

A HAR-TY HEART

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

And G-d spoke to Moshe at Har Sinai saying ... (VaYikrah 25:1)

This opening verse of this week's parsha should raise eyebrows even before reading Rashi. For almost an entire year G-d had been speaking to Moshe at Har Sinai; why all of a sudden mention it? Rashi answers: Just as this mitzvah of sh'mittah (which follows the above words) was given at Har Sinai with general and specific rules, so were all mitzvos detailed to Moshe at Har Sinai (though such details are not mentioned in the Torah).

In other words, in many cases the Torah teaches a mitzvah but provides very little background about how to properly observe the mitzvah, the way G-d wants us to. Instead, the written portion of Torah relegates such specifics to the oral portion of Torah.

For example, the Torah tells men to wear tefillin, but not precisely how (we're not even told what they look like!). We're commanded to ritually slaughter kosher animals if we wish to eat meat, but what is a kosher sh'chitah? Such explanations and others like them are the subject matter of the Oral Law, and the interest of the Mishnah, Talmud, and Shulchan Aruch.

The omission of such details opened the door for many splinter groups throughout Jewish history to originate their own oral interpretation. After over 1,000 years of complete acceptance of both a Divinely-given Written and Oral Law (during which time G-d spoke to prophets and it was next to impossible to deny the Oral Tradition), breakaway groups decided to reject the Oral Law, acting as if it had never existed and as if the Torah was subject to current interpretations of its vagueness.

Hence, Rashi implores: Do not assume that because the Written Torah did not detail all the mitzvos that G-d also did not detail them to Moshe, albeit orally. On the contrary, just as the mitzvah of Sh'mittah was detailed to Moshe at Har Sinai (as we see in the Written Torah itself), so too were all the mitzvos detailed by G-d at Har Sinai (though we don't see this in the Written Torah itself).

However, the question can be asked: Why sh'mittah? Why did the Torah specifically choose to detail the mitzvah of the Sh'mittah Year (and not another of the 613 mitzvos), and then connect it to Har Sinai?

The Talmud writes:

Rav Chisda and Rabbah the son of Rav Huna both said: Why is it called "Sinai"? Because it is the mountain from which hatred (Hebrew: sinah) came down to the Nations-of-the-World ... (Shabbos 89a)

Because they didn't receive Torah on it. (Rashi)

From the Talmud, it sounds as if the events of Har Sinai led to anti-Semitism, which is based upon an inexplicable innate hatred of Jews. From Rashi, it seems as if the issue is not so much one of hatred, but one of jealousy. And again, what does either have to do with the specific mitzvah of Sh'mittah?

Shabbos Day:

We can see the inherent relationship between jealousy and hatred from the story in the Chumash of Yosef and his brothers. His relationship to his older brothers already on bad footing, Yosef further antagonized them by revealing his dreams of success.

However, before the first dream the Torah states:

The brothers saw that Yosef was loved by his father more than all the brothers and they hated him ... (Bereishis 37:4)

After relating his two dreams to his brothers, which they (not Yosef) interpreted to mean that Yosef would one day rule the family, the Torah bears testimony:

And his brothers were jealous of him ... (Bereishis 37:11)

Somehow revealing the dreams transformed the brothers' hatred of Yosef into jealousy of Yosef. How, and why?

Hatred can be baseless; the Talmud tells us that the second Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred (Yoma 9b). We can find ourselves "hating" complete strangers about whom we know absolutely nothing. Furthermore, if someone has something we think he doesn't deserve, even if we don't want that thing for ourselves, we tend to hate him for it.

On the other hand, jealousy, as evil an emotion as it may be, is usually less baseless. We may have more difficulty proving to ourselves that the person doesn't deserve what he has, and tend to be upset that we don't have it as well. Often matching the person "heals" the feeling of jealousy within, though not necessarily in the healthiest manner since it creates tremendous pressure to "keep up with the Joneses," or Schwartzes, as whatever the case may be.

In the beginning, Yosef's brothers hated him because they saw a worthless, troublesome, unduly favored child of their father. "What could Ya'akov possibly see in Yosef, a boy who speaks loshon

hara and who seems more concerned about his physical appearance than his inner one?" the brothers angrily asked themselves. "After all, didn't Avraham mislove Yishmael ... And didn't Yitzchak want to give the blessings to our evil uncle Eisav instead of our righteous father? It must be a family trait to misjudge a son's spiritual worth, and our father is also mistakenly choosing Yosef over us!"

However, once the brothers saw and heard Yosef's dreams which they themselves interpreted, much to their mortification, as allusions to future royalty, on some level they had acknowledged that Yosef also had Divine approval. Their father's less-than-surprised reaction to Yosef's dream didn't help matters either, and combined, both acted as the mental threshold over which baseless hatred passed to become jealousy.

The Talmud (with Rashi's help) is indicating a similar situation with respect to the Jewish people and the Nations-of-the-World. Har Sinai is a testimony to the fact that the non-Jews believed that the descendants of Avraham had nothing special going for them, especially after they had sunken to the 49th level of spiritual impurity while in Egypt. Even the angels at the Red Sea, the midrash says, questioned the Jewish people's worthiness to be saved over the immoral Egyptian population.

