**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BEREISHIT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

**In memory of our beloved grandmother, Dora Levine דבורה בת יעקב ע"ה, whose Yartzheit we commemorate this week.**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Mishna in Masekhet Sukka (28a) cites a debate regarding the case of one who eats in a *sukka* from a table that is outside the *sukka*, in the house. Beit Shammai rules that one cannot fulfill the *mitzva* in this fashion, whereas Beit Hillel disagrees. As proof to their view, the scholars of Beit Shammai noted a story told of elder scholars who visited Rabbi Yochanan ben Ha-chorani and saw him eating in the *sukka* from a table that was inside the home. They sharply reprimanded him, saying, “If this is how you acted, then you have never fulfilled the *mitzva* of *sukka* in your life.” Interestingly, *Halakha* in this instance follows the view of Beit Shammai (*Shulchan Arukh*, O.C.634:4).

The implication of this remark is that this disqualification applies on the level of Torah law. Indeed, *Tosefot* (Sukka 3a) maintain that one does not fulfill the Torah obligation of *sukka* by eating from a table situated outside the *sukka*. Others, however, including the Ran (Pesachim 25a in the Rif), maintain that this law was enacted by *Chazal* out of the concern that “*yimasheikh achar shulchano*” – one might be “drawn after his table.” If one would be allowed to eat from a table situated outside the *sukka*, he might end up eating out of the *sukka*, and so the Sages enacted a provision requiring that the table be inside the *sukka*, even though on the level of Torah law one may eat from a table located outside. Those who follow this view are forced to interpret the comment “you have never fulfilled the *mitzva* of *sukka* in your life” to mean that Rabbi Yochanan ben Ha-chorani had not fulfilled the *mitzva* the way *Chazal* legislated that it be fulfilled.

We might ask, according to this view, why did these elderly scholars react so strongly to Rabbi Yochanan’s infraction? If this involves merely the violation of a rabbinic safeguard, why did they accuse him of never fulfilling the *mitzva* of *sukka*?

The *mitzva* of *sukka*, coming on the heels of Yom Kippur, represents the notion that the full range of human activity can and must be brought into the *sukka*, so-to-speak, and be endowed with holiness. After the period of complete withdrawal from mundane activity on Yom Kippur to demonstrate the extent of our devotion to God, we proceed to construct a *sukka* and spend a week engaging in ordinary human conduct in the sacred environs of the *sukka*, residing in close quarters together with God. The *mitzva* of *sukka* embodies the concept of sanctifying the mundane, of elevating our entire lives by bringing even our most basic areas of conduct – eating and sleeping – into the realm of *kedusha* and into the framework of our close relationship with God.

On this basis, perhaps, we can understand the elders’ strong reaction to Rabbi Yochanan’s arrangement. Even if, technically speaking, he fulfilled the *mitzva* of *sukka*, keeping one’s table outside the *sukka* symbolically undermines one of the fundamental themes of the *sukka*. The *mitzva* is intended specifically to teach us that even our “tables,” our mundane affairs, must be brought inside the *sukka* and informed by our connection to the Almighty which the *sukka* represents. The very purpose of the *sukka* is to remind us to bring all aspects of our lives into the framework of *avodat Hashem*, as our obligations to God encompass the full range of human activity. The Sages thus strongly condemned the practice of leaving one’s table outside the *sukka*, to remind us of the vitally important message of Sukkot – that every aspect of our lives can and must be endowed with sanctity.

Sunday

In the beginning of Masekhet Sukka (2a), the Gemara defines the *sukka* obligation as commanding us to “leave your permanent residence and dwell in a temporary residence.” The Gemara notes several halakhic implications of this definition of the *mitzva*, as requiring that we dwell in a “temporary residence.”

This notion, that the *sukka* represents a “temporary residence,” likely relates to its commemorative function, recalling *Benei Yisrael*’s experiences as they traveled through the wilderness. For one thing, this period was inherently temporary, a bridge between the Exodus from Egypt and the realization of our nation’s destiny to possess and settle *Eretz Yisrael*. We thus commemorate this experience by living in a temporary residence, a structure that by its very nature is suited for only short-term dwelling.

