**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT YITRO**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The final verse of Parashat Yitro introduces a prohibition against climbing to the altar by stairs: “*ve-lo ta’aleh be-ma’alot al mizbechi*” (20:23). The reason for this law, as the Torah explains, is “*asher lo tigaleh ervatekha alav*” – walking up steps while dressed in a robe results in exposing the private area of the body, which would be inappropriate when performing the service in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Due to this prohibition, the altar was constructed with a ramp that led to the top surface of the altar, and the *kohanim* would walk up in the ramp, instead of walking up steps. The details of the ramp’s construction are presented by the Mishna in Masekhet Middot (3:3).

The Talmud Yerushalmi, in Masekhet Berakhot (1:1), states that this law not only requires *kohanim* to ascend via a ramp instead of stairs, but also forbids them from taking long strides as they walk up the ramp. Specifically, the Yerushalmi comments, the *kohanim* were required to walk up the ramp in a manner of “*gudal be-tzad akeiv*” – heel to toe. With each step, the foot moving forward should not be placed further than the place where its heel would be parallel to the other foot’s toes. Taking wider steps would violate the Torah’s prohibition against exposing one’s private area while walking up to the altar. This requirement is also mentioned by one opinion cited in the *Mekhilta* (here in Parashat Yitro), by the Rambam, in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (*lo ta’aseh* 80), and by the *Sefer Ha-chinukh* (41).

Several *Rishonim* addressed the question of how to reconcile this requirement with the Mishna’s description in Masekhet Yoma (22a) of how the *kohanim* would race up the ramp to the altar. The original system for determining which *kohen* would receive the privilege of performing the *terumat ha-deshen* ritual – cleaning the top of the altar, the first ritual performed in the *Mikdash* each morning – was that the *kohen* who won the race and reached the top first would be given this privilege. (Later, it was decided to conduct a lottery, instead, as *kohanim* were getting hurt when racing up the altar.) It stands to reason that the *kohanim* racing up the altar took as large strides as possible in order to reach the top as quickly as they could, and, moreover, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to run in a manner of “*gudal be-tzad akeiv*.” How, then, was this race halakhically acceptable, in light of the requirement to take small, modest steps while ascending the altar? Indeed, some, such as Malbim, claimed that this account of the *kohanim* racing proves that the view requiring “*gudal be-tzad akeiv*” was not accepted, and for this reason, the Rambam omits this requirement in his *Mishneh Torah* (even though he does mention it in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*).

Others, however, suggested ways to reconcile the Mishna’s account with the requirement of “*gudal be-tzad akeiv*.” One relatively simple possibility is proposed by Rav Chaim Elazary, in his [*Netivei Chayim*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=42862&st=&pgnum=374). He writes that running might be permissible because there is no discernible pause between steps. When a person walks normally, there is a moment between each step when his legs are apart, thus disrespectfully exposing his private area. But when a person runs, and especially if he races and tries to reach the top as fast as possible, his legs move so quickly that the moment when his legs are spread apart cannot be discerned. Therefore, Rav Elazary suggests, *Halakha* might perhaps distinguish between walking up the altar, which must be done in a manner of “*gudal be-tzad akeiv*,” and running up the altar, which is entirely permissible.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Yitro briefly mentions the names of Moshe’s two sons, and the reasons for these names: “One’s name was Gershom, because he [Moshe] said, ‘I was a foreigner [*ger*]in a strange land’; and one’s name was Eliezer, because ‘my father’s God assisted me [*Elokei avi be-ezri*]and saved me from Pharaoh’s sword’” (18:3-4).

A number of commentators noted that the word “*amar*” (“he said”) is omitted from the Torah’s explanation of Eliezer’s name. Whereas in reference to Gershom’s name the Torah makes it clear that Moshe said, “I was a foreigner” which formed the basis of this name, when it comes to Eliezer the Torah writes only, “because ‘my father’s G-d assisted me,’” without saying that these words were spoken by Moshe. The simplest explanation, as Ibn Ezra writes, is that the word “*amar*” used in the context of Gershom’s name refers also to the explanation for Eliezer’s name, and there was thus no need to mention it in the latter context.

