**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYIGASH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Rambam, towards the end of Hilkhot Chanukah (4:12), rules that a pauper who relies on charity for his basic sustenance must find a way to fulfill the *mitzva* of Chanukah candles, such as by selling his clothes or borrowing oil and wicks. The *Maggid Mishneh* comments that the Rambam inferred this *halakha* from the explicit ruling of the Mishna in Pesachim (10:1) requiring an impoverished pauper to find a way to drink four cups of wine on the night of Pesach. If a beggar dependent on charity is required to drink four cups of wine on Pesach, the *Maggid Mishneh* writes, then certainly he is required to light Chanukah candles.

The *Lechem Mishneh* questions the *Maggid Mishneh*’s comment, wondering why it is more intuitive to require a pauper to fulfill the *mitzva* of Chanukah lights than to fulfill the obligation of the four cups of wine on Pesach. Why, the *Lechem Mishneh* asks, did the *Maggid Mishneh* present an *a fortiori* argument based on the *halakha* relevant to Pesach to prove the *halakha* regarding Chanukah lights?

The [*Avnei Neizer* (O.C. 501)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=1344&pgnum=573) suggests explaining the *Maggid Mishneh*’s rationale based on the desired public impact of the Chanukah candle lighting. The reason why poverty does not excuse a person from fulfilling the obligations of the *seder*, the *Avnei Neizer* writes, is because he bears the obligation to transmit the knowledge of the Exodus to his children. Although his personal obligations can be absolved by his state of destitution, his responsibility to his children cannot. The *Maggid Mishneh* thus reasoned that if this is the case regarding the obligations of Pesach, which involve teaching and inspiring one’s offspring, then it certainly applies to the Chanukah candles, which are lit to publicize the miracle far and wide. Whereas the *mitzvot* of Pesach are focused upon the family and home, the *mitzva* of Chanukah candles is focused outward to the public sphere. We light the Chanukah candles outdoors to inform everybody who passes by about the great miracle. Therefore, if our educational responsibility to our children must be met even when this entails great difficulty, then certainly our educational responsibility to the world at large must be met under difficult conditions.

We should, however, note one important caveat to the *Avnei Neizer*’s clever analysis. In the final passage in Hilkhot Chanukah, the Rambam clarifies that if a pauper can afford either candles to illuminate his home or candles for Chanukah, he should purchase candles for illumination, due to the primacy of *shalom bayit* (domestic harmony). As vitally important an obligation as it is to publicize the Chanukah miracle, this does not override the more basic obligation to maintain a joyful, serene aura in the home. The *mitzva* of Chanukah lights is deemed more significant than the *mitzva* of the four cups on Pesach, but it still pales in comparison to the obligation to create a happy home for one’s family. Without *shalom bayit*, the Rambam teaches us, we lack the foundation from which we can kindle the light of faith for the benefit of others, and thus illuminating our homes takes precedence to the need to provide spiritual illumination to those outside our homes.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Vayigash of how Yosef finally revealed his identity to his brothers, after hearing Yehuda’s impassioned plea that he allow Binyamin to return home to Canaan. The Torah introduces this dramatic stage of the story with a difficult verse that has been subject to different interpretations among the commentators: “Yosef was unable to control himself in the presence of all those standing in front of him, and he called, ‘Send everybody away from me!’ – and so no person stood with him when Yosef revealed himself to his brothers” (45:1).

This verse speaks of Yosef as being unable to “control himself,” but it is unclear to what precisely this refers and how this relates to Yosef’s demand that everybody leave the room. Rashi explains that the word “*le-hit’apeik*” – which is commonly translated as “control” – actually means “tolerate.” Yosef decided at this point to reveal his identity to his brothers, but he could not bear doing so in the presence of his servants and advisors in the room, who would see his brothers in their moment of shame. He therefore ordered everybody to leave. The Radak explains that the Torah refers here to Yosef’s need to cry. He could no longer restrain himself from crying, and so he ordered his servants to leave the room. Ibn Ezra suggests that Yosef did not want to wait to reveal his identity until everybody else present left the room on their own, and so he ordered them to leave.

A different approach is taken by the Ramban, who claims that Yosef’s servants, who heard Yehuda’s plea, were prepared to pressure him to yield and free Binyamin out of consideration for his father. Yosef therefore felt compelled to send his men away so he could continue with his plan without coming under pressure from his servants who were moved by Yehuda’s emotional petition. He then broke down and cried, and in his outburst of emotion, he felt compelled to reveal himself.

