition,p.252])

Diaries

R' Yaakov Emden (1697-1776) is well-known for his notes on the Talmud, his halachic writings, and his siddur commentary. One of R' Emden's lesser known works is his autobiography, Megilat Sefer, from which we present another excerpt this week.

In this selection, R' Emden describes his attempts to collect debts owed to his father, R' Zvi Ashkenazi (the "Chacham Zvi"), after the latter's early death in 1718. Among other things, this excerpt illustrates the caution and honesty that a tzaddik practices in his financial dealings. The incident described here took place when R' Emden was in his early twenties.

When I reached Hamburg [from Slovakia], the estate of Mordechai Cohen had already been distributed, and I therefore was unable to collect the debt of 1,000 reichsthaler. Regarding the second debt of 800 reichsthaler from R' N.D. and his guarantor R' B.K. of blessed memory, when I presented the promissory note, he [apparently, R' B.K.] told me it had been paid. I did not know the nature of the loan except that it clearly had his signature, which he did not deny, and I did not find it among paid notes; however, there was a certain plausibility to his claim that it only inadvertently had not been torn up or a receipt written. It is reasonable to think that my father and teacher would not have left this debt uncollected for so long, considering that R' B.K. was a wealthy man, who had the ability to pay, and he had signed as an absolute guarantor. Nevertheless, the only tears in the document were at the creases, which was because of old age. On the other hand, there are strong proofs that this was an outstanding loan. Firstly, there is an absolute presumption (chazakah) that a Torah scholar would not leave such a stumbling block in his possession. Halachah states that when a Torah scholar dies, one may presume that terumah and ma'aser have already been separated from his produce; certainly a pious and careful man such as my father would not have been so careless with a paid note. It also cannot be argued that my father and teacher died suddenly before he had the opportunity to tear-up the note, since R' B.K. claims that he paid it when my father and teacher was still rabbi of Amsterdam many years before his death. Most troubling, R' B.K. could not remember the circumstances under which he paid: exactly when, how, or through what agent. There also must not have been a record of the payment in his account book; otherwise he would have shown it to me. And, why did he not ask my father and teacher z"l for a receipt? Nevertheless, I could not bring myself to summon R' B.K. to a din Torah as he appears to be a very trustworthy man and he has a chezkas kashrut / presumption of being upstanding, and I was afraid of erring.

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