

SHABBOS IS BOTH A MITZVAH AND A PRESENT

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Ki Sisa

Shabbos Is Both A Mitzvah And A Present

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 804, Great Grandchildren. Good Shabbos! This week's parsha contains the Torah's first elaborate discussion of the mitzvah of Shabbos [Shemos 31:12-17]. Among other things we are taught: "The Children of Israel shall observe the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath an eternal covenant for their generations. Between Me and the Children of Israel [Baynee u'bein Bnei Yisrael] it is a sign forever..."

The Mechilta in Parshas Ki Sisa states that the words Baynee u'bein Bnei Yisrael imply that Shabbos is a covenant between G-d and the Jews, to the exclusion of being a covenant between G-d and idolaters. Now this seems peculiar. We do not need a special drasha [exegesis] to teach that a Gentile is not commanded to observe the Sabbath. We know that there are 7 Noachide laws, none of which involves a Gentile keeping Shabbos.

In fact, by Shabbos there is a unique prohibition. The Talmud [Sanhedrin 58b] teaches that not only is a Gentile not commanded to observe Shabbos, but on the contrary, a Gentile is not permitted to purposefully keep Shabbos! So the question is, why does the Mechilta find it necessary to marshal a special pasuk "Baynee u'bein Bnei Yisrael" to tell us that the mitzvah of Shabbos only applies to the Jewish people?

Rav Moshe Shmuel Shapira wants to answer this question by referring to a teaching of the Brisker Rav [Rav Yitzchak Ze'ev haLevi Soloveitchik]. The Brisker Rav analyzes the text of the Shabbos morning Amidah which reads: "And You did not give it, Hashem our G-d, to the nations of the lands, nor did You make it the inheritance, our King, of the worshippers of graven idols. And in its contentment the uncircumcised shall not abide - for to Israel, Your people, have You given it in love, to the seed of Jacob, whom You have chosen." This is a very elaborate liturgy.

The Brisker Rav notes that the Rambam writes in his Mishna Commentary on Tractate Terumos that when a Gentile who has a crop and separates Terumah from it (even though he is not obligated to do so), the separation is valid and what he has taken off has the status of Terumah. The Rambam

further writes in his Mishna Commentary that a Gentile who performs any of the commandments, receives some reward as one who "is not obligated but nevertheless fulfills". In other words, if we were to see a Gentile putting on Tefillin, he has fulfilled a mitzvah and gets "some reward".

However, the Brisker Rav points out, Shabbos is not like that. Shabbos is two things: It is a mitzvah [commandment] and it is a matanah [gift]. The Talmud [Shabbos 10b] quotes the Almighty telling Moshe "I have a wonderful present in my Treasure House and its name is Shabbos". The present was given to the Jewish people. Any nation that was not a recipient of this present is not able to observe Shabbos and even if they go through the motions of observing it, they have not fulfilled any mitzvah.

Tzitsis is not a present. Matzah is not a present. Tefillin is not a present. Shabbos is! The novelty of the idea of the Brisker Rav is that in order to fulfill the mitzvah of Shabbos, one needs to be included among the recipients of the present. This idea is emphasized in the above quoted portion of the Shachris Amidah on Shabbos.

It is for this reason that a Gentile may not observe Shabbos. He is taking something that doesn't belong to him!

Rav Moshe Shapira suggests that this is precisely what the above referenced Mechilta means. Baynee u'Bein Bnai Yisrael means "it is my present to you" -- to the exclusion of a Gentile who is not even eligible to receive reward as one who is not commanded but observes.

Rav Shapira relates a story that took place in St. Petersburg in Czarist Russia. There were a number of very wealthy Jews who had contracts with the government and they had to come to St. Petersburg, the capital of Czarist Russia, for business. This gathering took place around the High Holidays so these very wealthy Jewish businessmen were all in the Russian capital for Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur. Of course, they gathered together and made a minyan. On Yom Kippur, as is customary in many places, they auctioned off the Aliyahs. When it came time for Neilah, they sold the Pesicha [honor of opening up the Aron] for Neilah. The bidding started at 500 ruble, a tremendous amount of money. The bidding went higher and higher until a certain Baron Ginsberg, a famously wealthy Jew, bid 2000 rubles.

Rav Moshe Shapira, who wrote up this story, writes that 2000 rubles in Czarist Russia is the equivalent today of a hundred thousand dollars. He describes that when Baron Folk heard that Baron Ginsberg bid 2000 rubles for "Pesicha l'Neilah" he rose to his feet and bid 2500 for the honor! Going once, going twice, going three times, Pesicha l'Neilah is sold to Baron Folk. Baron Folk then turned to the Jew sitting next to him and asked him "What is 'Pesicha l'Neilah'?" The person next to him was astonished. "You just bid 2500 for 'Pesicha l'Neilah' and now you ask what it is?"

Folk answered: I do not know what Pesicha l'Neilah is, but I know that Baron Ginsberg is a good businessman. If Baron Ginsberg wants to give 2000 ruble for Pesicha L'Neilah then I want it because it must be a good business deal. He became Baron Ginsberg because he is a shrewd business man. He knows a good deal when he sees one. If he wants it, I want it more.

"I have a good present in my Treasure House." G-d tells us he has a wonderful present. "Shabbos is in my vault. It is very valuable." If G-d calls it a "matanah Tova" (good present) then we have something very special. L'Havdil it is like Baron Ginsberg. If he calls something good it must be good. Certainly, if the Almighty calls something good, it must be good!

