

THE GIVING AND LIVING OF TORAH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

They [the Jewish People] traveled from Refidim and arrived in the Sinai desert. Israel camped there in the desert; they camped opposite the mountain. (Shemos 19:2)

"They Camped ... Like a single person with a single heart" (Rashi)

There are very few parshios that afford an opportunity of addressing the issue of Jewish unity as directly as Parashas Yisro. This is because, as Rashi points out, at Har Sinai and the giving of Torah, the Jewish nation achieved an exceptionally high level of "achdus" (unity). Thus is the power of revelation of G-d.

If you ask many Jews today who still remember the Persian Gulf War, what is one of their fondest memories from that war, many will answer the "unity" that was achieved. Whether it was here in Eretz Yisroel, or outside of Israel, Jews came together to say Tehillim or to work together in some capacity -- Jews who previously often let differences of approach to Torah stand in their way of unity.

Thus is the power of a life-and-death crisis within a nation.

This does not mean that the Torah waves commandment-obligation in order to solve the problem of disunity and baseless hatred among Jews. Just the contrary: there can be no greater destructive force within creation than the abandonment of Torah and mitzvos. This the Torah makes clear in many places, and the Talmud reiterates often.

Then what DOES it mean? It means that, it is easier to go to the extreme "right" on an issue, or to the extreme "left." There is an instinctual yetzer hara within all of us to either avoid differences in people by either completely condemning them, or, by completely exonerating them.

Sometimes we have no choice: sometimes we have to go to extremes on issues because that is the best Torah response to the situation. However, other times we gravitate to extremes as a result of intellectual laziness, or, because of insecurity, or because of both reasons. Which direction one goes depends upon the nature of the individual: confrontational or non-confrontational.

In each case, the person can "justify" his or her approach in the name of G-d, i.e., "G-d wants unity

above all else ..." or, "G-d wants obedience above all else ..." Each statement can be very true, depending upon the situation. When Pinchas speared Zimri and Cozbi (Bamidbar 25:8), "unity" became secondary to mitzvah-obedience, because, it was only through mitzvah-obedience and such a corrective measure as Pinchas's that true unity could be restored.

Other times, G-d may expect us to be more accepting of others who do not live up to our standards of observance, in order to bring them back into the "fold" and to help them find their true place within the Jewish nation. Different levels of souls produce different types of Jews with different capacities to live by Torah.

(I just read a story of the Chazon Ish, one of the greatest rabbis of the last century, to whom a young man was brought. The boy was having difficulty fitting into the mainstream approach to Torah, and his rabbi and parents were worried about him. To the rabbi's utter surprise, the Chazon Ish did not rebuke the boy, the reason for which, apparently, he was brought to the Chazon Ish. Instead, the Chazon Ish spent the entire time trying to build a rapport with the boy, making him feel comfortable, so that he would be willing to come back a second time, and perhaps a third time ...)

The trick is to know in which mode to operate and at which time. The problem is that there is no single formula to apply in EVERY situation, which means that every situation has to be evaluated unto itself. As the Talmud says, you have to push a person off with your left hand while bringing him close with your right hand; a person has to know to show love amidst the discipline.

How much "left" and how much "right"?

It depends. It depends upon the person you are dealing with, the situation you find yourself in, and upon YOU yourself. However, the Talmud, like it does in many places, only provides the polar extremes, and leaves the middle ground undefined. This is not an oversight. It is the Talmud's way of telling us that Torah is for the thinking Jew, that truth is arrived at only after careful and effective deliberation of issues, and that only sensitive and secure people can penetrate the surface of a confusing situation, and turn it into a positive experience.

This is one of the greatest legacies of Har Sinai: the chance to see how Jewish unity is affected when intellectual and spiritual clarity is achieved.

Shabbos Day:

G-d came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and called Moses up to the top of the mountain ... (Shemos 19:20)

As the Talmud relates, history is divided into three equal periods of two-thousand years each: Spiritual Desolation, Torah Dissemination, Heels of Moshiach (Sanhedrin 97a). By the time Avraham

was fifty-two years of age, history rolled over to the year 2,000 (from creation), and the period of Spiritual Desolation, when mankind just about forgot about G-d altogether, came to a close.

In the year 1656 (2005 BCE), there had been the Great Flood of Noah's time. In the year 1996 (1665 BCE), the tower of Bavel had gone up and come down, and thus were born the seventy languages in the Great Dispersal of the people of Bavel. Now, in this week's parshah, the newly freed Jewish people were at the foot of Mt. Sinai to receive G-d's Torah -- the most significant historical event since the creation of man himself. The year is 2448/1313 BCE.

What really happened at that time? What does Har Sinai really represent as a historical event? For countless generations, we have drawn out and repeated the many possible messages that the giving of Torah teaches -- on a pshat level. Perhaps it is time to expand upon those messages, by looking at "Mattan Torah" on a deeper level.