However, when G-d gave the Torah to this previously downtrodden nation, it was Divine confirmation that G-d not only loved the descendants of Avraham, but that they were destined for royalty as well:

... G-d called to him [Moshe] from the mountain saying, "Speak to the house of Ya'akov ... Tell the children of Israel: You have seen that which I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to Me. Now, if you will listen to My voice and keep My covenant, then you will be My treasured nation among all the nations ... You will be My kingdom of priests and a holy nation ..." (Shemos 19:4)

From the "mountain" G-d said this. And, from such a mountain, such a commitment from G-d transforms the hatred of the nations of the Jewish people into a jealousy of the Jewish people, for it was Divine vindication and proof of a Divinely sanctioned illustrious destiny.

And is there any better symbol of this Divine love and commitment of G-d to the Jewish people than the Sh'mittah year itself, during which we are carried on "eagle's wings" while G-d miraculously provides for our every need? Indeed: the connection between Sinai and Sh'mittah is very, very telling.

Seudos Shlishi:

With the mention of the Yovel in this week's parsha, we are re-introduced to the concept of "fifty." Last week's parsha spoke about counting 49 days from the second day of Pesach, the Omer-Count,

after which, on the 50th day, we are to celebrate the holiday of Shavuot, Z'man Toraseinu ... the day on which we received the Torah (in the year 2448/ 1313 BCE). This week, we are commanded to count seven Sh'mittah cycles of seven years, after which the 50th year is to be declared a Yovel-Year.

"You shall sanctify the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land for all the inhabitants; it shall be a yovel for you. You must return every man to his possession, and each man shall return to his family." (VaYikrah 25:10)

Interestingly enough, the Yovel was not proclaimed on Rosh Hashanah, on the first day of the Jewish year, as was the Sh'mittah year. Instead, it was declared on Yom Kippur, and the connection is simple but deep.

Yom Kippur is a day of renewal, the completion of a process that began officially on Rosh Hashanah and continued throughout the eight days that followed. If Yom Kippur is observed properly, one has the potential and opportunity to become what is called a "b'riah chadashah," a new creation.

Yom Kippur, Kabbalistically, is associated with the sphere called "Binah" (Understanding) from which are derived the famous "Fifty Gates of Understanding," the place from which our souls emanate. When a person sins, the previous relationship between that person's soul and body becomes worn down, and tshuva (repentance) is a process of going back to Binah, so-to-speak, and gaining a "new" soul. It is this that provides the sinner with a new lease on life atonement from G-d.

This was the Yovel-Year as well. As the Maharal points out, the number fifty always alludes to something that is "nivdal," that is, set aside from the mundane, physical world. It is the number that alludes to the supernatural (as in the case of Sefiros HaOmer), and the potential to become a b'riah chadashah, a new being. This is why people and possessions are to be returned in this year to their original sources, for the Yovel-Year represents the end of one cycle of life, and the beginning of a wholly new one.

Melave Malkah:

A man must not be extortionate to his fellow; and you should fear your G-d ... (VaYikrah 25:17)

The Torah warns here against hurting a person with words (ona-us devarim), either by annoying him or by giving him unsuitable advice in order to benefit yourself. (Rashi)

And, as Rashi finishes, lest one think he can hide his true intentions when misleading his neighbor, the mitzvah ends off with a warning to fear G-d, who knows what lurks in the deep dark reaches of a man's heart (even when the man himself doesn't know!). As they say (or, at least ought to say), "You can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can't fool G-d any of the time."

The Talmud brings some examples of ona-us devarim. For example:

If the person is someone who returned to Torah after having lived a secular life, one should not say, "Hey! Remember what you used to do ..." Or, if the person is the son of a convert, don't say, "Remember what your ancestors used to do ..." etc. (Babba Metzia 58b)

Furthermore, the Talmud warns:

Don't make eyes for another's possession if you have not the money to pay for it.

And just to hammer home the point, the Talmud brings a real-life example of ona-us devarim from the life of Dovid HaMelech, after he was mistakenly accused of taking Bas Sheva while she had still been married to Uriah (Shmuel 2:11:1):

Dovid said to G-d, "Master of the World! You know that if they were to tear my flesh, the blood would not run! Even when they are busy discussing the laws Negaim and Ohalos (two difficult sections of mishnah dealing with laws of purity), they taunt me, 'Dovid, who is an adulterer, and with what kind of death must he be punished?' I answer them, 'He is to be hanged; he, however, has a share in the World-to-Come, but anyone who embarrasses his fellow in public has no share in the World-to-Come!' " (Babba Metzia 59a)

It may be hard for us today to imagine anyone talking to Dovid HaMelech that way, embarrassing him to the point that he could say his blood no longer remained in his veins! However, in his day and age, Dovid appeared differently to those around him, as he himself wrote:

The stone the builders despised became the cornerstone. (Tehillim 118:22).

Eventually. However, it was even until after his own death that Dovid became vindicated in the eyes of his enemies, after which he was no longer seen as anything less than G-d's anointed, he and his seed after him.

And therein lies the root of ona-us devarim, and the inherent danger in thinking and speaking it. Whether it is because of insecurity or over-confidence, we tend to deride other people when we look down upon them (as if that gives us a license to make them feel bad!). However, you never know how G-d looks at the person we disrespect, and what role he is going to play in history. Dovid's enemies are history now; Dovid HaMelech lives on through the generations that follow him, and eventually, through Moshiach himself.

Shabbat Shalom.

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