**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT EIKEV**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

In Parashat Eikev, Moshe speaks of the prosperity *Benei Yisrael* will enjoy after crossing into the Land of Israel and cultivating the land, and he warns them to remain cognizant of God’s Providence even after amassing wealth. He urges them to remember their experience in the wilderness, when they had no natural means of survival, and were miraculously sustained by God’s supernatural beneficence. The memory of this experience should remain with them even after they till the land and develop a thriving agricultural economy in *Eretz Yisrael* through which they support themselves and prosper.

In describing his fears of the people’s prosperity leading them to forget about God, Moshe warns, “Your heart shall grow haughty, and you will forget the Lord your God…” (8:14). The plain reading of this verse is that the people will become “haughty” in the sense of feeling independent and self-sufficient, proudly attributing their material success to their ingenuity and hard work, without recognizing God’s role in their success.

A number of *darshanim*, however, added a deeper layer of interpretation. The “haughtiness” mentioned in this verse may also allude to a sense of snobbery vis-à-vis those of lesser means. People who prosper oftentimes tend to live without any connection to or association with ordinary folks, not to mention the poor, viewing it as beneath their dignity to have contact with members of the lower socioeconomic classes. The natural result of this condescension, Moshe warns, is a disconnect between the individual and the Almighty. If a person feels that his stature of wealth and prestige requires distancing himself from ordinary people, then he will naturally assume that God, the Creator of the universe who exerts unlimited power and control over the world, likewise remains distant and aloof. We can believe in an omnipotent Creator who concerns Himself with the needs and actions of human beings only if we expect people of stature concerning themselves with the needs and actions of simple people. And thus if a person looks upon other people with arrogance and condescension, he will be unable to believe in a God who provides for our needs, who cares about how we act, and who listens to our prayers.

It is not coincidental that Avraham Avinu, whom our tradition describes as the one who introduced to the world the belief in a single God who is intimately involved in human affairs, was also the bastion of kindness who taught by example the need to compassionately care for the needy and downtrodden. As the Rambam famously describes in the beginning of Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim, paganism began when people assumed that the Creator wishes that they worship the natural forces, such as the luminaries. With time, people’s worship focused exclusively on the natural forces and physical structures, to the point where the Creator of everything was forgotten. The ancients were incapable of envisioning a Supreme Being who directly involves Himself in the affairs of our world, and so they turned to the worship of other creatures. Avraham, who taught the world of an engaged Supreme Being, who deeply cares about us human beings, was naturally the same person who taught about the need for care, concern and sensitivity for all people, regardless of their social or economic stature. Just as we must believe in a God who is entirely incorporeal and has no earthly properties, but who nevertheless concerns Himself with the needs of His lowly creatures here on earth, we, too, must display care and concern for even those whom we might think of as “lower” than us. If God desires, as it were, a relationship with us human beings, then we should certainly seek to connect and engage with all people, regardless of their perceived stature.

Sunday

In Parashat Eikev, Moshe recounts the tragic incident of *cheit ha-eigel* – the sin of the golden calf. He tells that while he was still atop Mount Sinai receiving the Torah, God informed him of what the people had done, and of His decision to annihilate them. Moshe then recalls, “I turned and came down from the mountain…and I saw that behold, you have sinned to the Lord your God, you made a graven image of a calf” (9:15-16).

The use of the word “*hinei*” (“behold”) in this context seems, at first glance, unusual. This term is normally used in reference to something unordinary or unexpected. For example, the Torah tells in Sefer Bereishit (29:25) that when Yaakov awoke in the morning after his wedding, “*ve-hinei hi Leah*” – he discovered that the woman with him was Leah, not the woman whom he had thought he married. Earlier in that narrative (29:6), we read that as Yaakov asked the shepherds of Charan about Lavan, they said, “*ve-hinei Rachel bito ba’a*” – observing that his daughter, Rachel, coincidentally just happened at that moment to be on her way to the well where they were assembled. And the prophets very often use the word “*hinei*” to introduce their prophecies of dramatic turns of events that would be unfolding in the future. (See Maharal’s discussion in *Gur Aryeh* to Bereishit 29:25 about the denotation of the word “*hinei*.”) Accordingly, we might wonder why Moshe uses this term in reference to the sight of the worship of the golden calf as he descended from Mount Sinai. After all, God had already informed him of what had happened, and thus there was, seemingly, no element of surprise whatsoever in the scene that Moshe beheld. Why, then, does he use the word “*ve-hinei*,” implying that the sight was unexpected?