The Riva (one of the Tosafists), however, suggests that this omission points to a difference between Moshe’s two proclamations which he commemorated through the names of his sons. The Torah writes that Moshe said “I was a foreigner” because this was spoken on one occasion. The second proclamation, however – “My father’s God assisted me” – was something that Moshe said regularly, and not just at one particular time. This was something that he carried within his mind and heart constantly, and which he frequently expressed, and this is indicated by the omission of the word “*amar*,” which would imply that these words were articulated just once.

The message which the Riva here conveys is clear: we should be reflecting upon our blessings and our appreciation of all what we have far more than we reflect upon our troubles and hardships. It is certainly natural, and acceptable, to express one’s distress and anguish, just as Moshe expressed his disadvantaged position as “a foreigner in a strange land.” However, when reflecting upon our lives, our primary point of focus must be on “*Elokei avi be-ezri*” – all the many blessings that we’ve been granted, all the ways in which we have been helped, all the good fortune we have received for which we should feel grateful. Many times, we find ourselves doing just the opposite – underscoring in our minds our struggles and difficulties, and overlooking our good fortune. The Riva, noting the Torah’s subtle shift in its discussion of the names of Moshe’s sons, teaches us to focus our attention on the many blessings we have been given, and to minimize, as much as possible, our feelings of grief and frustration over our struggles in life.

Monday

The Torah tells in Parashat Yitro of *Benei Yisrael*’s encampment at the foot of Mount Sinai, informing us that upon arriving in the Sinai desert, they encamped “*neged ha-har*” – literally, “opposite the mountain,” meaning, facing Mount Sinai. Rashi, citing the *Mekhilta*, comments, “Whenever you find [the word] *neged*, [it means] facing east.” When the Torah describes a person or group of people’s position with the word “*neged*,” it indicates that the person or group was facing eastward.

The Rebbe of Kotzk quipped that underlying this seemingly technical remark is a profound insight into the nature of religious life. He suggested that on a deeper level, Rashi is teaching that whenever a person experiences “opposition” (“*neged*”) and struggle, then he can rest assured that he is facing “eastward” – the direction commonly associated with holiness and virtue. If a person finds himself struggling to do the right thing, regularly confronting difficult challenges and obstacles in his efforts to live righteously, then he can be certain that he is living the right way, that he is doing precisely what he is supposed to do – trying to be the best he can.

If we wish to find some connection between the Kotzker Rebbe’s creative reading of Rashi’s comment and the context of this comment, we might point to the fact that *Benei Yisrael*’s journey to Sinai was not an easy or simple one. Tradition teaches that *Benei Yisrael* were steeped in the pagan culture of Egypt during their period of bondage, as indicated by the description of the prophet Yechezkel (20). Reaching the point where they were worthy of beholding God’s revelation and receiving the Torah entailed a long, difficult process. Naturally, then, the trek from Egypt to Sinai was fraught with hardship, with *Benei Yisrael* bitterly complaining and even rejecting Moshe’s leadership on several occasions – at the shores of the *Yam Suf*, in Mara, and later when they demanded food and then water. And *Chazal* teach that Amalek’s attack at Refidim served to punish *Benei Yisrael* for their lack of faith expressed when they doubted God’s ability to provide water (as cited by Rashi, 17:8). This period marked a critical time of growth, a process which did not go smoothly. *Benei Yisrael* failed on several occasions, but eventually reached the point where they stood and proclaimed in unison their unbridled devotion to God’s law.

