**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT MIKETZ**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Miketz of Yosef’s harsh treatment of his brothers when they came to Egypt to purchase grain. Now the Egyptian vizier who presided over the distribution of grain during a time of severe drought, Yosef accused his brothers – who did not recognize him – of coming to spy, and eventually took Shimon as a prisoner. He instructed them to return to Canaan and bring to him their youngest brother, Binyamin, to prove their innocence.

Many commentators noted how Yosef’s plan was to recreate the circumstances of the brothers’ crime against him. Now, just as then, their brother was being thrown into a “pit” – in this instance, a prison – and they would have to return home to their father and report that his son is missing. Yosef has them bring Binyamin and arranges that they would have to return to Yaakov and report that the son of his most beloved wife, Rachel, is gone – just as they did after Yosef was sold into slavery. (In response to Yehuda’s impassioned plea, however, Yosef reneges and reveals his identity to his brothers.)

It has been suggested that Yosef’s accusation against his brothers was also intended as a parallel, of sorts, to the event of *mekhirat Yosef*. Yosef accused them of coming as spies – “to see the hidden parts of the land” (42:9) – when in truth they had come out of the perfectly innocent desire to purchase grain. This is quite similar to what happened when Yosef was sold as a slave. He had come to the brothers innocently, with the intention of inquiring about their wellbeing, as Yaakov had requested. They, however – at least from what Yosef understood – suspected that he had come to “spy,” to pry into their private affairs and then report on them to their father. This is what led them to conclude that he had to be eliminated, either by being put to death or sold as a slave.

This parallel, however, brings into focus a crucial difference between the two incidents. Yosef cast allegations against his brothers that were entirely baseless. There was no reason at all to suspect them of having come to Egypt for any reason other than to purchase grain. When Yosef came to his brothers in Dotan, however, it was not unreasonable for them to assume that he had come to spy on them. He already a record of bringing negative reports about them to Yaakov (37:2), and he had spoken to them about his dreams of ruling over the family. The brothers had moved with their flocks to the area of Shekhem, far from the family’s home in Chevron, likely in order to distance themselves from Yosef, who was seeking to undermine their standing in the family and assert his authority. Now that Yosef had come after them, it was, seemingly, understandable that they suspected Yosef of coming to spy on them as part of his effort to impose his rule and authority.

Nevertheless, Yosef thought it was appropriate to arrange this “reconstruction” of his brothers’ crime against him, because the truth is that he had not come to spy against them. His message, perhaps, was precisely that their accusation about him was baseless. Despite their past history, they had no right to assume nefarious motives before even speaking to him and inquiring into the reason for his unexpected visit. He was as innocent when he came to Dotan as the brothers were when they came to Egypt. And thus their mistreatment of him was as cruel and unjustified as his hostility towards them when they were simply trying to purchase food for their families.

Yosef’s message is that we must give people the benefit of the doubt, and a chance to prove themselves, despite past tensions and hostility. We should not necessarily assume that people who were unkind and antagonistic in the past are acting the same way now. All people are given the opportunity to change, and we must allow them the opportunity to regain our trust and friendship.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Miketz tells of the experiences of Yosef’s brothers after they came to Egypt to purchase grain, a process which brought them to Yosef, whom they did not recognize, as he was now the Egyptian vizier. Yosef accused them of coming as spies, and forced them to bring their youngest brother, Binyamin, who had remained in Canaan. He took Shimon prisoner and then sent the others back to bring Binyamin. When the brothers returned with Binyamin, to their astonishment, they were brought to Yosef’s home and dined with him. The Torah tells, “*Va-yishtu va-yishkeru imo*” – “They drank and became intoxicated with him” (43:34).

Rashi, citing the Gemara (Shabbat 139a), comments that this was the first occasion when Yosef and his brothers drank wine since he was sold as a slave. Ever since that tragic incident, both Yosef and his brothers made a point of abstaining from wine, denying themselves the joy and gratification brought by intoxication. Now, however, when they were all finally reunited, they allowed themselves to drink.

The question naturally arises as to why the brothers drank on this occasion. Yosef, understandably, drank because he was finally reunited with his brothers, but the brothers, who at this point still did not know that the vizier was Yosef, had no reason to celebrate or to end their period of abstinence from wine. Why, then, did they drink?