Let us begin with an analogy. Most of us who make use of electrical appliances have very little understanding of what is happening when we turn the switch on -- within the appliance, or, at the source of its power. All we know is that we need to cook, for example, and our electric stove must function properly for us to succeed; all we know is that we are hot, and that, to cool down, we require our air conditioners to respond to our every beckon and call.

Then comes the "brown out." All of a sudden our lights flicker, and we are reminded once again that, as successful as we are at providing electricity to every home in the Western world, there are still limits. Turning on our air conditioner units in unison with the rest of the country draws more power than we can supply, and the system weakens to make the point.

It works the same way in the spiritual world as well, with one phenomenal and essential difference. Just as in the physical world a greater demand for electricity means a greater draw on the source of that electricity, so, too, does a greater demand for spiritual light draw down more of that light from its Source -- its UNLIMITED source, G-d Himself.

However, increased electrical input does not change the nature or potential of the appliance waiting to receive it; if it tries to, the appliance will become destroyed. That can happen also in the spiritual world as well: too much G-dly light can and will destroy the "vessel" that receives it. However, even a little extra spiritual light will transform the "vessel" -- in this case -- the person, enhancing their physical nature and expanding their spiritual potential.

For 2,448 years, the Original Light of creation had rarely made an appearance in any real, overt way. As Rashi points out, this sublime Light became the "Ohr HaGanuz" -- the "Hidden Light" -- because G-d "withdrew" it to a higher spiritual realm on the first day of creation, to protect it from abuse by the upcoming evil generations (Chagigah 12a).

While the Hidden Light remained revealed, nature remained almost non-existent. It was there, but it competed with open miracles every second of the day. It was barely a veil for the hand of G-d,

which is why Adam was able to have such a "real" relationship with his Creator. This is why this light is also called "Ohr HaNissi" -- the "Miraculous Light," and while it shone, physicality was drawn upwards to a much higher spiritual plane.

When the Ohr HaGanuz is withdrawn, nature became more "fixed," appearing quite permanent; miracles became less visible to the human eye. If you want to survive at such a time, you are forced to eat, and to take care of other physical needs -- unlike Moshe Rabbeinu who survived on Mt. Sinai in spite of the fact that he didn't eat or drink for FORTY consecutive days and night.

At Har Sinai, in the year 2448 from creation, the small nation camped at the base of mountain created a large demand for this spiritual light. We're not talking air conditioners here. We're talking primordial light ... we're speaking about the holy light with which G-d made creation itself.

And, as the light came down from its Upper World, aimed at the Jewish people below, physical reality gave way to a completely miraculous one. This is why, as the Talmud teaches, the Luchos (Tablets) with the law upon them inscribed by the "finger" of G-d, with which Moshe descended, were completely miraculous (Megillah 3a).

And, even though forty days later the golden calf would rip us from that higher, more sublime reality, and throw us back down to a more mundane physical existence, we would still never be the same again. Once touched by the Ohr HaGanuz, you are never the same again. In spite of all that happened to the Jewish nation from that time onward, and would ever happen to us, the Ohr HaGanuz has stayed with us on -- at least some level.

Perhaps that is the basis on our supernatural survival, at which even our enemies have marveled. Every Jew since Mt. Sinai has carried some impression of that fantastic, supernal light. Opening the Torah and penetrating its depths is no less than penetrating the depths of our very own souls, and when successful, unleashing the power of the Original Light that lies hidden within each of us.

Har Sinai lives on within all of us, forever.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

The Talmud makes a remarkable comment:

G-d spoke all these things, saying ... (Shemos 20:2)

"We learn that The Holy One, Blessed is He, spoke all of the Ten Commandments in one word, in a way that is impossible for a man to do. If so, then why does the Torah say [after], "I am ..." and, "You should not have ..."? [To tell you that] Moshe went over and explained each commandment individually ..." (Rashi)

We find this concept a few places in Torah, when G-d informs us of two different but related

concepts simultaneously. For example, as we say in "Lechah Dodi" in Kabbalos Shabbos on Friday nights:

"Keep" and "remember" [the Shabbos] in one word G-d caused us to hear ...

The question is, what is the point? The most important aspect of commandments is that we understand them for what they are, so that we can do them properly. The fact that Moshe had to review each one separately indicates that hearing all ten at once did not do the trick to make us fully relate to the mitzvos. So what was taught by hearing all ten commandments at one time?

Perhaps we can explain the meaning of this idea based upon the following section of Talmud:

Amos was able to reduce [the commandments] to one ... (Makkos 24a)

The question is, why? It sounds, at first, as if trying to reduce Torah in any way is degrading for Torah. If G-d wanted to make His Torah less complex, He would have. If G-d wanted to give only ONE mitzvah, He would have. So what right do these great people of the past have to do that which G-d Himself did not?

The answer is, of course, that Amos and the other great leaders of the past did not intend to try and reduce the importance of a single letter or crown in the entire Torah. These were G-d-fearing and Torah-loving individuals, who cherished every single word and mitzvah.

