**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BESHALACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The *haftara* for Parashat Beshalach is the story of the prophetess Devora and the war *Benei Yisrael* successfully waged under her leadership against the Canaanites (Shoftim 4-5). Devora is introduced in the opening verse of the *haftara* (4:4) as the wife of a man named “Lapidot,” a word which means “torches.” The Midrash (*Eliyahu Rabba*, 9) explains that Devora’s husband was given this name because of a unique contribution that he made. He was ignorant of Torah, the Midrash relates, and Devora suggested to him that he bring wicks to the *Mishkan* that would be used for illumination, and this way he would earn a share in the next world. The Midrash tells that Lapidot made especially thick wicks in order to increase the amount of light they would produce, and he brought them to the *Mishkan*. In commemoration of this unique *mitzva* which he performed, he was named “Lapidot,” alluding to the torches which burned with his wicks, illuminating the *Mishkan*.

The Midrash, reflecting on this story, comments, “I call heaven and earth as witnesses that whether a Jew or gentile, man or woman, servant or maidservant – in accordance with the actions one performs, so does the sacred spirit rest upon him.”

The story of Lapidot is told to instruct that each and every individual has the ability to “illuminate” the world in some way, however, small, and thereby earn “the sacred spirit” and his or her eternal reward. Lapidot was simple and unlearned, but he found a way to shine, to contribute, to give and to have an impact. And thus the Midrash shows us that no matter a person’s background, character and natural limitations, he or she has the capacity to make a meaningful contribution. This story also shows the importance of extending to one’s fullest and striving to excel in whatever he involves himself with. Once Lapidot decided to take upon this project, of making wicks for the *Mishkan*, he set out to do it in the best possible way, making the wicks especially thick, thereby enhancing the illumination in the *Mishkan*. In performing any task, big or small, we should aspire to do the very best job we can, and adhere to the highest standards.

No less significantly, the Midrash describes Devora as urging her unlearned husband to make his contribution by bringing wicks to the *Mishkan*. She did not complain about his ignorance of Torah, nor she ridicule or disrespect him because of his ignorance of Torah. What’s more, she did not even urge him to study, perhaps because she recognized that he was not suited for scholarship. Instead, she encouraged him to “shine” in a manner that was right for him. Rather than bemoan her husband’s lack of academic skills, and look down on him because of it, she instead identified his potential and encouraged him to use it to its very fullest.

The Midrash here teaches that instead of criticizing or disrespecting people for the qualities they lack, we should instead identify the qualities they have that could be used to “illuminate” in the world. In educating our children, particularly, we must ensure not to pressure them to try to accomplish what they are not cut out to accomplish, to be somebody whom they are not cut out to be, and instead help them find their special way to shine and bring more light and joy to the world.

Sunday

The *haftara* for Parashat Beshalach, taken from Sefer Shoftim (4-5), tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s resounding victory over the Canaanites who had oppressed them for twenty years, and the joyous song of praise sung by their leaders – the general, Barak, and the prophetess, Devora – to celebrate the triumph.

This story, like many others in Sefer Shoftim, begins with *Benei Yisrael* abandoning God and resorting to foreign worship: “The Israelites continued to do evil in the eyes of God…and so He handed them over to Yavin, king of Canaan…” (4:1). Following the pattern that runs through much of Sefer Shoftim, *Benei Yisrael* faced a dire crisis after abandoning God’s laws, and they then responded to their crisis by repenting and crying to God for help, in response to which He had a leader arise who led them to victory.

As the Midrash (*Shir Hashirim Rabba* 4:3) famously notes, however, this victory over the Canaanites appears to have been unique. We read that after the victory, *Benei Yisrael* enjoyed a forty-year period of peace and security (5:31), after which *Benei Yisrael* “did evil in the eyes of the Lord,” whereupon they came under attack by the nation of Midyan. The Midrash finds it significant that *Benei Yisrael* are described here not as “continuing” to betray God – the way their betrayal is normally described in Sefer Shoftim – but rather as “doing evil.” The implication, the Midrash notes, is that the nation’s betrayal of God after the defeat over the Canaanites did not continue the previous instances of betrayal, but rather began an entirely new chapter. The Midrash explains, “*Kevar machala shira le-she-avar*” – the song of praise which they sung brought them complete forgiveness for their past. The song, fundamentally, marked an end to the cycle of betrayal-crisis-repentance-salvation, such that when *Benei Yisrael* did once again turn to foreign worship, this was an entirely new development, and not a continuation of the previous pattern. Therefore, they are described not as “continuing” their sinful conduct, but rather simply as sinning.

