**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT YITRO**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Yitro tells of the Revelation at Mount Sinai, when God pronounced the Ten Commandments, the final of which is “*lo tachmod*” – the prohibition against coveting property belonging to one’s fellow (20:13). Ibn Ezra, in one of the famous passages in his Torah commentary, notes the question posed by many as to how the Torah could issue a command governing an emotion such as jealousy. While we readily understand the need for restraint, to control our emotions and resist the temptation to commit sinful actions such as theft, it seems difficult to understand how the Torah could prohibit a feeling. Ibn Ezra famously answers by drawing an analogy to a simple, poor peasant who sees a beautiful princess. This peasant, Ibn Ezra writes, will not desire an intimate relationship with the princess, because he knows that such a relationship is impossible. Similarly, Ibn Ezra writes, we are to perceive other people’s belongings as so far beyond our limits that we are incapable of envying them and desiring having what they have.

According to Ibn Ezra, then, the concept of “*lo tachmod*” is that the legal barrier between us and other people’s possessions should frame our perception such that we cannot even reach the point of jealousy.

A different analogy is suggested by Rav Tzvi Elimelech Shapiro of Dinov (the “*Benei Yissaskhar*”), in his work *Derekh Pikudekha* (*lo ta’aseh* 38), where he compares coveting somebody else’s possessions or life condition to desiring to have four legs like an animal, instead of just two. Whereas Ibn Ezra focused on the element of impossibility which should prevent us from feelings of jealousy, the Rebbe of Dinov focuses on our sense of self-identity. We do not desire four legs because we recognize and accept our identity as human beings, who have only two legs. For the precise same reason, the Rebbe of Dinov explains, we should feel no desire for what other people have, because we have a completely different identity than them. Every person is given precisely what is appropriate for him or her – just as every species is created with the precise biological features that suit its particular needs. As such, there is no room at all for jealousy. Desiring something which another person has means rejecting our identity, our singularity, our unique nature, our unique mission, and our unique contribution which we are to make during our brief sojourn on earth. Wishing we had what our fellow has is akin to wishing we were an animal instead of a human being, because we are given precisely what we need to have to actualize our unique potential and be the unique individual that we are meant to be.

The first of the Ten Commandments is the command of “*Anokhi Hashem Elokekha*,” to believe in God’s singularity, that there is only one Creator of the universe. The final of the Ten Commandments, according to the Rebbe of Dinov, is to believe in our own singularity, that there is only one “me,” that each person is unique and has a special nature and potential that is shared by nobody else in the past, present or future. Our belief in God’s singularity prevents us from placing our trust in anybody or anything else, and our belief in our own singularity prevents us from desiring what other people have, as we instead joyfully accept our condition, which is perfectly suited for us to fill our unique role and make our unique contribution.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Yitro of the preparations for the Revelation at Sinai, during which special emphasis was placed on the boundary set around Mount Sinai which the people were warned not to breach. Just before the Revelation, God stressed that the restriction applied not only to the masses, but also to the *kohanim* (identified by the commentators as the firstborns, who were designated as priests until the sin of the golden calf). God announced to Moshe, “*Ve-gam ha-kohanim ha-nigashim el Hashem yitkadashu*” – “And even the *kohanim* who approach the Lord shall be sanctified” (19:22). He proceeded to warn that the *kohanim*, like the masses, would be punished if they breached the boundary set around the mountain (“*pen yifrotz bahem Hashem*”).

The word “*yitkadashu*” (“shall be sanctified”) in this verse likely hearkens back to God’s original command to the nation earlier (19:11), “*ve-kidashtam*,” which Rashi explains to mean “prepare.” Onkelos similarly translates this word as “*u-tezameininun*” – “you shall prepare them.” Accordingly, Rashi interprets “*yitkadashu*” in our verse as referring to preparation, as the *kohanim* were told to be ready to remain in place and to be mindful of the boundary line which they were not to breach.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, however, offered a different interpretation of the word “*yitkadashu*” in this verse. He views this word as the reason why the *kohanim* were required to keep a distance like everybody else, and were not granted any special privileges at the time of Revelation:

And the priests too…are not to imagine themselves higher or holier or nearer to God than the rest of the people; are not, under such an illusion, to press themselves in front of the people, are rather to ponder on the fact that for them too, the task was still *le-hitkadeish*, to work themselves up to that stage of holiness i.e., of being absolutely and in all ways at the disposition of God, which would make them fit to be *kohanim*, leaders, directors, and models in front of the people. Nobody, including the priests, had yet reached the stage up to which the awaited Torah was to call them all, and up to which it would train and educate them. Hence the repeated warnings about pressing forward.

