

WHY SHABBAT?

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Emor

Why Shabbat?

We read in this week's parashah (23:3), "For six days labor may be done, and the seventh day is a day of complete rest, a holy convocation, you shall not do any work; it is a Shabbat for Hashem in all your dwelling places." R' Yaakov Zvi Mecklenburg z"l (1785-1865; rabbi of Königsberg, East Prussia) comments: "Shabbat" means "rest" and "refraining from work." However, it also means "reflection" and "study," as in the verse (Kohelet 4:7), "V'shavti [literally, 'Then I returned'] and contemplated another futility beneath the sun," and the verse (Yirmiyah 31:18), "For after shuvi [literally, 'repenting'], I regretted." This indicates that Shabbat is a time set aside for reflection about and study of matters relating to G-d, a time when every Jew should turn his thoughts solely to spiritual matters, as the Talmud Yerushalmi (Shabbat 15:3) states, "Shabbat and yom tov were given to the Jewish people only for Torah study." (Ha'ketav V'ha'kabbalah)

Adjacent to the passage just quoted, another sage in the Talmud Yerushalmi states, "Shabbat and yom tov were given to the Jewish people only for eating and drinking." R' Shmuel Yafeh Ashkenazi z"l (16th century; Constantinople, Turkey) writes that this can't possibly be meant literally, as it would contradict verses in the Torah which indicate that Shabbat is a reminder of Creation [for example (Shmot 31:17), "Between Me and Bnei Yisrael it is a sign forever that in a six-day period Hashem made the heaven and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed"]. Rather, the Gemara merely means that food and drink can put a person in the proper frame of mind to reflect on Shabbat's deeper meaning. (Yefei Mar'eh)

"When you slaughter a feast thanksgiving-offering to Hashem, you shall slaughter it willingly."
(22:29)

R' Eliezer Dovid Gruenwald z"l (1867-1928; Hungarian rabbi and rosh yeshiva) observes: A person is required to bring a korban todah / thanksgiving-offering if he was in danger and was saved. We read

in Tehilim (107:1-2), "Give thanks to Hashem, for He is good; His kindness endures forever. Those redeemed by Hashem will say it, those whom He redeemed from the hand of distress." This verse reflects man's tendency to thank G-d after man has been saved. However, one rarely remembers to thank G-d for not placing him in danger in the first place. Thus our verse teaches, "When you slaughter a feast thanksgiving-offering to Hashem, you shall slaughter it willingly." Don't wait until you are required to thank Hashem. Rather, thank Him voluntarily. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Chasdei David)

"In the seventh month, on the first of the month, there shall be a rest day for you, a zichron / remembrance with shofar blasts, a holy convocation." (23:24)

R' Yaakov Ba'al Ha'turim z"l (Spain; 14th century) writes: The word "zichron" appears three times in the mesorah (i.e., the traditional spelling of words in Tanach): here; in the verse (Kohelet 1:11), "As there is no remembrance of the first ones . . ."; and in the verse (Kohelet 2:16), "For there is no comparison between the remembrance of the wise man and of the fool at all . . ."

R' Gavriel Ze'ev Margolis z"l (1848-1935; rabbi in Lithuania and Boston) writes that this mesorah teaches the following lesson: Our verse states that blowing the shofar will cause G-d to remember us favorably. One might ask: Why won't G-d remember us favorably in any case, in the merit of our ancestors? The answer may be found in Chazal's teaching that the merit of prior generations protects their descendants only when the later generations follow in their ancestors' footsteps. In contrast, blowing the shofar, which inspires repentance, causes G-d to remember us favorably no matter what our deeds have been. Thus, the mesorah may be read as give-and-take, as follows:

"There shall be a rest day for you, a zichron / remembrance with shofar blasts." Why are the shofar blasts necessary? "Is there no remembrance of the first ones" - i.e., of the merits of our ancestors?" The answer is, "No! For there is no comparison between the remembrance of the wise man" --who follows in his ancestors' footsteps and who will be protected by their merits--"and of the fool"--who sins, and who will not be helped by the merits of his ancestors. (Torat Gavriel)

Pirkei Avot

"Rabbi Yonatan said: Whoever fulfills the Torah despite poverty, will ultimately fulfill it in wealth. But, whoever neglects the Torah because of wealth, will ultimately neglect it in poverty." (Ch.4)

Do all poor Torah scholars become rich? Clearly, it isn't so!

