

PARTING WORDS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

After surviving last week's list of curses, we head now towards Moshe's final discourse and "parting" words in preparing the Jewish people both for the transition of leadership and for their next stage of existence: life in Eretz Yisroel. The parsha begins by pointing out that the bris (covenant, made by passing through, or "parting" two sides; Rashi on Devarim 29:11) made with the Jewish people of that generation was also made with all subsequent generations, as Moshe stressed:

"Not only with you do I make this covenant and oath, but with him who is here and standing this day before G-d, Your G-d, and with him who is not here with us this day ..." (Devarim 29:13)

However, there is a concept in the Talmud that one cannot accept an obligation for someone who is not present and able to approve (one can benefit a person without his permission and foreknowledge, but not indebt him). If so, then how could future generations be made obligated to keep the Torah if they weren't present to accept that obligation personally?

There are different aspects to this answer. First of all, according to midrashic tradition, all of us were there, at least at Har Sinai when the Torah was given and the original covenant was signed, sealed, and delivered. According to Kabballah, all the Jewish souls that would ever be were present at the giving of Torah, and willingly accepted all of the commandments upon themselves. (This idea heads in the direction of a discussion of gilgulim, i.e., reincarnated souls, but who would want to talk about that?)

Secondly, according to the Talmud (Niddah 30b), every Jewish baby is taught all of Torah in its mother's womb just prior to birth, after which it is sworn to fulfill all the mitzvos and his or her own personal potential. Just before birth, the angel "touches" the child below the nose (causing that unusual single channel between the nose and upper lip), causing forgetfulness. Post-birth life is for recalling that knowledge in the pursuit of truth. Therefore, learning Torah is more a process of recollection than it is of learning "new" ideas. That is why a person, upon understanding a concept, feels a sense of familiarity with the idea as if he once knew it but forgot it, and will often say, "Ahaaaah. I get it."

Thirdly, as we have learned from previous parshios, Torah can either be a merit or an obligation, depending upon one's personal attitude and understanding of what counts most in life (see Parashas Aikev). The very fact that the Torah was accepted on behalf of all future Jewish generations without their physically being there is an indication that Torah is only a merit, at least to the soul, one which can be accepted on behalf of someone without his foreknowledge.

The Talmud (Kesuvos 11a) seems to indicate this when discussing whether or not a Bais Din can convert a non-Jew without his awareness. There the Talmud states that for a baby who has yet to transgress, conversion to Judaism is 100% a merit. However, for an adult, or, in the Talmud's language, "one who has 'tasted' transgression," it may not be a merit at all.

What the Talmud means to say is that, for the body that thinks little about ultimate fulfillment and mostly about temporal pleasure, Torah is a burden. However, for the soul that looks past the temporal and into the ultimate, Torah is the only way to go. As Rosh Hashanah approaches, a time to elevate the body to the level of the soul, G-d willing, we will better understand this, and reaffirm our commitment to that bris.

Shabbos Day:

Toward the middle of the parsha, the Torah states:

The secret things belong to G-d, Our G-d, but the revealed things belong to us, and to our children forever, that we may do the words of this Torah. (Devarim 29:28)

Rashi explains the intent of the possuk:

... I will not punish you for that which is hidden from you, for that belongs to G-d, and for that He will exact punishment from the individual ... but for those things which are revealed and belong to us and to our children in order that we will do away with evil from our midst. If we do not execute judgment upon people who publicly transgress, then the whole community will be punished. There are dots above the letters (in the Sefer Torah) of the words "lunnu ulvaneinu" ("us, and to our children") to hint that even for revealed sins He did not punish the community until they had crossed the Jordan River (into Eretz Yisroel), from the moment they took upon themselves the oath on Har G'rizim and Har Eival and had become responsible for one another.

This possuk emphasizes the extent of Jewish social responsibility; there is no such thing as "looking the other direction" when it comes to a transgression by one's fellow Jew. And this is not necessarily because you want to save him from erring again (which is the ideal intention one should have when

criticizing another), but because, in the end, his punishment is your punishment.

The Talmud presents an awesomely frightening example of just how far this collective responsibility goes. After stating that we are held responsible for the mistakes of others that we do not correct, the Talmud gives over the following dialogue in reference to the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish nation into Babylonia:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, told Gavriel, "Go and make a mark of ink upon the foreheads of the righteous so that the Damaging Angel cannot have an effect on them, and a mark of blood on the foreheads of the evil so that the Damaging Angel can affect them." The Trait of Judgment said before The Holy One, Blessed is He, "Master of the Universe, What difference is there between the two?" He told her, "These were completely righteous, and these were completely evil." She said before Him, "Master of the Universe, They (the righteous) could have protested, and yet didn't?" He answered her, "It is revealed and known before Me that had they protested, they would not have been listened to!" So she answered Him, "To you it was revealed ... but who revealed it to them?!" (Shabbos 55a)

At which point, says the Talmud, G-d concurred with the Trait of Judgment and destroyed the righteous and non-righteous alike.

