

THE WISE SON & THE ERUV

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Behaaloscha

The Wise Son & the Eruv

The Midrash Rabbah connects the opening of our parashah, "Speak to Aharon and say to him, 'When you kindle the lamps, toward the face of the menorah shall the seven lamps cast light,'" with the verse (Yeshayah 42:21), "Hashem desires for the sake of [man's] righteousness that the Torah be made great and glorious." What is the connection between the two?

R' Moshe Gruenwald z"l (rabbi of Chust, Hungary; died 1909) writes: The Gemara (Shabbat 14b) states that when King Shlomo established the concept of an eruv, a bat kol proclaimed the verse (Mishlei 23:15), "My son, when your heart becomes wise, then My heart, too, will rejoice." R' Gruenwald explains: According to Torah law, carrying outdoors on Shabbat is prohibited in certain types of places and permitted in other types of places. Subsequently, as a precaution lest one inadvertently violate a Torah prohibition, the Sages prohibited carrying in some places where, according to the Torah, carrying is permitted. However, King Shlomo decreed that one could make an eruv to permit carrying in those places where the Sages had prohibited carrying. [In effect, building an eruv substitutes as a precaution.]

Was G-d happy with this? One might argue that G-d is not happy that we are so lax in our performance of mitzvot that all of these extra precautions above-and-beyond the Torah's prohibitions are necessary. Says the Gemara: No! When King Shlomo established eruvin (plural of eruv), Hashem rejoiced.

Why? Because, as the above verse states, "Hashem desires for the sake of [man's] righteousness that the Torah be made great [i.e., bigger]." When we add mitzvot (within proper guidelines), Hashem approves.

Ramban z"l writes that the opening of our parashah hints that, in the future, the Sages would establish a holiday involving the menorah (i.e., Chanukah). It was for this new mitzvah that the midrash says that Hashem rejoiced. (Arugat Ha'bosem)

"Bnei Yisrael shall make the Pesach-offering in its appointed time." (9:2)

The word Pesach refers to the fact that Hashem passed-over ("pasach") the homes of Bnei Yisrael when He killed the firstborn of Egypt. After all the miracles before and during the Exodus, why does the name of the offering (and the holiday) commemorate this one detail?

R' Yitzchak Yerucham Borodiansky shlita (Yerushalayim) explains: The fact that Hashem passed-over the homes of Bnei Yisrael is not a mere detail of the Exodus. Rather, it is a sign of the hashgachah pratit / Divine providence with which Hashem relates to the Jewish People. That hashgachah pratit is the surest sign of the uniqueness of Bnei Yisrael; therefore, it is appropriate to highlight Hashem's passing-over the homes of Bnei Yisrael. (Siach Yitzchak: Shmot p.52)

"We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge; and the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic." (11:5)

R' Yosef Gikitila z"l (1248-1310; Spain; author of Sha'arei Orah) writes: Though it was necessary that Bnei Yisrael be exiled and enslaved as part of their formative experience, it was an act of kindness by Hashem that He caused them to be enslaved in Egypt, where food was plentiful. This surely lessened the suffering compared to what it would have been in a place that lacked abundant food. Moreover, Hashem decreed that Bnei Yisrael would multiply rapidly, and Bnei Yisrael had many mouths to feed. Therefore, in His kindness, He exiled them to Egypt. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Tzofnat Paneach p.20)

"Yehoshua bin Nun, the servant of Moshe since his youth, spoke up and said, 'My master Moshe, incarcerate them!'." (11:28)

R' Shabtai Hakohen z"l (the "Shach"; 1622-1663; author of one of the major commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch) writes that, although one is permitted to say his Torah teacher's / rebbe's name together with a title, that is only when one is not speaking to his teacher's face. To the teacher's face, even that is prohibited. Later authorities note, however, that the Shach's rule appears to be contradicted by Yehoshua's words in our verse ("my master Moshe"), which were said to his teacher's face!

