**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VEZOT HABERAKHA - PARASHAT BEREISHIT**

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Motzaei Shabbat

In Parashat Vezot Haberakha, we read the blessings which Moshe proclaimed to *Benei Yisrael* just before his passing. The Torah introduces these blessings by saying, “This is the blessing with which Moshe, the man of God, blessed the Israelites.” Curiously, the Torah here refers to Moshe as “*ish ha-Elokim*,” marking the only instance where he is given this lofty appellation. Rav Saadia Gaon explains this phrase to mean “*sheli’ach ha-Elokim*” – “the messenger of God.” Apparently, Rav Saadia Gaon understood that the Torah added this title in this context in order to make it clear that Moshe uttered these blessings at the Almighty’s behest. Although we do not find God commanding Moshe to proclaim these blessings, the Torah indicates that this is the case by noting that Moshe spoke these blessings in the capacity of his role as God’s messenger. This explanation appears more explicitly in the commentary of Ibn Ezra, who writes that the Torah refers to Moshe as “*ish ha-Elokim*” to inform us that these blessings were spoken prophetically.

This approach is taken also by Netziv, in his *Ha’ameik Davar* commentary, where he adds that the Torah found it necessary to emphasize this point in order to distinguish Moshe’s blessings from the other blessings given to *Benei Yisrael*. As Netziv writes, Yaakov proclaimed blessings to each of his sons before his passing, and *Benei Yisrael* were later blessed by the gentile prophet Bilam. The Torah introduces Moshe’s blessings by stressing that they were spoken by “the man of God” in order to impress upon us the special quality of these blessings. As opposed to the blessings given by Yaakov and by Bilam, Moshe’s blessings were spoken through prophecy, and they must therefore be regarded as though they were spoken directly by God Himself.

Interestingly enough, Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch presents the precise opposite approach. He suggests that the Torah refers to Moshe here as “*ish ha-Elokim*” specifically because these blessings, as opposed to virtually everything else that Moshe spoke to the people, were not communicated via prophecy. Rav Hirsch writes:

But just because this blessing was not God’s declaration but Moshe’s, this description of the personality who spoke here tells us that nevertheless these words are to be accorded an incomparably higher value than if they contained merely the speech of an ordinary man. It was still “*Moshe ish ha-Elokim*” who pronounced the blessing here, still the man whom God deemed worthy to be in such close relationship to Him, and even if this *berakha* was perhaps not said “*be-derekh nevu’a*” [via prophecy] it was still in any case inspired by *ru’ach ha-kodesh* [divine inspiration].

According to Rav Hirsch, the Torah here seeks to emphasize that although Moshe spoke here from his own mind and heart, and was not communicating words he received via prophecy, his blessings are nevertheless valuable and precious. Moshe did not convey these blessings as a prophet, but he pronounced them as a “man of God,” somebody who had devoted his entire life to serving God and fulfilling the mission God assigned to him, and this suffices to make his words significant and worthy of careful study and analysis.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted the discussion among the commentators concerning the opening verse of Parashat Vezot Haberakha, which introduces Moshe’s blessings to *Benei Yisrael* by saying, “This is the blessing with which Moshe, the man of God, blessed the Israelites” – referring to Moshe as “*ish ha-Elokim*” (“the man of God”), a title not given to him in any other context.

Rav Avraham Saba, in his *Tzeror Ha-mor*, suggests that the Torah refers here to Moshe as “*ish ha-Elokim*” because the blessings he pronounced before his death reflect his “Godlike” quality. Moshe died on the east bank of the Jordan River, without fulfilling his mission of leading *Benei Yisrael* into the Promised Land, because of the mistake he made at Mei Meriva when the people angrily shouted at him and hurled insults at him while demanding water. While it is unclear what precisely Moshe did wrong at that incident – a topic addressed at length by the commentators – it is clear that the people were partly to blame for the tragic consequences. It would have been understandable if Moshe had harbored resentment towards the nation for creating a tense situation which led to his failure. But Moshe felt no such hostility, and continued to lovingly tend to *Benei Yisrael* during their final months in the wilderness, and even now, as he was about to die because of his mistake, his parting words were affectionate blessings to the nation, wishing them a bright future of success and glory. At this moment, Moshe truly showed he was an “*ish ha-Elokim*,” that he was indeed like the Almighty. God continues to care for us and provide us with our needs even when we violate His commands and fail to fulfill His wishes. He is patient and forgiving even when we are sinful. He showers us with blessing even when we disappoint and betray Him. Moshe, the “*ish ha-Elokim*,” followed this example and extended his love and blessings to the people even when they were the cause of his downfall.

