

THE NITTY GRITTY OF TORAH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

These are the laws which you shall place before them. When you will purchase a Jewish slave ...
(Shemos 21:1-2)

As is the case every year, the drama of redemption and the receiving of Torah has passed, and it is now time to get down to the "nitty-gritty" of Torah -- the laws of living by that Torah, or which there are many.

However, that should never be intimidating. As a young yeshiva student, I ran to philosophy classes and walked slowly to halacha (Jewish law) classes. But, with the help of an excellent halacha teacher one year, I learned that, ultimately, there is really no difference between halacha and hashkofah (philosophy) -- they are really only two different approaches to the same goal: self-perfection and closeness to G-d.

In fact, if halacha is learned properly, then it becomes an invaluable tool for putting conceptual "flesh" on an abstract concept. We human beings, as abstract as we may be and as esoteric as we may become, require analogies and parables to help us bridge the gap between the intellectual world beyond us and the physical world within which we live.

Why is this important? Well, aside from providing intellectual satiation from the realm of ideas, more importantly, it allows us to recognize how what we know is part of the fabric of everyday life, in order to maximize our taking advantage of spiritual opportunities. Such intellectual and emotional recognition transforms theory into the basis of everyday life, and allows us to interact with G-d on a spiritually-mature plane.

In our day-and-age, technology has provided excellent examples of this idea. Personally, I have found computer technology (as much of it as I understand) to be especially helpful at allowing me to relate to very deep, abstract ideas, and to communicate those ideas to others. Discussions such as, "ain mazel l'Yisroel/yaish mazel l'Yisroel" (the Jewish people are not subject to destiny - are subject to destiny; Shabbos 156a) have become clearer to me because of the whole concept of computer programming.

(Some of you may be wondering what this means. However, I am writing this d'var Torah on a flight

from Minneapolis to Denver, and my battery on my computer is running low. B"H, I will write out this explanation in full later, and those wishing to understand the analogy can write me at a later date.)

This is what the Kabbalists say: When G-d desires that a certain generation should better relate to a Torah concept, He will cause society to perform in such a way PHYSICALLY to give us insight into what is happening in the SPIRITUAL realm.

It is true of mitzvos in general and halachos in specific: they are ongoing analogies and expressions in the physical world of what is going on in the invisible and mysterious spiritual realm. And this is one of the reasons why Parashas Mishpatim comes at this time, on the heels of Beshallach and Parashas Yisro, i.e., to give everyday meaning to what, until now, has been very lofty and abstract.

Perhaps this is why, also, there is a "vav" at the start of this week's parshah to connect Mishpatim to the previous one(s), as Rashi and others point out.

For example, as the Ramban points out, on the very first mitzvah taught in this week's parshah, there is a connection between the leaving of Egypt and the leaving of one's master, when one has been enslaved for six years. The first of the Ten Commandments adjures to recall that G-d redeemed us from Egypt and gave us freedom to allow us to build independent lives for ourselves; the law to free the slave and to send him out with gifts is, was, an ongoing throwback to that crucial time in Jewish history.

Furthermore, explains the Ramban, the connection to the idea of freedom in the seventh year of the Sh'mittah cycle connects us up with the concept of rest from our labors on the seventh day of the week, i.e., Shabbos -- another of the Ten Commandments. Concludes the Ramban:

"... It is all one matter, and it is the mystery of the days of the world from [the first word of the Torah] 'Bereishis' until [the end of G-d's creating when it says] 'and G-d completed.' Therefore, it is very fitting to begin with this mitzvah, because it hints at very important matters from the creation of the world." (Ramban, Bereishis 21:2)

From Rashi, to the Ramban, to the Orach HaChaim HaKodesh, to the great Arizal, it is all one approach. Personally, I like to view mitzvos and halachos as spiritual "envelopes" with messages waiting inside. Some peoplesimply receive the envelopes, but never peek inside. But "inside" is where the "heart" of the matter resides, and it is THIS that inspires OUR hearts to perform the mitzvos with zealousness and our life's energy. Before you write off what appears to be a "technical" law of Torah, and accept it as it is, deliberate on that judgment, and reap the benefits in This World -- and the Next One.

Shabbos Day:

And you shall serve Hashem, your G-d and He will bless your bread and your water, and remove illness from your midst. (Shemos 23:25)

This is a short verse, but there is a lot going on over here. To begin with, as the Pri Tzaddik points out, the command to serve G-d is in the plural (va'avad'tem), while the blessing is phrased in the singular (lachmechah, etc.). The Pri Tzaddik explains:

"This is because 'service of the heart' is prayer, and likewise, saying the Shema is a matter of accepting upon oneself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven ... and everyone has his own way, unique to himself, to serve [G-d] and therefore, the service of the heart is written using the plural. However, once the people unify for the purpose of serving G-d, then they merit to collectively receive the blessing of ... the Written Law and the Oral Law, which are often referred to as 'bread' and 'water' ..." (Pri Tzaddik, Mishpatim, 7)

The Pri Tzaddik doesn't mean to say that, on a pshat level, "bread" and "water" are not to be taken literally, for the same vort can be true on that level too: unity in service of G-d brings collective sustenance. However, the Pri Tzaddik is adding another dimension to the discussion, explaining that even an individual's success in Torah is part of a collective blessing resulting from a unified devotion to G-d!

