**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT YITRO**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Yitro of the Ten Commandments which God pronounced to *Benei Yisrael* at Mount Sinai, the fourth of which is the command of Shabbat: “Remember the day of Shabbat, to make it sacred” (20:7).

Rashi, citing the *Mekhilta*, explains that this command requires us to “remember” Shabbat throughout the week, by designating for Shabbat any especially high-quality items which we happen to come upon. If a person finds a particularly fine food product available for purchase even early in the week, he should buy it and set it aside for Shabbat, and this is how one “remembers” Shabbat throughout the week.

As noted by the Ramban, this interpretation follows the view of Shammai, who is described by the Gemara in Masekhet Beitza (16a) as “eating all his days in honor of Shabbat.” Meaning, he would reserve for Shabbat a fine food product which he obtained at any point during the week, and if he later found a higher quality one, he would eat the first and reserve the second for Shabbat. However, the Gemara relates, Hillel – who often disputed Shammai’s halakhic rulings – “had a different way” (“*midda acheret hayeta lo*”). Emphasizing that Hillel was a person “all of whose actions were for the sake of Heaven,” the Gemara tells that rather than setting aside food for Shabbat early in the week, Hillel enjoyed the food he obtained each day, trusting that God would provide him with a respectable food product in time for Shabbat.

Many writers addressed the question of why the Gemara described Hillel in this context as someone “all of whose actions were for the sake of Heaven.” How is this admirable quality relevant to his practice of trusting during the week that God would provide him with what he needed to properly honor Shabbat?

Netziv, in his *Ha’ameik She’eila* commentary to the *She’iltot* (1:21), explains that Hillel’s practice indeed stemmed from the fact that “all his actions were for the sake of Heaven,” in that he ate each day only the bare minimum he needed to maintain his physical wellbeing. The obligation to “remember the day of Shabbat” applies all week long, Netziv writes, and so indeed, one is required already at the beginning of the week to have Shabbat in mind, and thus set aside choice food items for Shabbat already then. Hillel acknowledged this requirement in principle, but in practice, he was exempt. Since he ate only the minimum he needed for his health, any food he came upon during the week was necessary for his wellbeing, and thus did not have to be set aside for Shabbat. His lifestyle, which was devoted entirely “for the sake of Heaven,” absolved him of the need to set food aside for Shabbat earlier in the week, because he never sought more food than he needed to survive. Thus, according to Netziv, there is no substantive argument between Hillel and Shammai, but practically speaking, Hillel’s ascetic lifestyle absolved him of the obligation to set products aside for Shabbat earlier in the week. This explains why Rashi, in his Torah commentary, explained the verse according to Shammai’s position, despite the fact that we normally follow Hillel’s positions in his disputes with Shammai.

However, in his *Meromei Sadeh* commentary to the Talmud (Beitza 16a), Netziv retracted this explanation. There he notes that after the Gemara describes the different practices of Hillel and Shammai, it cites a *berayta* stating that their students – *Beit Hillel* and *Beit Shammai* – likewise debated this issue. *Beit Shammai* maintained that one must start preparing for Shabbat already at the beginning of the week, whereas *Beit Hillel* argued that one may enjoy the food products he obtains each day, and prepare for Shabbat only when Shabbat approaches. It is difficult to imagine, Netziv writes, that all of Hillel’s disciples followed his ascetic lifestyle, and so his students’ ruling would seem to disprove the theory presented above attributing Hillel’s practice to the fact that he never ate more than he needed to.

