

THE REAL TORAH

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Matos

The Real Torah

Our parashah opens: "Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of Bnei Yisrael, saying, 'Zeh ha'davar / This is the word that Hashem has commanded'." Rashi observes that many prophets (including Moshe) introduced their messages with the phrase "Ko amar Hashem / So said Hashem," but only Moshe introduced some of his messages with "Zeh ha'davar / This is the word."

R' Yaakov Kaminetsky z"l (rosh yeshiva of Torah Voda'ath in Brooklyn, N.Y.; died 1986) elaborates: Our Sages teach that all of the prophets saw their prophecies with an "unclear vision," while Moshe saw with a "clear vision." In other words, all prophets (besides Moshe) had to interpret the visions they saw, a process that could be affected by the prophets' own personalities and predilections. Moshe's prophecy was different; he understood exactly what G-d meant and transmitted it literally and perfectly. He could say, "This is the word that Hashem commanded."

Why is this message alluded to in our parashah? R' Kaminetsky explains: The first section of Parashat Matot presents the laws of vows and oaths. These laws demonstrate man's special status in that, through a vow or oath, a person can, in effect, create new mitzvah obligations. For example, if a person says, "I swear that I will eat this loaf of bread," it becomes a mitzvah for him to eat that loaf of bread. If a person says, "Apples are forbidden to me like a sacrifice," it becomes a mitzvah for him to refrain from having any benefit from apples. This ability of man to enact new laws for himself might lead one to question the Divine origin of the Torah. Accordingly, the Torah chooses this context to inform us that Moshe's prophecy--indeed, the transmission of the entire Torah--was a literal transmission of Hashem's words. (Emet L'Yaakov)

"He shall not desecrate his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do."
(30:3)

R' Yehoshua Leib Diskin z"l (1817-1898; rabbi of Brisk, Poland; later in Yerushalayim) was once present at a hesped / eulogy for one his students. Following the hesped, a "Kail Malai" was recited, and the assembled crowd dispersed.

R' Diskin then approached the gabbai and handed him a coin. He said, "I am giving this coin to charity in memory of the deceased on behalf of everyone who was present today." He explained: When the gabbai recites a Kail Malai, he often says the phrase, "in the merit that the entire congregation promises to give charity on behalf of the elevation of the soul (of the departed)." I, said R' Diskin, am afraid that people will forget to fulfill this vow that was made on their behalf, so I am acting as their representative. (Quoted in Ve'karata La'Shabbat Oneg)

"Nekom nikmat / Take the vengeance of Bnei Yisrael against the Midianites . . ." (31:2)

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch z"l (1808-1888; Germany) writes: "Nekamah" shares a root with "kam" / "stood up." The purpose this war was not revenge, throwing down the enemy. Rather, it was raising-up the downtrodden, the re- establishing of rights which have been trodden underfoot. (Commentary on the Torah)

"You shall wash your garments on the seventh day and become purified; afterward you may enter the camp." (31:24)

R' Moshe Feinstein z"l (1895-1986) comments: Ordinarily, when a verse speaks of washing clothes, the Torah means that the clothes should be immersed in a mikvah. In contrast, it is apparent from the Targum (Aramaic translation) and from Rashi (to Vayikra 13:58) that this verse is commanding the Jewish soldiers to launder their garments. Why?

R' Feinstein explains: The Torah did not need to teach us that returning soldiers must immerse their clothes. We already know that if clothes became impure from coming in contact with the dead that they must be immersed. Rather, the Torah is teaching us a new law. One who wishes to ascend to a higher level of kedushah / sanctity must wear clean clothes. Thus, when these soldiers returned from the battle field and wished to re-enter the Camp of the Shechinah, they had to launder their garments.

This, adds R' Feinstein, is a source in the Torah for wearing finer clothes on Shabbat and Yom Tov, for that further elevates a person. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Arzei Ha'levanon Vol. I, p.75)

"The commanders of the thousands in the legions, the officers of the thousands and the officers of the hundreds, approached Moshe. They said to Moshe, 'Your servants took a census of the men of war under our command, and not a man of us is missing'." (31:48-49)

In his classic work on ethics and philosophy, Chovot Ha'levavot / Duties of the Hearts, Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakudah z"l (Saragossa, Spain; early 11th century) relates the story of a tzaddik who met victorious warriors returning from battle. He said to them, "It is premature to rejoice, for you have won the battle and collected booty only in the small war. The greatest battle, though, still lies ahead."

