

THE ETIOLOGY OF SIN

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

G-d took us out of Egypt, parted the waters of the Yam Suf, brought us to the foot of Har Sinai, gave us the Torah, forgave us for the sin of the Golden Calf, gave us the Mishkan (Tabernacle), taught us Sefer Vayikra (Leviticus), and all of it took place between the 15th of Nissan, 2448 and Rosh Chodesh Iyar, 2449 (one year and two weeks).

Next week's Parsha, Bamidbar, begins as the Bnai Yisroel (Jews) prepared to enter the land of Israel. Had the Jews not sinned with the Miraglim (Spies) they would have proceeded directly to Go; unfortunately, they did sin with the Miraglim and they were consigned to wander the desert for another 38 years.

Let's recap the above history from the perspective of the five books of the Torah.

- 1.** Bereishis, the first book, describes the creation of the world and the selection of the Avraham's family to become G-d's chosen nation.
- 2.** Shemos, the second book, describes the evolution of Yakov's family from a mere 70 to the 3 million plus who survived the persecution of Egypt and followed Moshe into the desert. The miracles of the Exodus and the desert are recounted and the Torah was given. The rest should have been history; however, the Jews sinned with the Golden Calf and G-d and the Jews had to deal with it. Emerging from that unfortunate episode is the second half of Shemos that is focused on the building of the Mishkan and its attendant Kohanim (priests).
- 3.** Vayikra, the third book, details the importance of the Mishkan as the focus of the nation's consciousness in the aftermath of the Golden Calf. As a nation of priests all Jews should have merited to live the sanctified life of a Kohain. Unfortunately, we lost the prerogative of "all being Kohanim" due to the sin of the Golden Calf. Nevertheless, we study the Mishkan, the service, and the Kohanim so that we know what we are aiming to accomplish in our service and devotion and what should have been the ideal life of every Jew. Sefer Vayikra describes in great detail what that lifestyle would have been like. We may no longer merit the benefits and restrictions of the Kohain status but we must still aspire to its sanctity.
- 4.** Bamidbar, the fourth book, describes the struggles of the Jews to embrace their own sanctified identity and destiny. The beginning of the book details the nation's preparation for entering the land. The middle of the book describes the incident of the Spies and its tragic consequences. The end of the book details the final years of the desert as the nation once again prepared to leave the desert

and enter the land. Little if anything is said about the intervening 38 years.

5. Divarim, the fifth book, took place in the last month of Moshe's life as the 40 years drew to their conclusion and Moshe prepared them to transition out of the desert.

Simply put, the entire Torah from beginning to end is all about one thing and only one thing. It is about G-d giving us the Torah and our accepting it. It is the focus of everything that preceded its giving and everything that followed.

From the cauldron of creation Avraham's family emerged destined to be chosen.

In the ghettos of Mitzrayim the family grew to become a nation from where they emerged to accept the Torah. Once the nation was given the Torah they should have entered the Promised Land. The first delay was due to the sin of the Golden Calf, the building of the Mishkan, and the study of Sefer Vayikra. The second delay was due to the sin of the Miraglim. If not for the two delays the only thing the Jews needed to accomplish in the desert was receiving the Torah.

What is the point?

Simple. The fact that G-d gave us the Torah defines us as G-d's chosen. The fact that we accepted the Torah defines us as unique. The fact that we were gifted the opportunity to live our lives following the laws of the Torah defines for us what chosen and unique are. The Torah is the *raison de'tre* of our existence. It justifies our claim that we are chosen and it supports our belief that we are stamped with divinity.

Every morning of every day we proclaim our chosenness and uniqueness through the Birkas HaTorah (the blessings recited before studying Torah). "...May we and our offspring and the offspring of Your people, the House of Israel - all of us - know Your Name and study Your Torah for its own sake..." "Who selected us from all the peoples and gave us His Torah..."

Following the blessings the authors of the Sidur (prayer book) incorporated two Talmudic passages: the first from Peah 1:1 and the second from Shabbos 127a. The reason for these passages is to complete the blessings for the Torah with the actual study of Torah; however, they selected passages that focus on the importance of Torah study and its potential rewards.

- 1.** (Peah 1:1) "These are the precepts that have no prescribed measure... and Torah study."
- 2.** (Shabbos 127a) "These are precepts whose fruits a person enjoys in this World but whose principle remains intact for him in the World To Come... and the study of Torah is equivalent to them all."

The first passage presents Torah study as unlimited by time or measure. That is not to suggest that we suspend all other responsibilities in regards to Torah study; however, it does suggest that Torah study must always be a priority in our decision making process. There is no such thing as too much Torah study or the wrong time to study. Somehow we must be able to structure our time and balance our lives in such a way that we tend to all our responsibilities and also make time for Torah

study.