Netziv therefore offers a different explanation, suggesting that both Hillel and Shammai (and, by extension, their students) agree that there is a requirement to begin Shabbat preparations already at the beginning of the week, but they disagree as to the level and weight of this obligation. Whereas Shammai viewed this obligation as an outright Biblical command, Hillel felt that preparing for Shabbat early in the week is not on the same level of obligation as preparing for Shabbat as it approaches. As such, earlier in the week, one who is preoccupied with working for his livelihood is exempt from preparing for Shabbat already at that earlier stages of the week. Netziv notes the ruling cited by the Rama (O.C. 248:4) that although generally one may not embark on a voyage within three days of Shabbat, unless this is necessary for a *mitzva*, one may embark on a voyage at this time when necessary for his livelihood, which is considered a *mitzva* in this respect. This prohibition was enacted to ensure proper enjoyment of Shabbat, as when one sets sail close to Shabbat, he will be unable to enjoy Shabbat. The fact that a voyage for professional or commercial purposes overrides this prohibition, Netziv points out, demonstrates that earning a livelihood is considered a *mitzva* to the point that it can, under certain circumstances, override the requirement to prepare for an enjoyable Shabbat during the week. As such, Hillel maintained that people who are busy working for a living during the week are exempt from preparing for Shabbat until Shabbat approaches, even though, in principle, the obligation to prepare applies already at the beginning of the week.

Sunday

God begins the Ten Commandments with the pronouncement, “I am the Lord your God who took you from the land of Egypt” (20:2). Rashi, citing the *Mekhilta*, explains the meaning and purpose of this introductory pronouncement: “Because He revealed Himself to them at the sea as a military hero, and He revealed Himself to them here [at Sinai] as a compassionate, elderly man… [He said:] ‘Although My appearance changes, do not say that there are two Deities’.” God appeared to *Benei Yisrael* much differently at Sinai, when He presented them His laws, than He did at the sea after the Exodus, when He miraculously rescued them from the Egyptian army. He therefore found it necessary to emphasize that He is but a single God, and so He began the Revelation at Sinai by announcing, “I am the Lord your God who took you from the land of Egypt.”

A slightly different version of this Midrashic passage appears in the *Mekhilta De-Rashbi* (in Parashat Beshalach, commenting to 15:3): “…when the Almighty revealed Himself at the sea, He appeared to them as a young man waging battle…and He revealed Himself to them at Sinai as an elderly man…” In this version, God is described as appearing to *Benei Yisrael* at the sea as a “*bachur*” – “young man,” energetically waging a fierce battle.

Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (*Kedushat Levi*, Parashat Yitro) finds it significant that the Midrash describes the difference between these experiences – the miracle of the sea, and the Revelation at Sinai – as the difference between a “*bachur*” and an elderly man. One of the differences between youth and adulthood, Rav Levi Yitzchak explains, is that youngsters are unsteady, unsure of which direction to take, whereas adults are typically more stable, with a generally clear path which they follow. Youngsters are often pulled one way and then another, exploring many different possibilities before finally settling on a direction upon reaching adulthood. When *Benei Yisrael* were trapped by the Egyptians against the sea, as numerous Midrashim tell, it was unclear whether they would be rescued. The Midrashim speak of the “prosecuting angels” in the heavens arguing that *Benei Yisrael* were unworthy of being miraculously saved, because they worshipped idols in Egypt. The path forward at that point was unclear, and thus God is compared on that occasion to a “*bachur*,” a youngster struggling to choose the direction he wishes to follow. At Sinai, however, God appeared not as a confused youngster, but as a confident, secure adult. There was no question at all that He wanted to give *Benei Yisrael* the Torah, and forge an eternal covenant with them. There was no other option on the table; there was no decision that needed to be made. And thus whereas at the sea He appeared as a young man trying to find his way, at Sinai, He appeared as a determined, resolute adult who knows exactly what he wants to do.

Like *Benei Yisrael* at the shores of the sea, we are all both worthy and unworthy. We are neither entirely good, nor entirely sinful. We should never definitively assume that we deserve what we want, nor should we ever definitively assume that we do not deserve what we want. We all have things to be proud of, and things to be ashamed of. We should never feel fully confident in who we are and how we live, but neither should we ever feel worthless, that we have only failed. The one thing we can and must be absolutely certain about, Rav Levi Yitzchak here teaches, is that God wants a relationship with us. Even when we feel uneasy or insecure about our standing, we must know with confidence that God wants us to commit ourselves to His service. Under all circumstances, He wants us to observe His commands, to perform *mitzvot* to the best of our limited ability. When it comes to *Matan Torah*, there is no ambivalence or uncertainty. No matter who we are or what we have done in the past, we can be certain that God wants our commitment, and wants to build a relationship with each and every member of His beloved nation.