According to Rav Hirsch, the warnings against violating the boundary symbolizes the fact that the nation had yet to achieve the lofty level of sanctity for which they were destined, as the Torah was now being given to them for this very purpose. They were shown that they become worthy of approaching God only via the study and observance of His laws which He was now giving them, and until then, they must keep a distance, as they were incapable of attaining the requisite standard of holiness. And for this precise reason, particular emphasis was placed on the inclusion of the *kohanim* in this restriction. The *kohanim* were reminded that their designation as ministers did not absolve them of the need for a process of “*yitkadashu*,” of “sanctification,” of working to learn the Torah’s demands and expectations, and to abide by them. Nobody is given a “free ticket” to closeness with God; this must be achieved only through hard work and a concentrated effort to develop a sacred character worthy of a close bond with the Creator.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Yitro tells of the dramatic event of *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, the Revelation at Mount Sinai when *Benei Yisrael* heard the pronouncement of the Ten Commandments. We read that at the time of the Revelation, *Benei Yisrael* stood “*be-tachtit ha-har*” – “at the bottom of the mountain” (19:17). As Rashi writes, this means, very simply, that *Benei Yisrael* stood at the foot of Mount Sinai. This point was made, seemingly, to emphasize that *Benei Yisrael* complied with the strict command not to ascend the mountain when God revealed Himself (“*hishameru lakhem a lot ba-har*” – 19:12). *Benei Yisrael* stood in place at the foot of the mountain, without going any further, obeying God’s command.

However, the Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (88a), as Rashi cites, famously interprets this verse to mean that *Benei Yisrael* actually stood underneath the mountain. The Gemara tells that God uprooted Mount Sinai and suspended it over *Benei Yisrael*, threatening to drop the mountain on them if they refused to accept the Torah. Several different approaches have been taken to explain the meaning of this depiction of God holding the mountain over *Benei Yisrael* at the time of *Ma’amad Har Sinai*.

An especially novel explanation is offered by Rav Moshe Mordechai Biderman of Lelov, who noted the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Sukka (52a) that the *yetzer ha-ra* – our human vices and weaknesses – is compared to a mountain. Our instinctive negative impulses stand in our way like a tall mountain, threatening to obstruct our path to the life we are meant to live, and can be overcome only with great effort and resolve, like climbing a steep hill. The Rebbe of Lelov explained that at the time of *Matan Torah*, as the Gemara teaches later in Masekhet Shabbat (146a), “*paska zuhamatan*” – the nation’s “filth,” their natural sinful tendencies, were eliminated. The experience of the Revelation had the effect of ridding *Benei Yisrael* of their negative inclinations, and they stood at that moment in a state of pristine purity. The image of God holding the mountain over them, the Rebbe of Lelov explained, refers to the restoration of the *yetzer ha-ra*. God does not want us to serve Him as angelic beings, and for this reason He gave us the Torah while holding over us a “mountain” – meaning, with our human flaws and frailties, forcing the evil inclination back onto the people.

*Benei Yisrael* announced at the time of the Revelation, “*Na’aseh ve-nishma*” – “We will do and we will hear” (24:7), proclaiming their willful, unwavering commitment to the Torah. But God wanted to ensure that we retain this commitment even when we do not feel inspired and motivated, when we find ourselves under a “mountain” – under the full weight of human weaknesses. We are expected to fulfill God’s will not only when we feel “angelic,” when we feel energized and driven, but even – and perhaps primarily – when we must struggle against ourselves, when we feel disinclined to learn and observe the Torah – because God specifically chose to give His Torah to frail, imperfect human beings, and not to angels.

Tuesday

The fourth of the Ten Commandments which God pronounced at Mount Sinai is the command of Shabbat, specifically, the *mitzva* to “remember the day of Shabbat, to make it sacred” (20:7). Rashi, based on the *Mekhilta*, explains this command to mean that we are to be mindful of Shabbat throughout the week, such that “if you chance upon a nice item, designate it for Shabbat.”