So then, what WERE they trying to do? They were trying to show that all the details of Torah are really aspects of more general, all-encompassing concepts. In fact, this is implied in the number of commandments that there are all together:

$$613 = 6 + 1 + 3 = 10 = 1 + 0 = 1$$

The great Hillel implied this idea with his famous comment to the potential convert:

"Do not do to others as you would not want done to you. The rest is commentary; now go and learn." (Shabbos 31a)

One can just imagine the converting non-Jew sitting there with the sea of Talmud and shaking his head, saying, "What? All of THIS is only commentary on THAT? Did this Rabbi Hillel pull a fast one on me?"

The answer is no -- not the great Hillel for whom patience with others was of the utmost importance. He was being completely honest, and not just honest, but extremely insightful, telling the would-be convert that living by Torah requires a change in attitude toward the commandments: Look not upon the details when weighing Torah, but upon the Klal -- the overall goal of Torah.

The root of this idea was a real root: the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Kabbalists explain that, in spite of the fact the Torah seems to indicate that there were many trees in the Garden of Eden before Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, in fact there was

only one: the Tree of Life!

But what about the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and all the other trees in the Garden to which G-d referred (Bereishis 1:29)? They WERE there too -- but not as independent trees; rather, they were branches off the Tree of Life (which is why they are called "aitz" as opposed to "e-lan"), until, that is, Adam ate from the forbidden fruit. Then, the sublime unity of knowledge was broken, and each "branch" became a tree unto itself.

(Incidentally, this is why, according to the Pri Tzaddik, Tu B'Shevat is called the "Rosh Hashanah of the Tree" -- in the first mishnah of Tractate Rosh Hashanah -- as opposed to "of trees." Which tree? The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which still awaits its final rectification and eventual reunification with the Tree of Life.)

Hence, Torah, which is called the "Tree of Life," is the general, overall tree from which all other aspects of knowledge branch out -- literally. In this vast world of unlimited information, especially in this "Generation of Knowledge," it is easy to be fooled into seeing the myriad of details of knowledge as being completely independent of Torah, and in the Torah world itself, as seeing the details of Torah as being independent and standing on their own.

However, at Mt. Sinai, G-d spoke all TEN Commandments at ONE TIME to hint at the age-old concept that all areas of knowledge, and all the mitzvos and their details converge into one concept: a profound need to mirror our Creator, for the sake of eventual union with Him. The rest is commentary. Now go and learn.

MELAVE MALKAH:

For it is good to make music to our G-d, for praise is pleasant and befitting ... (Tehillim 147:1)

This tehillah is considered to be a continuation of the theme of the previous one (see last week), that of the Final Redemption of the Jewish people:

The Builder of Jerusalem is G-d; the outcast of Israel He will gather in ...

Why the focus on the building of Jerusalem? Because, it is from Jerusalem that the Final Redemption will begin. After all, Jerusalem is the center of the universe; after all, it is over the Western Wall that all spiritual light enters the world and emanates out to the rest of the world.

And, to Jerusalem He will gather in the "outcasts" of the Jewish people, people, upon whom the world continues to look down -- until the time that G-d steps into history and sets the record straight. Then, the world will no longer reject the Torah, nor its devote followers. Most important of all, the Jewish people will no longer reject themselves, those of whom have abandoned any sense of connection to Sinai and the Divine Mission.

... The Healer of the broken-hearted ...

What a time it will be, when the guessing and the second-guessing will end. When Eliyahu comes, followed by Moshiach, no mistake will any longer be able to be made. It will be unbridled joy, because there will be no fear of error, no fear of disappointment. And, those who have waited and have lived to see their hopes of true redemption dashed over and over again, will be uplifted and experience true elation, like that of the giving of Torah at Har Sinai!

... He counts the stars, and calls each by name ...

G-d has not lost track of any of us over the ages (though we may have lost track of ourselves!). He remembers each and every Jew, who he was, how he lived, what he believed, and what were his tests. He can and will call each of us by our name, our true name, the one that describes the essence of all we became with all we were given. It will be a great and awesome day.

... Because He will strengthen the bars of your gates; bless your children in your midst ...

Finally, it will be a time of security. Jews, throughout history, have lived in fear and with tremendous insecurity everywhere they have gone, and some point in time. And, when seeking security meant leaving behind Torah values and assimilating into host cultures, the end result was even greater fear and insecurity.

"Not this time!" we promised ourselves, as we settled into everyday life.

"Yes, this time too ..." history answered us, when everyday life gave way to Divine planning.

However, not in the End-of-Days, to which King David refers. As the prophet promised, a time is coming, a "great" and "awesome" time, when G-d will send his prophet and redeemer. Finally, Mt. Sinai will stand once again, the Torah and the Jewish people will be united forever, and the world will achieve the state of universal brotherhood for which it has long, but never known.

Have a great Shabbos,
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