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in his *Oznayim La-Torah*, suggests that the brothers had no choice but to drink wine because of the company they were in. They were hosts of the vizier who was jovial and festive, and so they, too, out of courtesy, needed to act in a similar fashion. Of course, under the circumstances, they did not feel any joy. While they certainly felt some degree of relief seeing Shimon out of jail and being reassured they would not be accused of theft despite their money having been returned to their bags, they still had to be anxious and concerned. Their families were starving in Canaan during a drought which had shown no signs of ending, they still needed to travel home from Egypt, and they were at the mercy of the whims of a ruler who had proven to be insensible, unpredictable and cruel. They also knew that somebody had tampered with their luggage during their previous trip in an apparent framing attempt, and this could easily happen again. They were, undoubtedly, anxious and uneasy, but had no choice but to act as though they joyful and content, like their host. And so they drank wine in order to lift their spirits so they could at least outwardly act joyfully, even though this is not at all how they felt.

The lesson that perhaps emerges from Rav Sorotzkin’s reading of the Gemara’s comment is that we are able, and should strive, to present a positive, upbeat image even in times of anxiety and distress. While this of course is not always possible, we should endeavor not to wear our troubles on our faces, and to be upbeat out of consideration for the people around us. The Gemara, according to Rav Sorotzkin’s reading, teaches us that the brothers suspended their vow of abstinence from wine in order to put themselves in a jovial mood out of respect for their host. We, too, should try, when possible, to exude positivity and warmth even when we feel uptight or upset.

Monday

The Ramban, in a famous passage in his Torah commentary (beginning of Parashat Behaalotekha), cites Rav Nissim Gaon as noting a Biblical allusion to the Chanukah miracle. The Torah’s account of the “*chanukat ha-Mishkan*” – the formal inauguration of the *Mishkan*, which appears at the end of Parashat Naso, is immediately followed by God’s command to Aharon concerning the kindling of the *menorah*. Rav Nissim Gaon – offering a slightly different version of the more famous Midrash cited by Rashi – explains that Aharon was disturbed by the fact that neither him nor his tribe, the tribe of Levi, participated in the *chanukat ha-Mishkan*. The leader of each the twelve tribes brought an elaborate series of sacrifices to celebrate this event, with the exception of Aharon, whose tribe did not bring any such offering. God sought to comfort Aharon by informing him of the rededication of the *Mikdash* that his descendants would lead much later, after the victory over the Greeks. This rededication, of course, was highlighted by the miraculous kindling of the *menorah*, and thus the command to Aharon regarding the *menorah* alludes to the Chanukah story, when his descendants would stand at the forefront of the Temple’s rededication. This knowledge was intended to ease Aharon’s concerns over his absence from the *chanukat ha-Mishkan*.

Rav Nissim Gaon here draws a contrast between two very different events. The *chanukat ha-Mishkan* marked the culmination of the construction of the *Mishkan*, in which the entire nation participated. The verses in Parashat Vayakhel describe at length the nation’s enthusiastic response to the call for materials, with everybody generously supplying all that we needed, to the point where an announcement was made instructing the people to stop donating. This collective nature of the *Mishkan*’s construction is underscored by the fact that the two chief artisans, Betzalel and Ohaliav, were from, respectively, the tribes of Yehuda and Dan – the largest and smallest tribes. Appropriately, all the tribes took part in the celebration of the *Mishkan*’s inauguration, as the project marked the culmination of the joint, collective effort of the entire nation.

The rededication of the Temple during the time of the *Chashmonaim*, however, was, to a large extent, the culmination of the efforts of only the *kohanim*. The *Chashmonaim* initiated, spearheaded and led the campaign against the Greek oppression, and it was they who rededicated the Temple. Whereas the *Mishkan*’s inauguration was the result of a collective, nationwide effort, the rededication of the Temple in the *Chashmonaim*’s time was the result of mainly the *kohanim*’s efforts.