It is to this model, perhaps, that the Rebbe of Kotzk seeks to draw our attention in his clever interpretation of Rashi’s comment concerning the word “*neged*.” Just as *Benei Yisrael*’s process of growth from Egypt to Sinai was fraught with struggle and hardship, similarly, our lifelong journey to “Sinai,” our continuous quest for growth and achievement, will, necessarily, meet obstacles and challenges. If we find religious observance to be easy, undemanding, convenient and perfectly smooth, then we are not “facing” the right direction, and we will not reach “Sinai.” The lifelong trek to excellence should resemble *Benei Yisrael*’s journey to Sinai, bringing us struggles and requiring hard work and effort. If we expect religious life to be simple and straightforward, then we will either delude ourselves into thinking we’re leading a religious life when we aren’t, or we will simply give up when we face real challenges. The Kotzker Rebbe reminds us that struggle and difficulty are part of the process of growth, and thus when we confront struggles and difficulty, we should feel encouraged, rather than despair, as this is the greatest indicator that we are headed in the right direction.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Yitro tells of the preparations for *Ma’amad Har Sinai* – the Revelation at Mount Sinai – which began with God summoning Moshe to the top of the mountain and delivering a message for him to relay to *Benei Yisrael*. God opens this prophecy by proclaiming, “You saw what I did to Egypt, and that I carried you on the wings of eagles and brought you to Me” (19:4).

A surprising reading of this verse appears in *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel*, which explains that God transported *Benei Yisrael* to the Land of Israel on the night of the Exodus. He carried them “on the wings of eagles” to the site of *Beit Ha-mikdash*, where they partook of the paschal sacrifice, and then He promptly brought them back to Egypt, from where they were then driven by Pharaoh.

This unusual reading of the verse points to the halakhic anomaly of the paschal sacrifice observed by *Benei Yisrael* on the night of the Exodus. *Halakha* strictly forbids slaughtering sacrifices anywhere outside the *Beit Ha-mikdash* (or outside the courtyard of the *Mishkan*, when it stood), and yet *Benei Yisrael* were commanded to observe this sacrificial ritual in Egypt. It seems, at least at first glance, that *Targum Yonatan* sought to resolve this question by depicting *Benei Yisrael* as miraculously “flying” to the site of the Temple in Jerusalem for the observance of the *korban pesach*.

We might, however, prefer an allegorical understanding of this passage. Many sources speak of the *korban pesach* observance on the night of the Exodus as a vitally important display of disengagement from the pagan culture of Egypt. *Benei Yisrael* were commanded to place the sacrificial blood on their doorposts, publicly announcing their devotion to God and their rejection of the Egyptians’ worship of cattle, after which they remained in their homes throughout the night partaking of the sacrifice. This seclusion marked their withdrawal from Egyptian paganism, in which they had been deeply entrenched over the course of their period of exile. Although they were in ancient Egypt, a society which many sources portray as especially decadent and immoral, and they had been steeped in that society’s mores, *Benei Yisrael* succeeded that night in breaking themselves away and creating oases of sanctity in their homes.

*Targum Yonatan* perhaps seeks to impress upon us that this experience was considered, on some level, as significant as the experience of offering a sacrifice in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. As *Benei Yisrael* did the best they were capable of doing on that night, withdrawing from Egyptian culture and creating an aura of sanctity in their homes, this observance is worthy of being equated with the offering of sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem. Nothing more is expected of us than what we are capable of at any given moment. And thus if the best *Benei Yisrael* could do is publicly withdraw from Egyptian paganism by performing the paschal ritual in Egypt, then they were credited with a great achievement; they did something as sacred as frequenting the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The message being conveyed is that we are considered to have done something sacred anytime we do the best we can in any given circumstance. Even if we are figuratively distant from the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, far from the pristine spiritual state that we should ideally strive to reach, we are nevertheless deemed sacred if we achieve the most we can in “Egypt,” in our far less than ideal circumstances, each of us on his or her own level. Even modest achievements are sacred and significant if we exert maximum effort and do all we can under the circumstances.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Yitro of Moshe’s appointment of judges to assist him in addressing the many different questions and conflicts that arose among the people. Moshe made this decision at the recommendation of his father-in-law, Yitro, who saw Moshe devoting his entire day to addressing the people’s questions. Yitro advised Moshe to find “men of distinction, who are God-fearing, men of truth, and who despise ill-begotten money” to serve as judges and thus alleviate his burden (18:21). Several verses later, we read that “Moshe chose men of distinction [*anshei chayil*] from among all of Israel and appointed them leaders over the nation” (18:25). As several commentators noted, Yitro listed several qualifications that the leaders should possess, but Moshe chose people who were only “*anshei chayil*” and did not necessarily have the other credentials.