The Ramban disputes Rashi’s interpretation, noting that this view in the *Mekhilta* follows the position of Shammai, in a well-known argument between Shammai and Hillel mentioned in the Gemara, in Masekhet Beitza (16a). The Gemara relates that Shammai “ate all his days in honor of Shabbat,” in the sense that whenever he came upon a choice portion of food, he earmarked it for Shabbat. If later in the week he found a higher quality portion, he ate the first and designated the second for Shabbat. Hillel, however, acted differently. While the Gemara does not state explicitly Hillel’s practice – saying merely, “he acted differently” (“*midda acheret hayeta lo*”), it seems that Hillel enjoyed choice portions of food which he came across, trusting that God would provide another in time for Shabbat. The Gemara then tells that *Beit Hillel* and *Beit Shammai* – the schools of Hillel and Shammai – debated this question, each advocating for its founder’s practice. It thus emerges that the explanation cited by Rashi from the *Mekhilta* follows *Beit Shammai*’s opinion, which is not authoritative, as *Beit Hillel*’s rulings have been accepted.

Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi, in his work on Rashi’s Torah commentary, suggests defending Rashi’s comments by drawing an intriguing distinction between food products and other items. The Gemara describes Shammai as designating choice portions of meat for Shabbat, and Hillel as trusting that other such portions would be available later in the week. Rashi, by contrast, speaks of a person chancing upon a “***cheifetz*** *yafeh*” – a “nice **object**.” Quality food items, Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi contends, are not all that rare, and thus Hillel trusted that he would come upon another one closer to Shabbat. Hence, when he found a high-quality portion of food, he enjoyed it at that time, without putting it away for Shabbat. High-quality objects, however, are (or at least were) not all that common, and so even Hillel would reserve beautiful utensils and the like for Shabbat, rather than relying on the unlikely possibility that an object of similar quality would avail itself later in the week.

Maharal of Prague, in his *Gur Aryeh*, dismisses Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi’s theory. He notes the version of the debate that appears in the *Mekhilta De-Rashbi*, which is also cited by the Ramban, and which presents the debate between Hillel and Shammai in reference to a “*cheifetz tov*” – a “good object.” This would seemingly prove that Hillel disputed Shammai even when it came to objects, and not only with respect to food items. (Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi would likely respond that the *Mekhilta De-Rashbi* represents an alternate tradition of the debate, and Rashi followed the tradition that appears in the Gemara.) To explain Rashi’s comments, Maharal suggests a different distinction. He asserts that Hillel disputed Shammai’s position only in situations where he needed the item at that time. If Hillel chanced upon an especially high-quality food product or item which he did not need at that time, he would earmark it for Shabbat, just like Shammai would. The difference between them was that Shammai would forego on something he needed that day in order to save the item for Shabbat, whereas Hillel would use something he needed even if it was especially high-quality and deserved to be set aside for Shabbat. Rashi understood the *Mekhilta* as referring to a situation where the special item was not needed in the present – and it thus reflected the opinion of both Hillel and Shammai. For this reason, Rashi followed this view and incorporated it in his Torah commentary.

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted the debate presented by the Gemara, in Masekhet Beitza (16a), between Shammai and Hillel regarding the manner of preparing for Shabbat. The Gemara relates that whenever Shammai chanced upon a choice food product, he designated it for Shabbat, and if he later found a higher quality product, he ate the first and reserved the second for Shabbat. Hillel, by contrast, enjoyed the blessings of each day, trusting that God would provide a portion also for Shabbat. As we saw, Rashi, surprisingly, follows Shammai’s position in his Torah commentary, interpreting (based on the *Mekhilta*) the command, “Remember the day of Shabbat” (Shemot 20:7) to mean that one who comes upon a quality item during the week should earmark it for Shabbat. Whereas generally we accept Hillel’s rulings over Shammai’s, Rashi in this instance appears to embrace specifically Shammai’s view.

Maharshal (cited by *Siftei Chakhamim*) explains that Rashi understood that Hillel and Shammai do not, in fact, argue. According to Maharshal, Hillel agrees with Shammai, that even early in the week, one who comes across an especially high-quality item should set it aside for Shabbat. However, due to his exceptional level of piety and trust in God, Hillel himself acted differently, trusting that a similar item would become available closer to Shabbat. Normative *halakha* thus follows Shammai’s practice, to which even Hillel subscribed in principle, even though in practice he acted differently.

