

MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

"G-d told Moshe and Aharon, "This is the statute of the law which G-d commanded to be told ..."

(Bamidbar 19:1)

THIS IS THE STATUTE OF THE LAW: Because the Sattan and the nations of the world question the Jewish people, asking, "What is this mitzvah and what is the reason for it ... (Rashi)

A couple of years ago, I wrote about the concept of a "chok" -- statutes -- but seeing how most people probably lack sufficient time to read previous years' parshah sheets, and this is an extremely important concept, I'd like to update this particular d'var Torah.

In general, there are two different types of mitzvos: Mishpatim and Chukim, or, "Judgments" and "Statutes." Mishpatim, for the most part, are mitzvos that seem rational to man (e.g. do not steal), whereas Chukim are mitzvos whose rationale is not so readily available to a human being's mind (e.g. do not wear clothing made of a mixture of wool and linen).

For this reason, Mishpatim are mitzvos that are relevant to non-Jews as well as Jews, that is, when non-Jews wish to live in a civilized manner. Thus, even if the non-Jewish nations only hear of a Mishpat from the Torah, they won't question it, but rather, might even say, "What a good idea ... Let's implement it."

The reason is simple. As the old adage goes: Necessity is the mother of invention. Everyday life is governed by rules and regulations that man has little or no control of, such as death, physical vulnerability, human desires, etc. However, man also loves to live, avoid pain, and, whenever possible, have fun. So, therefore, man is 'compelled' to find ways and systems that can maximize the latter in spite of the former.

Thus, man has a whole host of laws and regulations -- Mishpatim, if you will -- of his own, though, he is not crazy about that. What can he do? It is the lesser of two evils by far, for, without such regulations and systems of enforcement the world becomes a virtual jungle where survival of the fittest wins out, and good people are obliterated by people far more ruthless than they could ever be.

On occasion, history has proven this point in no uncertain terms.

It is NOT a coincidence that almost all the Mishpatim deal with the physical reality, the tangible, everyday world of material existence, for, that is the most pressing reality, the one that is the most real to mankind. It is extremely hard to function and be productive when one's life is in danger; but, it is possible, at least it seems to mankind, possible to function and be productive with a limited amount of spiritual security.

Before explaining this latter point, I will provide a parable.

Imagine a group of co-workers, part of a manufacturing team, sitting around one lunch time, shmoozing. Everyone is eating, and talking about last night's basketball game, when all of a sudden, one of the workers notices that another is reading a book, called, "Management Skills For The New Millennium."

"Hey Charlie," he calls out to his friend, "Whatcha got there?"

At which point, all eyes turn to Charlie to see what he is reading. Charlie, a little intimidated, answers his friends anticipating their reaction,

"It's a new book about how to be a good manager and get promotions to Upper Office."

"Hah!" his friend remarks. "What do you need a book like that for down here? "

"Yea," another chimes in. "Isn't that stuff boring? What about the game last night ... Now THAT was exciting!"

Charlie answers, "You want to be down here FOREVER? I'm not going to put together kids' toys the rest of my life. I've got five kids myself who are growing like weeds, and I'm not going to make it by on this salary for much longer!"

"Gee, I don't know Charlie," another one says. "I don't think we're Upper Office material ... I think you're just spinning your wheels for nothin' ..."

"Yea," concurs the first one. "Besides, everyday I go home exactly at five, and I start exactly at nine. Those guys up in Head Office get here earrrrrly, and, most don't leave until I'm already sitting down on the sofa to watch TV."

Charlie, realizing he's not going to change anyone's mind today, finishes off by saying, "Don't you guys look beyond today? You have so much more potential if you just know how to get to it. This book tells you just that!"

There's a few sounds of disbelief, after which they leave Charlie to his book and he leaves them to their basketball statistics.

In the meantime, the very book that Charlie is reading is on the desk of every Head Office personnel

upstairs, and it is quickly becoming somewhat of a bible for them regarding office management and productivity. The C.E.O. of the company made sure of that.