Rav Nissim Gaon’s comments perhaps teach us that the greatest contributions are made when there is a vacuum that needs to be filled, when there is an urgent need to which nobody else is working to fill. Theinauguration of the *Mishkan* did not require the *kohanim*’s participation; the Jews struggling under Greek oppression most certainly did. Of course, there is much to be said for joining the nation in times of national festivity and celebration, and thus Aharon’s discomfort is understandable. But Rav Nissim Gaon reminds us that far more important is to step up to the plate when nobody else is, to undertake initiatives that others do not wish to take, and to fill gaps that no one else can fill.

Tuesday

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 2) relates that during the time of the Greek persecution, the oppressors ordered *Benei Yisrael* to engrave upon “the horn of the ox” the inscription, “We have no share in the God of Israel.” Part of the effort to extinguish the flame of Jewish faith and practice was a decree calling for this formal proclamation to be inscribed on the people’s cattle.

The decree that these words should appear on “the horn of the ox” might be understood as simply a metaphor for publicity. Since most everyone owned oxen, this edict had the effect of making this formal proclamation widespread among all the Jews in *Eretz Yisrael* at that time. Still, we might wonder whether perhaps there is some deeper message conveyed by this depiction of the Greeks’ decree.

[Rav Asher Weiss](http://www.torahbase.org/%D7%A7%D7%99%D7%91%D7%9C%D7%95-%D7%A2%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%99%D7%94%D7%95-%D7%97%D7%95%D7%91%D7%94-%D7%AA%D7%A9%D7%A2%D7%94/) suggests that the answer emerges from a passage in the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 27:8) explaining the prominence of the ox in the realm of *korbanot*. When the Torah lists the three types of animals that can be used as a sacrifice (oxen, sheep and goats), it mentions oxen first (“*Shor o khesev o eiz*” – Vayikra 22:27). The Midrash explains that the ox is the most prominent sacrificial animal because of the association it conjures with the sin of the golden calf. The enemy nations point to this incident as evidence of the fact that *Am Yisrael* are not worthy of their designation as God’s special nation, and God therefore places the “ox,” the symbol of this incident, at the centerpiece of our service in the *Mikdash*, to counter this claim. The Midrash draws an analogy to a noblewoman who was rumored to have had an illicit relationship with a certain member of the royal class. After ascertaining that the allegations were false, the king sought to dispel the rumor by inviting this man to the dais at a royal feast held in the palace. By placing this individual in a position of special prominence, the king made it clear that the noblewoman did not commit any offense with him. Similarly, by placing the oxen at the forefront of the sacrificial system in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, God made it clear that *Am Yisrael* are not guilty of this sin.

Of course, as Rav Weiss noted, the analogy is not precise. After all, the “allegations” against *Benei Yisrael* were correct: they did, in fact, worship the golden calf, as opposed to the man in this story, who committed no offense. Nevertheless, Rav Weiss explains, *Chazal* drew this analogy because the golden calf serves as a basis for questioning *Benei Yisrael*’s commitment and consistent devotion. Enemy nations could point to that incident as evidence of the fact that we, like them, change deities and modes of worship at whim, without firmly committing ourselves to the worship of the one, true God. But in truth, the Midrash teaches, we are firmly committed, despite the unfortunate mistake of *cheit ha-eigel* and other serious mistakes that have been made.

This, Rav Weiss suggests, is why the Greeks wanted the Jews’ pronouncement to be made on “the horn of the ox.” They wanted to draw attention to the symbol of the golden calf, which, in their view, reflected the fact that there is, in truth, no substantive difference between the Jews and the pagans. They set out to show that we, like others, buckle under pressure and surrender our faith when put to the test. Just as we resorted to paganism at Sinai when Moshe did not return, we would likewise embrace the Greeks’ beliefs and lifestyle in the face of pressure.

We might add that this might be the symbolic significance of the pure jug of oil discovered by the *Chashmonaim* at the time of the Temple’s rededication. It demonstrated that although the majority of the Jews of the time indeed surrendered to the “impurity” of the Greeks, there remained – and there will always remain – a small “jug of pure oil,” an element of untarnished devotion to the Almighty. Just as the tragic incident of *cheit ha-eigel* does not diminish from our essential commitment to God, similarly, the widespread abandonment of Torah Judaism in the time of the Greek persecution did not signify that we were “contaminated” at the core. Even when we fail and make mistakes, we must not overlook the “pure jug of oil” within us that allows us the kindle a radiant, brilliant light of Godliness, which is capable of shining far more than we might initially expect.