This theory is advanced also by the *Or Zaru’a* (*Hilkhot Erev Shabbat*, 18), as cited by several *Acharonim*. The *Or Zaru’a* draws proof from the story told in Masekhet Shabbat (119a) of a fabulously wealthy man who attributed his financial success to the way he showed honor to Shabbat. This man had a butcher shop, and anytime he came across an especially high-quality animal, he reserved its meat for Shabbat. The Gemara appears to approve of this man’s practice, which clearly followed Shammai’s position. The *Or Zaru’a* thus concludes that Hillel did not disagree with Shammai on this point, even though personally he acted differently due to his unique stature of piety.

This view of the *Or Zaru’a* is cited approvingly by the *Bach* (O.C. 242) and by the Rama, in *Darkhei Moshe* (O.C. 250:1). Likewise, Chida, in his *Petach Einyaim* commentary (Masekhet Beitza) and in his *Machazik Berakha* (O.C. 242:5), cites a manuscript of the *Shibbolei Ha-leket* citing Shammai’s practice, without noting that Hillel acted differently, indicating that the *Shibbolei Ha-leket* accepted Shammai’s position. Later *poskim* who embrace this position include the *Magen Avraham* (250:1), the *Shulchan Arukh Ha-Rav* (242:10) and the *Chayei Adam* (1:1).

A number of other writers, however, questioned this theory. As we mentioned yesterday, after the Gemara notes the different practices of Hillel and Shammai, it relates that this issue was also debated by *Beit Hillel* and *Beit Shammai* – the schools of Hillel and Shammai, with each school advocating for its founder’s practice. It appears that this question was, indeed, the subject of a bona fide halakhic debate, and Hillel – and his disciples – disputed Shammai’s position. At least from the simple reading of the Gemara, it seems quite clear that Hillel did not merely choose to follow a different personal practice, but actually held a different opinion that Shammai, such that we should accept Hillel’s practice, and not Shammai’s.

As a practical matter, the *Mishna Berura* (250:2) writes that certainly, if one comes across a high-quality item that will not likely be available later in the week, he should designate it for Shabbat, rather than assume that it will somehow be attainable later.

Thursday

Our last two installments have dealt with the Gemara’s account (Beitza 16a) of Shammai’s practice to designate for Shabbat any high-quality product that he happened to come across during the week. As we saw, Rashi (based on the *Mekhilta*) explains the command to “remember the day of Shabbat” (Shemot 20:7) to mean that we should “remember” Shabbat during the week by following Shammai’s practice – earmarking for Shabbat exceptionally high-quality products that we find available for purchase. However, the Gemara tells that Hillel acted differently, enjoying the high-quality products he chanced upon and trusting that God would provide another in time for Shabbat. Yesterday, we noted the theory advanced by the *Or Zaru’a* that Hillel did not actually dispute Shammai’s position, but acted differently due to his unique level of faith and trust in God. The *Or Zaru’a* draws proof from the story told in Masekhet Shabbat (119a) of a butcher who was rewarded because anytime he saw an especially choice animal, he designated its meat for Shabbat – indicating that Shammai’s practice was accepted.

The *Korban Netanel* commentary to the Rosh (Beitza 2:4) challenges the *Or Zaru’a*’s position, and refutes the proof drawn from the story told in Masekhet Shabbat. That man’s situation, the *Korban Netanel* argued, differed from that of most people, in that he operated a butcher shop, presumably serving his entire community, including the poor. This butcher performed a special *mitzva* by ensuring that the underprivileged would have access to especially high-quality meat for Shabbat – not by reserving the high-quality animals for his own Shabbat meals. Therefore, the *Korban Netanel* contended, this story does not prove that every individual should follow Shammai’s practice of reserving for Shabbat every high-quality product he comes across. This should be done only by those like this individual, who provided goods for the needy residents of his community. (We might add that the *Korban Netanel*’s reading explains why this man was deemed worthy of special reward. If he was simply following Shammai’s practice because this is the view accepted by *Halakha*, there seemingly should be no reason for him to deserve a unique blessing of wealth. According to the *Korban Netanel*, however, he was not halakhically required to earmark high-quality animals for Shabbat, but he nevertheless did so out of concern for the needy townspeople who might otherwise have been unable to obtain quality meat for Shabbat.)

