

GATHERING THE 'REST'

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Moshe assembled all the congregation of the Children of Israel, and said to them, "These are the words ..." (Shemos 35:1)

Everyone's eyebrows go up over the emphasis on Moshe's gathering of the people to hear G-d's command, asking, "Why is this night different from all others?" (to borrow the words from the Haggadah). In other words, why doesn't it say that Moshe "gathered the people" in other places that he was told to speak to the Jewish people on behalf of G-d?

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh says that, after Moshe came down exuding light at the end of last week's parshah, many from the Jewish people were afraid to approach him. Therefore, Moshe summoned all of them to come before him, to allay their fear--men, women, and children too.

The Ohr HaChaim also says that normally, women and children were not in attendance when Moshe told over G-d's words. However, since the building of the Mishkan was from "gifts of the heart" brought from ALL the Jewish people, the women and children were also asked to be present when Moshe spoke on this topic again.

Another reason for the complete assembling of the entire nation has to do with what Rashi mentions. Rashi says that this parshah begins on the eleventh day of Tishrei, the day after the first Yom Kippur in the history of the Jewish people, and eighty days after the building and destruction of the golden calf. Moshe had since ascended for two more sets of forty days, in order to beg G-d for forgiveness on behalf of the Jewish nation. Apprehensively, every Jewish man, woman, and child waited in the camp below for G-d's verdict. Hence, it was only fitting that all should be convened to hear the good news.

The Ba'al HaTurim adds yet another idea. He says that, since this massive gathering was to teach laws of Shabbos and Yom Tovim, it was also a way to instruct the Jews to gather together on these special days for communal drashos (Torah lectures).

And finally (for now), one more underlying concept behind this anomaly in the Torah may simply be to emphasize the need for Jewish unity. Nothing empowers the Jewish people more than when we rally around the banner of Torah as a unified whole. Fragmented, we become weak and vulnerable

to all kinds of anti-Torah currents, as the account of the golden calf proved.

It is amazing how quickly and effectively immorality is able to mobilize followers to do its bidding. This is because it does not take much convincing to satisfy one's more base instincts. However, when it comes to fulfilling man's loftier side--the side of the soul--it is never an easy job; it is not one that tends to go very smoothly (like picking up a link-chain from only one end).

Hence, Shabbos is the mitzvah they were gathered together to learn in this week's parshah. For, Shabbos is the great unifier, integrating the previous unrelated six days of the week and synergizing their efforts and successes. And though national unity, for this moment at least, seems to be a distant dream, we must remember that every little bit of unity counts in this critical effort. G-d cares about Jewish unity, and each of us has to start somewhere.

Shabbos Day:

Six days you shall do work, and the seventh day will be holy to you--a Shabbos of Shabboses to G-d; all who do work will be put to death. (Shemos 35:2)

The juxtaposition in this week's parshah of the prohibition to do work on Shabbos with the building of the Mishkan hints to us just which labors are forbidden to do on Shabbos. We know from the Oral Law that there 39 principal forms of creative activity forbidden on Shabbos--from this week's parshah and the connection to the Mishkan we understand why it was these specific forms of labor that were forbidden.

The following adds another dimension to the number thirty-nine:

There are forty labors, less one, corresponding to the thirty-nine lashes (administered to one who has deliberately violated a negative mitzvah), which are not administered on Shabbos; they correspond to the ten curses given to Adam, the ten curses given to Chava, the ten curses given to the snake, and the nine curses pronounced on the earth. (Tikunim 48)

In creation and history, everything is about tikun--rectification. There isn't one commandment that isn't for the sake of fixing up what went wrong in the Garden of Eden. Keeping Torah, and especially Shabbos, is not only about making better people; it is primarily about bringing the world to fruition, and since eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was a "left turn" from the right path in history, the thirty-nine labors from which we abstain on Shabbos represent some "right turns" to bring us back on to the main path to fulfillment.

However, what is interesting is why, of all the thirty-nine forbidden activities, only the prohibition of lighting fire is actually mentioned outright. On this, the Tikunim comments:

On Shabbos, Gehinnom does not function, therefore, The Holy One, Blessed is He, commanded the

Jews not to kindle fire on Shabbos ... (Tikunim 24)

Gehinnom is that place, well, that place we don't want to ever go to, but must pass through if we fail to rectify our lives in This World in preparation for the World to Come. In honor of Shabbos, the fires of Gehinnom do not operate on Shabbos, and emphasizing the prohibition of lighting a fire over the other thirty-eight, in a sense, reminds us of this "break."

