

OF TREES, MEN, AND RECEIVING THE TORAH

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BS"D
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Today's Learning:
Nach: Ruth 1-2
Mishnah: Demai 4:6-7
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Kamma 11

Parashat Bamidbar generally is read on the Shabbat immediately preceding Shavuot (though that is not the case this year in Eretz Yisrael). The reason for this is as follows:

The Gemara (Megillah 31b) states that Parashat Bechukotai (last week's parashah) should be read before Shavuot because Shavuot is a day of judgment: on Shavuot, Hashem determines the success of the year's fruit harvest. Accordingly, we wish to "dispense with the year's curses as the year ends," a reference to last week's parashah, which contains curses on those who abandon the mitzvot. However, in order not to enter Shavuot with the curses on our minds, we distance them by one week by reading Bemidbar before the festival. (Tosafot Megillah 31b.)

Why is Shavuot the day when Hashem determines the fruit harvest? R' Tzaddok Hakohen z"l (1823-1900) explains that before Adam sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, he was surrounded by abundant fruit trees that had been planted by Hashem's own "Hands." After his sin, Adam was cursed that he would have to work the earth to make his food. However, when Bnei Yisrael received the Torah, they (briefly) returned to the spiritual level that Adam had before his sin [see page 3], and thus Shavuot is a propitious time to judge the fruit harvest favorably. (Pri Tzaddik: Vayikra p.209)

R' Avraham of Slonim z"l (late 18th century) offers another explanation: "Fruit of the tree" alludes to man's spiritual produce, for the Torah (Devarim 20:19) refers to man as a "tree of the field." Man is judged regarding the fruits of his spiritual labor on Shavuot, because, to the degree he accepts the Torah on this holiday, so he will receive Divine assistance in serving Hashem in the coming year. (Torat Avot p.98)

"And with you shall be one ish / man from each tribe . . ." (1:4)

The word "ish" commonly denotes a person of spiritual stature. Why? R' Chaim Yehuda Meir Hager z"l (the Vishever Rebbe in Tel Aviv; died 1968) explains: Our Sages teach, "One hour of Torah and good deeds in this world is worth more than an entire lifetime of Olam Ha'ba." What is Olam Ha'ba? The Mishnah (end of Masechet Uktzin) teaches, "Hashem is destined to reward each tzaddik with 310 worlds." Note that the gematria of ish, referring to the person who engages in Torah and good deed, equals 311, one more than the number of worlds in the tzaddik's Olam Ha'ba, thus alluding to their relative importance. (Zecher Chaim)

"From twenty years of age and up--everyone who goes out to the legion among Yisrael--you shall count them according to their legions." (1:3)

Many have wondered at the incredible fact that every single tribe had a population that was divisible by ten. R' Meir Simcha Hakohen of Dvinsk z"l (died 1926) suggests the following explanation for this phenomenon: As our verse indicates, the purpose of counting the Jewish People was to organize them for war. We learn from several verses in Tanach and from the Talmud Yerushalmi that each brigade in the army of Yisrael had either one hundred men or ten men. Thus, if any tribe had a number of soldiers that was not a multiple of ten, the remaining were not counted because there was no place for them in the army. (Meshech Chochmah)

"And it happened in the days when the Judges judged, that there was a famine in the Land, and a man went from Bet Lechem in Yehuda to sojourn in the fields of Moav, he, his wife, and his two sons. The man's name was Elimelech . . ." (Ruth 1:1-2)

R' Moshe Sofer z"l (1762–1839; rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Pressburg, Hungary) writes: The verse says, "There was a famine in the Land," i.e., there was a hunger for earthly things. There was not, however, a hunger for spirituality, as that generation lacked interest in such things. This, he writes, is why Elimelech abandoned Eretz Yisrael: he did not want to give charity to his starving brethren, because he held that "amei ha'aretz" / people with no connection to Torah do not deserve to be supported.

Elimelech's view was shared (1,000 years later) by the very wealthy sage who compiled the Mishnah, Rabbi Yehuda Ha'nassi, known simply as "Rebbe." The Gemara (Bava Batra 8a) relates: Rebbe opened up his storehouses in years of famine. He said, "Let those who know Tanach or Mishnah or Gemara or Halachah or Aggadah enter. However, amei ha'aretz shall not enter." Rabbi Yonatan ben Amram pushed his way in and said, "Rebbe, sustain me!" Rebbe asked him, "Have you studied scripture?" "No," he replied. "Mishnah?" "No," he replied. "Then how shall I sustain you?" asked Rebbe. R' Yonatan ben Amram replied, "Sustain me as G-d sustains dogs and crows." [Until here from the Gemara; see Rashi z"l for sources regarding G-d's compassion for dogs and crows.]