Additionally, however, the concept of a “temporary residence” is associated with uncertainty about the future. The Torah in Sefer Bamidbar (9:15-23) emphasizes this aspect of *Benei Yisrael*’s experience in the wilderness. Whenever they encamped or embarked, they did not know for how long they would remain encamped or for how long they would be traveling. Their “itinerary” was determined solely by God and was not given to them in advance. And thus their “*sukkot*” throughout this period were the embodiment of a “*dirat arai*,” a “temporary residence,” in the sense that their arrangement was subject to change at any time in a moment’s notice. By commanding us to live in a “*dirat arai*,” the Torah calls upon us to sense this feeling of instability, to become more aware of the transient and uncertain nature of life, which can always change and bring us to new and unexpected challenges and blessings.

This perspective on the *sukka* perhaps sheds light on the significance of the well-known *halakhic* principle relevant to this *mitzva*: “*teishvu ke-ein taduru*” – that we are to live in the *sukka* the way we live in our homes. Beyond the technical halakhic implications of this rule, it instructs that we are to try, as much as possible, to live in our temporary dwellings during Sukkot precisely as we live in our permanent residences throughout the rest of the year. Despite the transient nature of the *sukka*, our residence there must resemble our ordinary residence in our regular homes. The message, perhaps, is that we are capable of living normal, happy lives despite the uncertainties and insecurities that plague us. Even at times when we feel anxious and vulnerable, we are able to live “*ke-ein taduru*,” as though our lives are stable and secure. Sukkot is “*zeman simchateinu*” – the festival of joy – to teach us that we do not need to wait until all the loose ends in our lives are tied, until all our problems are resolved, or until all our concerns are put to rest, to experience joy and serenity. As we commemorate *Benei Yisrael*’s sojourn through wilderness, we find comfort and security in our close relationship with the Almighty, in the fact that wherever life takes us, we know that God is accompanying us and spreading His protective “*sukka*” over us at all times.

Monday

We read in Parashat Bereishit that after Adam ate from the forbidden tree, and was then confronted by God, he cast the blame on his wife: “Adam said: The woman that you placed alongside me gave me from the tree, and I ate” (3:12).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 19:22) offers a startling interpretation of Adam’s response, explaining the word “*va-okheil*” (“and I ate”) as though it were written in future tense (“*ve-okheil*”). According to the Midrash, Adam’s response to God was “I ate and I will continue eating.” He audaciously expressed his intention to continue disobeying God’s command and to eat again from the forbidden tree.

This Midrashic reading of the verse effectively reverses its meaning. According to the simple reading, Adam excused himself by blaming Chava for what happened. He explained to God that ordinarily he would never violate His command, but he was lured by his wife. According to the Midrashic reading, however, Adam felt no remorse for his misdeed and openly planned to commit the sin yet again in the future. How are we to understand the Midrash’s interpretation?

Rav Meir Aryeh Segal, in his [*Imrei Da’at*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=41372&st=&pgnum=11&hilite=), explains that the Midrash does not truly intend to say that Adam planned on repeating his offense. Rather, the Midrash is teaching us the failing to own up to our mistakes and to accept accountability for them is, to some extent, equivalent to planning to repeat them. If we blame our failures on other people, or on any external factors, then we are not truly committing to change. After all, we will always have to deal with pressures and overcome obstacles if we wish to follow the divine will. There will always be factors and circumstances that make observance difficult and challenging. And thus if we dismiss our failure with an excuse, rather than accept responsibility and acknowledge guilt, we are all but guaranteed to repeat the failure in the future when we confront a different challenge. Hence, by blaming Chava for his mistake, Adam was, effectively, announcing his intent to repeat it.

The Midrash instructs us to avoid the natural tendency to find excuses for our mistakes and to clast the blame on others. When we err, we must acknowledge our guilt, recognize that we failed, and resolve to try harder in the future.

