

# PARSHAS HAAZINU

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*Ha'azinu, 5634 [paragraph 3]*

It helps to begin with some background information. In parshas Emor, the Torah presents many halachos which pertain to the Yomim Tovim. As we would expect, that material includes a section on Sukkos. That section, in turn, includes the halachos of the "arba minim" -- the "Four Species" -- i.e., the esrog and the items that we take with it.

The Torah presents these mitzvos with the following pasuk [Vayikra, 23: 40]: "U'lekach'tem la'chem ba'yom ha'rishon ... " [ArtScroll: "You shall take ... on the first day "]. This sounds like a straightforward communication, with no hidden message to uncover and explain. In fact, Chazal do see this pasuk's words as conveying another level of meaning. Reacting to the pasuk's mention of the "first day", Medrash Raba asks: Why do you speak of taking the arba minim on the first day? In reality, the day on which we begin taking the arba minim is the fifteenth day [of the month of Tishrei].

If the Torah referred to the initial day in which we take the arba minim as "the fifteenth day" [of Tishrei], it would be providing additional information -- namely, when do we begin the mitzva. By contrast, referring to the initial day as "the first day" tells us nothing new. For we already know that the "first day" on which we take the arba minim is the "first day". Why, then, did the Torah prefer to use the less informative expression?

[Note: The Medrash is fully aware of the difference between the first day of the mitzva and the first day of the month. The medrash is simply using the superficial inconsistency between the Torah's reference to the "first day" and the "fifteenth" day as a trampoline to catapult us into a new perspective.]

What is the new perspective that Chazal are proposing? As you may recall from past years, the days between Yom Kippur and Sukkos are extremely busy. People are working on their Sukka, selecting arba minim, doing the Igud on the lulav; and preparing special food and clothing for the Yom Tov. There are only four days between Yom Kippur and Sukkos. Consequently, the long list of things to be done faces a tight deadline -- the arrival of the Sukkos holiday.

Apparently Chazal also experienced these acute time pressures. In addition, they noted an unexpected phenomenon. People are so busy during these four days that they lack the time to do aveiros [to sin]! The much diminished level of aveiros continues until the first day of Sukkos.

Further, because people have been too busy to commit sins during that time period, another special feature also surfaced. No aveiros worth talking about means that the days between Yom Kippur and Sukkos have a special kedusha. For all intents and purposes, during these four days there are no sins to record. This unique time period comes to an end on the first day of Sukkos. On that day, there are sins to tally, and they are duly tallied. Thus the "first day" on which the Medrash has focused is a "first day" that we have not yet mentioned: namely, the first day "le'chesh'bon avonos". The first day of Sukkos is also the first day on which HaShem resumes reckoning our accounts with Him.

So much for background information. We move now to the text of the Sfas Emes on Ha'azinu, 5634, paragraph 3

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The Sfas Emes begins by referring to the Medrash cited above and by citing a question that the Taz had asked about it. The Taz pointed out that -- just as we would expect -- the Medrash assumes a hierarchy of values. That is, implicitly the Medrash considers some things to be more important than other things. The problem is that the Taz found the hierarchy with which the Medrash works unacceptable. Thus the Medrash assumes that the four days of preparing the mitzvot -- e.g., arba minim -- are "yoseir gedolim" [on a higher level] than the actual mitzva of taking the arba minim. The Taz asked: How could that be? Apparently he found the idea unthinkable, and left it at that.

By contrast, coming from a different tradition, the Sfas Emes finds it eminently thinkable that hachonos [preparation] for a mitzva could pack more "ko'ach ve'hatzolo" [power and rescue] than the mitzva itself. [The Sfas Emes's use of the word "hatzolo" ("rescue") is noteworthy. "Rescue" implies having previously been captured by enemies, or swept away by overwhelming forces of nature ... The Sfas Emes's mention of "hatzolo" implies that he knew of such states -- from personal experience and/or as Gerer Rebbe.)

The Sfas Emes explains what he has in mind when he tells us that the hachonos for a mitzva are more powerful than the mitzva itself. Preparing oneself to perform the mitzva involves getting into a proper intellectual and emotional state. Achieving that state may take a long time -- the Sfas Emes actually says "le'olam" [forever]. That state of preparation and striving to come closer to HaShem keeps a person at a high level of ruchniyus. By contrast, a person can perform the mitzva itself in brief, finite time. That is: 1, 2, 3, ve'gomar'nu [and it's done]!

