

PARSHAS EIKEV

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The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar with an allusion to the parsha's first Medrash Rabba. In the time of Chazal, a new type of menorah (lamp) was invented. What was new about this menorah was the following feature. The menorah was made of components which could be assembled or disassembled. Thus, the parts could be joined to make a whole lamp, (and vice versa.) In this context, the Medrash raised a halachic question. While in use, the menorah might fall; and because of its unique design, might come apart. The menorah's owner might then reassemble it, Reassembling the menorah, however, would involve a melacha (an activity forbidden on Shabbos) -- the melacha of boneh (construction). Hence, Medrash Rabba asks: To avoid such a potential outcome, have Chazal instituted a protective law that would prohibit moving such a menorah on Shabbos in the first place?

The Sfas Emes extracts from this discussion one thought that is pertinent to his discourse, namely, the possibility that a person can construct a complete keili (instrument; vessel) by assembling its components. As we will see below, he is able to view this halachic issue as, at one level, a metaphor. Now the Sfas Emes calls up a series of pesukim that come to (his, and thence, to our) mind by association. These references may seem to totally unrelated to the menorah that we might construct by joining its parts. But trust the Sfas Emes to put it all together.

The Sfas Emes cites the parsha's first Rashi, quoting the Medrash Tanchuma. To understand what is coming, bear in mind the following. Our parsha begins "Vehaya eikev tish'me'un es ha'mishpatim . . ." ("It will come to pass as a result of your observing the commandments . . ."). As you see, the word "eikev" has the sense of "as a result of" or "in exchange for." It so happens that there is another word in Hebrew with the exact same spelling (in Hebrew) : "ahkeiv" -the heel of the foot. The pesukim with which the Sfas Emes works start from this basic 'remez' -- 'eikev' as an allusion to the heel of a person's foot.

In that perspective, the Sfas Emes (and Rashi) refer us to a pasuk in Tehillim (49:6). That pasuk sees Dovid Hamelech as saying (in colloquial mode): "I'll tell you what really scares me as I contemplate my Yom Hadin (Day of Judgment). I'm not worried about the severe mitzvos("hechamuros"). I am worried about the mitzvos "kahlos," i.e., those that I, like most people, take lightly." In figurative terms, we might refer to these as mitzvos on which people tread with their heels. Hence, Dovid Hamelech's reference (in the pasuk just cited) to "ahvon ahkeivai," that is, "the aveiros that I have done with the heels of my feet." (What might be examples -- in our lives -- of such mitzvos that too often, we treat

lightly? One such case might be talking about divrei chol (weekday matters) on Shabbos. Another example might be: saying the tefila that concludes virtually each davening, -- "Aleinu Le'shabei'ach," - without kavana.)

Another text that the word "eikev" brings to mind is Tehillim (19:13): "... beshomrom eikev rav." (ArtScroll: "... in observing them [the mitzvos], there is great reward."). Finally, by association with the word "rav," the Sfas Emes introduces still another pasuk from Tehillim (31:20): "Mah rav tuvcha asher tza'fanta liyerei'echa!" ("How wonderful are the good things that you are keeping hidden for the people who have yir'as Shamayim!")

A fair question at this point is: this chain of 'eikev' allusions is all well and good. But what does this have to do with the Medrash with which we started -- about the menorah that could be assembled from its components? You will soon see.

The Sfas Emes observes that HaShem made the world such that all things created should be brought together to be close to Him. (We now see why the Sfas Emes started this ma'amar with the metaphor of constructing the menorah by assembling its disparate components.) This task -- linking people and nature together in a great chain of being connected to HaShem -- may seem remote from our life and our concerns. But note: What is the word that describes the condition of a world in which people are not linked -- not to each other, not to nature and not to HaShem? The word is "alienation.". And 'alienation' is often used to characterize the sicknesses of the society in which we live.

Who has the responsibility for bringing together the many different components of creation? The Sfas Emes tells us that HaShem has given this assignment to Klal Yisroel -- to bring all creation together, for the glory of HaShem. Continuing, the Sfas Emes explains how to go about accomplishing this mission. He observes that radiance (he'ara) of HaShem is present in all creation. Our job, explains the Sfas Emes, is to live our lives in constant awareness of that glow : HaShem's Presence in all things. By so doing, we connect all things to HaShem. Achieving that goal requires us to bring our desire to do HaShem's ratzon (will) even in everyday, routine matters. This is the reason for the Torah's reference to "eikev" -- the heel of the foot, the limb farthest from the head. There, in mundane, everyday matters, HaShem's Presence is most hidden, and therefore hardest to discern.

Perceiving the whole world aglow with the Presence of HaShem helps us unify and bring together all that we encounter. Continuing in this vein, the Sfas Emes recalls the intimacy we achieved with HaShem at matan Torah (Revelation at Sinai). Parsha's Eikev begins : : "tishme'un eis ha'mish'patim" ("You shall hear the ordinances"). This means, explains the Sfas Emes, that we can (and should) be aware of and hear the radiance of HaShem that is present in all creation. (The phrase 'hear the radiance' evokes matan Torah, where Bnei Yisroel 'saw the sounds'.)

The mitzvos encompass all aspects of our lives. Thus, by performing mitzvos, we can constantly be aware of HaShem's Presence, if only we try. The Sfas Emes has already told us that mitzvos can be

our modality for assembling life's disparate components in homage to HaShem. He sharpens this point by his reading of the word "mitzva". He reads this key word as a derivative of the word "tzavta" - a linking, a grouping (Note: the word in modern Hebrew for a pliers -i.e., a tool for holding things together -- is 'tzevat'.) This reading makes it easier to see the link between doing mitzvos and recognizing HaShem's Omnipresence.

This all sounds beautiful. But one would appreciate some form of a 'take- home lesson' -- practical advice on implementing these ideas in everyday life. If that is what you seek, you have come to the right address. For, as you may recall, the Sfas Emes also had the job of being the Gerrer Rebbe. As such, he had much experience with the religious life, and unique wisdom on how to live it. He concludes with two thoughts that can well serve as a take-home lesson.

First, the Sfas Emes tells us that, to succeed in our awesome assignment, we must start with yir'as HaShem -- awe of HaShem. From yir'a, a person can progress to ahava (love) of HaShem. But it all begins with yir'a. Second, the Sfas Emes now refers to yir'a as a "mitzvo kahla." Why? Because yir'as HaShem is, as he phrases it, ' kefi retzon ha'ahdam'. That is, in reality an attitude of yir'as HaShem -- awe of HaShem -- depends on a person's will. In matters of yir'a, volition sweeps all.

An Epilogue

Careful readers will have noted an important omission in the Sfas Emes's presentation. The parsha's first pasuk -- and the one which the Sfas Emes uses to launch the ma'amar -- - focuses on reward. The Sfas Emes evidently agrees on the centrality of this theme, For, as we saw, he cites two pesukim in Tehilim which say important things about reward.. But if we scrutinize the ma'amar in search of the Sfas Emes's own thoughts on the subject, we come up empty-handed.!

I suggest a simple explanation for the Sfas Emes's failure to discuss reward. A simile will help. Consider the case of a star athlete -say, a basketball player -- who is asked to present a talk on the sport to a group of novices. For this athlete, basketball is his life. As a star, he is paid an astronomical salary. But as an enthusiast, he would be willing to play without that high reward. In his talk to the novices, he will have to mention the word 'salary'; but for the most part, he will discuss what matters to him in the sport-namely, playing the game.

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