Tuesday

The Gemara in Masekhet Sukka (49a) suggests an unusual reading of the first word of the Torah – “*bereishit*” – suggesting that it be read as, “*bara sheet*,” alluding to the creation of the *shittin*, the piping system beneath the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. These pipes carried the water poured over the altar during Sukkot deep beneath the ground, and the Gemara asserts that they were brought into existence and put into place already at the time of the world’s creation. As such, they are mentioned by way of an allusion in the very first word of the Torah.

How might we understand the notion of the *shittin* being constructed at the time of creation?

Rav Chaim Kanoler, in his *Peri Chayim*, associates the Gemara’s comment with the “history” of the *mitzva* of the water libations, as told by the Midrash (cited by Rashi to Vayikra 2:13). The Midrash relates that after God separated between the “upper waters” and the “lower waters” on the second day of creation (Bereishit 1:6-7), the lower waters – meaning, the waters here in our world – bitterly protested. They desired closeness with God, and were resentful over their banishment from God’s presence. God consoled the waters through the *mitzva* of *nisukh ha-mayim* – the water libation on Sukkot – through which they were poured on the altar and thus reunited, as it were, with the Almighty.

In light of this background, we might say that the *shittin* – the pipes through which the water of *nisukh ha-mayim* flowed – represent the water’s return to their origin, to their primordial relationship with God. Symbolically, these pipes are the mechanism through which the “lower waters” are able to regain the closeness with God that they had lost.

On this basis, Rav Kanoler suggests, we might explain the notion that these pipes were put in place at the time of the world’s creation. *Chazal* are teaching us that the possibility of return and restoration was implanted within the very fabric of the world. Almost invariably, we will experience periods of distance and alienation, when we feel a degree of separation and disconnect from God. During such periods, we are to remember the story of the “lower waters,” whose return route to the heavens was arranged at the outset of the world’s creation. A “built-in” feature of the world is the *shittin*, the opportunity to return and to rebuild our connection with God. This is why *Chazal* draw our attention to the *shittin* already when we read the very first word of the Torah – to teach us that the path to regaining our sense of closeness with the Almighty has already been paved, and we need simply to make the decision, and invest the effort, to take it.

Wednesday

The Torah tells of the creation on the fourth day of the “two large luminaries,” and then proceeds to clarify that these are the “large luminary” – the sun, which shines by day – and the “small luminary” – the moon, which shines at night. To explain why the Torah initially refers to the sun and moon as “the two large luminaries,” Rashi writes, based on the Gemara (Chulin 60b), that God originally created the sun and moon equal in size. The moon, however, protested, arguing, “It is not possible for two kings to reign with one crown,” and God responded by diminishing the moon’s size. Thus, initially there were “two large luminaries,” but then they became “the large luminary” and “the small luminary.”

An especially insightful approach to explaining this famous comment of Rashi is suggested by Rav Dov Weinberger, in his *Shemen Ha-tov* (vol. 4). He writes that the moon’s mistake lay in his description of his and the sun’s role in terms of governance: “It is not possible for two **kings** to **reign** with one **crown**.” The sun and the moon were not created to “rule,” but rather to serve a specific function – to illuminate the earth. As Rav Weinberger observes, it is only after the moon’s complaint, when its size was diminished, that the Torah speaks of them as “ruling” (“*le-memshelet…ve-limshol*”). Before the moon’s objection, the sun and moon served, as opposed to rule. And this is precisely the moon’s mistake. It is indeed difficult, if not impossible, for two kings to rule together, but two servants can certainly work in perfect harmony together, cooperating to complete their assigned task. If people see themselves as servants, given a task or series of tasks to perform, then they need simply to construct an efficient practical arrangement whereby the particular duties are divided among them. But when people seek to use their position to exert authority or control, or for their own prestige, then they will, in all likelihood, be unable to work together. Necessarily, they will be in a constant state of competition with one another, rather than working in conjunction with one another, and this arrangement is thus doomed to fail.

This is the message the Gemara seeks to convey to us. The key to successful cooperation is remaining focused on the satisfactory completion of the task at hand, and not on personal aggrandizement. If we approach life with the goal of performing our individual missions and carrying out our responsibilities, we will find it easier to work peacefully and harmoniously with other people. Friction and tension arise, more often than not, when people pursue honor and prestige, rather than the satisfactory fulfillment of their obligations.

