

PARSHAS REEH

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This parsha begins with a focus on choice. We hear Moshe Rabbeinu saying: "Re'ei a'nochi no'sein lif'nei'chem ha'yom bracha u'klalla". (ArtScroll: "See. I present before you today a blessing and a curse ..."). The Sfas Emes notes that implicit in this pasuk is a key fact of life: that HaShem has endowed us with "bechira chofshis" -- free will -- to choose between good and evil.

The Sfas Emes develops this thought by citing an insight from his Grandfather. The Chidushei HarRim had commented on the fact that every morning, we say a bracha (blessing) whose inner message may initially be hard to grasp. In that bracha, we thank HaShem for giving roosters the ability to distinguish between day and night (and accordingly, to crow at daybreak). A bracha on this theme seems bizarre. Why did Chazal introduce it into our daily davening? The Chiddushei HaRim explained that this bracha is a daily reminder that, just as HaShem gives the rooster the ability to distinguish between day and night, so, too, has He given us the free will necessary to choose between right and wrong.

You may be wondering: the fact that we have free will is well known. Why does the Sfas Emes bother to mention -- and to emphasize -- it? The answer is straightforward. In reality, most people in today's world are not aware -- and do not acknowledge -- that they have bechira chofshis. Much research in present-day sociology and psychology focuses on the causes of given human behavior. Often the links of causality are drawn so taut that the behavior being studied seems inescapable. As the French proverb says: understanding behavior often amounts in practice to excusing it. Further, free will implies responsibility and accountability for our actions -- something that many people are not willing to accept. So, it turns out that in reality, bechira chofshis is not a well-known fact. We can thank the Sfas Emes for bringing the subject up, and giving us the opportunity to think about it.

The Sfas Emes gives us his reaction to a word in the pasuk which begins the parsha. As cited above, that pasuk says: "Re'ei ... hayom" That is, "I present ... today". Normally, we would expect that a person who has done wrong would lose some of his capacity to choose between right and wrong; that is, his free will. Not so, says the Sfas Emes, who is working with the word "today". Every day, HaShem renews creation ("ha'me'chadeish be'chol yom tamid ma'asei be'reishis"), As part of this daily renewal HaShem gives us new bechira chofshis, thus enabling us to start anew. And, adds the Sfas Emes, quoting a pasuk in Yechezkel (33:12), "A person who is returning will not stumble".

The Sfas Emes moves on now to another topic, a set of ideas brought to mind by a single Hebrew root. The root with which the Sfas Emes has chosen to work is "shamor" -- usually translated as: to guard; to protect; to take care of; to observe. The Sfas Emes begins by citing a Medrash (4, 4) on a pasuk in Eikev (Devarim, 11:22). The pasuk contains a double use of words derived from the root "shamor". Thus: "Ki im shamor tish'merun es kol ha'mitzva ..." (ArtScroll: "If you will observe the entire commandment ...") Note the double verb "shamor ti'sha'merun". Both parts of this double verb are in the active voice (i.e., "... you will observe"). However, in non-pshat mode, the Medrash reads the second verb as "tishameirun"; i.e., in the passive voice. Thus, the Medrash understands the pasuk to be saying: "If you take proper care of [the mitzvos], you will be taken care of properly".

The Sfas Emes continues, alluding to another question of the Medrash. The pasuk cited says: "If you will observe the entire commandment ..." ("kol hamitzva"). This phrase seems to refer to a single mitzva which -- if we observe it properly -- is equivalent to our observing the entire Torah. What mitzva can that be? Chazal answer that the unique mitzva which encompasses the entire Torah is Shabbos. How do they arrive at that answer? By allusion. The pasuk indelibly inscribed in our mind is: "Shamor es yom Hashabbos ..." That is: "Take proper care of Shabbos". (Devarim, 5, 14).

The Sfas Emes reacts to this idea with astonishment. He asks: Why does Shabbos need special care? He replies by alluding to a classic Medrash. The Medrash describes how, after the first week of creation, all the days of the week paired up with each other. Yom Rishon paired with Yom Sheini (Sunday with Monday), and likewise all the other days of the week -- except Shabbos, which could find no mate. When Shabbos told HaShem how unhappy she was for lack of a mate, HaShem replied: "Klal Yisroel will be ben zugeich (your marriage partner)."

(Do not be taken aback by the Medrash's (and the Sfas Emes's) personification of Shabbos as wife. This metaphor is no more extreme than one which most of sing (with gusto) every Friday night -- in "lecha Dodi". We know, from the text of Shir Hashirim, that HaShem can be referred to as "Dodi" -- my beloved.. Thus, the words in "lecha Dodi" have us saying to HaShem: "Come, my Beloved, let us welcome the kalah"; i.e., Shabbos personified as a bride.)

Thus, the Sfas Emes is telling us that just as a wife is given to her husband to provide her with proper care, ("husband" actually means "to take care of"), so, too, does Shabbos need us to take proper care of her. (Note how the Sfas Emes's view of marriage is the reverse of the conventional view. The conventional view sees the man as having a wife in order to have someone to take care of him.) What does "proper care" mean in the context of shemiras Shabbos? Presumably, observance of Shamor and Zachor -- the mitzvos that HaShem has given us to define our relationship with Shabbos. And, continues the Sfas Emes, our relationship with Shabbos is reciprocal; i.e., it goes in both directions. Thus, we are commanded (Shemos, 35 : 3) to observe Shabbos wherever we live ("bechol moshe'vosei'chem"). So, too, Shabbos has stuck loyally with Klal Yisroel in all of our distant dwellings. Further, Shabbos gives chiyus (vitality; vibrancy) to all creation.

How do we know this? From two pesukim (Bereishis, 2:1-2) that we recite in kiddush every Shabbos: "Vayechulu Hashamayim ..."; and Vayechal ..." The Sfas Emes is reading these two words as coming from the root "chal", and thus as related to the word keli" -- a vessel. Mention of the word "keli" immediately evokes the phrase "keli machzik beracha" -- that is, a vessel that contains a blessing from HaShem. That phrase, in turn, evokes the maxim that the best vessel for holding a beracha is shalom (peace; harmony). And sure enough, Shabbos is closely related to shalom.

The Sfas Emes has taken us on a circuit of associations: shamor; Shabbos; kala; vayechulu; keli; beracha; shalom. That circuit is not easy to follow, So it helps to keep its central feature in mind. Shabbos brings a special blessing: to fill all creation -- heaven and earth -- with the chiyus of HaShem. We can all partake of this additional flow of HaShem's Presence that comes on Shabbos, each of us at his own capacity.

What can we do to increase our capacity to receive HaShem's additional presence on Shabbos? The Sfas Emes tells us that subordinating one's personal agenda (one's nefesh) and giving a lower priority to one's physical wants (one's guf) will help. The Sfas Emes underlines this vital point by noting still another meaning -- and hence another allusion -- of the root "shamor".

The word "shemarim" is the Hebrew word for lees (the sediment after grapes have been squeezed to make wine). The Sfas Emes leads us to a phrase in Yeshayahu (7:4): "Hishameir vehashkeit ..." ("Be calm and still ..."). He quotes Rashi on that pasuk to bring home the point about keeping one's personal agenda and one's bodily wants in their proper place. Rashi tells us that, left in their proper place -- the bottom -- the lees, too, can enhance the wine.

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