Monday

Parashat Yitro tells of Moshe’s father-in-law, Yitro, who joined *Benei Yisrael* at Mount Sinai, and soon after his arrival, we are told, he advised Moshe to appoint a team of judges to assist him in leading the nation. Yitro observed Moshe fielding questions and settling disputes the entire day, “from morning until evening” (18:13), and he told Moshe, very plainly, “the thing you are doing is not good” (18:17). He warned Moshe that he would “assuredly whither” bearing this kind of burden and keeping this kind of schedule, and so he advised Moshe to appoint other judges with whom to share his responsibilities. Moshe agreed, and proceeded to selected qualified individuals to serve as judges (18:24-26).

Moshe’s embrace of Yitro’s constructive criticism, and accepting his advice, instead of stubbornly insisting that he did not need to change his leadership style, is certainly a reflection of Moshe’s humility, but may also be a reflection of Yitro’s character. It has been suggested that Yitro’s successful and effective criticism can be attributed to a quality indicated by the Midrash, cited by Rashi (18:11), who tells that Yitro “did not leave a single pagan deity that he did not worship.” Yitro explored every religious creed and mode of worship, before finally joining *Benei Yisrael*. This theological journey perhaps reflects a character of humility and honest self-assessment, the ability to objectively, truthfully and thoroughly scrutinize oneself, one’s beliefs and one’s conduct to determine whether they are what they should be. Yitro, as the Midrash describes, was a master of self-scrutiny, constantly assessing and reassessing his life to determine whether he was living the right way, and not hesitating to make changes – even drastic changes – upon recognizing that his approach was incorrect.

This quality may perhaps have contributed to Yitro’s ability to effectively offer sincere, constructive criticism. If a person has the humility to honestly criticize himself, then people are more likely to accept his sincere criticism of them. Such a person has a better chance of appearing genuine, rather than arrogant and condescending, thus making people more open and receptive to his advice. Unsolicited advice from somebody who does not appear to scrutinize himself, who seems overly self-assured, is less likely to be heard and accepted than that which comes from somebody who exudes genuine humility. And thus Yitro, who honestly and frequently scrutinized himself, was in a position to effectively offer advice to Moshe, who, displaying his own humility, gladly accepted and implemented Yitro’s recommendation.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Yitro of the recommendation given by Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, that Moshe appoint judges so that he would not have to personally preside over all the people’s cases. Yitro watched as Moshe spent the entire day hearing the cases brought before him, and he warned Moshe, “*Navol tibol*” – “You will assuredly whither” (18:18) – by doing all this work by himself. Moshe accepted Yitro’s advice, and proceeded to appoint qualified judges.

The Ralbag offers a unique explanation of Yitro’s concern, writing that Yitro warned Moshe of the effects of this overwhelming burden of responsibility on his ability to receive prophecy. This demanding schedule, Yitro cautioned, would weaken Moshe to the point where, in the Ralbag’s words, “the attachment between you and God, may He be exalted, might separate, such that prophecy will not come to you when they ask you about it.” In order for Moshe to maintain his stature as prophet, he needed to maintain a high level of spiritual focus. Yitro feared that by devoting too much time to judging the people, Moshe might compromise his spiritual level and thus risk losing his power of prophecy, which the people needed. And whereas there were other qualified scholars among the nation who could serve as judges, only Moshe was able to fill the role of prophet which was vitally important at that time. Yitro therefore urged Moshe to share the burden of judging with other capable scholars, in order to ensure that he would be able to continue serving the crucial role of prophet.