How might we understand this notion, of *shira* (song of praise) erasing past mistakes, such that mistakes made subsequently mark a new page, and not a recurrence of past misconduct?

Over the course of life, we make many mistakes, and we oftentimes fail, in one way or another. This grim reality can sometimes lead us to view life as but a dismal pattern of failure, where one mistake follows another, albeit separated by small gaps of successes. The Midrash here perhaps teaches us how to avoid this dark, gloomy perspective on life – through “*shira*,” by genuinely and fervently celebrating our successes and good fortune. If we experience true joy, pride, gratitude and satisfaction when we achieve, when we succeed, when we do things right, then we drop the “baggage” of our past failures, so it does not accompany us to our next mistake. If we “sing” and rejoice after experiencing success, we stop our disappointment from accumulating into a weighty, debilitating emotional burden. Otherwise, if we do not properly appreciate and feel proud of our successes, we will view them as nothing more but brief flashes of light in a generally dark, unproductive life. The Midrash here urges us to “sing,” to celebrate, to appreciate and to feel gratified over our accomplishments, in order to ensure that we approach each mistake as a separate, independent misstep, and not part of a hopeless, lifelong pattern of failure.

Monday

The fourth chapter of Sefer Shoftim, which is read as the *haftara* for Parashat Beshalach, tells of the war *Benei Yisrael* waged against the Canaanites during the time of the prophetess Devora. The story begins by telling that Sisera, the Canaanite general, commanded a powerful army that included nine hundred iron chariots, “and he oppressed the Israelites forcefully for twenty years” (4:3). Under the leadership of their general, Barak, and with God’s assistance, *Benei Yisrael* defeated the Canaanites in battle, and Sisera was forced to flee, ultimately being killed by Yael, in whose home he sought refuge.

The description of Sisera oppressing *Benei Yisrael* “*be-chozka*” (“forcefully”) appears to refer to Sisera’s brutality in attacking and plundering *Benei Yisrael*’s territory. The Midrash (*Tanchuma*, Behar 25:3), however, suggests a different interpretation, understanding the word “*be-chozka*” to mean that Sisera ridiculed and mocked *Benei Yisrael.* The basis for this reading, as the Midrash cites, is a verse in Sefer Malakhi (3:13), in which God, through the prophet, charges, “*Chazeku alai divreikhem*” – “Your words have been harsh towards Me.” The root *ch.z.k.* in that context denotes the people’s disrespect towards God, as the prophecy continues, “You said: It is worthless to serve God, and what gain is there when we observe His will?” Just as the word “*chazeku*” in Malakhi’s prophecy refers to the people’s blasphemous speech about God, similarly, the word “*be-chozka*” used to describe Sisera’s oppression of *Benei Yisrael* refers to his harsh rhetoric, the degrading insults he spoke in an attempt to crush their spirits.

The Midrash draws a comparison between two different kinds of insults – insulting God by questioning the value of serving Him, and insulting other people, specifically, insulting those who are weaker and less successful, as in Sisera’s insults of *Benei Yisrael* who were under his rule. Similar to Malakhi’s charge that the people disparaged God by questioning the value of observing His commands, we sometimes might disparage other people by questioning the value of showing them sensitivity, concern and kindness. Especially, as in Sisera’s case, we might look disdainfully upon those who seem to us unimpressive and unaccomplished – just as *Benei Yisrael*’s seemed to Sisera – assigning to them in our minds a stature of lowliness, and thus concluding that we stand nothing to gain by befriending them or helping them.