In the story, which are the 'Mishpatim' and which are the 'Chukim,' and to whom, and why?

The Mishpatim were all the rules and habits that the workers related to given their positions in life, and what they are used to. Charlie's book was a 'chok' to them, because, they could not see its value on the floor of their factory, nor could they relate to elevation to higher business planes. However, though some of the ideas in the book were still 'chukim' to Charlie as well, being outside of his work experience, still, he did relate to much of the book given his ambition to climb to higher stations in life.

In other words, Chukim are Mishpatim for higher levels of spiritual existence. They are 'laws' that can only be experienced on higher spiritual planes, though, they can be performed down here regardless of that experience. Furthermore, when one senses that there are higher spiritual planes to which to strive, and begins to think in that direction, then, immediately and automatically, he begins to 'sense' their higher logic, and enhance his relationship to the concepts of that higher level.

Eventually, if such a person continues to grow towards the level of Chukim, then he can, in fact, achieve that level of experience and understanding, as did Moshe Rabbeinu, and Shlomo HaMelech (although not to the same degree that Moshe himself did).

Standing 'down here' and looking up, Chukim seem beyond logic, questionable according to the Sattan and the nations of the world. However, standing 'up there' and looking down, Chukim seem at least as practical as what we call 'Mishpatim,' if not more.

Shabbos Day:

This is the law when a man dies ... (Bamidbar 19:14)

Life is filled with uncertainties, but, death is not one of them. Ever since G-d delivered the dreaded verdict to Adam HaRishon for disobeying the commandment not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, death has become as much a part of life as life itself.

This is why the Talmud's statement seems a bit peculiar at first:

Rav Ammi said: There is no death without sin ... (Shabbos 55a)

Sure there is. Not only that, but there is even immortality even WITH sin, for, Ya'akov Avinu made at least a few small mistakes throughout the course of his long life, and yet he didn't die (Ta'anis 5b). And, elsewhere, the Talmud states that seven people went right to the Garden of Eden and did not die.

Not only this, but, there have been all kinds of righteous people throughout history who have died

True, Shlomo HaMelech wrote:

"There is no righteous person on the earth who does good and does not sin." (Koheles 7:20)

Which means that all the righteous people who have ever died have not gone completely sinless, which, is reasonable to assume. However, according to Rav Ammi, if they could have lived perfect lives, then, they would have not died, which is what the Talmud concludes:

Four people died because of the bite of the snake: Binyomin son of Ya'akov, Amram father of Moshe, Yishai father of Dovid, and, Kaleiv son of Dovid. (Shabbos 55b)

In other words, their lives were so perfect that, had it not been for the curse placed upon mankind because of the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, they would not have died and lived for ever. Their deaths, therefore, were no fault of their own.

Regarding death, the Talmud teaches:

Anyone who cries for a 'kosher' person will have his own sins forgiven ... It is taught in a brisa: Rebi Shimon ben Elazar said: Anyone standing by a dead person at the time his soul leaves is obligated to tear. To what is this likened? To a Sefer Torah that was burned. (Shabbos 105b)

In other words, though normally one only tears one's clothing for certain close relatives, being by the person as his or her soul leaves This World is different. It is such a 'tragic' event, like a Sefer Torah being burned, G-d forbid, that all present at the time must likewise rent their clothes.

It is an interesting comparison. In a very real sense, the soul inside the body is like the holy letters written on the parchment of a Sefer Torah, and though we may forget this, the halachah does not. Rebi Chanina ben Teradyon, one of the Ten Martyrs to die at the hands of the Romans, also did not. For, when they had bound him and ignited him that he should die a slow and very painful death for teaching Torah in public, he told his overwhelmed students,

"The parchment burns, but the letters fly off!" (Avodah Zarah 18a)

Considering that Rebi Chanina was wrapped in the Sefer Torah from which he had been teaching when he Romans had found him, and the Talmudic dictum cited above, Rabbi Teradyon's statement had a double meaning. Both the parchment and his body burned -- true -- but the holy light encased in the letters of the Sefer Torah, along with the holy light that was his soul, flew heavenward, untouched and undamaged by the Roman executioners.