R' Eliezer Dovid Gruenwald z"l (1867-1928; rabbi of Oyber Visheve, Hungary) explains: The Gemara (Eruvin 54a) describes how Torah was taught to the Generation of the Desert: Moshe taught Aharon, he repeated the lesson for Aharon's sons, then again for the elders, and once more for all the people. Then Moshe left, and Aharon repeated the lesson for his sons, then again for the elders, and

once more for all the people. Then Aharon left, and his sons repeated the lesson, and so on, until every person had heard the lesson four times. In short, Yehoshua had multiple teachers. Had he said merely, "My master, incarcerate them," no one would have known to whom he was speaking. He had to address Moshe by name! (She'eilot U'teshuvot Keren Le'Dovid, no. 181)

"Miriam and Aharon spoke against Moshe . . ." (12:1)

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (Maharal of Prague; died 1609) writes: The midrash Yalkut Shimoni cites the verse (Mishlei 10:19), "In an abundance of words, silence will not be lacking," and applies it to Miriam who spoke against Moshe. Regarding the continuation of that verse, "but one who restrains his lips is wise," the midrash comments: Because he restrains his lips from speaking against others, he is wise. The Sage Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said, "My entire life I grew up among wise men, and I never found anything as good for a person as silence."

The midrash relates: Two courtiers were standing before [the Roman Emperor] Hadrian. One claimed that speech is preferable to silence, while the other claimed the opposite. The one who claimed that speech was preferable presented his arguments first: "Without speech, kings couldn't be crowned, the dead wouldn't be buried, brides couldn't be praised for their beauty, and no business would be transacted."

Then the second courtier began to present his arguments in favor of silence. Suddenly, his colleague slapped him across the face. "Why did you slap him?" the Emperor demanded. "I made my arguments using speech, which I claim is preferable," he replied. "Let him make his arguments using silence, which he says is preferable!" [Likewise, continues the midrash,] King Shlomo said, "I never said one should muzzle his mouth, only that he should restrain his mouth from speaking against others." [Until here from the midrash]

Maharal explains: The middle section of the midrash seems to be teaching that one should not talk unless it is necessary, as in the examples the courtier gave. Without speech, one couldn't accomplish anything, not even to prove the merits of silence. Nevertheless, silence is preferable when there is no need to speak, lest one say things which should not be said.

On the other hand, Maharal continues, the earlier part of the midrash seems to say that all speech is permitted except hurtful speech. To sit quietly in the company of others is not fitting, Maharal writes. Even so, excessive talking is definitely prohibited, he adds.

In all, Maharal concludes, there are five types of speech: (1) Speech which is a mitzvah, such as Torah study; (2) speech which is a sin--for example, lying and lashon hara; (3) speech which is to be despised, because it serves no constructive purpose, which is the category into which most of

human speech falls, Maharal writes; (4) speech which is beloved, i.e., extolling the virtues of good character traits and pointing out the fallacy of bad character traits; and (5) speech which is permitted, i.e., which is necessary for engaging in business and other worldly necessities. (Netivot Olam: Netiv Ha'shetikah ch.1)

Letters from Our Sages

In connection with the section of our parashah relating that Miriam spoke lashon hara about her brother Moshe and was punished with tzara'at, we present the following excerpt from "Iggeret Ha'Gra," a letter that R' Eliyahu z"l (1720-1797), the "Vilna Gaon," wrote to his family during his unsuccessful attempt to reach Eretz Yisrael.

One who succeeds in muzzling his mouth merits an unimaginable abundance of the hidden light [see Rashi to Bereishit 1:4], as it is written (Tehilim 34:13-14), "Who is the man who desires life, who loves days of seeing goodness? Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit." Such a person's sin are forgiven and he is saved from gehinnom, as it is written (Mishlei 21:23), "One who guards his mouth and tongue guards his soul from troubles." It is written also (Mishlei 18:21), "Death and life are within the power of the tongue." Woe to someone who kills himself using his tongue! What gain is there from constant speech? . . . Do not speak a person's praises excessively, for this leads to speaking about his faults, and certainly do not speak about a person's faults, for what gain is there in speaking of foreign things, about which it is written (Mishlei 22:14) "The mouth [that speaks] foreign things is a deep pit; those scorned by Hashem will fall there"? [In his commentary to Mishlei, the Vilna Gaon writes that the second half of the verse refers to those who listen to the improper speech of the person referred to in the first half of the verse.]

The primary protection [against speaking and hearing improper speech] is solitude. . . In shul, sit alone, avoiding other people, because wherever people are gathered, it's impossible not to hear idle chatter and lashon hara. Even one who hears and remains silent is punished, as our Sages said. Especially on Shabbat and Yom Tov, when multitudes gather in shul, it's impossible that there won't be among them some who chatter idly or speak lashon hara. Take care not to sit among them. Distance yourselves from this ugliness. Sit alone in shul, for speaking in shul is a felonious transgression and a great sin, about which the Zohar says, "One who converses in shul has no share in the G-d of Israel." The law is the same in a bet medrash as in a shul.

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