Developing this comparison further, just as the precious value of *mitzvot* is not always apparent, similarly, we sometimes might not immediately see the precious value of our fellow human being. There are many *mitzvot* whose reasoning eludes our limited human comprehension, and whose value we must accept on faith, without ever thinking, “It is worthless to serve God.” Likewise, there are people whom we might not, at first, admire or respect, because their qualities and achievements are not readily apparent. The Midrash, by comparing the blasphemy described by Malakhi and Sisera’s disdain for *Benei Yisrael*, perhaps teaches us that we must believe in the value and worth of each and every human being even when it might be at first difficult to see. If we encounter somebody whom we instinctively dislike, or whom we initially find unimpressive, then rather than rashly dismiss this person as unimportant or unworthy of respect, we must trust that this individual, like all humans, has within him a sacred, divine spark, and is, in some way, deserving of admiration. Just as we are to trust in the great value of each and every *mitzva* even when its value is not immediately discernible, so must we trust in the great value of each and every individual, even if we our initial impression leads us not to.

Tuesday

We read in the *haftara* for Parashat Beshalach (Shoftim 4:6) of how the prophetess Devora summoned Barak, the nation’s general, and conveyed to him God’s command to mobilize an army on Mount Tavor in Northern Israel. Devora assured Barak that Sisera, the general of the Canaanites who oppressed *Benei Yisrael* at the time, would attempt to launch a strike from the Kishon Valley below the mountain, and God would then help Barak and his forces vanquish the enemy.

The Gemara in Masekhet Megilla (14b) criticizes Devora for summoning Barak, instead of extending him the honor of going to him to convey her prophecy. Devora is accused of “*yehiruta*” – preoccupation with honor and stature, which led her to insist on summoning Barak to her, rather than humbly going to him. The Gemara comments that another prophetess – Chulda, who lived much later, during the time of King Yoshiyahu – was guilty of a similar mistake. In the prophetic message she sent to Yoshiyahu, she addressed him as the “*ish*” (“man” – Melakhim II 22:15), instead of “king,” a display of disrespect which the Gemara attributes to a tinge of arrogance. The Gemara notes that because these two women were guilty of a slight degree of arrogance, they were both given unflattering names – a “*devora*” is a bee, and a “*chulda*” is a rat.

We find Devora criticized for this flaw also elsewhere in the Gemara – in Masekhet Pesachim (66b), where the Gemara cites Devora’s proclamation in the famous song of praise which she sung after *Benei Yisrael*’s triumph over the Canaanites: “Unwalled cities ceased in Israel; they ceased – until I, Devora, arose, until I arose as a mother for Israel” (Shoftim 5:7). The Gemara found it inappropriate for Devora to publicly pride herself over her successful achievements as a leader over *Benei Yisrael*, and teaches that her prophetic abilities were taken from her as a result. For this reason, several verses later in this song (5:12), Devora cries, “*Uri uri Devora, uri uri daberi shir*” – “Awaken, awaken, Devora; awaken, awaken, and sing a song!” Devora needed to plead to be “awakened” and capable of continuing her prophetic song, after having lost her prophetic capabilities due to her inappropriate expression of pride.

Returning to the Gemara’s comments in Masekhet Megilla, it is worth noting that the Gemara associates the names of these two prophetesses with the names of common pests, attributing these unflattering names to the tinge of arrogance which they exhibited. Bees and rodents are creatures which quite commonly arrive unwanted, and which people try to chase away. By linking Devora and Chulda’s inappropriately self-aggrandizing conduct with these creatures, the Gemara perhaps points to the fact that those who display arrogance and are overly concerned with their honor are, generally, not well-liked. People who promote themselves and seek recognition and respect often come across as “pests,” intruding where they do not belong and where they are not wanted. Arrogance is, of course, inherently wrong, but it also has the effect of making oneself unliked.

Devora and Chulda were outstanding, successful and influential leaders, both of whom played important roles in inspiring a nationwide process of repentance after a period of widespread abandonment of God. By noting the meaning of their names, and associating them with the tinge of arrogance which they displayed, the Gemara perhaps indicates that had they exhibited slightly more humility, they could have had an even greater impact. The small mistakes that they made, showing slightly too much concern for their honor, may have undermined, if only somewhat, their influence upon the people. The more humility we display, and the less attention we pay to our honor and prestige, the better impression we will make, and thus the greater our chances will be to have a positive influence upon the people around us.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Beshalach tells about the manna, the miraculous food which fell each morning for *Benei Yisrael* during their years of travel in the wilderness. The first day the manna fell, Moshe warned the people not to leave over any manna for the following day, and those who did found that the leftover manna had spoiled overnight. The exception was on Friday, when double the daily quantity was provided for each person, and the extra portion remained intact until the following day, Shabbat, when no manna fell. The first Shabbat after the manna began falling, when the people discovered that the leftover portion remained fresh, Moshe instructed them, “Eat it today, for today is Shabbat for the Lord; today, you will not find it in the field” (16:25).