This idea gives new meaning to what it means to disgrace one's body with unholy activities. A body without a soul that once had one, still retains a level of holiness, just as a Sefer Torah does whose words have faded, and a talmid chacham who, G-d forbid, forgot his learning. How much more so is this true of a body that still retains its soul, whether one can feel and relate to that soul or not.

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

They journeyed from Mount Hor by way of the Red Sea, circumventing the land of Edom. The people became discouraged along the way. (Bamidbar 21:4)

THE PEOPLE BECAME DISCOURAGED ALONG THE WAY: Because of the difficulties of the journey, they said, "We are so close to enter the land, and now we have to turn back, just like our ancestors who had to spend thirty-eight years wandering until this day." (Rashi)

In other words, the Jewish people had had enough of wandering. And, being so close to the border of Canaan, and, by all rights, they should have been able to pass through the Land of Edom as a short-cut to their final destination, it was exasperating to be told to return to the desert and take the long road home.

On the other hand, what do you expect from Edom? So, therefore, the Ba'al HaTurim provides a little more insight into just what 'shortened' the souls of the Jewish people (tiktzar nefesh ha-umm):

... We learn from this that they saw all the travails that would come upon them in the exile of Edom and how long it would last. (Ba'al HaTurim)

In other words, once the Jewish people arrived at the border of the territory of Edom, they received a prophecy of what this nation would do their descendants over a long period of history that reaches even until this day. Before the Jewish people even entered the Land of Canaan to turn it into Eretz Yisroel, they already had a vision of leaving it and suffering in a long and hard exile! It was enough to take anyone's breath away, and make one say, "What's the point?"

This is why, some forty years later, they can still talk as if they left Egypt only yesterday:

The people spoke (harshly) to G-d and Moshe, "Why have you take us up from Egypt to die in the desert ..." (Bamidbar 21:5)

That is, if in the end we're only going to be exiled by this nation for such a long period of time, then what was the point of leaving Egypt forty years ago in the first place, and wandering around the deadly desert for thirty-eight years in the second place? It was a vision that took all the wind from their sails.

G-d's response was to send in poisonous snakes which ended up killing many Jews. As a result, the Jewish people admitted their mistake, and begged Moshe to help them. He, in turn, turned to G-d who told Moshe to make a copper snake for those to look at once they were bitten by the real snakes. Somehow, looking at this copper snake neutralized the effects of the venom.

ALL WHO ARE BITTEN: ... Our rabbis taught: Does a snake kill or revive? Rather, once the Jewish people looked upwards and devoted themselves to their Father in Heaven they became healed.

(Rashi)

Thus, this episode was not merely a punishment for complaining against G-d and Moshe; it was primarily the answer to their question. For, the snake always represents Pharaoh, and the venom injected into the heel of the person represented the sure death all Jews would have suffered in Egypt, and G-d not taken them out.

The copper snake, on the other hand, made by Moshe was the anti-body, the 'medicine' to save from the vicious 'bite' of Pharaoh and his philosophy. However, even that was only a device to re-focus the Jewish people on the true source of life and death in creation, the true source of redemption, The Holy One, Blessed is He, Himself.

Thus, no matter where we Jews go, looking around us might get extremely depressing at times, indeed vicious beyond our worst nightmares. However, as long as Jews can remember to look up, there is always hope and, eventually redemption. It is Edom's hope, and those who work like him, to make us forget that, so that their 'venom' can have its desired effect on us.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Part Five: War of Gog and Magog

It is fascinating how many peoples and religions have some kind of tradition of an apocalyptic battle at the end of history, perhaps borrowed from the writings of the Jewish prophets. On the other hand, perhaps, being acutely aware of evil in the world, and, its overwhelming hold on mankind, they sense that nothing short of a major showdown between the forces of good and evil will end evil's dominance over history once and for all.