The posuk itself goes one step further by applying this concept to the realm of personal health as well, because "in your midst" is also in the singular (mikirbechah). Perhaps this is a partial (at best) explanation for why disease and illness have been so persistent even among those of the Jewish people who have devoted themselves entirely to G-d and His holy Torah. Even tzaddikim are subject to what is going on spiritually with the rest of the nation.

If so, then, perhaps the reason why all the infirmed were healed at Har Sinai was not just because of the revelation that occurred, but, because of the achdus that occurred as well. But then again, such a high-level revelation of G-d's Presence can only result in such a high level of unity, and the healing powers that come along with such spiritual cohesion as well.

But, a person will say, "How is such sublime unity possible today? Look at us! If the Jewish people were a piece of earth, we'd have more fault lines than the San Andreas Fault! And talk about baseless hatred! It's way out of hand ..."

So, I will answer back what I do to people who tell me that making aliyah to Eretz Yisroel is next to impossible for them (which can be the case, sometimes): At least YEARN to go, and be PAINED by the fact that you are NOT there. Perhaps, in this merit, G-d will help you work it out and remove obstacles you can not control and help you fulfill the dream of living in the Holy Land.

So, too, must we look at Jewish unity this way. First, we must make peace with those whom peace is

a possibility, though, perhaps, not without some/much effort. Then, we must YEARN for peace among ALL Jews, even those of whom make our blood boil. We must be PAINED by the lack of Jewish unity today, and the profanation of Torah and G-d's Name that results.

And, if that is difficult to do, then go visit a local cancer ward of a hospital and see how many Jews are there suffering from the "machalah" (Rachmanah Litzlan) -- non-religious AND religious. Take a look at the statistics and see how many Down Syndrome and Autistic babies are being born to Jews -- non-religious AND religious. See how disease and illness are affecting our people, perhaps like never before, at least in recent times.

Then, go back and read Shemos 23:25, and meditate on that verse for a while. And then, perhaps, we will raise our collective voice Heavenward, and bring down the necessary Divine assistance to assist us in bridging the gaps and unifying the ENTIRE Jewish people around the flag of Torah, and merit the collective brochah to which the Torah refers.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

He (Moshe) took [the] Book of the Covenant and read it in the ears of the people, and they said, "All that G-d said we will do (na'aseh) and we will listen to (v'nishmah)." (Shemos 24:7)

Famous last words. How many generations of Jews have seen epikorsim -- heretics -- spring up from within their midst, even creating entirely new religions to counteract Torah Judaism. Well, at least we meant it at the time ... But then again, who wouldn't have meant it at Mt. Sinai, if G-d held the mountain over YOUR head like a barrel (Rashi, Shemos 19:17)?!

However, there is an explanation for our deviation from the angelic words, "na'aseh v'nishmah" (Shabbos 88a). According to the Pri Tzaddik, these two words correspond and counteract two specific negative forces in creation -- one embodied by Eisav and his descendants, and one embodied by Yishmael and his descendants.

Which one corresponds to whom? Logically, since the Hebrew root word of Eisav is "to do," "na'aseh" came to counteract the force of his people. Likewise, the Hebrew root word of Yishmael is "to listen," and therefore, "nishmah" represents the counteracting force against Yishmael's people.

Explains the Pri Tzaddik, when the Jewish people allowed the golden calf to be built, "na'aseh" was broken. The golden calf was a physical and base creation, and represented a desire on behalf of those who participated in its construction and worship to remain in the everyday world of "Asiyah" -- of action. However, since there was not a complete abandonment of Torah, says the Pri Tzaddik, "nishmah" remained intact, at least somewhat.

Hence, as a result of the golden calf, the spiritual protection against Eisav and his people throughout the ages, whether against physical attack or spiritual attack, whether to convert or to assimilate, was

obliterated that day. We have not since recovered it, and we have paid dearly -- in Roman times, Middle-Age times, Russian times, and Nazi times -- and STILL are paying for it -- witness the Dulberg Sisters ongoing tragedy in Italy today, and world-wide assimilation into Western Society -- dearly.