The *Sefat Emet* (in Masekhet Beitza) dismisses the *Korban Netanel*’s contention, rejecting his refutation of the *Or Zaru’a*’s proof. According to the *Korban Netanel*, a distinction exists between one’s own preparations for Shabbat, and one’s efforts to assist the poor prepare for Shabbat. When it comes to one’s personal preparations, the *Korban Netanel* follows Hillel’s view, that one should enjoy in the present the high-quality products he can obtain, and trust that more will be available in time for Shabbat. But when one seeks to supply goods for the poor, like the butcher in the story told by the Gemara, it is proper to reserve the high-quality goods for distribution to the poor before Shabbat. The *Sefat Emet* argues that if one should trust that God will provide high-quality products for his own Shabbat enjoyment, then he should likewise trust – and perhaps even more so – in God’s providing high-quality products to distribute to the poor before Shabbat. There appears to be no reason to distinguish between the level of trust in God required by Hillel with regard to one’s own enjoyment of Shabbat, and the level of trust that should be required when looking to assure that the underprivileged would be able to enjoy Shabbat. Therefore, if the butcher reserved high-quality animals for Shabbat to ensure that the poor would have access to quality meat on Shabbat, this must prove that *Halakha* has accepted Shammai’s position, such that even with regard to one’s own Shabbat enjoyment, he should reserve high-quality products for Shabbat, rather than trust that others would become available.

Friday

This week we’ve discussed the different practices of Hillel and Shammai regarding their Shabbat preparations, as noted by the Gemara in Masekhet Beitza (16a). Shammai would earmark for Shabbat any especially high-quality food product he came across during the week, and if he later found an even higher-quality product, he reserved the second one for Shabbat and ate the first. The Gemara relates that Hillel, “all of whose actions were for the sake of Heaven,” acted differently. He enjoyed the high-quality products he chanced upon that day, trusting that God would provide another in time for Shabbat.

A number of writers raised the question of why the Gemara describes Hillel in this context as somebody “all of whose actions were for the sake of Heaven.” How does this unique quality – performing every action solely for the sake of God, rather than for one’s personal benefit – relate to Hillel’s practice of trusting that God would provide quality products for Shabbat?

*Chatam Sofer* suggests that it was precisely because all of Hillel’s actions were done for a lofty purpose that he immediately partook of quality foods to which he had access, rather than reserve it for Shabbat, as Shammai did. Hillel agreed with Shammai, in principle, that if one happens to find a high-quality product, it should be earmarked for Shabbat, as a way of showing proper respect and honor for Shabbat. However, in the case of an exceptionally pious person, such as Hillel, whose physical actions are all performed solely for sacred purposes, and not simply for enjoyment, such a person should make use of the food in the present. For a righteous individual of this caliber, eating and all other bodily activities constitute *mitzvot*, religious acts. As such, if such a person has access to quality food, he should eat it that day – because this eating, like all that person’s physical actions, is a *mitzva* act. The individual in such a case has the opportunity to perform a *mitzva* now in the present, and he should therefore seize this opportunity, rather than set the item aside for Shabbat.

*Chatam Sofer* notes that this interpretation of the Gemara explains why Rashi, in his Torah commentary, appears to follow Shammai’s opinion. As we’ve noted earlier this week, Rashi (based on the *Mekhilta*) understands the command, “*Zakhor et yom ha-Shabbat*” (“Remember the day of Shabbat – Shemot 20:7) to mean that one should be mindful of Shabbat throughout the week, and reserve for Shabbat exceptionally high-quality products that he comes across. Already the Ramban raised the question of why Rashi would follow the view of Shammai, when *Halakha* virtually always accepts Hillel’s position in his disputes with Shammai. *Chatam Sofer* notes that according to his approach to explaining Hillel’s practice, the answer is clear. Hillel agreed that for the vast majority of people, Shammai’s practice is correct. It is only somebody whose every action can truly be considered a “*mitzva*” that should make use of quality products he comes across, seizing the opportunity they offer to perform a sacred religious act in the present, rather than setting them aside for Shabbat.

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