R' Zvi Yehuda Kook z"l (1891-1982; rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Merkaz Harav) quotes his wife's grandmother, Rebbetzin Hendel Hutner a"h, who explained this mishnah as follows:

Successful Torah study requires diligence. A student who is born very sharp and is a quick learner will nevertheless fail to realize his potential if he relies on his wits as a substitute for effort. On the other hand, one who is less talented can nevertheless succeed if he works hard.

This is what our mishnah is teaching: Whoever studies Torah despite poverty, i.e., lacking intellectual capabilities, will ultimately fulfill it in wealth, i.e., he will sharpen his mind. But, whoever neglects the Torah because of wealth, i.e., he fails to apply himself because he relies on his quick mind, will ultimately neglect it in poverty, i.e., he will lose his ability to grasp the wisdom of the Torah. (Sichot R Z.Y. al Mesilat Yesharim p.89)

"Rabbi Meir said: 'Minimize your involvement in commerce ("esek") and study Torah'."

R' Avraham Pinso z"l of Sarajevo writes: This can be understood in light of the Gemara (Avodah Zarah 19b) which promises that if one studies Torah with the proper intentions, his investments will prosper on their own. It does appear superficially that this is not the case, but we cannot gauge a person's inner motivations; therefore, we don't really know who deserves this blessing and who does not. Also, a person may study Torah with the purest of intentions, but forfeit this promise because of his sins. This, writes R' Pinso, is the likely explanation any time we see that a promise of the Torah is not fulfilled. (Katit La'maor)

From the same work:

"Don't focus on the pitcher but on its contents."

R' Pinso writes: This is an allusion to the yetzer hara, the evil inclination. It looks like an earthenware jar, something of little value. In fact, however, it is filled with the sweetest wine. How so?

We think of the yetzer hara as a pest. We are constantly fighting with the yetzer hara, trying to do good and to please Hashem. This is how we earn our places in the World-to-Come. But without the challenge which the yetzer hara presents, we would never earn that reward.

Letters from Our Sages

Below is a continuation of the letter begun last week, written by R' Moshe ben Maimon z"l

(Rambam/Maimonides; 1135-1204), who lived in Egypt, to R' Yehonatan Hakohen z"l (approx. 1150-1215) in Lunel, Provence (southern France). The letter was a response to a series of letters posing questions about Rambam's halachic code, Mishneh Torah, and his Moreh Nevochim.

And I, Moshe, further inform the glorious rabbi, R' Yehonatan Hakohen, and all the wise men and scholars who read my writings [paraphrasing Yirmiyah 1:5]: Although before I was formed in the womb, the Torah knew me, and, before I left the womb, I was sanctified to study her; although I was designated to distribute her wellsprings outward and she is my beloved and the wife of my youth, for whom I was lovesick from my youth--even so, foreign wives [i.e., other studies] have been her competitors. G-d knows that these other wives were taken at first only to be servants, to demonstrate her [the Torah's] beauty to the nations and officers, for she is very beautiful [paraphrasing Esther 1:11]. Nevertheless, my marital obligations to her [the Torah] were neglected, for my heart was divided among all types of wisdom. How I toiled day and night for approximately ten years over this work [Mishneh Torah]! Great people such as yourselves will appreciate what I have done, for I gathered together what was dispersed and separate [i.e., arranged the Talmud's laws into a systematic code. . . Nevertheless,] "Who can discern mistakes?" [Tehilim 19:13]. Everyone makes mistakes, and certainly zekeinim [older people or wise men]. For all these reasons, it is appropriate to search and inspect my words. The reader of my composition should not say [Kohelet 2:12], "What is man that he should go after the king?" I have given permission. "The king said, 'Let him approach'" [Esther 6:5]. You have done me a great kindness--you, the wise men. Anyone who finds something [wrong with my words] and notifies me will have done me a favor so that no stumbling blocks will remain. . . May Hashem, He is blessed, assist us and you to study His Torah and know His Oneness, so that we not stumble and so that in our days and your days will be fulfilled the verse (Yirmiyah 31:32), "I will place My Torah within them and I will write it onto their hear

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 **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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