When we have experienced Shabbos virtually all our lives, then as Shabbos rolls around again we think, "Ok, here comes another Shabbos." We never appreciate what we have while we have it. Shabbos is something that comes with a Certification. It is like when one buys a gem and he receives a certificate from the Institute of Gemology stating the value of the gem. Shabbos comes with G-d's Certificate stating its worth: "A good present I have in my Treasure House."

Shabbos Observance and Shabbos Anticipation

I would like to share another story I saw in the Sefer Otzros HaTorah:

A Jew named Rav Simcha Kaplan was a Rabbi in Tzfas. He learned in the Mir Yeshiva in Poland and he recalls the following story. He used to board by a couple who lived near the Mir Yeshiva. One Friday morning, he heard the wife repeat to her husband several times "Make sure you come home early for Shabbos." He had been living with them for some time and he had never heard this warning from her before. Simcha Kaplan got up, went to Davening, went to the morning learning Seder, he returned home in the afternoon. He saw that the wife was waiting by the window and she was full of anxiety. He asked her, "What are you so worried about?" She says "I'm worried about Shabbos!" He said, "It is not going to be Shabbos for another 4 hours, what are you so worried about?"

She responded with the following story: We were childless for many years. Finally, we had a child. We raised the child, but he was sickly. He did not grow, he did not eat, he was weak, he did not walk until he was much older. He was very frail. We consulted with the doctors here in Mir. They sent us to a specialist in Vilna who told us that the child had a heart problem. The specialist said "There is nothing I can do for this child. He will only live a couple of more years. There is nothing more anyone can do for this child. Do not waste your money. Do not waste your time. You will only have the child for a couple of more years."

They were heart-broken. Someone advised them that on the way back from Vilna to Mir, they should stop in Radin and ask the Chofetz Chaim for a blessing. This was late in the life of the Chofetz Chaim. He was already very weak and was not seeing people. They were not able to arrange a visit. However, there was a young man who was married to the granddaughter of the Chofetz Chaim who happened to know the woman in the story, the mother of the frail child. She pleaded with this grandson and he was able to get them into see the holy sage.

They told the Chofetz Chaim their tale of woe and begged him to do something for them. The Chofetz Chaim said "There is nothing I can do for you. I am very sorry." The grandson who had

accompanied them to see his wife's grandfather then yelled out, "but it is their only child!" The Chofetz Chaim said, "It is an only child? Then I will tell you what to do!" He spoke to the mother and said "I want you to accept upon yourself from this day on that every Erev Shabbos by noon you will have the table already set for Shabbos and have the candles ready to be lit. I want that from the time you light Shabbos candles, nobody in the house will do any melacha [forbidden labor]." (Even though according to the strict law, when a woman lights candles 18 minutes before sunset, other members of the household can still do melacha until sunset.) The woman readily accepted this proposal.

By the time they arrived back in Mir -- a two day journey from Radin - the child was already showing signs of improvement. He started eating, he started gaining weight, and so forth. They brought the child back to the doctor in Mir and he was astounded by the improvement. He insisted they go back to the specialist in Vilna to show him the child and paid for their journey. The specialist saw the child's improvement and refused to believe that it was the same child.

But this story is somewhat perplexing. Why is it that the Chofetz Chaim only seemed to have mercy for the child when he heard that it was an only child? What if she had 10 other children? Would the Chofetz Chaim not have been sympathetic to the plight of the parents and the sickly child in that situation? Furthermore, what kind of "segulah" is this business of being ready for Shabbos at mid-day, several hours before the halachic arrival of Shabbos? The whole story requires explanation!

I heard an explanation of what this story is all about from Rav Mannis Mandel. Rav Mandel said the Chofetz Chaim was not a Chassidic Rebbe and he was not a miracle worker. But the Chofetz Chaim understood the meaning of a pasuk in Chumash. "And the Children of Israel shall observe the Shabbos (v'Shamru), to make the Shabbos an eternal covenant for their generations (l'Dorosom)..." [Shemos 31:12]

Rav Mannis Mandel explains that the word "v'Shamru" has two meanings. It can mean you have to OBSERVE it (meticulously) or it can mean you have to ANTICIPATE it (as in the pasuk "And his father SHAMAR es haDavar" [Bereishis 37:11]). The Chofetz Chaim interpreted: You want "l'Dorosom" - the preservation of your generations (through this only child). If this child will not live, then you will not have future generations. But the Torah says that if v'Shamru there will be l'Dorosom - future generations. Therefore, fulfill "v'Shamru" according to both meanings. The simple interpretation of v'Shamru is observing it. When you light candles, no one in your house should do any more melacha. But beyond that, v'Shamru also means to anticipate it. From noon on, I want you to expect and anticipate the Shabbos. Therefore, the table must be set and the candles need to be ready.

This is why the woman stood at the window. It was 12:00 o'clock and sunset was not until 5:00 o'clock. She was anxious -- where is my husband? What was her problem? The answer is because she accepted upon herself to do more than merely observe the Shabbos. She needed to anticipate the Shabbos as well. That is the interpretation of the story: She fulfilled both aspects of "v'Shamru." Therefore, they saw in their family "l'dorosom" (future generations).

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Ki Sisa are provided below:

Tape # 046 - Dealing With Illness on Shabbos
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Tape # 274 - Saying Tehillim at Night
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