The clear implication of the Ramban’s comments is that Yosef did not plan on ending his scheme at that point and revealing his identity to his brothers. His intention was to refuse Yehuda’s plea and keep Binyamin with him in Egypt, but he broke down in tears and revealed himself. This gives rise to the question of what else Yosef planned to do, and until when he had intended to withhold his identity from his brothers.

One possibility, suggested by Netziv, is based upon the Ramban’s earlier comments explaining that Yosef’s intention all along was to bring about the fulfillment of his dreams. Viewing his dreams of his family prostrating before him as prophetic, Yosef felt obliged to ensure their fulfillment. This is why he forced the brothers to bring Binyamin, and this is why he was going to have them bring Yaakov, as well – so that his dream of the entire family bowing to him would be fulfilled. But Yosef broke down and revealed himself without fully realizing his dreams.

This approach works off the questionable assumption that Yosef’s prophetic dreams necessitated his brothers and father bowing to him without knowing who he was. Seemingly, it would suffice for the family to bow before him under any circumstances, and not specifically without knowing that he was Yosef.

A different possibility (noted by Rav Eliyahu Meir Feivelson, in [*Va-yavinu Ba-mikra*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=48367&st=&pgnum=122&hilite=)) is that Yosef’s intention was to ensure that the brothers had regretted their mistreatment of him. He arranged a situation which challenged the brothers to stand up to protect the youngest and most cherished son of Yaakov – the exact opposite of their having conspired to eliminate Yaakov’s other cherished son over twenty years earlier. Yehuda’s plea, and his offer to remain in Egypt permanently as a slave in Binyamin’s stead, proved to Yosef without a doubt that he, Yehuda, had experienced a change of heart and was prepared to sacrifice everything for the sake of Yaakov’s most beloved son. However, Yosef wanted to ensure that all his brothers, and not just Yehuda, had undergone this transformation, and for this reason, he had planned to persist. His plan, however, was disrupted by his rush of emotion wrought by Yehuda’s impassioned appeal and the warning of Yaakov’s death should the brothers return to Canaan without Binyamin. Yosef therefore discontinued his plan, and revealed himself at this point.

Monday

We read in Parashat Vayigash of Yaakov’s relocation in Egypt, where he was reunited with his beloved son, Yosef, after a period of twenty-two years during which they had not seen each other. The Torah tells that upon Yaakov’s arrival, “Yosef harnessed his chariot and went up to greet Yisrael in Goshen” (46:29).

The Tosafists, in *Da’at Zekeinim*, suggest several reasons for why the Torah speaks of Yosef’s excursion to Goshen to greet his father with the verb “*va-ya’al*” (“went up”). Their first suggestion is, “He experienced an ‘ascent’ by going to greet his father in order to honor him.” The fact that Yosef made this trip for the noble purpose of showing honor and respect to his father lent it an “elevating” quality, such that he can be described as having “ascended” as a result of this excursion.

Remarkably, despite who Yosef was and all that he had accomplished, the Tosafists felt that making a trip to greet his father resulted in an additional “ascent.” Yosef had already overcome the harshest forms adversity, withstood difficult challenges, and literally saved the lives of millions of people through his foresight and skill as the Egyptian vizier, by storing grain during the seven surplus years. He extended a hand of friendship to his brothers who had sold him into slavery, and offered to support them and their families during a period of harsh drought and economic crisis. Yosef had, by all accounts, already established himself as an extraordinarily pious, capable and accomplished individual. And yet, the Tosafists teach that he achieved yet another “ascent,” he elevated himself just a bit higher, by going to show respect to his father.

The Tosafists’ remark perhaps reminds us of the inestimable value of each and every good deed we perform, how even seemingly simple and self-understood acts are significant and impactful. We grow not only by overcoming difficult challenges and achieving outstanding accomplishments, but also through the ordinary, day-to-day goodness that we do, such as by showing respect to parents and elders. As the Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (2:1) teaches, “Exercise care with regard to a ‘light’ [*mitzva*] as with regard to a ‘serious’ [*mitzva*], for you know not the reward given for *mitzvot*.” We should never underestimate the significance of even acts of goodness that appear “light” and ordinary, for each and every act is valuable and has an “elevating” effect upon us.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayigash tells of Yaakov’s dramatic reunion with his son, Yosef, after twenty-two years of separation. We read that Yosef went to greet his father, and “he appeared to him and fell on his neck and cried…” (46:29).

The Ramban raises the question of why the Torah found it necessary to inform us that Yosef “appeared” to his father. Clearly, once he went to greet him, and before Yosef cried on his father’s shoulder, they saw one another. What did the Torah intend to convey with the expression “*va-yeira eilav*” (“he appeared to him”)?