The Ralbag’s explanation perhaps teaches the importance of prioritization, that sometimes even a valuable endeavor is unwise or even inappropriate if it comes at the expense of a more vital need. As human beings, our time and energy are limited, and they must be apportioned correctly. Anything we do or involve ourselves in, necessarily, comes at the expense of other valuable undertakings. Moshe felt it was important to personally try all the people’s cases – and it certainly was; in fact, the Ralbag himself (*toe’elet* 11) points to Moshe’s boundless devotion to the people as one of the lessons of this story, setting an example of how a leader must commit himself to work tirelessly for the benefit of his constituents. However, Yitro urged Moshe to consider whether perhaps this extraordinary display of self-sacrifice was undermining his ability to do something which was even more important. His decision to personally tend to all the people’s questions and quarrels was motivated by sincere intentions and a genuine commitment to them, but – as Moshe himself conceded – it was not the correct decision. We must carefully prioritize our time and our strength, and try to avoid involving himself in even valuable pursuits if they come at the expense of more crucial ones.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Yitro (20:1-14) tells of God’s pronouncement of the Ten Commandments, which he later engraved on the two stone tablets which He gave to Moshe as a testament of His covenant with *Benei Yisrael* (Devarim 9:10). The Ten Commandments appear also later in the Torah – in Moshe’s recounting of the event of the Revelation at Sinai, during his lengthy series of addresses to the nation before his death in Sefer Devarim (5:6-18). As many have observed, there exist a number of differences between the two texts of the Ten Commandments. Most famously, the command to observe Shabbat is formulated here in Parashat Yitro as, “*Zakhor et yom ha-Shabbat*” – “Remember the day of Shabbat,” whereas in Sefer Devarim it is formulated, “*Shamor et yom ha-Shabbat*” – “Guard the day of Shabbat.”

Some, such as Ibn Ezra (*Peirush Ha-arokh*, 20:1), explain that the text in Parashat Yitro is the text which God engraved on the tablets, but Moshe, when reiterating the commandments to *Benei Yisrael* in Sefer Devarim, added commentary. This accounts for the minor discrepancies between the two texts. Ibn Ezra suggests proving this theory from the fact that twice in the text of the Ten Commandments in Sefer Devarim (5:12,16), we find the expression, “as the Lord your God has commanded you.” This would seem to indicate that this text is not a direct citation of God’s pronouncements, but rather Moshe’s presentation of the commands. It is thus reasonable to attribute the discrepancies between the two texts to Moshe’s altering the text in reviewing them for the people forty years later.

Another theory is that the two texts refer to the two occasions when the commandments were engraved on stone tablets. The original stone tablets upon which God engraved the Ten Commandments were shattered by Moshe when he came down from the mountain and saw *Benei Yisrael* worshipping the golden calf. After Moshe’s pleas on the people’s behalf, God agreed to renew His covenant with the people, and He proceeded to engrave the commandments on a new set of tablets. Conceivably, then, the text of the Ten Commandments in Parashat Yitro is the text written on the original set of tablets, whereas the text that Moshe presented to the people in Sefer Devarim is that which God engraved on the second, permanent set of tablets.

This approach is taken by the Gemara’s in Masekhet Bava Kama (54b-55a), in explaining one of the subtler discrepancies between the two texts. In the version of the command to respect parents that appears in Sefer Devarim, the phrase “*u-lema’an yiytav lakh*” (“so that you will benefit”) is added, emphasizing the reward for fulfilling this command (Devarim 5:16). This phrase marks the only instance of the word “*tov*” in the text of the Ten Commandments, and it does not appear in the first version of the Ten Commandments, in Parashat Yitro. The Gemara brings the story of an *Amora* who found it noteworthy that the word “*tov*” (“good,” or “goodness”) appears nowhere in the original text of the Ten Commandments, and the explanation given is, “because they [the tablets] would in the end be destroyed.” The underlying assumption of this answer is that the text in Parashat Yitro was the text engraved on the first set of tablets, which were eventually shattered, whereas the text in Sefer Devarim is the text engraved on the second tablets. As God knew that the first tablets were destined to be shattered, He intentionally omitted the word “*tov*,” because had this word been included, then when the tablets were shattered, this would have given the impression that, in the Gemara’s words, “*paseka tova mi-Yisrael*” – “goodness has ceased from Israel.” The destruction of the word “*tov*” in the tablets may have implied that any hope for “goodness” has been destroyed.

What might be the significance of this concept – that the first tablets could not include the word “*tov*,” to avoid giving the impression after they were shattered that *Benei Yisrael* would never again experience “goodness”?

