

MAKING THE TORAH GREAT(ER)

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Today's Learning:
Nach: Tehilim 107-108
Mishnah: Demai 7:4-5
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Kamma 25

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 verses?

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 add a

mitzvah by establishing a holiday involving the menorah (i.e., Chanukah). It was for this new mitzvah that the midrash says that Hashem rejoiced. (Arugat Ha'bosem)

"Moshe said to Hashem, 'Why have You done evil to Your servant; why have I not found favor in Your eyes, that You place the burden of this entire People upon me? Did I conceive this entire People or did I give birth to it, that You say to me, "Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a suckling, to the Land that You swore to its forefathers?" Where shall I get meat to give to this entire People when they weep to me, saying, "Give us meat that we may eat"? I alone cannot carry this entire nation, for it is too heavy for me. And if this is how You deal with me, then kill me now, if I have found favor in Your eyes, and let me not see my evil!"' (11:11<-15)

R' Avigdor Miller z"l (1908-2001; mashgiach ruchani of Yeshiva Chaim Berlin, shul rabbi and a prolific lecturer and author) observes that these are the harshest words uttered by Moshe Rabbeinu in the entire Torah. Why did he react this way now, when Bnei Yisrael complained about eating the mahn day-after-day?

R' Miller explains: The foundation of our relationship with Hashem is hakarat ha'tov / recognition of, and gratitude for, His never ending kindness to us. When Moshe saw that Bnei Yisrael were not satisfied with their lot, he understood that everything he had worked for--the Shechinah's very presence in the midst of Bnei Yisrael--was at risk. Moshe Rabbeinu loved Bnei Yisrael and shared their pain, but his worry about preserving their future as the nation in whose midst the Shechinah resided outweighed his empathy for their present unhappiness.

Adding to Moshe's frustration was the fact that, in his great humility, he blamed himself, R' Miller adds. Moshe assumed that, if Bnei Yisrael lacked a proper perspective on their condition, he (Moshe) must have failed to teach them well.

Hashem responds to Moshe (verse 16): "Gather to Me seventy men from the elders of Yisrael, whom you know to be the elders of the People." How, asks R' Miller, was this supposed to help a hungry nation? Moreover, isn't the verse's description of the elders ("elders of Yisrael . . . elders of the People") redundant?

R' Miller answers: Bnei Yisrael's problem wasn't a lack of food, since they had the mahn--the most perfect food that ever existed. Their problem was a lack of hakarat ha'tov. When a person has a bad attitude about material belongings, be it food or anything else, the problem cannot be solved by giving him more belongings. He will never be satisfied that way. Rather, the only solution is to counsel him to have a healthier attitude. For this, R' Miller explains, Bnei Yisrael needed counselors who were "elders of Yisrael"--Torah scholars--but also "elders of the People"--leaders who knew the people and could relate to their feelings.

R' Miller concludes: To sing to and rejoice with Hashem, a person must be grateful to Hashem for his

eyesight, his lucidity, his daily bread, and every delicious glass of water; he must recognize the debt of gratitude that he owes Hashem for a good night's sleep and for peace and tranquility in the streets of his neighborhood; he must realize how wonderful it is to have a roof over his head, to have each article of clothing that he has, and to have each of the furnishings in his house; not to mention appreciating an infinite number of other kindnesses that Hashem bestows. That was Bnei Yisrael's trial here. (Sha'arei Orah Vol. I, p.113)

"Gather for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and its officers . . ." (11:16)

Rashi quotes the midrash which says that the term "officers" refers to those people who were assigned by the Egyptians to whip Jews who failed to meet their work quotas. In fact, these officers failed to do their "duty" and were beaten themselves.

R' Aharon Kotler z"l (1891-1962) asks: Why is this a qualification to serve on the sanhedrin / high court? He explains that a Jewish leader can succeed, not in his own merit, but only in the merit of the Jewish people. It is therefore incumbent upon a would-be leader to demonstrate his total commitment and self-sacrifice for his people. Moshe, too, the midrash tells us, used to help his brethren with their slave labor although, as a Levite, he was exempted by Pharaoh. (Mishnat R' Aharon Vol. II, p.113)

"My eved / servant Moshe, in My whole house he is trusted." (12:7)

What does it mean when the Torah says that Moshe was a "servant of Hashem"? R' David Kimchi z"l ("Radak") explains (in his commentary to Yehoshua 1:1) that someone who devotes all of his powers to serving Hashem and who, even when he is engaged in mundane matters, does them for the sake of serving G-d, is called a "servant of Hashem."

R' Elchonon Wasserman z"l hy"d (1874-1941) elaborates: Slaves cannot own property; everything they acquire belongs to their masters. Similarly, when a person recognizes that all of his powers and belongings belong to Hashem and must be used exclusively to serve him, he can be called an "eved of Hashem."

In this light, adds R' Wasserman, we can understand Rambam's statement that, although no person will ever be as great a prophet as Moshe, one can be as great a tzaddik as Moshe. Anyone can choose, as Moshe did, to direct all of his actions to serving G-d.

Of course, it was easier for Moshe to do this than it would be for any of us. However, the Gemara teaches that a poor person's sacrifice of wheat is as beloved to Hashem as a rich man's sacrifice of an ox. One must only make the sacrifice. (Kovetz Ma'amarim p.48)

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 sins 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.