The Sfas Emes presents another reason why getting to a state of readiness for doing a mitzva can be more important than actually doing the mitzva. He asks: who can do a mitzva properly [ " ke'mish'pata " ] The answer to his rhetorical question is: "very few". By contrast, preparing oneself to perform mitzvot with focus and joy is within our grasp -- once we have been alerted to the importance of hachonos for getting us there. The Sfas Emes has just sounded that alert, loud and clear.

Finally, the Sfas Emes quotes a pasuk in Devarim [4:6] in support of his perspective on hachanos. The

pasuk says: "U'she'martem ve'as'isem...". ArtScroll gives us this pasuk's pshat pashut (simple, plain meaning) as: "You shall safeguard, and you shall perform [the mitzvos]" The Sfas Emes, however, reads the pasuk in nonpshat manner as: "Be attentive -- keep yourselves in a state of readiness. Proper performance of the mitzvos is contingent upon first giving them your intellectual and emotional attention." [You may wonder: how does "U'she'martem" become "Be attentive"? Wonder no longer. Instead, see Rashi on the pasuk in Bereishis (37:11): "Ve'aviv shomar es hadavar" .

Good. In fact, excellent! The Sfas Emes has just given us an insight to help us in our Avoda, an insight that is as powerful as it is radical. But just because the doctrine is so bold and innovative, we must be careful to examine its validity. Two aspects of validity are of concern. The first is practical validity. That is, in practice, have people found that ideas of the Sfas Emes have enhanced their relationship lwith HaShem? The Sfas Emes scores high on this account. The many thousands. of chassidim who took the Sfas Emes as their Rebbe attest to the doctrine's practical validity.

Some people may also raise a question concerning the doctrine's conceptual validity. That is: do these ideas of the Sfas Emes resonate with thoughts in any classical, mainline Torah text? The answer to this question is "They do" In fact, the Sfas Emes himself brings a corroborative passage to our attention. The passage that the Sfas Emes cites echoes his thoughts concerning hachonos and action; and does so in an unexpected form -- a mirror image of the Sfas Emes's initial statement.

What might such a mirror image look like? The Sfas Emes emphasized the importance of preparing one's mind-set before doing a mitzva -- to a degree that the hachonos can be more potent than the mitzva itself. The mirror image would deal with aveiros rather than with mitzvos. Also, it would tell us that thinking about doing an aveira is worse than actually doing the aveira. Why? Again, because doing the sin is a finite action on which a person can get a grip. By contrast, thinking about doing the wrong thing has no limit. Thus, it can plant deep roots within a person, roots so deep that that uprooting those thoughts is difficult.

Can we find such a mirror-image corroborating the Sfas Emes's doctrine? We can. In Gemoro Yoma [29a], we find an explicit statement that tells us: "Hir'hurei a'veira kashu mei'aveira". That is, thinking about doing improper actions is worse than actually doing those improper actions ... This statement's structure sounds familiar. And in fact, it supports the Sfas Emes's perspective on proper preparation for doing mitzos.

But the Sfas Emes is quick to break the apparent symmetry between doing mitzvos and doing aveiros. He reminds us of Chazal's statement [Sanhedrin, 100b ; Sota, 11a] that "Mida tova meruba mi'midas pur'oniyus." That is, the reward for doing a mitzva is far greater than the payment that a person must pay to settle his account for doing a misdeed. How much greater is "far greater"? Much, much greater. (E.g., see Rashi's calculation in his commentary on Shemos [20:6]).

This discussion leads me to a basic question [and a scary answer]. The doctrine that "Mida tova meruba ..." is quoted numerous places in Shas [the Talmud]. Hence, it cannot be dismissed as an

aberrant da'as yachid [view of a solitary individual]. Moreover, as we have just seen, so great an authority as Rashi also subscribed to this doctrine. Hence, my question. If the reward for mitzvos is so great, how come is there so much misery and suffering in this world?

Apparently because not enough mitzvos are being done. But if we look at the world, we see that tons of mitzvos are being done. The answer to this puzzling situation is clear. HaShem's standards for what He considers adequate performance of a mitzva seem to be much higher than ours. Thus, weighed on HaShem's scale, the "tons" just mentioned may amount in reality to ounces. In other words, HaShem's expectations are much higher than ours. And it is His standards that we must meet. You see why I call this a "scary answer".

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