On the other hand, with "nishmah" somewhat (and I stress the "somewhat") intact, the Arabs, descendants of Yishmael, have proved equally hateful (if not more so) as their Eisavian counterparts, but (until now, and may it remain so) less effective at carrying out their dream-plan of annihilation of the Jewish people. They are trying hard to do so (and some of our own people are extending a helping hand), but MIRACULOUSLY, they have thus far failed, Boruch Hashem Yisborach.

Why? Because European and Russian anti-Semites are smarter, more capable than their Arab counterparts? One might think so, but quite mistakenly. When one-hundred and fifty million people can't accomplish what fifty million people could, then it is time to start considering the supernatural forces at play in history, and when one does that, he or she arrives at the brilliant and insightful words of the Pri Tzaddik.

One more point on this idea. Interestingly enough, the posuk, when referring to the people who responded with these Heavenly words does as, "ha-umm" -- the people. There is a tradition that, whenever the Torah uses the term "ha-umm," it is a reference to the Erev Rav, the Mixed-Multitude that left Egypt with the Jewish people, and upon whom the Midrash pins most of the blame for instigation against G-d throughout the forty years in the desert. The question is, why?

Perhaps, the posuk is hinting at the inherent potential for fall from this lofty level because of the Erev Rav contingent. In other words, even though the Erev Rav was duly impressed by the giving of Torah, and was moved to join in unison with the rest of the Jewish people at that moment of acceptance, something about the Erev Rav prevented them from being able to hold on to the greatness they achieved that day. They were destined to fall, it seems, and to bring many Jews down with them along their way.

This would fit in with the Arizal's explanation of the Erev Rav -- where they came from and who they were. But, it also goes to show how relevant and important it is to trace back the events of today to their historical roots, if you want to better understand and respond to the context of your history.

MELAVE MALKAH:

... Praise G-d from the heavens; praise Him in the heights. Praise Him, all His angels; praise Him all His legions ... (Tehillim 148:1-2)

It is verses like these that invoke the concept of "poetic license." What does King David mean, in this tehillah that is the next one in the series referred to as, P'sukei D'Zimrei? Why does he call upon

"heavens" and "heights" to praise G-d -- as if they can speak!

Can they not?

Well, of course it all comes down to what you call "speaking." The simplest definition of speaking is what man does when he opens his mouth and articulates ideas. But, as we all know, even art makes statements, and people talk about how sunsets and things "speak to them."

Do they mean that they really hear voices? Not usually. But, just as "actions can speak louder than words," so, too, can creation articulate concepts, in its own way and make impressive statements that can be more instructive about life than the deepest book.

There is a reason for this. It is because, as the Midrash says, when G-d made creation, He used the Torah like a spiritual blueprint to build everything from scratch. Creation is the physical expression of all that is spiritually constructed in the Torah.

Thus, just as a good builder can look at a building and recreate the blueprints in his mind, so, too, should a spiritually and intellectually sensitive human being able to look at creation, and draw Torah conclusions by what he or she sees and contemplates. This is what the Rambam is really saying when he writes:

... What is the way to love and fear Him (G-d)? When one contemplates His awesome and mighty actions and creations, and sees from them that there is no way to measure or limit His wisdom, immediately he will love, praise, and glorify Him, and greatly desire to know His Great Name, like Dovid said, "My soul thirsts for G-d, the living G-d!" (Tehillim 42:3) ... (Yad, Yesodei HaTorah 2:1-2)

And, this is what the author of this article meant as well:

"... Perception of the miraculous requires no faith or assumptions. It is simply a matter of paying full and close attention to the givens of life, i.e., to what is so ever-present that it is usually taken for granted. The true wonder of the world is available anywhere, in the minutest parts of our bodies, in the vast expanses of the cosmos, and in the intimate interconnectedness of these and all things ... We are part of a finely balanced ecosystem in which interdependency goes hand-in-hand with individuation. We are all individuals, but we are also parts of a greater whole, united in something vast and beautiful beyond description. Perception of the miraculous is the subjective essence of self-realization, the root from which man's highest features and experiences grow. (Michael Stark and Michael Washburn, "Beyond the Norm: A Speculative Model of Self-Realization," Journal of Religion and Health, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1977), pp. 58-59)

Just like each commandment is like an envelope with a message inside, so, too, is G-d's world. But we're shooting the messenger. We're becoming disconnected from the physical world around us, abusing it and lessening our appreciation of it. Technology is dwarfing the awesomeness of creation, when, instead, it should be enhancing our reverence for G-d's world.

After all, we are using that physical world to advance our technology!

However, as Dovid HaMelech points out in this tehillah, regardless of whether we listen or not to the praise G-d's creation sings out to its Creator each day, by its very beauty and grandeur, the song goes on and the praise goes out. And knowing this obligates us to open our ears and, perhaps if necessary, change our spiritual frequency, so that we can hear that song and join in as well.

Have a great Shabbos,
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