The celebration of Sukkot marks the conclusion of two distinct series of festivals: the festivals of Tishrei (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot), and the festivals celebrating the various stages of the harvest (Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot). It marks the culmination of the period of repentance and atonement, as the *sukka* symbolizes our close, intimate bond with the Almighty after we’ve repented and earned His forgiveness. In addition, it marks the end of the harvest season, when we express our gratitude for the material benefits He has graciously granted us, and we thus sing His praises holding four different types of plants and reside outside in nature, thanking Him for His bounty. In truth, however, these two aspects of Sukkot are very closely related to one another. On Sukkot, we express gratitude for our material blessings knowing that we do not necessarily deserve them. At the conclusion of the harvest, we take stock of our good fortune – at the same time as we take stock of ourselves, of our conduct, of our moral and spiritual successes and shortcomings, and we are overcome with joy over God’s grace and compassion, His continually showering us with blessing despite our underachievement. We commemorate the experience of our ancestors who were miraculously sustained through their travels in the uninhabitable desert even when they betrayed God; who received manna from the heavens each morning even when they worshipped a golden calf and when they assailed Moshe for what they perceived as his failed leadership. At the conclusion of the harvest and of the process of atonement, we reflect upon God’s unending kindness and love for His nation, the protection and care He provides us despite our many mistakes and deficiencies. And we are, hopefully, inspired to live our lives as an “*ish ha-Elokim*,” following His example of consistent, unconditional graciousness, and to dispense kindness even to those whom we might not consider strictly deserving of it, recognizing that even such people deserve our respect, goodwill and generosity – just as we rely on God’s kindness and grace even when we are unworthy of it.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Bereishit tells the famous, tragic story of Kayin, who murdered his brother, Hevel. After God spoke to Kayin to condemn him for his crime and announce that he would endure a life of wandering, Kayin expressed his fear that people would seek to kill him for murdering his brother. God then reassured Kayin by pronouncing a death sentence upon anyone who would kill him (4:15).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 22:12), commenting on this exchange, tells that after Kayin’s crime, all the animals came to demand justice for Hevel’s murder. Even the snake of *Gan Eden* that had persuaded Chava to partake of the forbidden fruit, thereby bringing death to the world, came to demand justice. God responded to all of them that anybody who killed Kayin would be put to death.

How might we understand this Midrashic image of the animals and beasts – and even the snake of Eden – standing up to demand Kayin’s execution for Hevel’s murder?

Rav Moshe Amiel, in his *Hegyonot El Ami* (vol. 1, pp. 263-4), explains that *Chazal* here seek to illustrate the haste, zeal and passion with which people rush to condemn and criticize wrongdoing. All too commonly, people who display little passion and devotion to religious values and principles become riled and are quick to judge and condemn violators of religious values and principles. The scene depicted in the Midrash symbolically speaks of this phenomenon, of “animals” bereft of ethical scruples suddenly portraying themselves as bastions of morality in the face of another person’s wrongdoing. As Rav Amiel observes, the easiest – and hence most popular – of all the Torah’s *mitzvot* is the command of “*u-vi’arta ha-ra mi-kirbekha*” – condemning wrongdoing and calling out violators. It is far more appealing to denounce somebody else’s misconduct or poor character than to work to improve our own conduct and character, because it allows us to effortlessly feel superior without having to change ourselves. *Chazal* here alert us to the fact that even the snake of *Gan Eden* can criticize and condemn, that joining a chorus of censure – even if at times is the right thing to do – does not make one pious. We become righteous by working hard to improve ourselves, not by rushing to seize every opportunity to self-righteously condemn others.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Bereishit the story of Kayin and Hevel, which began when Kayin decided to bring an offering to God, after which his brother, Hevel, chose to do the same. For a reason not disclosed by the Torah, God accepted Hevel’s sacrifice, but not Kayin’s. (Rashi explains that God sent fire to consume Hevel’s offering to express His acceptance of the sacrifice.) Kayin felt very distraught, and God responded with a syntactically difficult remark that has lent itself to many different interpretations: “*Ha-lo im teitiv se’eit ve-im lo teitiv la-petach chatat roveitz*” (4:7). Onkelos – referenced approvingly by Rashi – explains this verse as referring to forgiveness. God was telling Kayin, “If you improve your ways, you will be forgiven, and if you do not improve, your sin will be stored until the day of judgment” – meaning (as Rashi explains), the judgment that will take place after death. The difficulty with this explanation, however, lies in the seeming irrelevance of repentance to Kayin’s situation. He was distressed over his offering’s having been rejected by God, an understandable reaction which does not appear to be addressed by a reminder about the notion of repentance.

