

THE MISPLACED LETTER

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Yisro

The Misplaced Letter

In the Aseret Ha'dibrot in our parashah, we read (20:8), "Zachor / Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it." In the Aseret Ha'dibrot in Devarim (5:12), we read, "Shamor / Safeguard the Sabbath day to sanctify it." The Gemara (Shevuot 20b) teaches that G-d uttered "Zachor" and "Shamor" simultaneously, something that no human mouth can utter and no human ear can comprehend [absent a miracle].

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (the Maharal of Prague; died 1609) asks: What is the purpose of G-d's uttering "Zachor" and "Shamor" simultaneously? Some say, Maharal writes, that it is so that our Sages would equate the two phrases and derive the principle: "Whoever is obligated to safeguard Shabbat, i.e., whoever is prohibited from doing melachah / work on Shabbat, is obligated to remember Shabbat." This teaches that women are obligated in kiddush, which they otherwise would not be because kiddush is a mitzvat aseih she'hazman gerama / an affirmative commandment which is time-dependent. However, Maharal argues, we would have derived the same law if Hashem had just said, "Zachor ve'shamor / Remember and safeguard the Sabbath day to sanctify it."

Rather, he writes, the two phrases were uttered simultaneously to teach us that they are equally essential to proper Shabbat observance. Had the Torah said only, "Shamor / Safeguard the Sabbath day," we would have thought that the Shabbat is sanctified if we merely refrain from working; we do not need to do anything to imbue the day with sanctity. On the other hand, had the Torah said only, "Zachor / Remember the Sabbath day," we would have thought that the Shabbat is sanctified if we just recite kiddush, no matter what else we do on the Sabbath. Now we know, however, that only with both aspects--refraining from melachah and actively sanctifying the day--do we properly observe Shabbat. (Gur Aryeh)

"Yitro, the father-in-law of Moshe, took an olah-offering and feast offerings for Elokim, and Aharon and all the elders of Yisrael came to eat bread with the father-in-law of Moshe before

Elokim." (18:12)

Why did they eat, so-to-speak, before "Elokim"--the Attribute of Justice, which is associated specifically with yir'at shamayim / fear of Heaven? R' Mordechai Leifer z"l (1824-1894; Nadvorna Rebbe) explains: Praying and studying Torah should in fact be done with love of G-d. However, when it comes to matters of this world--eating, drinking, and other physical needs--the trait of fear of G-d should predominate [in order to promote restraint]. (Divrei Mordechai p.7)

"Hashem descended upon Har Sinai to the top of the mountain." (19:20) "You have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven." (20:19)

R' Yitzchak Isaac Chaver z"l (1789-1852; rabbi of Suvalk, Lithuania) writes that, in these two verses, Hashem reveals the two different ways that He will relate to us, depending on whether or not we are doing His will. On the first verse above, "Hashem descended upon Har Sinai," the midrash comments that Hashem "tore open all of the heavens, and they saw His Honor." This is His relationship with us when we do His will.

We read (19:18), "All of Har Sinai was smoking because Hashem had descended upon it in the fire." Likewise, we read (Devarim 4:36), "On earth He showed you His great fire, and you heard His words from the midst of the fire." The nature of fire is to break things down to smaller parts until only basic elements are left. So, too, the purpose of the fire at Har Sinai was to say: "Nothing really 'exists' in the world besides Me [see below]; therefore, nothing can or should come between us."

The second verse above, "You have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven," implies distance. When we are not doing His will, Hashem does not reject us, but he does act more distant. This same distance is implied, as well, in the other half of the verse from Devarim (4:36) quoted above, "From the heaven He caused you to hear His voice in order to teach you." (Haggadah Shel Pesach Yad Mitzrayim)

What do we mean when we say that nothing really "exists" in the world besides Hashem? Surely we are not figments of our own imaginations! R' Yisrael Elya Weintraub z"l (Brooklyn, N.Y. and Bnei Brak, Israel; 1932-2010) explains: The term "existence" in this context refers to something that is independent of any other power. In that sense, the only thing that "exists" is Hashem. When Hashem created the world, He created another concept that we call "existence," but that is an existence which is dependent on His continuing desire that it be so and, thus, is very different from His existence. (Yirat Chaim Al Nefesh Ha'Chaim p.3)

"I am Hashem, your Elokim . . . You shall not have other gods." (20:2-3)

R' Elazar Menachem Shach z"l (1898-2001; rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Ponovezh in Bnei Brak) writes in the name of R' Yitzchak Ze'ev Halevi Soloveitchik z"l (1886-1959; the Brisker Rav): Parallel to G-d's declaration, "I am Hashem, your Elokim," we proclaim in Shema, "Hashem is our Elokim." Parallel to G-d's command, "You shall not have other gods," we proclaim in Shema, "Hashem is One."

