

PARSHAS BECHUKOSAI

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

"Then will I remember My Covenant Yaakov'. Of old the earth's foundation You laid, and the work of Your hands is the heavens'; Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel. Bet Shammai taught, 'the heavens were created first', while Bet Hillel taught, 'the earth was created first'. Rabbi Yochanan in the name of the Sages taught, 'In creation the heavens came first but in improvement the earth had precedence'. Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon said, 'Although my father taught that they were created simultaneously, but still sometimes the heavens are mentioned first and at other times the earth is mentioned first, that shows that they are equal'. However, always Avraham is mentioned first among the Patriarchs but here the verse mentions Yaakov first'. (Midrash Rabba, chapter 36).

Although we might think that it is of little consequence whether the heavens or the earth were created first, the discussion between Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel comes to teach us great and important things.

Every person is a world unto them-selves so that everything in the world has its counterpart in a person. The heavens are like a person's mind and come to teach the necessity of elevating oneself through studying, knowing and understanding the greatness of G-d. Earth is like a person's heart and comes to teach a way towards G-d through humility, the frailty of human endeavor and the worthlessness of the human being; 'The Lord will not despise a broken heart' (Psalms, 51:19). [The Admor Menachem Mendel of Kotsk taught that, 'There is nothing more complete than the broken heart']. A person is not complete until they are able to possess both heart and mind. One needs the elevations of one's mind and wisdom, together with the humility and lowly spirit of the heart. It is obvious that a person cannot achieve both of these attributes quickly or easily. This requires a process of education and the discussion between the two sages, Shammai and Hillel, is concerned with the correct way of starting the process, as each of the attributes has good and bad qualities. The mind that can lead a person to elevate themselves through study, the inquiring mind and the seeking of knowledge, can also lead to arrogance and a gross and crude spirit. These then lead to a rejection of HaShem. Earth can truly lead one to humility but it can also also bring one to despair, depression and negation of one's own worth. This then leads one to sin.

Bet Shammai who taught that the heavens were created first, believe that only if one first uses the brain and wisdom can one understand the greatness of G-d, the wisdom of His works and subject themselves to Him. Bet Hillel believe that one should commence with the broken heart, otherwise

reliance on the mind and wisdom could lead one to arrogance, to pride and to chutzpa.

It would seem that the halakha is in accordance with Rabbi Yochanan in the name of the Sages, who said that first the creation was of heaven but the improvement, purification and finesse was of the earth. So, the beginning of the way to G-d is through the mind and through wisdom, while it has to be refined and improved through the heart. It seems as though Bet Hillel actually agrees with this. He said, 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me. If I am only for myself, what am I?' (Avot, chapter 1, mishna 14). So a person should start their way to HaKodosh Barukh Hu by elevating their minds and thoughts, but should not be content with that. Then should come the worship through the heart, so that one should learn humility. [One should note that humility is not the same as the lack of self-esteem or of the intrinsic value of oneself]. The process should not stop there. Rather one should strive for the continued elevation of the mind through study and ecstasy in prayer.

We can see a parallel between this discussion and the events of Pesach, the period of Sefirat Haomer and Matan Torah on Shavuot.

It is well known that Pharaoh was the epitome of the negative aspects of the mind and wisdom. He said, 'Who is G-d that I should hearken to Him. I know not G-d' (Shmot 5:2) and 'The river Nile is mine, I created it' (Yechezkel 29:9). He affected the sons of Yaakov in this, so that when Israel was in Egypt they were devoid of divine wisdom. Then through the Exodus and kariat Yam Suf they reached great heights of wisdom and knowledge. However, they were unable to maintain these great heights and their thinking reverted to the petty, the selfish and the arrogant. They were given the 49 days of Siferat HaOmer to purify their nefesh habeheimit and achieve the broken heart. Then they were able to merit Matan Torah that is the elevation of the mind, in greater intensity and force.

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[The centrality of learning and wisdom to religiosity that is so clear here should not surprise us as this is the hallmark not only of the ShemMi Shmuel, but of the whole school of Physcha to which he belonged. In his commentary to Beha'alotcha, he calls the ecstasy of the mind the highest form of ecstasy].

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