The Tolna Rebbe suggested that the use of the word “*ve-hinei*” in this context demonstrates the extent to which Moshe looked positively upon *Benei Yisrael* and did not consider them sinful. Even after being informed by God Himself that the people had sinned, he was nevertheless surprised, to one extent or another, when he saw it with his own eyes. He held the people in such high esteem that the sight of the worship of the calf startled him despite having already been told about the incident. The word “*ve-hinei*” thus teaches us to recognize and truly believe in the inherent goodness of other people, to the point where we never expect them to act wrongly. Rather than relishing reports of negative behavior, and celebrating the downfall of another person, we should remain skeptical and doubtful, and even when the report is confirmed, we should feel disheartened and disappointed. We should try to see what is good and noble about others, rather than looking upon them suspicion and negativity, to the point where their wrongdoing surprises and upsets us, and is never something we anticipate.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Eikev (10:19) reiterates the command of “*va-ahavtem et ha-ger”* – to show special affection for foreigners who come to join *Am Yisrael*, adding, “for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt.”

The Sefer Ha-chinukh (431) explains this additional clause as alluding to the basic reason underlying this command. *Benei Yisrael* had themselves experienced the hardships of being foreigners, of living among people who were far different from them, and thus they were in a position to sympathize with the plight of a foreigner who joins their nation

While this appears to be the simple, straightforward understanding of this mitzva, the Rambam, surprisingly, seems to indicate otherwise. In Sefer Ha-mitzvot (*asei* 207), the Rambam writes that God commanded us to show special love to a convert “because he has entered our Torah.” Similarly, he writes in Hilkhot Dei’ot (6:1), “Loving a foreigner who has come and entered under the wings of the Shekhina constitutes two positive commandments…” The implication of the Rambam’s comments is that this special obligation stems not from consideration for thee convert’s difficult plight and disadvantaged position, but rather from the respect and reverence owed to converts for their decision to join *Am Yisrael* and draw closer to God.

The question arises as to how the Rambam understood the conclusion of this verse, where the Torah itself explains the reason for this prohibition: “for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt.” The Torah similarly says in Sefer Shemot (23:9), “Do not oppress the foreigner, and you know how it feels to be a foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt.” The simple meaning of this explanation is that Benei Yisrael are expected to be particularly sensitive to the hardships faced by foreigners who join their nation, because they had experienced those very same hardships during their stay in Egypt. According to the Rambam, however, this command is rooted not in the need for sensitivity to these hardships, but rather in the admiration we ought to have for converts.

The likely answer (as discussed by Rav Yitzchak Hutner in Pachad Yitzchak – *Pesach*, 29) is that the hardships endured by foreigners should raise our level of appreciation and esteem for their courageous decision to join our ranks. The great admiration we are to have for converts stems not merely from the very fact that they chose to embrace the Torah, but also from the sacrifices they make by willingly subjecting themselves to the difficulties entailed in living as foreigners for the sake of embracing the Torah.  We are therefore commanded to treat converts with special affection, not just as a matter of sensitivity, but also – and, according to the Rambam, primarily – as an expression of profound respect for the sacrifices they make, which ought to serve as an example for us to follow of willingness to make difficult sacrifices for the sake of Torah study and observance.

