

PARSHAS KI SISA

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Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Ki Sisa, 5631 and 5638

In the Sfas Emes's first year as the Gerrer Rebbe, Parshas Ki Sisa coincided with Parshas Pahra. The Rebbe chose to speak mostly on the topic of Pahra; he presented only a brief Dvar Torah on Ki Sisa. To see what the Sfas Emes said in his first year, we will start by presenting the cameo Dvar Torah of 5631. We then proceed to the full-scale ma'amar on Ki Sisa that he presented in 5638.

Sfas Emes, Ki Sisa 5631

We begin with the third paragraph of the Sfas Emes on Parshas Pahra and Parshas Ki Sisa of the year 5631. The Sfas Emes repeats a remark of his Grandfather. The Chidushei HaRim asked: why did Moshe Rabbeinu have to spend 40 days (and 40 nights) on Har Sinai when he received the Torah the second time? After all, he had mastered the entire Torah during his first sojourn of 40 days (and 40 nights).

The Chiddushei HaRim answered his question. He explained that Moshe Rabbeinu had to learn the entire Torah anew. Why? Because he was now on a higher level, the level of a ba'al teshuva. At this point, the Sfas Emes asked a question of his own. How could Moshe Rabbeinu reach the level of a ba'al teshuva? After all, Moshe Rabbeinu had not sinned with the golden calf. How could he do teshuva for a sin that he had not committed?

The Sfas Emes explains that Moshe Rabbeinu had such empathy with Bnei Yisroel -- who had sinned and who had done teshuva -- that he, too, had to receive the Torah in a new way. That is, in a form suitable for people who are on a very high level in their relationship with HaShem -- a level higher than that of people who are 'frum from birth', 100 percent tzadikim (Sanhedrin, 99a).

Sfas Emes, Ki Sisa, 5638

The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar by quoting a pasuk (Shemos, 31:13): 'Ach es Shabsosai tishmoru ...' (ArtScroll: 'However, you must observe my Sabbaths ...')

The Sfas Emes is puzzled by the word 'Ach'. So too are other authorities. As you have just seen, ArtScroll translates this word as "however" -- clearly, a forced meaning. Other translators encounter the same problem, and come up with equally difficult solutions. Thus, R'Aryeh Kaplan translates 'ach' as "still". That is, even while you are building the Mishkan, you must still observe Shabbos. R'Hirsch translates the phrase as: 'Only keep my Shabbos'. These efforts at finding the meaning of

'ach' in this context are obviously awkward. The Sfas Emes had ample reason to be puzzled.

The word 'ach' often indicates something that is being excluded from a general pattern. In that vein, the Sfas Emes quotes Rashi on the pasuk. As we know, construction of the Mishkan (the Tabernacle) is a major topic in this parsha. Rashi explains that this is the context within which we should understand the word 'ach'. In that context, the word 'ach' is in fact conveying its standard message of excluding. Excluding what? Excluding performance on Shabbos of any of the 39 melachos (constructive actions) used in building the Mishkan ...

The Sfas Emes recognizes that we may not fully understand what is going on here. So he continues his explanation. Before Matan Torah, Bnei Yisrael had made the monumental commitment (Shemos, 24: 7) of "Na'aseh ve'nishma". (ArtScroll: "Every thing that HaShem says we will do and we will obey".) The Sfas Emes understands this pasuk differently. Working in non-pshat mode, he reads the pasuk as saying: We will consecrate all our actions -- i.e., our 'Na'aseh' -- and all our thoughts -- i.e., our 'Nishma' -- to Avodas HaShem (to the service of HaShem).

Unfortunately, Bnei Yisroel then went on to sin with the eigel ha'zahav (the golden calf). That action knocked us off our high level with respect to "Na'aseh". The Sfas Emes tells us that this is the context within which we should understand the construction of the Mishkan. Our actions in making the Mishkan came to repair the unhappy situation of our having mis-used our actions in making the golden calf. How so?

The Sfas Emes explains that building the Mishkan involved the entire set of constructive human activities ("kohl ma'aseh he'adam"). On Shabbos, HaShem did not create or construct. We are enjoined to emulate our Maker, and like Him, not to engage in creation or construction on Shabbos. Let us be more specific. What activities are forbidden on Shabbos? The 39 melachos (constructive activities) that were used in building the Mishkan. Because these activities encompass all constructive actions, these are the activities from which we must abstain on Shabbos.

Note that this formulation also brings with it the possibility of upside gains. That is, HaShem made this world in such a way that players have the possibility of taking home some loot. Thus, the Sfas Emes tells us that by striving to do these 39 melachos be'kedusha (with sanctity) during the week, we can be privileged to perceive the light of HaShem's Presence everywhere.

The Sfas Emes leads us forward to more new ideas. He notes that HaShem refers (Shemos, 31: 13) to Shabbos as an 'os' -- a sign; a signal -- between Him and us. A 'sign'(or a 'signal ') implies two-way communication. The pasuk says: "Os hi beini u'vei'neichem ..." (ArtScroll: "... a sign between Me and you). A reciprocal relationship is especially pertinent in this case, in which both parties (HaShem and us) are mentioned individually and explicitly. The Sfas Emes comments that we must hold fast and gain special strength from such a mitzva given as an "os" between HaShem and ourselves.

This phrase -- 'between HaShem and ourselves' -- calls to mind a pasuk in Mishlei (27: 19) -- a pasuk that speaks of reciprocal relationships. The pasuk says: "Kamayim ha'panim la'panim ..." (ArtScroll: "As

water reflects a face back to a face, so one's heart is reflected back to him by another"). The Sfas Emes applies this perspective to our relationship with HaShem. To the degree that we are emotionally involved in performing mitzvos, so too is HaShem emotionally involved with our welfare.

Moving on to a new line of thought, the Sfas Emes discusses another pasuk that focuses on the meaning of Shabbos. The pasuk (Shemos 31: 15) tells us that on the seventh day of the week, there shall be 'Shabbas Shabbason'. (ArtScroll: '... a day of complete rest.')

A question. What does the Torah mean with the doubling of the Shabbos words in this phrase?

As we just saw, ArtScroll tries to handle this question by viewing one Shabbos word as giving emphasis to the other. Accordingly, the translation becomes: "complete rest". The Sfas Emes takes a different approach. He quotes Rashi on the pasuk, who says: "menuchas margo'a, ve'lo menuchas ara'i." Leket Habohir -- a super-commentary on Rashi -- explains the meaning of the term "menuchas ara'i". He tells us that "menuchas ara'i" is rest that comes for lack of work, or, rest that comes in preparation for work. In such cases, the rest is not the essence of the story, but rather a respite that comes incidentally.

By contrast, "menuchas margo'a" is rest in which the rest itself is a key feature of what is happening. In other words, the rest has meaning and significance in itself -- i.e., rest (menucha) which is truly rest (margo'a).

The Sfas Emes is concerned that we achieve 'menuchas margo'a' on Shabbos. How do we get there? The Sfas Emes speaks of the necessity of forgetting all weekday matters. Recognizing that such is not easy, he tells us that a person should teach himself ('le'his'lameid') that when Shabbos arrives, he/she must forget all non-Shabbosdicke things.

We know that Shabbos is a foretaste of Olam HaBa (the world to come). Concluding, the Sfas Emes tells us that Shabbos is also preparation for Olam HaBa. Thus, if we achieve proper menucha on Shabbos, we will be privileged to adjust easily to the new regimen of menucha in Olam HaBa.

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