

IT'S A FAST ONE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

It's a fast one. Normally the transition from parsha to parsha is as slow and methodical as it is from week to week. We start reading next week's parsha on the Shabbos afternoon preceding, and then we have all week to fulfill the halacha to read the parsha twice, and with Targum Onkeles and Rashi, in advance of the main reading the upcoming Shabbos morning. And this is the way it works the whole year until the last parsha of the Sefer Torah, Zos HaBeracha, and the first parsha, Bereishis, which share a single week separated only by an hour or so on Simchas Torah.

For this reason, often, neither parsha gets its fair due. Not to mention that the activities and confusion of the holidays makes it very difficult for anyone to focus on either parsha sufficiently. In order to overcome this problem, we'll deal with Zos HaBeracha this week, even though we won't read it until Simchas Torah, b"H, and Parashas Bereishis next week, even though we won't read it until the Shabbos after. However, since there are no meals this Shabbos, being Yom Kippur, I will not divide this sheet according to meals.

One of the controversies in the Talmud includes the discussion about whether or not Moshe Rabbeinu wrote the last eight lines in the Torah describing his own death (Bava Basra 15a):

Moshe, the servant of G-d, died there in the Land of Moav, as G-d commanded. He buried him in the valley of Moav opposite Beit Peor, and no man knows his burial place unto this day ...
(Devarim 34:5)

According to Rebi Yehudah in the Talmud, Yehoshua bin Nun completed the Torah for Moshe. However, Reb Shimon disagrees: Is it conceivable that Moshe, the greatest prophet that ever existed, who did the impossible by receiving the Torah from G-d Himself, did not receive and write every word of the Torah? On the other hand, does it make sense that Moshe wrote about his own death? Yes, says Reb Shimon-with a "tear" in his eye.

The Talmud doesn't really indicate whose opinion is more valid, and for this reason, later commentaries also debate the issue. On one side of the disagreement, there is the Chachom Tzvi, Reb Eibeshitz, and the Torah Temima who side with Reb Yehudah, while the Ritvah, the Ain Ya'akov, the Maharsha, the Mizrachi, and the Maharal all hold like Reb Shimon. The Arizal himself seems to indicate that Moshe wrote the words himself.

The Vilna Gaon writes that there is a way for both points of view to be correct. According to the Gra, Moshe did receive the entire Torah from beginning until the end, and wrote the entire Torah down on Har Sinai. But wait a second-Har Sinai occurred forty years before the end of Moshe's death, and before many of the stories that had yet to occur! Did Moshe know everything that was supposed to happen in the future at the time he received the Torah, and simply acted as if he hadn't?

Yes, and no, says the Gra. Moshe did possess all the stories in advance of their happening, but, didn't know what they were until after G-d told him. The reason is because Moshe received the entire Torah at one time in a very long stream of letters, only to be broken up into their proper words and paragraphs at the right time, at G-d's command-after the event occurred-an amazing miracle!

This would mean that Moshe received the "letters" that would eventually describe his own death, but, that it fell to Yehoshua to form the actual words that described his rebi's death for all the generations to read and mourn.

But what about the fact that Rebi Shimon said that Moshe wrote the last eight lines about his death "b'dimah," with a tear in his eye? The answer is that in truth, "dimah" can actually also mean "mixed up." In other words, when Moshe wrote about his death, it was in "mixed up" form.

Whatever the conclusion actually is, this philosophical discussion also affects the realm of halacha, which states that:

*The last eight verses of the Torah should not be broken up, but read to only one person.
(Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 428:7)*

... Even according to the one who says that Moshe wrote them with a tear in his eye, since there is something unique about them, we don't break them up. (Mishneh Brurah, 428:7:21)

It is a curious thing that the last lines of the Torah, which was given to us to help achieve clarity, actually causes confusion. However, perhaps it is only to indicate a deeper message of Torah, and that is: Torah began with Moshe, but didn't end with him. The body of Torah with all its principles was received by Moshe and given to us in his lifetime-in its entirety. We are not at liberty to add to or subtract from Toras Moshe.

However, within that "body" of Torah is a lot of mystery requiring investigation and elaboration. The mystery of Moshe's death is our personal invitation to delve in.

Rebi Simlai explained: The Torah begins with [an act of] chesed and ends with [an act of] chesed, as it says, "G-d made for the man and his wife garments of leather and clothed them (Bereishis 3:21)." It ends with [an act of] chesed, as it is says, "He (G-d) buried (Moshe) in the valley ... (Devarim 34:6)." (Sota 14a)

If any trait exemplifies the Jewish people, it is the trait of chesed. Just as Avraham, who is principally known for his chesed, was the founding forefather of the entire Jewish people, chesed is the founding principle upon which the Jewish people were established. Furthermore, it was Avraham's acts of chesed which endeared him to G-d and even justified the continuation of creation. This is seemingly alluded to in the following midrash:

And G-d said, 'Let there be Light!' (Bereishis 1:3) ... 'Light' ... this is Avraham. (Bereishis Rabbah 2:3)

The creation of light was the first act of creation to be called "good" by G-d. It is not often that G-d Himself verbally evaluates His own work, at least not in the Torah. The fact that G-d called the light good implied that its coming into existence satisfied some Divine purpose.