The technical, Biblical term for this war is "The War of Gog and Magog." There are a few references to this war in the Talmud itself:

There is no accepting converts in the Days of Moshiach ... but rather, they will be 'Gerrim Gerurim' (dragged along). They will wear Tefillin on their heads and arms, Tzitzis on their clothing, Mezuzos will be at their openings. However, once they see the war of Gog and Magog, they will ask them, "Why have you come?" They will answer, "Against G-d and his Moshiach" ... At which point, each one will abandon his mitzvos and go. (Avodah Zarah 3b)

Thus, such converts, unable to build up the proper faith in the face of such mortal danger, will instead quit rather than be counted amongst the Jewish people.

Elsewhere the Talmud writes and advises:

All who eat the three meals of Shabbos will be saved from three things: punishment during the travails of Moshiach, the judgment of Gehinnom, and the war of Gog and Magog. (Shabbos 118a)

Apparently, the third meal on Shabbos should not be taken lightly, especially at this late time in history.

Of course, one of the original sources for the concept of 'Milchemes Gog u'Magog' is the prophets:

"It shall come to pass on that day, on the day that Gog shall come against the Land of Israel," says the L-rd, G-d, "My fury shall rise up ... And in My jealousy, in the fire of My anger, I have spoken -- surely on that day there will be a great shaking in Eretz Yisroel. The fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and the beasts of the field, and all the creeping things that creep upon the earth, and all the people who are upon the face of the earth, shall shake at My Presence; the mountains shall be destroyed, the steep places shall fall, and every wall will fall to the ground." (Yechezkel 38:18-20)

Other prophets, such as Zechariah (12-14), Yirmiyahu (30), Daniel (11-12), Yoel (4), speak of this war. There is a reference to the war of Gog u'Magog in Tehillim as well (83).

Now, there is a rule when it comes to prophecy, and that is, whereas ALL good prophecies MUST come true, negative prophecies DO NOT have to come true. They can be avoided through national teshuvah and world rectification, admittedly a tall order as of this time.

According to the Zohar (Shemos 7b), Moshiach's coming is supposed to stir up the nations and precipitate a major war against the Jewish people. Says the prophet, Daniel, it will be ...

"A time of trouble such as has never been seen" (Daniel 12:1)

However, according to the Midrash, this will not happen just once, but three times -- three times throughout Jewish history Gog u'Magog will have marched against the Jewish people and onto Jerusalem, with the help of other nations. (Midrash Tehillim, 118:9). According to Rashi (Yechezkel 38:8), this battle will purge the Jewish people of all insincere converts (as we saw above), and act as a rectification for the nation.

And even though the Talmud refers to the battle of Chizkiah and Sennecheriv as one such a battle:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, was about to make [King] Chizkiah the Moshiach and Sennecheriv [who attacked Jerusalem], Gog and Magog, when the Attribute of Judgment said before The Holy One, Blessed is He, "Master of the Universe! David, the king of Israel, who recited many songs and praises You did not make Moshiach. Chizkiah, for whom You have performed great miracles, and for which he did not recite song, You want to make Moshiach?" (Sanhedrin 94a)

-- it is uncertain whether Midrash Tehillim counts this battle as one of the three. Chizkiah might not have been Moshiach, but, was Sennecheriv at least Gog and Magog?

Many hold that World War II was also such a war. It certainly had all the conditions for a war of Gog and Magog, for Hitler himself claimed to be at war only with the Jews. From Hitler's point of view, the Holocaust was not about World War II, but World War II was about the Holocaust.

Not too long after World War I, Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian wrote:

I heard in London from the holy Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, quoting the Chofetz Chaim, that Chazal say the war of Gog and Magog will be threefold. After the First World War, the Chofetz Chaim said that this was the first battle of Gog and Magog, and in about twenty-five years (1942) there would be a second world war, which would make the first one seem insignificant, and then there would be a third battle ... Rav Elchanan concluded that one must suffer the pangs of Moshiach, but the wise man will quietly prepare himself during that time-perhaps he will be worthy of seeing the comforting of Tzion and Yerushalayim. (Lev Eliyahu, Shemos, p.172)

Thus, according to this statement, one final battle of Gog and Magog may have yet to occur, G-d forbid.