He continues: This is why, when one recites the word "Echad" / "One" in Shema, he should have in mind that G-d reigns over the upper worlds, the lower worlds, and all four points of the compass. Why have this intention only when reciting the second half of the verse ("Hashem is One") and not when reciting the first half ("Hashem is our Elokim")? Because the first half of the verse refers to G-d's Essence ("I am Hashem"), which cannot be described in terms of place ("the upper worlds, the lower worlds, and all four points of the compass"). Only when we say that Hashem is One, to the exclusion of any other gods, can we speak of place, which is the realm in which idolatry exists. (Quoted in B'Emunah Sheleimah p.6)

Why does our verse use the word "Anochi" for "I" instead of the more common "Ani"?

R' Mordechai Neugroschl shlita writes: The Hebrew word "anach" means a plumb line or level. Thus, the first word of the Aseret Ha'dibrot teaches us that the Torah is the tool by which we can tell if we are on a straight path. (Mi'darchei Ha'lev Ha'yehudi p.9)

From the Haftarah

"L'marbeh / To him who will be great in authority, and have peace without limit upon the throne of David . . ." (Yeshayah 9:6)

The word "l'marbeh" in this verse is unique in having a "mem sofit" / "final mem" (rather than a regular letter "mem") in the middle of the word, the only such instance in Tanach. R' Yitzchak Isaac Chaver z"l (1789-1852; rabbi of Suvalk, Lithuania) explains:

Our haftarah contains a prophecy told to King Achaz regarding the birth of mashiach. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 94b) teaches that King Chizkiyah, son of Achaz, should have been mashiach, but he lost that opportunity by failing to sing a shirah / song of praise and thanksgiving after Hashem saved Yerushalayim from the Assyrian king Sancheirev. As the midrash Perek Shirah relates, every creation sings shirah, which is, R' Chaver writes, what gives that creation the ability to exist. That is why we say, "David Melech Yisrael chai ve'kayam" / "David, King of Yisrael, lives and exists," for he was the ultimate composer of shirah (i.e., Tehilim). Had Chizkiyah continued the legacy of his ancestor, King David, he would have enabled the world to exist forever in its perfected state. Instead, the final letter mem [which is closed on four sides; unlike a regular mem (מ), which is open] alludes to four sources

of "light" that were "closed" as a result of Chizkiyah's failure.

R' Chaver continues: The first of these four sources of "light" is shalom / peace and harmony. The Mishnah (end of Tractate Uktzin) teaches that Hashem found no vessel for holding blessings other than shalom. Thus, Birkat Kohanim / the priestly blessing ends with the word "shalom," as does Shemoneh Esrei. And, the future state to which we aspire, i.e., Olam Haba, is one in which our spiritual soul and physical body will exist in perfect harmony / shalom with each other.

The other three sources of "light" are alluded to in the Gemara (Chagigah 5b), which comments on the verse (Yirmiyah 13:17), "My soul will cry tears in its hidden chambers . . . and if tears will flow freely, my eye will drip tears," as follows: What are these three tears? One for the first Bet Hamikdash, one for the second Bet Hamikdash, and one for bitul Torah / the neglect of Torah study.

The first Bet Hamikdash is the symbol of the second "light"-- prophecy, which existed until the end of the first Temple Period. The second Bet Hamikdash is the symbol of the third "light"-- hashgachah pratit / G-d's direct involvement in man's affairs, which was more evident until the second Temple was destroyed (see Avot 5:5). Finally, "bitul Torah" refers to the relative lack of clarity among Torah scholars compared to prior to the Temple's destruction. All of these -- shalom, prophecy, hashgachah pratit, and clarity of Torah -- were meant to be found among us after the Exodus and the Giving of the Torah and will be returned to us at the time of mashiach. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Yad Mitzrayim: Potei'ach Yad)

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