Having stated this, it is a simple equation to discover the centrality of chesed in the continuation of history and in Torah. If Avraham's life was the justification and fulfillment of creation, and his principle vehicle in achieving this was continuous acts of chesed, then it must be that it is chesed which G-d cherishes most, as the following dictum illustrates:

... Avraham had all who passed by and stayed [with him] call out in G-d's name. How did he do it? After they ate and drank and stood up to bless him [before taking their leave], he would say, 'Was it of mine you ate? It was of the G-d of the world that you ate! Thank, praise, and bless the One who spoke and created the world ...' (Sota 10b)

It is this chesed about which Rebi Simlai came to teach.

Why is this one trait of chesed associated with spiritual perfection and so important to the Torah? As Avraham understood, chesed is the unifying factor in creation, binding people together and more importantly, people to G-d. For to master the trait of chesed is to master many of the traits necessary for building relationships (e.g., selflessness, caring for others, appreciation of life, etc.). Avraham reasoned that the world was created for such relationships; consequently, it was created for chesed. When he looked at creation, Avraham saw a beautiful and generous world, a world created with chesed, as Dovid HaMelech wrote:

A world of chesed You created ... (Tehillim 89:3)

This is one reason why doing chesed is so important to the Torah. However, there is an even greater reason why chesed is so vital for fulfilling the purpose of creation. When one makes chesed a high priority in life, then one resembles G-d. This is the essential goal of every human being—an important point which will be elaborated upon soon. So important is it to be like G-d, the rabbis teach, that imitating G-d in this respect is an even higher spiritual experience than talking to G-d. They learn this from the following episode in the Torah:

[Avraham] said, 'My master ... if you favor me, don't pass by your servant.' (Bereishis 18:3)

... [These words] were addressed to The Holy One, Blessed is He, asking Him to wait until he (Avraham) had a chance to invite the passersby [into his home].-Rashi

It was the third day after G-d had commanded Avraham to circumcise himself and his entire household. It was also the hottest day of the year, the midrash says, because G-d kept wayfarers from traveling by the tent of Avraham until he was fully recovered. However, the pain of not serving guests was greater for Avraham than his condition, and therefore he sat by the entrance of his tent, in the scalding heat, looking for travelers to welcome.

That is when G-d, while in the midst of speaking with Avraham, made three angels to appear in the distance as wayfarers. So, in the midst of prophecy, Avraham ran out to serve his potential guests, asking G-d to wait for him until he finished with this important mitzvah.

Avraham's decision did not meet with Divine disapproval, and G-d did in fact wait for him. Obviously Avraham knew that in leaving prophecy to serve his guests he was doing the will of his Creator; that was the opportunity of the moment. He knew that the highest purpose for a human being was to emulate his Creator, and that meant using every opportunity to do chesed for others.

The correlation made between Avraham and the light of the first day of creation (mentioned above) also reveals how central chesed is to creation. For, as will be clear in a later chapter, the light of the first day of creation was unique. It was a special light, unlike the light we enjoy from the sun, moon, and stars, (which were only created on the fourth day of creation), which embodied the very purpose of creation. As such, anything associated with that light must also be special, and a reflection of the Divine reasoning for creating this world.

If Avraham was singled out because of his exemplary trait of chesed, and he is compared to the supernal light of creation, it follows then, that when one performs acts of chesed, one emanates this light and fulfills the purpose of creation. Likewise, the reverse can be true: When one emanates the light of the first day of creation, as was the case with Moshe (the redeemer of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery), it must be because he is chesed-oriented.

How do we know that Moshe glowed with this light? The Talmud teaches regarding the birth of Moshe:

When Moshe was born, he filled the house with light. It says here, 'And she [Yocheved] saw that he was good (Shemos 2:2), and there it says [by the creation of the light of creation], 'G-d saw the light, that it was good...' (Bereishis 1:3) (Sota 12a)

Even though Moshe (unlike Avraham), was not specifically associated with the trait of chesed, chesed nevertheless played a major role in his development as redeemer and teacher of the Jewish people. Moshe's fulfillment of each task assigned to him was only possible because of his

superhuman capacity to do chesed, which, seemingly, was inherent.

However, of all the acts of chesed Moshe performed, only one is called a chesed shel emes (true-kindness). It was for this act, according to the Talmud, that G-d rewarded and honored Moshe by burying him Himself. The Talmud states that when the Jewish nation was busy collecting spoils from the Egyptian people just prior to the exodus, Moshe was elsewhere, involved in a mitzvah. While others were enriching themselves, Moshe was busy taking care of the needs of another.

According to the Torah, when Yosef was about to die in Egypt, he foretold of the future redemption from Egypt. He also made the people promise that when the time came to leave Egypt, they would take his bones with them for reburial in Canaan. One hundred and forty-three years later, the redemption Yosef spoke about was at hand, and Moshe sought to fulfill that promise. Recovering Yosef's coffin, however, was not an easy task. The Egyptians had hidden it in the Nile river, and nobody remained from that generation to reveal its whereabouts. Nobody, that is, except for Serach, the daughter of Asher. After she showed Moshe the location of Yosef's bones, Moshe successfully surfaced the coffin, which traveled with the nation the entire forty years in the desert until burial in Shechem.

Why was Moshe's fulfillment of Yosef's last request a true-kindness? Because it was done for a deceased person, and as the benefactor, Moshe could expect no compensation. Is there a greater proof of one's selflessness and concern for others than this? For performing such a high level of chesed, Moshe merited burial by G-d Himself; for being an embodiment of the trait of chesed, Moshe fulfilled the purpose of creation and shined with its supernal light.

All of this and more is alluded to by the simple, yet profound words of Rebi Simlai.

G'mar Tov and Shabbat Shalom
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