The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (117b) famously infers from this verse the obligation of *shalosh se’udot* – to eat three meals on Shabbat. Moshe mentioned the word “*hayom*” (“today”) three times in his instructions to *Benei Yisrael* to eat the manna on Shabbat, alluding to a requirement to eat three meals over the course of Shabbat.

Rav Yosef Chaim of Baghdad (the “*Ben Ish Chai*”), in his *Ben Yehoyada* commentary, notes that rather than simply state this obligation, the Gemara first poses the question, “How many meals is a person required to eat on Shabbat?” It then answers, based on the aforementioned verse, that one must eat three meals. The *Ben Yehoyada* finds this presentation significant, and suggests that it indicates that all three meals constitute a single *mitzva*. Had the Gemara simply stated, “A person is obligated to eat three meals on Shabbat,” we would conclude that a person is obligated three times on Shabbat to conduct a meal, such that each meal fulfills its own, separate requirement. But the Gemara poses the question, “How many meals is a person required to eat on Shabbat,” which the *Ben Yehoyada* explains to mean, “How many meals is a person required to eat on Shabbat to fulfill his obligation to enjoy Shabbat?” Meaning, according to the *Ben Yehoyada*, the three Shabbat meals comprise a single obligation, such that if a person eats just one or two meals, he has not fulfilled a *mitzva* at all. Since there is but a single *mitzva* to eat three meals, one is not credited with any *mitzva* if he eats fewer than three meals. Therefore, according to this view, if one knows he will be unable to eat three meals on Shabbat, either because he does not have enough food, or because his medical condition does not allow him to eat three meals, there is no halakhic value in eating one or two meals. Since the three meals are components of a single *mitzva*, one who eats fewer than three meals does not fulfill any *mitzva*, and there is thus no value in eating only one or two meals without the third.

This also appears to be the position of Rav Chaim Binyamin Pontremoli, in his *Petach Ha-devir* (3:274:1), where he addresses the question of why the Sages did not institute the recitation of a *berakha* over the *mitzva* of *shalosh se’udot*. He answers by drawing a comparison to the *mitzva* of the four cups of wine on the night of the *seder* on Pesach, over which no *berakha* is recited. The Avudraham, as the *Petach Ha-devir* cites, explains that the Sages enacted the recitation of a *berakha* over a *mitzva* which we perform without any interruption, and thus no *berakha* is recited over the *mitzva* of the four cups, which are drunk at different stages over the course of the *seder*. By the same token, the *Petach Ha-devir* writes, since the *mitzva* of the three Shabbat meals is fulfilled on three separate occasions over the course of Shabbat, no *berakha* was instituted over this *mitzva*. This comparison would certainly suggest that, like the *Ben Yehoyada*, the *Petach Ha-devir* understood that one does not fulfill a *mitzva* at all by eating fewer than three meals on Shabbat, as they are three interdependent components of a single requirement.

However, Rav Chaim Chizkiyahu Medini, in his *Sedei Chemed* (*Pe’at Ha-sadeh* – *Ma’arekhet Berakhot*, 3) cites those who disagree, and maintain that each Shabbat meal constitutes a separate, independent obligation. And thus, according to this view, even one who cannot eat the third meal, for whatever reason, should eat two meals, as he thereby fulfills two *mitzvot*.

(Based on Rav Asher Anshel Schwartz’s [*Ma’adanei Asher*, Parashat Beshalach, 5778](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/32_16_78.pdf))

Thursday

Toward the beginning of the *Az Yashir* song of praise which *Benei Yisrael* sung after the miracle of the sea, they exclaimed, “…*sus ve-rokhevo rama va-yam*” – praising God for casting “the horse and its rider” into the sea (Shemot 15:1).

The Tosafists, in the *Hadar Zekeinim* commentary, note the significance of the fact that God drowned both the horses and the Egyptian horsemen when He had the waters of the sea fall back into place after *Benei Yisrael* safely crossed. They explain that after the miracle of the sea, God turned to each Egyptian horseman and asked, “Why did you chase after My children?”