Some conclude that the final battle will not be a physical one, but an ideological one (Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch). According to Rabbi Hirsch, "Gog" is the people and philosophy, and "Magog" is the exporting of that philosophy (just like "medabehr," which means speaking, is the "projection" of the Hebrew word, "dibur," speech). Hence, according to this opinion, the existing and exceedingly difficult battle against assimilation and inter-marriage, and general disinterest in Judaism, may itself be that very battle!

Who exactly are "Gog" and "Magog" supposed to be?

Originally, 'Magog' was the name of a people:

These are the generations of Noach's sons, Shem, Cham and Yefes, [to whom] children were born after the Flood. The sons of Yefes were Gomer, Magog ... (Bereishis 10:1-2)

Targum Yonason identifies Magog with Germania (I Divrei HaYamim 1:5), whereas the Talmud Yerushalmi (Megillah 1:9) seems to say they were the Goths, who migrated to Scythia in what is now southern Russia. Others say that the Mongols may have been from Magog, and it is reported that the Great Wall of China was called by Arab writers, the 'wall of al Magog.'

Gog, according to the Septuagint, is 'Agag,' a generic term used for kings of Amalek, the anti-thetical nation of the Jewish people. That would figure because, any war against the Jews meant to annihilate them has to involve Amalek, if not physically, at least conceptually. For, according to the Brisker Rav, even if there are no pure-bred Amalekians walking the earth today, there are evil people who can imitate his philosophy and even have the halachic status of an Amalekian. Many believe that Adolph Hitler had such a status.

Not to mention the concept of 'gilgulim.' Though current bodies of protagonists and antagonists may be on the stage of history for the first time, it is unlikely that this is the case for their souls. The souls of today's evil people, especially ruthless anti-Semites, no matter what their nationality may be today, are, more than likely, the same souls as ruthless anti-Semites from the past.

In other words, whether Gog and Magog is a people that has actually PHYSICALLY descended from Biblical ancestors or not, it matters not. What matters only is who will 'wear' the 'clothing' of Gog and Magog at the End-of-Days should, G-d forbid, such a battle occur.

According to the Zohar, though, it says that:

... The Children of Yishmael will go up at that time with the nations of the world against Jerusalem ... (Zohar, 1:119a).

Furthermore, there are other midrashim that seem to paint the Arabs in this light, and many rabbis who have taught that 'Golus Yishmael' comes at the tail-end of 'Golus-Edom.' And, as we have pointed out before, the Zohar also says:

In the time of the resurrection of the dead, many camps will arise in Land of the Galil, because that is where the Moshiach is going to be first revealed, since it is part of Yosef's territory. It will be the first place to be destroyed. It will begin there ahead of all other places, and then spread to the nations (Zohar, Vayakhel 220a)

Have we witnessed the fulfillment of this prophecy already? At the beginning of this most recent Intifadah, the Arabs pillaged and destroyed the yeshivah in Shechem -- Yosef's inheritance!

In any case, whomever Gog and Magog will be, whatever war they will wage at whatever time in history, and, for however long it will last (some say not more than three hours!), it's main purpose will be to test the faith of the Jews of that time. For those alive at the time, it may seem like an issue of PHYSICAL survival only. However, according to tradition, all of that will only be to test our ability to SPIRITUALLY survive -- to remain steadfast in our belief in spite of the terrible storm brewing on the horizon.

That is not a level of belief that one simply 'snaps' into at the moment of crisis. It is the result of many years of hard work developing the proper understanding of how G-d runs His world, and, why we can trust Him until the very end, and beyond. Faith is like a muscle: strengthen it during the 'quiet' moments and it will serve you well during the 'hard' moments.

We'll discuss this point, b"H, after this series of discussions is complete.

Have a Great Shabbos,
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