

PARSHAS KI SEITZEI

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Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Ki Seitzei, 5631

The parsha opens: "Ki seitzei lamilchama al oiyvecha, unesana Hashem Elokecha beyadecha veshavisa shivyo". (ArtScroll: "When you will go to war against your enemies, and HaShem, your God, will deliver them into your hand, and you will capture its captivity.") The Sfas Emes's reaction to this pasuk may come as a surprise. He observes that HaShem's Presence pervades all creation. Why does this comment come as a surprise? Because the fact of HaShem's Omnipresence is well known. Why, then, does the Sfas Emes find it necessary to repeat it?

Upon reflection, an answer comes to mind. Recall that the Sfas Emes was also the Gerrer Rebbe. As such, the Sfas Emes knew a great deal about people's inner and religious lives. On the basis of that knowledge, he apparently felt that many people -- including many otherwise observant Jews -- live their lives in ways inconsistent with an awareness that HaShem's Presence pervades all creation. For this reason, the Sfas Emes found it worth allocating time to bring this point home (again) to his chassidim.

Note the great difference between the Sfas Emes and mainstream Jewish thought on this key hashkafa (ideology) issue. For many (most? almost all?) authorities, HaShem's Presence is self-evident, indeed, HaShem's Presence is so obvious that we barely need to exert ourselves to perceive it. Thus, we can fulfill the mitzva of knowing HaShem's Presence with complete passivity.

For the Sfas Emes, the situation is very different. Taking the parsha's first pasuk (quoted above) as his text, the Sfas Emes tells us that to find HaShem during the week, we must take the initiative ("ki seitzei"). Indeed, we must be aggressive and take the offensive; even "go to war". But then comes Shabbos. On Shabbos, HaShem reveals Himself as the Creator Whose word gives life -- indeed, existence -- to the whole world.

At this point, skeptical (i.e., truth-seeking) fellow-learners may say: These thoughts are all very beautiful, and they also ring true. But how does the Sfas Emes see them in the pasuk? I suggest that the Sfas Emes sees these ideas in the following non-pshat reading of the text. For the Sfas Emes, the "war" of which the pasuk speaks is our primordial struggle against the yetzer hara (the dark forces of evil and self-destruction which lurk deep within us). During the week, we struggle with the yetzer hara -- including with its denial of HaShem's Presence.

The forces of evil are both strong and clever And in fact, during the struggle, some of us become its

captive - "shivyo". But on Shabbos, we can more easily sense HaShem's Presence in all creation. This heightened awareness enables us to recapture the fragments of ourselves that the yetzer hara has taken captive.

This interpretation is buttressed (in a non-pshat way) if we take two non-pshat steps forward. The first step involves the root of the pasuk's word "ve'shavisa". The pshat reading sees the root as SH'V'H' -- "to take captive". By contrast, a non-pshat reading sees the root as SH'U'V' -- 'to return'. In the hif'il ("causative ") construction, that translation of the root gives us : "to take back"; i.e., "to recapture".

The second non-pshat step is easier. It simply involves recognizing that the pasuk's word "ve'SHaViSa" can be read as an allusion to SHaBBos. With a connection thus established between the two, the idea that Shabbos enables us to recapture what we have lost to the yetzer ha'ra becomes more plausible.

(I merely "suggest" this interpretation because it is not explicit in the Sfas Emes's text. Why not? Perhaps because the Sfas Emes thought that this way of understanding the pasuk was totally self-evident.)

The Sfas Emes is concerned lest we get a false picture of our life's agenda. That inaccurate picture would be : kedusha (sanctity) on Shabbos, and chol (emptiness, devoid of kedusha) on the weekdays. To counter that erroneous perspective, the Sfas Emes points out that the quality of our Shabbos depends on the quality of our avoda (service) during the weekdays.

The Sfas Emes points out in another way that it would be a mistake to see Shabbos and the weekdays as separated by a total break in kedusha. He does so by giving us a whole new perspective on erev Shabbos (the day before Shabbos; i.e., "Friday"). He reads the word "erev " as related to the word "eiruv" -- "a mixture" For, in fact, Erev Shabbos is a mixture, containing aspects both of Shabbos -- e.g., the feeling of coming closer to one's beloved, and of chol -- e.g., the exertion of preparing for Shabbos. Thus, erev Shabbos serves as a bridge connecting kodesh and chol.

The Sfas Emes concludes with still another reading of the words "ve'shaviso shiv'yo". This time, he views both words as coming from the root SH'U'V' -- "to return". Thus, he understands the phrase as saying: 'You shall return to HaShem what has been taken from Him.' More specifically: "You shall return to HaShem the particle of kedusha that you received from Him". What does this mean?

The Sfas Emes views our performing mitzvos as carrying out a mission (a "shelichus") that HaShem has assigned to us. And he considers it an essential part of a mission that the agent report back to the principal who sent him. This is what he wants us to return to HaShem -- explicit recognition that we have performed the act of the mitzva for the sole purpose of doing HaShem's will.

The problem the Sfas Emes is addressing is serious. It is all too easy to live a life apparently

brimming with Torah and mitzvos -- and yet not have a relationship with HaShem. That is what the Sfas Emes is trying to help us avoid. Hence, "ve'shavisah shivyo": "Return to HaShem what is truly His." What is truly HaShem's, but which--unless we make the effort to make it happen-- can easily be forgotten? Our commitment to maintaining a meaningful relationship with Him.

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