Tuesday

Yesterday we saw two different perspectives on the Torah obligation of *ahavat ha-ger*, which requires showing special love and affection to foreigners who join *Am Yisrael*. The Torah in Parashat Eikev (10:19) commands us to love foreigners “because you were foreigners in the land of Egypt,” which appears to mean that we must empathize with their plight, having ourselves experienced oppression as foreigners in Egypt. Indeed, the *Sefer Ha-chinukh* (431) indicates that this command is rooted in the need to empathize with the disadvantaged position faced by foreigners. The Rambam, however, in his discussion of this *mitzva* (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, *asei* 207; Hilkhot Dei’ot 6:1), implies that this command is rooted in the admiration and respect owed to a convert who made the decision to abandon his lifestyle and surroundings in order to join *Am Yisrael* and thereby draw close to the Almighty.

These different perspectives might perhaps yield a number of interesting practical ramifications. (These are noted and discussed in [*Peninei Minchat Chinukh*, Parashat Eikev, 5776](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/170_46_76.pdf).) First, this question may affect the scope of the command, and determine whether it applies only to the convert himself, or even to his children, an issue discussed by the *Minchat Chinukh* (431:2, 64:4). According to the *Chinukh*, we might assume that since the convert’s entire family experiences the hardships of living as foreigners, the special requirement of *ahavat ha-ger* must govern our treatment of the entire family, and not merely the convert himself. However, the Rambam’s perspective might perhaps lead us to limit this special requirement to a person who had himself made the decision to convert, and not to children who were born after his conversion. Likewise, this question might affect the status of an *eved meshuchrar* – a gentile servant released from servitude – with respect to this command. A non-Jewish servant becomes a full-fledged Jew, and fully obligated in all *mitzvot*, upon being released, even if he did not willingly choose to join *Am Yisrael*. According to the Rambam, then, it stands to reason that the special *mitzva* of *ahavat ha-ger* would not apply to this kind of convert, as he did not willingly take it upon himself to become part of the Jewish Nation. According to the *Sefer Ha-chinukh*, however, the *mitzva* should apply, as an *eved meshuchrar* experiences no less hardship than any other convert (and may even face greater challenges due to his former status of servitude).

This question might also affect the nature of the treatment required by force of this *mitzva*. Whereas the *Chinukh* appears to require treating the convert with special concern and sympathy, the Rambam would likely require treating a convert with special respect and reverence. This might mean that according to the *Chinukh*, it would suffice to avoid causing the convert emotional harm, in consideration of his especially fragile state, whereas the Rambam would require displaying special admiration and respect. (Of course, we speak here in strict halakhic terms. There is no doubt that according to all views, Torah values teach us to show both empathy and respect to converts.)

Wednesday

Rashi, in his opening comments to Parashat Eikev, famously cites a Midrashic interpretation (from the *Midrash Tanchuma*) of the word “*eikev*” used in the introductory verse to this parasha. Moshe in this verse promises *Benei Yisrael* rewards as a result of – “*eikev*” – their observance of the Torah’s laws, but the Midrash finds an allusion in the word *eikev* to the word *akeiv* – “heel.” It explains that Moshe refers here to, in Rashi’s words, “the ‘light’ *mitzvot* which a person tramples with his heel.” The Midrash here emphasizes the need to observe even those *mitzvot* which people tend to neglect or overlook.

We might wonder why the Midrash describes disregard for *mitzvot* with the image of “trampling.” Is there no a difference between neglecting certain religious responsibilities and “trampling” on them? Is it not possible for a person to be guilty of paying insufficient attention to certain *mitzvot* without scorning them or showing them contempt?

Perhaps, we could suggest that the Midrash here speaks of a particular kind of neglect, one which is fundamentally justifiable. We “trample” on something when we walk, as we make our way somewhere, and do not find the object on the ground valuable enough to take the time to avoid stepping on it. Generally, this happens in rushed situations, when we hurry and focus exclusively on reaching our destination, such that we cannot pay attention to things lying on the ground in our path. Translating this image into the Midrash’s analogy, we might suggest that is speaks of pressing circumstances, or situations of urgency, when a certain *mitzva* is, rightfully, “trampled” upon. There are times when different values conflict, and we need to choose one at the expense of the other. The most obvious example is situations of risk to life, when we must do all we can to rescue the person in danger, without paying heed to Torah laws which must be violated in the process. Another example might be a person who faces a grave crisis in his family which requires him to focus all his energy and effort on his family, and cannot involve himself in communal affairs or other valuable *mitzva* pursuits. More generally, it is understood that parents during the child-rearing years will likely be unable to set aside the kind of large periods of time for Torah study as those who have yet to marry or whose children are grown. The limitations of life force us to choose between competing values, often resulting in our understandable “trampling” of one in favor of another which rightfully takes priority.