The Ramban explains that Yaakov did not initially recognize Yosef, as he had not seen him since he was a teenager, and because Yosef was now adorned in the attire of Egyptian royalty. The Torah thus tells that after a few moments, “he appeared to him” – meaning, Yaakov recognized Yosef and identified him as his son. At that point, Yaakov felt on Yosef’s shoulder and wept. (Unlike other commentators, the Ramban understood the verse to mean that Yaakov wept on Yosef’s shoulders, not the other way around.)

A different approach is taken by Seforno, who explains “he appeared to him” to mean that Yosef stepped away from his entourage so his father could see him. According to this interpretation, “*va-yeira eilav*” should be understood as “he made himself visible.” This seems to be the approach taken by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, who translates this phrase to mean that Yosef “presented himself unto” Yaakov. Somewhat similarly, the Radak explains (citing his father) that Yosef made himself visible to Yaakov from a distance rather than appearing to him suddenly.

An intriguing explanation is offered by Rav Avraham Horowitz, in his [*Netiv Yashar*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=40206&st=&pgnum=212&hilite=), where he suggests that the phrase “*va-yeira eilav*” might be understood as an allusion to Yosef’s “revelation” of his true self to his father. Ordinarily, people should not be putting their piety and religious devotion on public display. Genuine spirituality is not flaunted or openly broadcast. A truly righteous person conducts himself with a “normal” persona, engaging with other people without condescension or detachment. However, when Yosef reunited with his father after spending twenty-two years in Egypt, fully integrating in Egyptian society and even rising to become the country’s second-in-command, he “appeared” to him in the fullest sense of the term. He openly displayed to Yaakov his faith, his morality, his devotion to his family traditions, and his commitment to the spiritual legacy of the patriarchs. On this occasion, Yosef made no attempt to humbly keep his religious devotion private, as we normally should. Instead, he presented himself entirely to Yaakov, reassuring him that despite living and integrating in a foreign culture, he remained steadfastly committed to his family’s spiritual heritage.

Wednesday

As Yosef sent his brothers from Egypt to Canaan in order to bring their father and their families to Egypt, he warned, “*Al tirgezu ba-darekh*” (45:24) – an ambiguous expression that has been interpreted in several different ways. The Gemara in Masekhet Ta’anit (10b) explains this warning to mean that the brothers should not engage in halakhic discussion and deliberation. Although it is proper to speak in Torah matters during travel, the Gemara clarifies, one should not delve deeply and intensively engage in complex, intricate subjects. And this is the warning expressed by Yosef to his brothers before they traveled.

Rashi explains that intensive study is improper during travel because of the concern that the traveler might not sufficiently focus on his journey, and he would then be endangering himself. Rabbenu Gershom, however, explains the Gemara’s teaching much differently. He writes that when students engage in difficult and complex matters, they are likely to end up debating the various issues that arise. During travel, when the students are in public view, engaging in debates is inappropriate, as onlookers will mistakenly assume that they are fighting out of personal animus. Therefore, travelers should study light material that does not lend itself to vigorous debate, so as to avoid giving the impression of bitter confrontation and conflict.

Rabbenu Gershom’s reading of the Gemara reminds us that while debate and argumentation is endemic to the process of learning and applying the Torah, we must do what we can to avoid projecting an image of pettiness and internecine hostility. Our intense debates and disputes over Jewish teaching and practice should take place within the walls of the *beit midrash*, within the “privacy” of our institutions and communities, and not publicly. As Rabbenu Gershom wrote, we must not give the mistaken impression that we engage in personal and petty attacks. Therefore, we must, to whatever extent possible, keep our legitimate debates within our own quarters, and not engage in disputes publicly and thus appear argumentative and belligerent. As the Gemara teaches in Masekhet Kiddushin (30b), “Even a father and son…who are involved in Torah in the same gate become enemies of one another, but they do not leave from there until they [once again] love each other.” Within the confines of the *beit midrash*, among ourselves, we can engage in intense debate with the understanding that we respect and admire one another as a father and son, even as we argue as “enemies.” Once we leave the *beit midrash*, however, and enter the public view, we must end the debate and put our mutual love and appreciation on full display, so that we make it clear to all who see us that despite our disagreements, we ultimately respect, love and are fully committed to one another.