Among the various explanations offered for this discrepancy is the approach suggested by Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni, who write that the quality of “*anshei chayil*” is the only one among those listed by Yitro which could be definitively recognized. These commentators understand the term “*anshei chayil*” as referring to people with the strength and fortitude to handle the burden of leadership. This quality can be definitively discerned, whereas the others – a person’s fear of God, honesty, and aversion to illegal profiteering – are characteristics that only God can recognize with certainty. No human – not even Moshe, the greatest prophet who ever lived – is capable of conclusively and accurately assessing another person’s level of morality and fear of God. Therefore, Moshe chose people who were “*anshei chayil*,” but did not attempt to find people with the other characteristics mention by Yitro, given the inability to know with certainty that a person possesses these characteristics.

This explanation should remind us of the need to reserve judgment and avoid making assumptions about other people’s spiritual standing. As perceptive as we think we are, our ability to truly understand people and judge their character will always be limited. We should admire the fine qualities we see manifest in other people, and be prudently cautious of people whom we have reason to suspect, but we must avoid making definitive judgments about them. All people have a vast, complex inner world that cannot be seen – and certainly not understood – by others. By recognizing how little we are able to see and understand about the people around us, we will be less judgmental, less critical, and more capable of extending the love, kindness and respect that we ought to be according to all people.

Thursday

The fourth of the Ten Commandments is the weekly observance of Shabbat. God commands, “Do not do any work – you, your son, your daughter, your servant, your maidservant, your animal and your foreigner in your gates” (20:10).

Rav Yechezkel of Shinova, in his *Divrei Yechezkel*, tells that there was once a convert to Judaism who felt disheartened, or even offended, by this verse, which lists children, servants and animals before “foreigners.” In its list of those who must refrain from work on Shabbat, the Torah mentions the foreigner – people from other nations who joined *Am Yisrael* – last, after even the animals. The sequence in this list appears to progress from the highest to lowest stature – adults, children, servants, and animals – and concludes with the foreigners, suggesting that they are considered inferior even to animals.

The Rebbe of Shinova proceeds to offer a clever reason for why this sequence does not suggest any disrespect to converts. He explains that the Torah first commands a person to observe Shabbat and to ensure that all those under his authority – his children, servants and animals – also refrain from forbidden work on this day. Then, the Torah emphasizes that foreigners are no different from any other person in this regard, as they, too, must observe Shabbat like everybody else. In other words, the Torah mentions children, servants and cattle before mentioning the convert because their observance is the responsibility of their parents, master or owner, and not their own personal obligation. The convert, by contrast, is personally responsible for his own Shabbat observance, just like other members of the nation. In essence, then, according to the Shinover Rebbe’s reading, the Torah here instructs, “Do not do any work, and ensure that those under your authority likewise refrain from work; and this command applies equally to converts, as well.”

This discussion is perhaps intended to emphasize the convert’s personal responsibility for his religious observance, despite the challenges and disadvantages he faces coming from a foreign background. The Torah on numerous occasions impresses upon us the obligation to care for and assist foreigners, who face unique difficulties by virtue of their origins. The Rebbe of Shinova here makes the point that despite the obligation for others to lend the foreigner much-needed assistance, nevertheless, he must take personal responsibility for his religious observance. He must not see himself as dependent on other people for his *mitzva* performance. Despite the special challenges he faces, he is not like a child or servant, whose religious responsibility rests upon the shoulders of the parent or master. While others are certainly expected to help him, he is expected to do his part in working to overcoming the challenges he faces in his efforts to satisfactorily observe the Torah’s laws.