The second passage presents Torah study as the single endeavor whose lasting reward transcends any other Mitzvah. The Mitzvos it transcends are among the most meaningful and profound: Honoring parents, acts of kindness, coming early to davening (prayers), hospitality, visiting the sick, providing for a bride, and bringing peace between man and his fellow man. The passage does not say that Torah study is the most important Mitzvah. It does say that its reward is the most lasting.

What is it about Torah study that defines us as a nation more so than any other Mitzvah? Why is the Giving of the Torah the obvious focus of the Torah and the fulcrum of all the events recorded in the Torah? Why is Torah study without measure and limit and has a reward that is equally unlimited?

At the beginning of this week's Parsha, the last Parsha in Sefer Vayikra, G-d details the consequences for not listening to His commandments. The opening verses of the Tochacha (admonitions) state, (26:14-15 -16) "But if you will not listen to Me... and if you will despise My statutes... reject My social ordinances so that My commandments will not be carried out... then I will do the same to you..."

The Hebrew word for "listen" is "Shema." At times Shema connotes obedience and at times it connotes hearkening and listening. Because the Pasuk goes on to say that "My commandments will not be carried out" we translate Shema as "listen and hearken" rather than obedience. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the word "Shema - listen" means, "Failure to listen to the Word of G-d, showing that forsaking the Law in practice begins with neglect to study the laws of G-d in theory."

G-d began the Tochacha explaining why individuals defect from the practice of Torah. The defection begins with not studying the Torah. Torah study is far more than learning what to do, how to do it, and what not to do. Torah study is the single most powerful connection that we can have with G-d. It awakens our senses to the reality of G-d in every aspect of our lives. It is the mechanism through which spirituality is experienced and understood. It teaches acquiescence, service, and humility. It structures all aspects of life, time, space, and person in a framework of purpose and selflessness. It teaches responsible Chesed as the reason for creation rather than a tool toward some greater reward. It establishes the hierarchy of authority between generations and toward G-d. It transcends time by connecting all people throughout history to the transmission of truth that defines reality.

Rav Hirsch continues...

"The process of defection continues. Once you have lost the theoretical knowledge and understanding of the laws and, no matter what the reason, have ceased to observe the laws in practice, your conscience will give you no peace until, in order to justify your behavior, you will be able to rationalize your disobedience as "progress," to look down upon loyalty to the Law as an outworn idea. For even if you have lost your theoretical knowledge of the Law and the Law has ceased to be a factor in your daily life, its power to shape and rule life still becomes apparent to you from the lives of contemporaries who do adhere to it. As a result, every such loyal adherent of the

Law becomes a mute reproach to the defector until he has convinced himself that he is superior to the others and has taught himself to look down with contempt upon the Law and those who obey it.

This sort of self-training becomes particularly easy in relation to the "Chukos," those Divine statutes which set limits to the sensual aspects of our lives and which, to those who no longer observe the Law, seem to obstruct the happiness and stunt the lives of observant contemporaries. More than with any other laws of G-d, the hallowing moral effect of these particular laws can be understood only by those who observe them faithfully, and the defectors, who consider that they have "liberated" themselves from such "silly restraints" find these laws the easiest to dismiss with contempt. And so the defection from the Law that began with ignorance progresses to outright contempt for the Law. One who does not study and does not observe the Law will come to despise those who observe it." (Toras Kohanim)

Rav Hirsch's analysis of the etiology of defection from the Torah is far more elaborate and profound than the little I have presented. I highly recommend that you take the time to study his essay.

Torah study defines us in a way that supports observance and performance of all Mitzvos. In our new age of innovation, individuality, personal rights, and good until proven evil, Torah study is even more important. Spirituality has become a buzzword, mysticism is claimed as an emotional right, and scholarship has been removed from tradition. It is as if 3000 years of proven truth is undeserving of being designated as absolute and empirical.

Those who search for G-d and seek the truth must begin and end with the study of Torah. Spirituality is the product of disciplined study and observances. Mysticism is lifting the veil of natural law to glimpse the radiance of Divine truth. Both demand rigorous devotion to the stricture of traditional Torah scholarship and the ever demanding and challenging introspective of a truly humble soul.

As the Bnai Yisroel were about to leave Har Sinai, site of their greatest defining moment, Moshe confronted them with the clearest of warnings. "Listen to G-d's Torah. Study its laws and statutes and observe its demands. It is the gift of your choseness and the birthright of your children. Do not take it upon yourself to define good and evil, right and wrong. G-d has already done so. Your job is simply to listen to His Law and do as He commands. If you do so, G-d promises you a reward that transcends all else. If you do not...

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