In contrast, writes R' Sofer, Boaz did not leave Eretz Yisrael. He shared the view of Rabbi Yonatan ben Amram that every Jew has some connection to Torah. This, writes R' Sofer, is the halachah.

R' Sofer adds: This is why there is a custom to place non-fruit-bearing plants in the shul on Shavuot, to emphasize that even such a "tree" [see front page] has a connection to Torah. Also, R' Sofer writes, the reason we read Megillat Ruth on the holiday of the giving of the Torah is to declare that the halachah follows the view of Boaz and Rabbi Yonatan ben Amram. (Derashot Chatam Sofer)

Shavuot

Our Sages say that when our ancestors stood at Har Sinai and declared, "Na'aseh v'nishmah" / "We will do and we will hear," the zohamah (literally, poison) of the sin of Adam Ha'rishon left them. How did their declaration repair the damage done by Adam's sin?

R' Yosef Yoizel Horowitz z"l (1847-1919; the Alter of Novardok) explains: Commentaries write that, before Adam sinned, he had no yetzer ha'ra / inclination to sin. But, if that was the case, how did he sin? The answer is that, before Adam sinned, he knew right from wrong objectively. Adam still had free choice to sin--the same way we today have free choice about whether to place our hands in a burning furnace. We have that choice, but we know objectively that it is a bad idea.

The nachash / serpent persuaded Chava, who then persuaded Adam, that they could serve Hashem better if they not only had the theoretical ability to sin but also had a temptation to sin, and then overcame that temptation. Somehow, eating from the Tree of Knowledge would implant that temptation within them, and that is why they agreed to eat from it.

In essence, writes R' Horowitz, Adam's sin was choosing to serve Hashem the way that felt right to Adam, rather than the way that Hashem wanted to be served. "Na'aseh v'nishmah" / "We will do and we will hear" was a declaration that Bnei Yisrael were prepared to serve Hashem ("to do") without question and before getting any explanations ("to hear"), a declaration of their willingness to follow the Torah's dictates blindly without compromise, asking only how to do what needs to be done.

The Gemara (Shabbat 88a) teaches: "When Bnei Yisrael declared, 'Na'aseh v'nishmah,' Hashem asked, 'Who revealed this secret to My children?'" What is the "secret"? R' Horowitz explains that the secret, which most people don't know, is that the greatest obstacle to serving Hashem properly is man's innate desire to question and understand before submitting to authority. (Madregat Ha'adam)

Letters from Our Sages

R' Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin z"l (the "Netziv"; 1816-1893) was rabbi of Volozhin, Russia and rosh yeshiva of the yeshiva there, as well as the author of many Torah works. In this letter, published in Igrot Ha'Netziv Mi'Volozhin p.42, he responds to someone who had critiqued one of his works.

Regarding your apology, stating that you do not mean your critique to hurt my feelings, G-d forbid that I would think such a thought about your honor. To the contrary, I derive satisfaction from anyone who clarifies and corrects my mistakes--mistakes being something that even those greater than I make.

Regarding this, I suggest the following interpretation of the verse (Kohelet 10:1), "Dead flies putrefy, yabia the perfumer's oil; a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor." The word "yabia" is obscure. Also, according to the pshat / plain meaning, it is difficult to connect the parts of this verse. I suggest that, in this context, "yabia" means "to publicize." The verse is teaching that, while flies do spoil the perfume in which they land, they also perform a kindness by publicizing the perfume's attractiveness. Likewise, while a little ignorance, i.e., a mistake, does sully a Torah work, the fact that people draw attention to that mistake and critique it makes it a better work.

It is well known how happy a person feels when he knows that great people read his words. Our Sages [Yevamot 97a] teach that even those who are deceased derive pleasure from their words of Torah being quoted. If those who know no physical pleasure or honor feel such, how much more so, then, does a living person enjoy this!

Therefore, I owe a debt of gratitude to your honor, and to anyone who looks at my works Emek She'eilah and Ha'amek Davar. In this merit, may Hashem come to their aid and may their words enlighten their generation. [I give you] the blessing of your friend who is weighed down with avodah.