The Egyptian responded, “The horse brought me against my will!”

God then turned to the horse and asked, “Why did you chase after My children?”

The horse, naturally, defended itself by saying, “The Egyptian brought me with his feet, with spurs, against my will!”

God then cast both the soldier and the horseman together into the sea, as both took part in the unjust pursuit of *Benei Yisrael*. This account presented by the *Hadar Zekeinim* appears in a slightly different version in the *Mekhilta*.

Often, we attribute our position in our lives, our conduct, our habits and our routines, on our “horse” – the natural current of life. Like the Egyptian in the Tosafists’ depiction, we defend our innocence by blaming our inadequacies on our circumstances, our surroundings, our natural instincts and weaknesses, and the influences to which we are subject. We perceive ourselves as helpless objects being carried by the “horse,” the flow of life and our ingrained tendencies, such that we cannot be held responsible for where we end up and what we do.

In truth, however, the “horse” is under our control. Nobody but we decide how to act and how to live our lives, notwithstanding our negative impulses and external influences against which we must struggle. We cannot excuse our shortcomings by saying, “This the way I am,” or by blaming our upbringing, our environment, the hardships we’ve endured, or any other factor. We are to assume responsibility for our conduct, recognizing that we are the “horsemen” who control where we go and what we do. It is only once we accept responsibility, and acknowledge our power over ourselves, that we can then work towards becoming better and actualizing our potential to its very fullest.

Friday

We read in Parashat Beshalach (16:15) that when *Benei Yisrael* saw for the first time the manna – the miraculous bread which God sent them each morning from the heavens as they traveled through the desert – they turned to one another and asked, “*Mann hu*?” – “What is it?” The Torah later tells (16:31) that *Benei Yisrael* named the heavenly food “*mann*,” presumably in commemoration of their initial reaction upon seeing this mysterious food which they had never before been shown and which they could not identify.

Rav Menachem Mendel of Riminov is cited as offering a creative reading of *Benei Yisrael*’s question, “*Mann hu*?” He explained that the manna, which was purely spiritual food originating from the heavens (according to one view, manna is the food eaten by the angels in heaven – Yoma 75b), had a profound spiritual effect upon *Benei Yisrael*. Eating the manna propelled them to great heights, such that they could no longer recognize one another. And so after eating the manna for the first time, *Benei Yisrael* asked about each other, “*Mann hu*” – “Who is this?” Everyone was elevated to great heights, and each person was thus surprised to discover how much his fellow had changed.

What might be the meaning behind this chassidic insight into the manna – that it transformed the people to the point where they asked about one another, “Who is this?”

The manna system is described by the Sages as the ideal form of nourishment, perfectly suited for sustaining a person. It came effortlessly each morning, not requiring any hard work, creativity, ingenuity or risks, and each person received the precise same amount, without the need for competition, thus avoiding all strife and discord. And, the manna was perfectly nourishing, fully satisfying the body’s needs without producing any waste. Rav Menachem Mendel of Riminov perhaps observes that very often, once people are freed from the pressures, hassles and tension of their daily struggles, they are capable of rising to great heights which they had never previously attained. While we are, of course, expected to strive towards greatness and to achieve even under difficult circumstances, in reality, many of us end up stifled by the rigors and hardships of life. *Benei Yisrael*’s reaction, as Rav Menachem Mendel of Riminov describes, shows us that we would be very surprised to see how much greatness lies beneath the surface within the people around us, but is suppressed because of their daily challenges. If only they received the “manna,” if the burden of pressure would be lifted from their shoulders, they would shine and excel. If we would be able to see our fellowman once he was “fed” the “manna,” released from the pain, troubles and anguish that he currently experiences, we would ask, “*Mann hu*” – “Who is this?”

If so, then this chassidic reading teaches us a profound lesson about favorable judgment, about recognizing that the flaws we see in the people around us might very well be the result of the heavy burden of stress or anguish that they bear. While we must all aspire to achieve despite such burdens, in our assessment of others we are to acknowledge the harsh realities of daily life that so often lead people to act in ways they wouldn’t if only they received “manna” to relieve them of their pressure and angst.

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