This message, of course, applies not only to converts, but to all of us. The challenges we confront as we try to observe the Torah do not absolve us of our responsibilities, and do not allow us to wait until others help us. We must not put our religious commitment on hold while wait for somebody to come along to inspire us, to energize us, or to somehow make *mitzva* observance easier, more convenient, more appealing or more exciting. In a sense, we are all like “foreigners,” as each of us faces difficulties of one sort or another in our religious lives. The Shinover Rebbe’s insight teaches us that we need to accept, embrace and devote ourselves to our Torah obligations despite the challenges we face, without expecting others to assume this responsibility for us.

Friday

The fourth of the Ten Commandments begins, “*Zakhor et yom ha-Shabbat le-kadesho*” – commanding that we “remember” to observe Shabbat as a sacred day (20:7). Rashi, citing the *Mekhilta*, famously comments, “*Zakhor ve-shamor be-dibur echad ne’emru*” – that God simultaneously proclaimed this command of “*Zakhor et yom ha-Shabbat*,” and the command in the version of the Ten Commandments which appears in Sefer Devarim (5:12), “*Shamor et yom ha-Shabbat*” (“Guard the day of Shabbat”). The command to observe Shabbat is formulated differently in these two versions because God actually uttered both “*zakhor*” and “*shamor*.”

The common explanation of the *Mekhilta*’s comment, as the Ramban famously writes in his commentary to Parashat Yitro (20:7), is that the commands of “*zakhor*” and “*shamor*” refer to the two fundamental aspects of Shabbat observance. The command of “*shamor*” speaks of the obligation to refrain from the various forms of forbidden activity, whereas “*zakhor*” instructs that we actively treat Shabbat as a special day of sanctity. God is said to have issued both commands simultaneously to impress upon us that both elements of Shabbat observance are equally vital.

Rav Yosef Salant, in his *Be’er Yosef*, offers a different explanation for the significance of “*zakhor*” and “*shamor*.” Somebody who is charged with guarding an object must ensure not only that he does not cause it harm, but also that it is not taken or damaged by other people. Therefore, Rav Salant writes, the command of “*shamor*,” which requires us to “guard” Shabbat, refers to the obligation to try to protect Shabbat from violation. Beyond our personal obligation to observe Shabbat – “*zakhor*” – we are also required to do what we can to minimize Shabbat desecration by others.

On the basis of this theory regarding “*zakhor*” and “*shamor*,” Rav Doron David Gold suggests in his work *Orchot Mussar* (pp. 446-447) an insightful explanation for the famous story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai told in Masekhet Shabbat (33b). The Gemara tells that after Rabbi Shimon and his son spent twelve years hiding in a cave, engrossed exclusively in Torah study, they finally left the cave and saw people working as farmers. Rabbi Shimon and his son could not bear the sight of Jews involved in mundane activities instead of devoting their time to Torah learning, and were enraged by what they saw. The Gemara describes that a “fire” erupted wherever they looked. A heavenly voice condemned the rabbis for “destroying” the world, and ordered them back into the cave. They left a year later, on a Friday afternoon, and they saw a man running with two bundles of fragrant myrtle branches. Rabbi Shimon and his son asked the man why he was carrying these bundles, and he explained that he was bringing them home in honor of Shabbat. He was bringing two bundles, he said, to correspond to the dual commands of “*zakhor*” and “*shamor*.” Rabbi Shimon said to his son, “Look at the Jews’ love for *mitzvot*!”

Rav Gold explains that the association drawn between fragrant myrtle branches and the commands of “*zakhor*” and “*shamor*” sent an important message to Rabbi Shimon and his son. These commands, according to the *Be’er Yosef,* express the obligation to both observe Shabbat and to try to ensure that others do so, as well. Rabbi Shimon and his son were shown that this can be achieved only in a pleasant manner, through love, affection, respect and sensitivity. If we feel distraught by other people’s disregard for *mitzvot*, the proper response is not the anger shown by Rabbi Shimon and his son when they first left the cave, but rather the “fragrance” of myrtle branches. It is specifically by projecting warmth, kindness and joy, by displaying the beauty and appeal of Torah life, that we are able to inspire people to embrace *mitzva* observance.

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