The Midrash here thus perhaps seeks to warn against complete disregard of the *mitzvot* which we need to set aside for the sake of others. Even when we are forced to prioritize some *mitzvot* over others, we must be mindful of the *mitzvot* to which we cannot currently tend, and ensure not to belittle their importance. Although certain *mitzvot* are, in Rashi’s words, “*kalot*” (“light”), and thus give way to other *mitzvot* in situations of conflict, their “light” stature does not mean they can be ignored altogether. We must retain our full, unwavering commitment and devotion to all the Torah’s laws, even those which are occasionally overridden by others.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Eikev Moshe’s account of the events of *cheit ha-eigel* – the sin of the golden calf – in which he elaborates on the gravity of this incident and the intensive efforts he invested in praying on the nation’s behalf after God had decided to annihilate them. Towards the end of this account, we find a very difficult pair of verses (10:6-7) that seem entirely out of place, and that appear to contradict other verses elsewhere in the Torah. These verses tell of *Benei Yisrael*’s journey to a place called Mosera, where Aharon is said to have passed away and thereupon succeeded by his son, Elazar. The Torah then proceeds to tell of *Benei Yisrael*’s travels after journeying from Mosera. This account of Aharon’s death, which occurred some thirty-eight years after the golden calf, seems entirely irrelevant to the context of *cheit ha-eigel*. Additionally, Moshe’s account seems to directly contradict the accounts in Sefer Bamidbar (20:22-28, 33:37-38), which tell that Aharon died at Hor Ha-har, and not at Mosera.

Yet a third difficulty with these verses is that the journey it mentions is the reverse of what is told in Sefer Bamidbar (33:31-33). Here in Parashat Eikev, Moshe speaks of *Benei Yisrael* journeying from the wells of Benei Ya’akan to Mosera, whereas in Sefer Bamidbar, *Benei Yisrael* are said to have traveled from Moserot – which is, presumably, a variation of the name Mosera – to Benei Ya’akan.

The commentators struggled to resolve these difficulties, and several different approaches have been suggested. Rashi, based on Midrashic sources, explains that Moshe refers here to a tragic incident that occurred after Aharon’s death, which is not told explicitly anywhere in the Torah. Namely, the miraculous protective clouds, which were provided in Aharon’s merit during his lifetime, disappeared after his passing, leaving *Benei Yisrael* feeling vulnerable to enemy attack. They therefore turned around and began heading back towards Egypt, but were pursued by the tribe of Levi, which trusted in God’s protection and opposed the people’s decision to flee. A deadly civil war ensued, after which the people held new eulogies for Aharon, recognizing the terrible calamity that his passing wrought. This story is told here, in the context of the sin of the golden calf, to indicate, in Rashi’s words, that “the death of the righteous is as grave before the Almighty as the day when the tablets were broken.”

Ibn Ezra, Rashbam and Chizkuni offer a much simpler explanation for the relevance of Aharon’s death to the story of *cheit ha-eigel*. Several verses earlier (9:20), Moshe told *Benei Yisrael* that God had decreed severe punishment upon Aharon due to his role in the sin of the golden calf, and Moshe prayed on his brother’s behalf to annul the decree. In order to show the people that his prayers were effective, Moshe noted that Aharon did not die until many years later, and for this reason the account of Aharon’s death is mentioned here. As for the discrepancy between the geographic locations named here and in Sefer Devarim, these commentators offer several different approaches, including the theory advanced by Ibn Ezra that “Mosera” is not the same place as “Moserot,” and “the wells of Benei Ya’akan” are not the same as “Benei Ya’akan.”