Rav Yitzchak Yaakov Rabinowitz of Biala, in his *Divrei Bina*, suggests a different interpretation of this verse, according to which God indeed directly addressed Kayin’s reaction to the rejection of his offering. The Rebbe of Biala understands the word “*se’eit*” in this verse (which Onkelos translated as referring to forgiveness) to mean “bear,” or “tolerate.” He explains that God was telling Kayin, “*Im teitiv*” – if one wishes to act properly, then “*se’eit*” – he will patiently and humbly accept failure and rejection. Such a person will not fall into despair when he sees that his efforts and sacrifices have been for naught, that he worked hard to achieve but did not succeed. But “*im lo teiteiv*” – the wrong way to live and act – is “*la-petach chatat roveitz*” – to see one’s past sins and failures lurking at every entrance, at every bold and ambitious goal he wishes to achieve. As the *Divrei Bina* writes, those who live wrongly use their prior failures as excuses with which to absolve themselves of the need to work hard to achieve. They allow their mistakes to block the “*petach*” – the “entranceway” to achievement, to conveniently discourage them from the prospect of achieving in the future.

According to this explanation, we might say that God’s response to Kayin’s despondency was an answer to the question of how to reconcile the bold ideals by which the Torah demands that we live, with our flawed and imperfect reality. How can we be expected to abide by the Torah’s rigorous standards of conduct if our human frailties and faults all but guarantee our occasional, if not frequent, failure? The *Divrei Bina*’s answer to this question is “*se’eit*” – living with patience and with the trust in our ability to improve. Kayin’s mistake was despairing when his efforts to earn God’s favor did not succeed, and God therefore taught him the importance of “*se’eit*,” of patiently bearing the shame and frustration of failure, utilizing it as an impetus to try harder, rather than allowing it to sow despair. Our mistakes should not break our spirits or discourage us, and should instead be viewed as an inevitable part of the lifelong process of growth, which should motivate us to redouble our efforts and strive for greater heights of achievement.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Bereishit tells the famous story of the snake in *Gan Eden* which persuaded Chava to partake of the fruit of the tree which God proclaimed forbidden. The snake falsely claimed that God forbade eating that tree’s fruit for “selfish” reasons, because partaking of the fruit would endow a person with God-like intelligence. The Torah then tells that Chava saw “that the tree was good for eating and that it was desirable to the eyes,” and so she took some fruit and ate it (3:6).

What exactly did Chava see that made her violate God’s explicit command and partake of the forbidden fruit? Was it the snake’s argument that led her to eat the fruit, or the fruit’s tempting appearance?

Rashi explains that Chava “saw” the correctness of the snake’s claim. When the verse speaks of Chava’s seeing the fruit’s appeal, according to Rashi, it means that she accepted what the snake said – that God forbade eating the fruit only because the fruit would be beneficial to her. This is also the approach taken by the Radak.

In a slightly different vein, the Ramban writes that Chava had initially presumed that God prohibited eating the fruit because it was toxic or otherwise harmful. But after hearing what the snake said, she carefully examined the fruit, and realized that it was, in fact, tasty, and so she decided to eat it.

A much different approach is suggested by Chizkuni, who proposes that the description of Chava’s positive impression of the fruit is presented as the reason why she proceeded after eating it to share it with Adam. According to this explanation, Chava ate the fruit because she was persuaded by the snake, and then, after seeing how flavorful the fruit was, she decided to bring some to her husband.

Yet another explanation is offered by Rav Shlomo Kluger, in his *Imrei Shefer*, where he writes that Chava examined the forbidden fruit in response to the snake’s claims, and found, to her surprise, that it was of a higher quality than the other fruit in the garden. What ultimately led Chava to her mistake was her conclusion that the prohibited fruit was better than the other fruit. It was simply inconceivable in her mind that specifically the choicest fruit in the garden would be off-limits to her and Adam. She therefore reached the conclusion that the snake must be correct, that there was in truth nothing wrong with the forbidden tree, and it could be eaten.

This insight into the sin of the forbidden tree points to one of the mistakes that commonly lead to wrongdoing. Oftentimes, conduct which the Torah forbids seems preferable and more appealing than the conduct it allows or requires. The “forbidden fruit” strikes us as simply too good or beneficial to have been declared “off-limits.” Chava’s mistake reminds us that we must trust God’s commands and firmly believe that whatever He proscribed cannot ever to our benefit, even when it appears more appealing than that which He permitted. Although at times it might outwardly seem we would be better off ignoring the Torah’s obligations and restrictions, we must remember that there is never anything more beneficial than strictly complying with God’s laws.