Thursday

Yesterday, we noted Yosef’s vague final instruction to his brothers as they prepared to travel from Egypt to Canaan in order to bring Yaakov and their families to Egypt, where they would settle to escape the famine in Canaan. Yosef told his brothers, “*Al tirgezu ba-darekh*” (45:24), which appears to mean, “Do not be angry along the way.” The Gemara in Masekhet Ta’anit (10b) cites different interpretations to this verse, one of which explains it to mean, “*Al tafsi’u pesi’a gasa*” – “Do not take big steps.” In other words, although Yosef had earlier urged his brothers to quickly return to Canaan to bring Yaakov and their families (“*Maharu va-alu el avi*” – 45:9), he now warns against journeying too quickly, and urges them to travel at a reasonable, measured pace.

The question arises as to how this interpretation accommodates the text. How did *Chazal* arrive at this reading based on the words “*al tirgezu ba-darekh*”?

An enlightening answer to this question is offered by Rav Chaim Yirmiyahu Plansberg, in his [*Divrei Yirmiyahu*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=31710&st=&pgnum=153&hilite=) commentary. He writes that this Midrashic interpretation of the verse reads the words “*al tirgezu ba-darekh*” in a purely literal fashion, to mean, “Do not be angry at the road.” When a person rushes hurriedly and frantically to his destination, he shows that he affords importance only to the destination, to his goal and objective, and looks askance upon, and even feels “anger” towards, the road he needs to travel to reach his destination. When we rush, we naturally feel embittered by the time and effort required to reach our goal, as we are interested solely in achieving the final objective. In interpreting Yosef’s admonition to mean, “Do not be angry at the road,” *Chazal* urge us to recognize the value and significance of the *derekh*, of the process, the journey we need to take in pursuing our goals. We should not look disdainfully upon the road, with our eyes turned solely to the finish line, but should instead try to appreciate and capitalize on the process we must undergo to get there. We should embrace, rather than feel contempt for, the *derekh*, the many journeys we need to take and achieve our goals, and we will then be able to find meaning and joy in every station at which we arrive over the course of our lives.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Vayigash lists the names of the children of Yaakov’s sons, including a son of Shimon with an unusual name – “Shaul the son of the Canaanite” (46:10).

The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (82b), surprisingly, identifies this individual as Zimri, the leader of the tribe of Shimon who, many years later, was killed after committing a public sinful act with a princess of Midyan (Bamidbar 25). Zimri was called “Shaul,” the Gemara explains, to indicate that “*hish’il atzmo li-dvar aveira*” – “he lent himself out for a sinful act.” And he is referred to here as “the son of the Canaanite” because he committed an act that reflected the decadent, immoral culture of the ancient Canaanites.

We may reasonably assume that the Gemara’s comment is not to be taken literally, to mean that Zimri was Shimon’s son, as historically, this seems implausible. Shaul is described here as having been alive when Yaakov’s family relocated in Egypt, and he would have had to live throughout the entire period of *Benei Yisrael*’s enslavement in Egypt and until the fortieth year of travel in the wilderness, when Zimri’s act was committed. It stands to reason that the Gemara’s intent was not to identify Zimri as Shimon’s son, but rather to describe his sinful act with the term “*hish’il*,” which means to “lend.” The question, then, becomes, how does this expression shed light on the nature of Zimri’s misdeed?

Rav Meir Aryeh Segal, in his [*Imrei Da’at* (Parashat Shelach)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=41372&st=&pgnum=109&hilite=), suggests that *Chazal* refer here to the temporary nature of a loan, which is, by definition, an impermanent transaction. When somebody lends an object he owns to another person, his intention is not to permanently part with the object, but rather to temporarily relinquish rights over it. In describing Zimri’s act as a “loan,” Rav Segal suggests, *Chazal* seek to emphasize that Zimri’s intent was not to permanently abandon Torah observance and break with religious tradition, but rather to “lend” himself, to temporarily release himself from the constraints imposed by Torah law. Nevertheless, he was punished, because our religious devotion must be consistent and unshakable, not something from which we can allow ourselves occasional, temporary breaks.

Rav Segal adds that this might be the meaning of Rashi’s remark in his commentary to Parashat Shelach (Bamidbar 15:39), “The heart and the eyes are the body’s ‘spies’… The eye sees and the heart desires, and the body commits the sin.” A spy sent to collect information intends not to permanently settle in the region where he fulfills his mission, but rather to briefly sojourn there to get a sense of what it is like. Similarly, we are sometimes inclined to “spy” the realm of sin, to act wrongly not as a permanent break from Torah observance, but merely as a “spy” or “tourist,” as a temporary, one-time experience. The Gemara’s formulation of Zimri’s sin warns that even temporary “visits” to the realm of wrongful conduct can have disastrous consequences and must therefore be avoided.

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