We hold of this idea, even in halachah. To begin with, we say the supplication prayer "Tzidkascha tzedek" ("Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness ...") after Minchah Shabbos afternoon, according to some, because the souls return to Gehinnom on Motzei Shabbos (Mishnah Brurah, 292:2:6). Furthermore, it says:

There are some who forbid drinking water between Minchah and Ma'ariv on Shabbos, because that is when the souls return to Gehinnom ... (Shulchan Aruch 291:2; the Mishnah Brurah explains why)

Apparently, Shabbos is a day of rest not just for the living, but for those who have left This World as well. However, the proper observance of Shabbos is a crucial part of making sure one doesn't end up in THAT place as well, as the Talmud states:

He who eats all three meals on Shabbos is saved from three things: the troubles in advance of Moshiach's coming, the judgment of Gehinnom, and the war of Gog and Magog. (Shabbos 118a)

If that is true of keeping mitzvos we enjoy doing, how much more so must this be true of abstaining from prohibitions we also enjoy, in honor of Shabbos.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Pekudei: Making It All Count

These are the accountings of the Mishkan-the Mishkan of Testimony-as requested by Moshe of the Levites, under the guidance of Itamar, the son of Aharon the priest. (Shemos 38:21)

It says "these" to render meaningless all other countings in the world which are temporary ... This counting lasts forever, because it was for the Mishkan which became a dwelling place for G-d. (Ohr HaChaim)

In other words, the emphasis on this accounting de-emphasizes all other countings, and the reason is the end result of what was enumerated. Normally, when it comes to a person's possessions, he counts them in order to determine his wealth, or lack thereof. The counting, in a sense, limits what is being counted, because you can have no more or less than what you count. It is to this that the Talmud refers when it says:

Blessing will not come to anything weighed, measured, or counted; it will only come to things hidden from the eye. (Ta'anis 8b)

However, something very spiritual happened to what was counted for the Mishkan. In a sense, the counting helped not to limit what was brought, but to increase it. This is because when one gives something to G-d, G-d uses this as a reason to give back to the person much more.

Take a prophet, for example. A prophet was someone who worked on himself for years, gaining Torah knowledge and perfecting his character traits. However, prophetic vision was not just the next step in the ladder of increasing knowledge and personality development--it was a whole other area of understanding, another dimension altogether.

This is what the rabbis teach G-d says to the Jewish people:

"Open for Me an opening the size of the eye of a needle, and I will open for you one the size of a hall."

When it comes to serving G-d, we have to do the very best we can, given who we are, our position in life, and our strengths and weaknesses. But even when the best we do falls short of what the circumstance requires, still, to G-d, it counts for much more. The Talmud even tells us that one who intends to do a mitzvah, but is prevented from doing so for reasons beyond his control, G-d counts the mitzvah as having been performed (Brochos 6a). A "gift of our heart" can go that far.

This means, for example, that when one gives charity and all he can give is twenty-five cents, but has the heart to give ten times that amount, to G-d, that is what was given. Because, as we learned from Parashas T'rumah, it is the gift of our heart that G-d truly desires, and what we actually give and how we give it is just a way to reveal what we feel towards G-d.

In our world today, we may have difficulty accepting this. However, if one really thinks deeply into the matter, he will see that there can be no better investment of money, time, or life.

Melave Malkah:

Parashas Chodesh

G-d told Moshe and Aharon in Egypt, "This month will be for you the beginning of the months; it will be the first month of the year for you. (Shemos 12:1-2)

The mitzvah to sanctify the new month was the first one given to the Jewish people, and I have already discussed its significance (including why it was the first mitzvah given, especially before leaving Egypt) in previous years. One aspect of this mitzvah that has not been covered so far is our relationship to time.

It is ironic that there is something called "Jewish time." Jewish time, for the most part means that Jews run by a different clock. The wedding invitation says the chupah is called for 6:30 PM, but

everyone knows it won't start until at least 7:15 ... AM the next morning! (Unless, of course, it is a German wedding, which starts on time no matter what--guests or no guests.)

We won't discuss why simchos don't start on time (though I have a few theories of my own). What we will use this mitzvah and special parshah for is to open up a discussion on what the Jewish relationship to time ought to be.

On many occasions, we make the brochah: shehechyanu, v'kiyemanu, v'higi'anu la-zman ha-zeh--Blessed are You, Hashem our G-d, King of the Universe, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this time. Many peoples have instituted "Grace after Meals," and some may thank G-d here-and-there for the odd gift or two. But how many people thank G-d for just being alive to witness another moment in time? Where does this consciousness come from?

It comes from recognizing that every moment in time is another precious opportunity--to earn more reward in the World-to-Come. Although we are warned not to serve G-d for the sake of receiving reward (Pirkei Avos 1:3), Kiddush HaChodesh--Sanctification of the New Moon--is the flip side of the coin. It tells us to at least keep in the back of our mind that every moment counts, that every moment is precious, and that every moment can be transformed into more eternal reward.

The yetzer hara (evil inclination) prefers to give the impression that there will always be "more time" to make good on potential, and to fulfill obligations we may have. It's an illusion, though, because, even if we should live another eighty years, we'll always be missing that missed opportunity, and our growth will always be less by that much, if not more.

Freedom from the Torah's perspective means being real with life and responsibility. It means seeing the spiritual potential of a moment, and capitalizing on it. It means wanting to do the moral thing, and doing the moral thing even when you don't feel like doing the moral thing--which for many is pretty much most of the time. Then you know you are in charge, not your yetzer hara. And then, like the moon we sanctify every month, there is a chance for renewal and growth on a regular basis.

Have a great Shabbos,

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P.S. Perhaps this is why we eat lots of "moon" hamatoshin on Purim. Just kidding.