The soldiers asked him, "What battle is that?"

He answered, "The fight against the yetzer hara and its agents." [Until here from Chovot Ha'levavot, Sha'ar Yichud Ha'maaseh Ch.5]

R' Moshe Gruenwald z"l (rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Khust, Hungary; died 1911) explains the above teaching of the Chovot Ha'levavot in light of another story in that work. There it is recorded that a pious man said to his disciples, "If I believed that you were free of all sin, I would fear for your sake for something that is worse than sin, namely, that you might believe yourselves to be tzaddikim." Similarly, why must a victorious warrior prepare for battle against the yetzer hara? Because the haughtiness he feels makes him particularly susceptible to sin.

R' Gruenwald continues: When the armies of Bnei Yisrael returned from the battle against Midian, as related in our verses, they knew that they had to prepare for the next battle, the one against the yetzer hara. And, they knew that this meant they had to subdue any feelings of haughtiness. But they did feel haughty. They "took a census" and felt as if "not a man was missing (i.e., lacking)." Therefore, they took action to combat their feelings of haughtiness; the next verse (31:50) relates that they divested themselves of many of the riches they had gathered, devoting them instead to Hashem: "So we have brought an offering for Hashem--what any man found of gold vessels, anklet and bracelet, ring, earring, and clasp, to atone for our souls before Hashem." (Arugat Ha'bosem)

R' Shlomo Halberstam z"l (1907-2000; the Bobover Rebbe) finds the above teaching of the Chovot Ha'levavot alluded to in another verse, i.e., in Moshe's words to the tribes Reuven and Gad later in our parashah (32:22), "And the Land shall be conquered before Hashem, and then you shall return--then you shall be 'clean' before Hashem and Yisrael." After you successfully conquer the Land, then you also need to ensure that you are clean of any sin--and haughtiness--before Hashem and Yisrael. (Kerem Shlomo, Vol. III)

Memoirs

R' Yaakov Halevi Lifschutz z"l (1838-1921) was the long-time secretary to R' Yitzchak Elchanan

Spektor z"l (1817-1896; rabbi of Kovno), who was one of the leading halachic authorities of the second half of the 19th century as well as a spokesman and lobbyist for Russian Jewry in the Czar's court. Through his position, R' Lifschutz was a witness to, and a participant in, many important events of that era. His memoirs are entitled "Zichron Yaakov." He writes:

The period after the Crimean War [1853-1856] brought a new and very worthwhile development. It can truly be said without exaggeration that this was a new era for our nation--the beginning of Hebrew periodicals.

Immediately after the Crimean War, when the peace brought with it "light" and more openness, Rabbi Eliezer Lippman Zilberman z"l, a native of Raseiniai [Lithuania], who was a shochet in Lyck, Prussia, was inspired to found the periodical Ha'maggid, the first weekly in the history of our People. [R' Lifschutz notes that there were previous attempts to publish Hebrew periodicals, but never a weekly, and never successfully for a sustained time.] Ha'maggid held on and remained on schedule, coming out once each week, like any European periodical.

In order to have some idea of how the (Jewish) nation related to this periodical, we should take note that there is no nation that has a greater desire to know, to inform others, and to be informed of the latest news than our nation.

For example, during the Crimean War, which lasted for three years, everyone, from the youngest to the oldest, spoke and conversed about the war. However, as there were few periodicals in any language, and few Jews who could read languages, they had to satiate their thirst for news with whatever they heard from storekeepers and tavern owners who had contact with the upper-class . . .

In the beginning, this periodical was very lean. Readers did not find in it the news that they sought. For the most part, they found only essays by the editor about the need for such a publication and the benefits it would provide.

Besides these essays, Ha'maggid chose to fill its pages by reporting on the comet that everyone was discussing at that time. There was a widespread rumor that a comet would hit the earth and destroy it. [The reference is to a widely-reported prediction that a comet would destroy the world on June 13, 1857.] Belatedly, a comet did appear in 5619 [possibly a reference to Donati's Comet which passed near earth in October 1858]. . . Nevertheless, Ha'maggid acquired readers from all walks of life, including the religious.

- To be continued -

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **[Torah.org](https://torah.org)** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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