One might have thought that self-righteousness is enough of a merit to survive the sword of the Angel of Destruction. This week's parsha and the Talmud say, "Wrong, tragically wrong." For, it seems, as much as the Torah wishes for us to take responsibility for ourselves, it also, if not more so, wishes that we take responsibility for others.

This helps to explain why a day that everyone associates with fighting for their own neck makes no reference to personal tshuva. We are told that on Rosh Hashanah we are begging for survival, to prove to G-d that He ought to give us a new lease on life, at least for the next year. Yet, all of the prayer service is devoted to acknowledging G-d's supremacy as King over everything, and all the prayers are worded in the plural!

Why? Because that is the tshuva and repentance for a Jew.

Transgressions are the result of selfishness, ultimately. Even accidental transgressions display a lack of care for the ultimate purpose of creation, and the impact our actions have on the world as a whole. Otherwise, wouldn't we check out what we do before we do it. Wouldn't we spend more time over important issues such as, "What is the purpose of life?"

If wars prove anything positive at all, it is what people are prepared to personally sacrifice just to advance the cause of their nation. Wartime often shows us just how unselfish we can be when we see clearly how potentially impactful our actions can be on the lives of others, and vice-versa.

Rosh Hashanah says: If you want to overcome transgression, impress G-d enough to warrant more life and blessing, and achieve personal fulfillment, take responsibility for others as well as yourself.

You may start by being concerned with your own personal life, but ultimately, it is the collective body of the Jewish people that you have to care about the most. After all, isn't the process of maturation, of going from childhood to adulthood, one of leaving the state of total selfishness in pursuit of selflessness?

A professor once gave an exam, and had someone else act as proctor.

"You have exactly two hours to complete this exam," said the proctor. "If you hand in this exam even ten minutes late, you will fail it."

The students took the exam, and after the allotted two hours, everyone handed their exams in on time; everyone, that is, except for one student who took ten extra minutes to complete it. After doing so, he approached the proctor, who, refusing to look up at him said,

"I told you-anyone who failed to hand in the exam on time fails."

The student, not giving up asked the proctor, "Do you know who I am?"

The proctor, not to be intimidated, answered without looking at the boy, "No, I don't know who you are, and I don't care to know who you are."

It was a battle of wills.

The boy again asked, "Do you know my name?"

And again, the proctor, not to be intimidated, answered, "I told you, I don't know your name, and I don't want to know your name."

At which point, the boy calmly said, "Good," shoved his paper into the middle of the pile, and ran off. (Heard from Rabbi Yissocher Frand, shlita)

There is power in being part of community, especially at this time of year.

Seudah Shlishi:

Toward the end of the parsha (Nitzavim), the Torah makes the following remark:

For this commandment which I command you today is not hidden from you, nor is it far away. It is not in heaven, that you can say, "Who shall go up to the heaven and bring it to us, and let us hear it that we can do it?" (Devarim 30:11)

In other words, Moshe was saying: You have no excuse for not knowing Torah! It is available and accessible, and you ought to learn it!

Thus, when is Torah considered "inaccessible"? When it is in a study hall across the street? When it is

available only across the city? When you have to climb Mt. Everest to get to it? No, says Moshe Rabbeinu. In fact, says Rashi quoting the Talmud (Eiruvim 55a), even had Torah remained in heaven and had not been brought down by Moshe and recorded for all subsequent generations of Jews, we would have been responsible for devising a way of going "up" there and gaining access to Torah and learning it!

But where is heaven? Up? Down? All around?

Kabbalistically-speaking, "heaven" is more a matter of consciousness than it is a different physical reality. We know from the Talmud (Chagigah 14b) that Torah can be learned on various levels: pshat, remez, drush, and sod (translation: simple understanding, hint, exegetically, and kabbalistically). The word created by using the first letter of each word (peh, reish, dalet, samech) is PaRDeS, which means "garden," or "paradise," alluding to the Garden of Eden, the state of eternal existence prior to the transgression of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

What the Torah is alluding to is the power of a human being to intellectually pierce through his physically reality and rise to greater spiritual realities, upon which the Torah becomes more and more pristine. Had Moshe not brought the Torah down for us, we would have been unable to learn even the simplest level of Torah without first embarking on an deep intellectual and spiritual journey into the mysteries of creation.

However, Moshe did bring the Torah down for us, which means that to achieve the simplest understanding of Torah requires little in the way of a spiritual initiation before approaching it. But, on the other hand, the availability of Torah should not inhibit one from tracing the simplest understanding of Torah to its deepest root, to better and more fully understand its message. This is why the Torah concludes by saying,

■ *"Choose life! that you and your descendants may live!" (Devarim 30:19)*

In other words, keep the process of spiritual growth going. Go deeper and deeper into the Torah, for the deeper you go, the more of "paradise" you will experience ... the more spiritually fulfilling your life will be!

This class continues with the Melave Malkah section from Parshas Vayeilech.

Have a great Shabbos,
Chasiva v'Chasima Tova
Pinchas Winston

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