

SHAVUOS - THE GIVING OF THE TORAH

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

One of the fascinating aspects of the Shem Mi Shmuel is the teaching that the discussions in the Talmud, even when they concern purely legal and ritual issues, in effect present different perspectives and emphases of religious, spiritual and ethical aspects. This is an affirmation that the Divine Law revealed at Sinai is justice, spirituality and truth. Apart from showing great scholarship, the approach adopted by the Shem Mi Shmuel adds a spiritual dimension to what are usually taught as purely legal and ritualistic matters. A short discussion, prior to presenting the texts regarding this festival, may help to describe this approach.

The Talmud (Shabbat, 21b) discusses the order of the lights of Chanukah in which are presented the opposing views of Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai. The former held that one commenced by lighting one candle the first night and increasing the number till the final eighth candle, while the latter commenced with eight candles and decreased them till the remaining one light on the last night.

There are many legal discussions among the commentators regarding this difference of opinion, yet the Shem Mi Shmuel saw it neither as technical nor as religious ritual. Rather it represents a difference of how the world is to be redeemed, whether first by departing from evil 'Sur Mi Rah' or 'Asei Tov, doing good. Bet Shammai gave priority to 'Sur Mi Rah', teaching that to do otherwise would be like one who immersed in the mikveh for purification, yet still held onto that which caused the impurity. It is obvious that the efforts- physical, spiritual and mental- to desist from evil, are greatest at the outset, and that once the first steps are taken, each step is easier. Therefore, the first night there are eight candles, decreasing till one at the end of Chanukah. Bet Hillel agreed that both things had to be done, except that ' Sur Mi Rah? at the outset was practically impossible. Therefore, one should do as much good as one could and such good would grow until evil would be destroyed .So on the first night there are eight candles and the numbers increase to eight. Shem Mi Shmuel : Shavuot, 5670, 5671 and 5672.

'Rava said,' The third day mentioned in the Torah refers to their encampment at Sinai. Rabbi Acha the son of Ya'akov said,' This refers to the commencement of their journey from Refidim to Sinai'. They disagreed concerning the Shabbat commandment given to Israel at Marah. Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rava,' As I commanded you ' [in the Ten Commandments (Devarim, 5:12)], means that they were given Shabbat laws at Mara [' There He gave them edicts [Shabbat] and social laws'(Shmot,15:25)]. One scholar said that at Marah they were commanded only concerning the 39 types of work forbidden on Shabbat but not with regard to techumin, thus they were able to travel from

Refidim. The other scholar taught that at Marah they were given even Techumim, and therefore the 3rd day refers to their encampment. According to Tosaphot, here, this refers to the laws regarding transferring from one reshut to another' (Talmud Shabbat 86b). There is an intrinsic difference between these two types of work. The 39 types of work all make a change in the article worked upon, whereas the transfer from one reshut, domain, to another, makes no change in the article. Here the change is only in the person who desires to have an article in one area rather than in another. We know that the reason why it is forbidden to transfer articles from reshut harabbim to that of the yachid, and vice versa, from one domain to another, is because the holiness of the public domain is that of materialism and the mundane, whereas in the private domain the sanctity is that of holiness. When one transfers into or from another domain, this causes a mingling of the holy and the mundane in Heaven. The Baal Shem Tov taught that 'The Lord is your shade (Ps.121: 5), means that just like a person's shade follows them, so too does HaShem and their actions have an effect above.

'Rabbi Yehushua ben Levi taught, that the 26 verses of the Great Hallel correspond to the 26 generations that the Holy One blessed be He maintained in this world only through mercy, since he did not give them a Torah and judge them accordingly. The upper worlds were not affected by the actions of people here on Earth and there was no awakening above in response to actions below' (Talmud, Pesachim, 118a). It is obvious therefore that before Matan Torah the movement from one domain to another initiated by people, was not considered to be spiritually significant. Therefore at Marah, they were only instructed in the 39 types of work. The Seven Noachide laws as well as those given to Israel prior to Sinai were only meant to affect and change people, as a preparation for Matan Torah. After Sinai, it became possible for their actions and deeds to affect and sanctify even the Heavens above. However, for this one needs to be 'tamim' unblemished and innocent. Avraham was told at the time of the brit milah to walk before HaShem and be Tamim. This was necessary since Avraham feared that after the Brit Milah, which separated him from the rest of the world, he would no longer be able to draw them close to Heaven; which was his whole mission and drive. By being tamim, he would be able to rise above the satisfaction of his own spiritual needs and thereby continue to affect the world despite the separation induced by the Brit Milah.

'When Israel said, 'we will hear and we will do', 60,000 ministering angels came down and put 2 crowns on each of their heads; One for Na'aseh and one for Nishmah. When they sinned with the Golden Calf, 120,000 angels of destruction descended and took from them both crowns' (Talmud, Shabbat 18a). The Avnei Nezer questioned this, arguing that since they had sinned by their actions only the crown of Naaseh should have been taken. They still had retained the merit of Nishmah. However, 'crown' is a matter of kingship that separates the king from the rest of the people, so too, their crowns separated each person from their own personality and own individuality. All their actions were only for the sake of Heaven, rather than for the spiritual satisfaction, status or good feelings that they may bring. For such an achievement not only actions are needed but also 'Nishmah'. After the Golden Calf, their religious actions were once again primarily for their own spiritual benefit and not primarily for the sake of Heaven. So the angels took back both the crown of

Naaseh and that of Nishmah.

There is a link between the 6 ears of wheat that Boaz gave to Ruth (Ruth,3:15), and the need for an Avodat HaShem, Divine worship, that is solely for the sake of Heaven.. ?By the merit of these ears of wheat, Boaz merited being the ancestor of 6 spiritual giants, the kings David, Chikiyahu, Yoshiyahu, the prophets Chananya, Mishal, Azariah and Daniel, and the King Messiah? (Ruth Rabbah, chapter 7). The whole book of Tehillim is replete with the expression of this by David, and all of them inherited this from Boaz. He gave the ears of Barley to Ruth, knowing of the merit they would bring, even though it was not at all clear or definite that he would be the source; there was another kinsman who had prior claims. Nevertheless, Boaz was prepared to subject his own spiritual and religious achievements or rewards. The sole consideration was the fulfillment of the Avodah.

Copyright © 2002 by Rabbi Meir Tamari and Project Genesis, Inc.

Dr. Tamari is a renowned economist, Jewish scholar, and founder of the Center For Business Ethics (www.besr.org) in Jerusalem.