The sin of the golden calf, where *Benei Yisrael* worshipped a foreign deity just several weeks after the Revelation, marks the epitome of sin and failure, and was compared by the Sages to a bride who betrayed her groom right under her wedding canopy (Gittin 36b). The Gemara here perhaps seeks to teach that even after the greatest failure, we must never think for a moment that “*paseka tova*,” we will never again be worthy of God’s grace and goodness. Even after the gravest of all sins, when God proclaimed His desire to annihilate the entire nation, “goodness” was still attainable. The Gemara here urges us to remain hopeful and optimistic in the face of failure, emphasizing that even after the sin of the golden calf, the prospects for “*tova*” were not lost. We must trust in our ability to recover and to improve, and in God’s willingness to continue bestowing His “goodness” upon us even after failure, as long as we consistently and genuinely seek to grow.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Yitro of God’s instructions to *Benei Yisrael* in advance of the Revelation at Mount Sinai. God emphasized in particular the need to make a boundary line around the mountain to ensure that nobody among the nation would approach the mountain during the event. He informed the people that “*bi-mshokh ha-yoveil heima ya’alu va-har*” – “when the sound of the horn is extended, then they may ascend to the mountain” (19:13). Rashi explains that an extended *shofar* sound would be blown to signify “*siluk Shekhina*” – the departure of God’s presence from the mountain, at which point the people would again be permitted on the mountain.

Citing from *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (31), Rashi then writes that the horn sounded at Mount Sinai was none other than the horn of “*eilo shel Yitzchak*” – the ram which Avraham offered in Yitzchak’s place. After Avraham complied with God’s command to sacrifice his son, placing Yitzchak on the altar and lifting the knife, God then told Avraham to desist, that the command to sacrifice Yitzchak was merely a test of his faith and devotion, whereupon Avraham proceeded to sacrifice a ram, instead (Bereishit 22:13). According to the Midrash, the horn of this ram was the horn which produced the extended blast at the conclusion of the Revelation at Sinai.

*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* also comments that the ram’s other horn will be sounded in the future, at the time of the final redemption. The prophet Yeshayahu (27:13) foresees the time when “a great *shofar* will be blown,” whereupon the dispersed Jews will return to the Land of Israel “and they shall prostrate to the Lord on the sacred mountain.” *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* teaches that this *shofar* will be the second horn of the ram offered in Yitzchak’s place.

The Ramban, commenting on this verse, cites this Midrashic passage, and writes, “*Yeish lah sod*” – “It contains a secret.” He then explains that the Midrash’s intent is to associate the sounding of the *shofar* at Mount Sinai with “*pachad Yitzchak*” – Yitzchak’s unique level of fear of God, which led him to offer his life in fulfillment of God’s will. This point is articulated a bit more clearly by Rabbeinu Bechayei (a disciple of the Ramban), who, after citing the passage from *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, writes, “This *shofar* sound is the ‘fear of Yitzchak’ which they attained at Mount Sinai…” This seems to mean that the Midrash associated the event of the Revelation with *akeidat Yitzchak* (the offering of Yitzchak as a sacrifice) to teach that at the time of the Revelation, *Benei Yisrael* attained a level of clarity and devotion resembling that displayed by Yitzchak at the time of the *akeida*. This experience, of beholding God in as direct a manner as humanly possible, brought them absolute certainty and perfect clarity regarding God’s existence and the value of serving Him. They thus reached the level of Yitzchak, who recognized so clearly the importance of fulfilling the divine will that he allowed himself to be sacrificed in compliance with God’s command. *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* teaches that in the future, too, at the time of the final redemption, we will regain this level of clarity, and it will become obvious and evident to us that we must unhesitatingly and unconditionally fulfill every command of the Almighty.