Thursday

On several occasions in the story of the world’s creation in the first section of Parashat Bereishit, God’s pronouncement of a stage of creation is followed by the words “*va-yehi khein*” – “and it was so.” For example, this phrase appears after the creation of the firmament which separated between heaven and earth (1:7), and when God pronounced the formation of dry land on earth (1:9). One instance of this phrase, however, seems somewhat difficult to understand. After Adam’s creation, we read, God instructed Adam that he was given plants and fruits to eat, as were the animals, and the verse then concludes, “*va-yehi khein*” (1:30). Unlike in the previous instances of “*va-yehi khein*,” where this phrase refers to the creation of that which God proclaimed should exist, here, the context is the designation of vegetation as food for animals and human beings. The question thus arises as to the meaning of “*va-yehi khein*” in this verse. What “came into being” after God informed Adam of the vegetation assigned to him and to the other creatures as food?

The Radak explains that “*va-yehi khein*” in this verse means that God created the desire within each creature for the food appropriate for that species. This marked a distinct, and crucial, stage of the process of creation, whereby each species of animal – including the human being – was given a craving for the species of plants that are beneficial for that creature.

A different approach is cited in the name of Rav Simcha Bunim of Pashischa (in *Chedvat Simcha*, Parashat Bereishit). He suggested that the assigned vegetation actually became edible food only at the time of God’s pronouncement. While it is unclear precisely what this means, Rav Simcha Bunim claimed that until God announced to Adam that the various types of vegetation would serve as sustenance for different species, this vegetation had no nutritional qualities and could not be used for food. The phrase “*va-yehi khein*” thus refers to the nutritional properties of different species vegetation which make them suitable as sustenance for humans and animals, properties which were created once God made this pronouncement to Adam.

On this basis, Rav Simcha Bunim suggested answering a question posed by numerous commentators regarding the story told later of Hevel’s sacrificing sheep as an offering to God (4:4). The Gemara (Sanhedrin 59b) famously comments that meat was forbidden for human consumption until after the flood, and thus Hevel offered as a sacrifice something which was not permitted to be eaten. The commentators raised the question of whether Hevel’s sacrifice could be reconciled with the well-established rule (Menachot 6a) allowing sacrificing only food which is permissible for consumption. Seemingly, Hevel’s sacrifice violated this rule, as sheep were not proclaimed permissible for human consumption until after the flood. Rav Simcha Bunim suggested answering this question by asserting that before the flood, animals were not considered food at all. Just as vegetation had no nutritional properties until after God proclaimed to Adam that it should be used as food, similarly, other living creatures were not suitable at all for nourishing human beings until God’s proclamation to Noach following the flood. As such, sheep in Hevel’s time was not forbidden food; it was not food at all. It thus would not have violated the restrictions regarding offerings – just as Kayin, according to Midrashic tradition (Rashi, 4:3), brought inedible flax as his offering.

Friday

The Gemara in Masekhet Avoda Zara (8a) tells that on the first day Adam was created – the same day on which, according to rabbinic tradition, he partook of the forbidden fruit – he became frightened when the sun set. Having yet to experience the day-night cycle, Adam assumed that the newly-created world was coming to an end, that because of his violation of God’s command, God was destroying the earth. After crying in angst the entire night, he finally spotted new rays of light over the eastern horizon. Adam then understood that the world operates on a cycle of light followed by darkness, and his fears were allayed.

It has been suggested that this account of Adam’s experiences serves as an allegorical depiction of the cycle of “light” and “darkness” that so often characterizes our lives. Sometimes, as life “darkens,” we feel, as Adam did, that our world is coming apart, that we are permanently condemned to “darkness,” to hardship and gloom. On some occasions, as in the case of Adam, the “darkness” into which we find ourselves plunged resulted from our mistakes, the consequences of which appear to condemn us to perpetual darkness. The story told of Adam teaches us that darkness is followed by light, that hardship does not endure forever, that there is always hope for a brighter future no matter how dark the present appears.

A famous tradition cited by the Talmud Yerushalmi (Berakhot 8:5) tells of what happened on the second night of Adam’s life – which was Motza’ei Shabbat. On that night, the Yerushalmi relates, God showed Adam how to kindle fire, thereby providing him with a means of illumination during the dark of night. This tradition, of course, is the reason why we recite a special *berakha* over the light of a candle as part of the *havdala* service on Motza’ei Shabbat. Symbolically, the discovery of fire on Adam’s second night of life points to the fact that we are endowed with the capability to illuminate our darkness, to overcome hardship and distress to some degree and in some way. God has shown us that alongside our faith in the “light” that will ultimately shine, we are also able and expected to kindle our own “light,” to work towards alleviating our pain and improving our plight. In virtually any situation of “darkness,” there is at least one small “candle” that we can light, a way to make the situation at least slightly better. As we patiently wait and pray with faith, hope and optimism for the “darkness” to end, we should also be working to “brighten” our world in whatever small way we can, trusting in our God-given power to bring some light to even the darkest periods of life.

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