Thursday

Yesterday, we noted the well-known passage in the Gemara (Chulin 60b), cited by Rashi in his commentary to Parashat Bereishit (1:16), which tells about the creation of the sun and the moon. Initially, the Gemara comments, the sun and moon were created equal size, but the moon protested, noting the impossibility of “two kings ruling with the same crown.” In response to the moon’s complaint, God diminished its size.

Much has been written about this account of the creation of the luminaries, and the message it symbolically conveys. One insight emerges from Rashi’s concluding remarks to this verse, where he writes regarding the creation of the stars, “Because He diminished the moon’s size, He gave it a large cadre in order to put its mind at ease.” God sought to comfort the moon, as it were, after it lost its stature, and so He created a very large “cadre” of stars serving under it.

Assigning a large group of underlings is a sign of importance and prominence. Even though God strongly disapproved of the moon’s complaint and decided upon an especially severe punishment, He nevertheless found it necessary to have the moon maintain its sense of dignity and worth. It was shown that despite the grave mistake it made, it is still a very important part of creation, and prominent enough to have a vast array of stars serving alongside it.

*Chazal* here are likely teaching us of the need to show our respect even to those whom are deservedly punished or reprimanded. In this story, the moon was given a degree of honor after it was found worthy of the humiliation of having its size reduced to a fraction of its original stature. The lesson conveyed is that even when criticism or punitive measures are warranted, we must still express respect. People deserve dignity and a sense of self-worth even after making grave mistakes or speaking foolishly, like the moon in this story. Nobody should feel that he or she has forfeited the right to respect because of a severe mistake. Just as the moon was given a cadre of stars after it was penalized, we must likewise ensure to show respect to children, students, and all people even when we deem them worthy of criticism or punitive measures.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Bereishit (5:24) briefly introduces us to the mysterious figure of Chanokh, Noach’s great-grandfather, describing him as a pious man who was taken by God at a relatively young age. Rashi, citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 25:1), explains that although Chanokh was a righteous man, he could have easily been influenced to sin, and so God took his life before his time, to ensure he would die in a state of piety.

The Rebbe of Kotzk (cited in *Ohel Torah*), in a fascinating passage, insists that this cannot possibly be the Midrash’s intent. It is inconceivable, the Rebbe claims, that Chanokh was so spiritually fragile that God had to take his life to protect him. The Kotzker Rebbe therefore suggests a different, startling reading of Rashi’s comment. He explains this comment to mean that Chanokh would have too easily inspired the wicked to repent. It is not that Chanokh would have been too easily influenced by his generation’s sinners, but rather that his generation’s sinners would have too easily been influenced by him. His powerful influence, the Rebbe asserted, would have eliminated people’s free will, and so the Almighty felt compelled, as it were, to take Chanokh from the world.

We might suggest that the Rebbe offered this reading to convey the message that there cannot ever be any “guarantees” with regard to religious commitment. God created the world in such a way that there is never any force strong enough to make religious devotion automatic or natural. He does not allow in our world any “Chanokh” – a person or some other factor that can inspire us to the point where we no longer need to struggle to do the right thing. The doctrine of *bechira chofshit* (free will) requires that we must always make a conscious decision to act properly or improperly, and no person or set of circumstances will ever exert a strong enough influence upon us to make this decision automatic. Never do we reach the point where we are naturally drawn to act properly without any challenges or obstacles to overcome.

The Kotzker Rebbe’s remark also serves as a reminder to parents and educators about their limited influence upon their charges. Never is one able to exert complete control over a child or student. Ultimately, the decision of how to act is made by the child. While we must make our best effort to exert a positive influence upon those entrusted in our hands, we must also realize that our efforts are never guaranteed to succeed. The image of Chanokh, and his fate, as depicted by the Rebbe of Kotzk, teaches us that even the most influential leaders are limited in their capabilities, as God creates people in such a way that they, and only they, bear ultimate responsibility for their decisions, and nobody and nothing can ever compel them to make the right or wrong decision.

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