Wednesday

The *Shulchan Arukh* (O.C. 673:2) codifies the well-known *halakha* of “*kaveta ein zakuk lah*,” which means that if one’s Chanukah candle was extinguished after it was lit, he is not required to rekindle it. Even though the candle did not burn for the minimum required duration, nevertheless, as long as it was lit with enough oil to burn for this period and under the proper conditions, one has fulfilled the *mitzva* and does not have to light the candle again. This issue is subject to a debate among the *Amoraim* (Shabbat 21a-b), and *Halakha* follows the position that one does not have to light a Chanukah candle that was extinguished after having been properly lit.

However, numerous *Acharonim*, including the *Peri Megadim* (*Eishel Avraham*, 673:12), Rav Yaakov Emden (in *Mor U-ketzi’a*) and the *Avnei Neizer* (503), qualify this ruling, and maintain that it applies only if the flame was extinguished unintentionally. If, one purposely extinguished the candle, for whatever reason, before it burned for the minimum-required duration, then he is required to rekindle the flame.

An exception is the *Sefat Emet*, in his commentary to Masekhet Shabbat (21b), who writes that even if one intentionally extinguished the candle, he has fulfilled his obligation and does not need to rekindle the flame. The *Sefat Emet* draws proof to this position from the Gemara’s discussion of the subject. The Gemara attempts to disprove the opinion of “*kaveta ein zakuk lah*” based on the *berayta*’s comment that the obligation of Chanukah candles extends until people are no longer walking about outdoors in the evening. This might be understood to mean that as long as people are walking about, one is required to ensure that his candles are lit, and thus he must rekindle a flame that has been extinguished. The Gemara dismisses this argument, however, explaining that the *berayta* refers either to the fact that one who did not light at the ideal time is still required to light as long as people are walking about outside, or that one must initially place the amount of oil necessary to sustain the flame as long as people are walking about. The *Sefat Emet* notes that the Gemara could have refuted this proof differently, by suggesting that the *berayta* refers to one who intentionally extinguished the candle. If, indeed, the view of *kaveta ein zakuk lah* concedes that one must rekindle the flame if he extinguished it intentionally, then the *berayta* can be reconciled with this view if we explain it as requiring rekindling the flame that one had purposely extinguished, as long as people are still walking about. The fact that the Gemara did not suggest this reading of the *berayta* suggests that this assumption is incorrect, as according to the view of *kaveta ein zakuk lah*, one does not have to rekindle the flame even if it was extinguished intentionally.

[Rav Asher Weiss](http://www.torahbase.org/%D7%A9%D7%90%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%91%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%91%D7%A2%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%99-%D7%97%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%9B%D7%94/) dismisses this argument, noting that the Gemara did not find it reasonable to explain the *berayta* in this vain. The Gemara occasionally advances the argument of “*atu bi-r’shi’i askinan*” (literally, “Are we really dealing with wicked people?”), which means that we do not assume a Mishna or *berayta* speaks of wicked people, unless this is clearly indicated. It stands to reason that in this instance, too, the Gemara did not accept the possibility that the *berayta* addresses the case of a person who intentionally extinguished the Chanukah candles.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Miketz of the dire predicament in which Yaakov and his sons found themselves after the Egyptian vizier – who was actually Yosef – demanded that the sons bring their youngest brother, Binyamin, to Egypt. Yaakov adamantly opposed allowing Binyamin, his youngest child, to travel to Egypt, but the vizier had warned the brothers not to come without Binyamin, and the family desperately needed to purchase grain from Egypt, as Canaan was ravaged by drought. (And, Shimon was imprisoned in Egypt, and would not be released until the brothers returned with Binyamin.) Reuven attempted to change Yaakov’s mind by granting Yaakov permission to kill his – Reuven’s – two sons if Binyamin did not come back safely from Egypt. Yaakov remained insistent, however, and declared, “*Lo yeireid beni imakhem*” – “My son will not go down with you [to Egypt]” (42:38).