An entirely different method of explaining these verses is proposed by Seforno. He solves the contradiction between Moshe’s account here and the accounts in Sefer Bamidbar very simply, by claiming that Moshe speaks of only one segment of the nation. When mentioning the people’s journeys from Mosera, Moshe says that they arrived in Yotvat, “a land of streams of water.” Seforno thus suggests that as *Benei Yisrael* were encamped in Benei Ya’akan, a significant portion of the nation wandered about in search of pasture and streams for their herds, and ended up traveling back to their previous stations. While they were in Mosera, they heard of Aharon’s death at Hor Ha’har. However, instead of returning to the Israelite camp to join the rest of the nation in mourning Aharon and giving honor to Elazar, his successor, they remained focused on their cattle, proceeding to Gudgod and Yotvat in search of water and pasture for their animals. Seforno explains that Moshe mentioned this here, in the context of the golden calf, to show how despite his having saved the nation through his prayers after they worshipped the calf, they nevertheless failed to appreciate the important role served by their religious leaders. After Aharon’s death, the people should have recognized the significance of this tragic event, knowing the value of their righteous spiritual guides. And thus after describing at length his prayers for the people after *cheit ha-eigel*, which succeeded in annulling the decree of annihilation, Moshe proceeded to criticize those who failed to show proper respect to Aharon after his passing.

Friday

Yesterday, we saw the tragic story told in the Midrash, which Rashi cites in his commentary to Parashat Eikev (10:7-8), of the events that transpired after Aharon’s death. *Chazal* teach that the miraculous “clouds of glory,” which surrounded *Benei Yisrael* as they traveled through the wilderness and guaranteed their protection, were provided in Aharon’s merit. Therefore, they disappeared after his passing. *Benei Yisrael* then felt vulnerable, especially as they were passing near the hostile Canaanite tribe in the Arad region. The nation fled in fear, retreating backwards in the direction of Egypt. The tribe of Levi – the same tribe which, nearly forty years earlier, opposed the worship of the golden calf – opposed the move, and pursued the other tribes, resulting in a deadly civil war.

Symbolically, this story teaches of the human tendency to grow to feel dependent upon certain conditions which afford us a feeling of security and protection. Just as *Benei Yisrael* felt fragile and vulnerable upon the loss of the miraculous clouds, people, too, naturally feel fragile and vulnerable after the loss of somebody or something which made them feel secure, such as a beloved family member, a job, a piece of property or some other important asset. However, while this feeling is perfectly normal and understandable, *Benei Yisrael*’s retreat serves as an example that we must try not to follow. We must never break down in the face of uncertainty and vulnerability and resort to drastic, reckless measures. Just as *Benei Yisrael* were wrong to resort to idolatry (the golden calf) when Moshe did not return from atop Mount Sinai at the time they anticipated, and should not have begun heading back to Egypt when the clouds of glory disappeared, we, too, must not despair when we lose somebody or something that has been important to us. Instead, we must follow the example set by the tribe of Levi, who retained their faith and trusted in God’s ability to care for them in the absence of their leader and without the means of protection to which they had grown accustomed.

In Sefer Bereishit (32:1), we read that as Yaakov made his way back to Canaan after his long stay in Charan, he was greeted by a group of angels. Immediately thereafter (32:33), the Torah tells, “Yaakov sent angels ahead of him” to deliver a message of reconciliation to Esav. The Rebbe of Kotzk interpreted this verse to mean that Yaakov “sent the angels away.” He did not want the angels to protect him, the Rebbe explained, as he trusted in the direct care and protection of the Almighty. The message being conveyed is that we should try to avoid becoming overly attached to, and dependent upon, the various “angels” which come into our lives to help us. We must be prepared at times to let go of an “angel,” a feature of our lives which has provided us with a livelihood, with fulfillment, with happiness, or with anything else we need or desire, and trust that our needs and wishes can be fulfilled through other means. As vulnerable and insecure as we might feel upon the loss of our “clouds of glory,” we must follow Levi’s example of steadfast faith and trust in the Almighty, rather than break down and fall into depression and despair.

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