The greatness of Yitzchak (and Avraham), of course, was in the display of absolute fealty to God’s will without the benefit of revelation. The Torah tells that as Avraham and Yitzchak made their way to the chosen site of the *akeida*, Avraham “saw the site from afar” (Bereishit 22:4), and Rashi, based on the Midrash, comments, “He saw a cloud bound upon the mountain.” The site of the *akeida* is depicted as having been enveloped by fog, perhaps alluding to the darkness and confusion that surrounded this event. Avraham and Yitzchak had no explanation for why God would issue such a command; this was the furthest thing from everything they understood about His expectations of mankind. And yet, they proceeded, trusting in God’s goodness even when it was impossible to see, when it was engulfed by a “cloud.”

Already before the Revelation, in presenting His instructions to *Benei Yisrael*, God made a point of informing them that this event was temporary, that when they would hear an extended sounding of the *shofar* – representing *akeidat Yitzchak* – God’s presence would no longer be seen on the mountain. He emphasized to them that the perfect clarity and faith they would attain during those moments would not last, that God’s presence will not always be felt, and His ways will not always be understood. The *shofar* of the “*eilo shel Yitzchak*” is associated with the Revelation to emphasize that we must devote ourselves to God unquestioningly and unconditionally even in times of confusion, when we do not have the benefit of the clarity experienced by our ancestors at Mount Sinai. We must follow the example set by Avraham and Yitzchak, whose faith did not waver even in the darkest moment, and whose loyalty to God’s command remained firm and unflinching even when it seemed utterly inexplicable.

Friday

We read in Parashat Yitro that after Moshe ascended Mount Sinai and heard God’s instructions to the people in preparation for *Matan Torah*, “Moshe descended from the mountain to the nation” in order to prepare them (19:14). Rashi, commenting on the phrase “from the mountain to the people,” writes, based on the *Mekhilta*, “This teaches that Moshe did not turn to his own affairs, but rather [went directly] from the mountain to the nation.” The *Mekhilta* understood the verse to mean that Moshe proceeded immediately to the people after descending from the mountain, without first tending to his personal matters, demonstrating his unbridled devotion to the nation. This remark cited by Rashi is often viewed as highlighting the lofty standards of commitment that the Torah demands of leaders, who are called upon to sacrifice – at least to some extent – their personal needs and concerns for the sake of caring for the people under their charge.

Rav Shmuel Borenstein of Sochatchov, in *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* (Parashat Teruma), adds a different – but no less meaningful – insight into the *Mekhilta*’s comment. He writes that when the *Mekhilta* speaks of “*asakav*” – Moshe’s “affairs,” this must refer to Moshe’s personal spiritual growth. Moshe held a unique spiritual stature whereby he involved himself in mundane, physical activities as minimally as a human being could, and thus, according to the *Sheim Mi-Shmuel*, the term “*asakav*” as applied to Moshe must necessarily refer to his spiritual engagement, his study, prayer and contemplation. If so, then *Chazal* here speak of Moshe’s sacrificing his own spiritual advancement for the sake of working with the people. He understood that his role as leader necessitated compromising his growth in order to help the people grow.

The *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* makes his comment in reference to his discussion of the command, “*Kedoshim tiheyu*” (“You shall be sacred” – Vayikra 19:2). The term “*kadosh*,” which is commonly translated as “sacred,” is also understood to mean “separate” and “withdraw.” The *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* thus explains that “*kedoshim tiheyu*” requires us to be prepared to retreat from that to which we are naturally drawn, for the sake of serving our Creator. For the vast majority of people, this means moderating our indulgence in physical pleasures, restraining our bodily instincts, enjoying worldly delights within the framework of God’s laws. But for Moshe, the *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* writes, this meant moderating his “indulgence” in spirituality when necessary to fulfill God’s commands. Moshe was naturally drawn to spiritual devotion, and he was required to occasionally abstain from spiritual engagement in order to work with the people, tend to their needs, and uplift them, as his job demanded.

The *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* here teaches that sometimes, we must restrain not only our base desires, but even our natural religious instincts. There are times when our ingrained sense of what is spiritually appropriate and important is not correct, when God’s will is counterintuitive even from a purely religious standpoint. The command of “*kedoshim tiheyu*” requires us to submit our wishes and our intuition to God’s will, to abstain from what we naturally feel inclined to do – even that which is inherently noble and lofty – when necessary for the sake of serving our Creator.

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