The Midrash, in an unusual passage (*Bereishit Rabba* 91:9), tells that when Rabbi Tarfon would hear a “*davar shel batala*” – meaningless or absurd comment – he would reply by saying, “*Lo yeireid beni imakhem*.” He responded to absurd statements the way Yaakov responded to Reuven’s strange offer that Yaakov could kill his two sons if Binyamin did not return home safely.

Rav Moshe Rubenstein, in his [*Parperet Moshe*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=47826&st=&pgnum=259&hilite=), explains the message underlying the Midrash’s comment. The Midrash (as Rashi cites) previously remarked that in response to Reuven’s astonishing suggestion, Yaakov said, “This firstborn son [Reuven] is a fool. He tells me I can kill his sons; are they only his sons, and not mine?” In his mind, Yaakov ridiculed Reuven’s outrageous proposal. But when he spoke to Reuven, he did not criticize or mock him. He simply reiterated his stance, that he would not permit Binyamin to travel to Egypt. And this is the meaning of Rabbi Tarfon’s practice. When he heard an absurd idea or suggestion, he would not ridicule the speaker. Rather, following the precedent of Yaakov, he simply refused to accept it. Just because a statement can be ridiculed does not mean that it should be. The fact that a person says something foolish does not give others license to embarrass or mock him. Rabbi Tarfon, drawing upon Yaakov’s precedent, teaches us here an important lesson about maintaining dignity and respect in discourse. We can and should argue without poking fun at ideas which we find – even rightfully – absurd. Our proper response to such comments should be to ignore them or politely refuse to accept them, without humiliating the speaker.

Friday

We read in Parashat Miketz of Reuven’s startling proposal to Yaakov as he and his brothers attempted to persuade their father to allow Binyamin, the youngest brother, to join them in Egypt, as the vizier (Yosef) had demanded. Yaakov adamantly refused to allow Binyamin to join them, fearful that something might happen to Binyamin. Reuven tried to assure Yaakov by “offering” that Yaakov could kill his two sons if Binyamin did not return home safely (42:37). Yaakov, naturally, refused, and Rashi, citing the Midrash, writes that Yaakov (at least inwardly) ridiculed the suggestion that this “offer” would give him assurance of Binyamin’s safety.

The question arises as to what Reuven actually had in mind in making this proposal. Why did he think this would convince Yaaakov to allow Binyamin to travel to Egypt?

One simple possibility, perhaps, is that Reuven was merely expressing his confidence that Binyamin would return safely. He was not “offering” to Yaakov the “right” to kill his two sons if Binyamin did not return, but was rather committing to ensure Binyamin’s wellbeing to the point where he was prepared the wager his own sons’ life for it.

A different approach is taken by Rav Aryeh Nachum Lubetzky, in his [*Nachal Kedumim*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=7191&st=&pgnum=188&hilite=). He writes that Reuven was not “offering” to kill his sons, but was rather explaining to Yaakov that the alternative to sending Binyamin to Egypt was the death of Yaakov’s grandchildren. After all, as the Torah described several verses earlier, the famine in Canaan was dire, and the family had already consumed the rations that the brothers had brought with them from their initial trip to Egypt. They were all starving, and it would not be too long until some family members began dying from hunger. This, Rav Lubetzky writes, was the point Reuven was trying to make to Yaakov. Out of respect for his father, he did not want to come right out and say that he was killing his grandchildren. And so he instead conveyed this message in an awkward, roundabout way.

If, indeed, this was Reuven’s intent, this his comments to Yaakov perhaps serve as a warning against the tendency many of us have to obsess over one particular concern at the expense of everything else. Reuven charged that Yaakov was narrowly concerned with Binyamin’s wellbeing and thus lost sight of the broader picture, of the needs of the family at large. His preoccupation with Binyamin’s safety, at least from Reuven’s perspective, was literally putting the family’s lives at risk. Often, we stubbornly adhere to a particular matter, affording it such high priority that other, equally important concerns are neglected. We need to ensure that our concern for one “son” does not risk the entire “family”; that our passionate commitment to one issue does not lead us to neglect everything else.