**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT EKEV**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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**IN LOVING MEMORY OF**

**Jeffrey Paul Friedman z"l**

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**לע"נ**

**ז"ל יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל**

**כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב**

**ת.נ.צ.ב.ה**

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Motzaei Shabbat

As part of his discourse to *Benei Yisrael* in Parashat Eikev, Moshe mentions God’s quality of “*lo yisa fanim*” – that He does not show favoritism, and will not pardon wrongdoing because of the violator’s stature (10:17).

The Gemara, in a famous passage in Masekhet Berakhot (20b), tells that the angels in heaven questioned this description in light of the final verse of *birkat kohanim*, the blessing conferred upon the nation by the *kohanim*, in which they bless, “*Yisa Hashem panav eilekha*” – that God should show the people favor (Bamidbar 6:26).  How could the *kohanim* wish *Benei Yisrael* that they should be favored by God, if God does not show favoritism?

The Gemara relates that God answered this question by noting that He feels compelled, as it were, to show special favor to *Benei Yisrael* because of one specific measure of stringency which they observe.  Earlier in Parashat Eikev (8:10), the Torah requires reciting *birkat ha-mazon* after eating to the point of satiation (“*ve-akhalta ve-savata*”), and yet, *Benei Yisrael* have accepted the practice to recite *birkat ha-mazon* even after eating “*ad ke-zayit ve-ad ke-beitza*” – even just the size of an egg or olive.  This practice makes then worthy of God’s special favor, and His overriding His usual policy of “*lo yisa fanim*.”

Several different approaches have been offered to explain why the observance of this particular ordinance – reciting *birkat ha-mazon* after eating just a *ke-zayit* or a *ke-beitza* of food – makes us worthy of the blessing, “*Yisa Hashem panav eilekha*.”   One especially creative explanation is offered by Rav Yehoshua of Kutna, in his *Yeshuot Molkho* (cited by Rav Baruch Simon in *Imrei Barukh*, Parashat Eikev, 4), where he notes the Gemara’s unusual formulation in this passage – “*ad ke-zayit ve-ad ke-beitza*.”  Whereas this phrase is commonly translated to mean, “even just a *ke-zayit* or just a *ke-beitza*,” this does not appear to be the precise translation.  Literally, this phrase means, “until a *ke-zayit* and until a *ke-beitza*.”  Moreover, if the Gemara meant that we observe the practice of reciting *birkat ha-mazon* even over small amounts of food, then it should have simply said, “as little as a *ke-zayit*,” without making any mention of a *ke-beitza*, which is a larger volume than a *ke-zayit*.

Rav Yehoshua of Kutna therefore explains the Gemara’s intent much differently, referencing a debate recorded later in Masekhet Berakhot (49b) regarding the minimum volume of food for which one must recite *birkat ha-mazon*.  Whereas Rabbi Meir maintains that the Sages extended the *birkat ha-mazon* even to those who eat just a *ke-zayit*, Rabbi Yehuda ruled that the rabbinic extension of the obligation applies only to amounts no smaller than a *ke-beitza*.  In light of this debate, Rav Yehoshua of Kutna proposes a novel reading of the Gemara’s comment regarding the practice to be stringent with regard to *birkat ha-mazon* “*ad ke-zayit ve-ad ke-beitza*.”  He writes that the Gemara refers to groups consisting of disciples of both *Tanna’im* – Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehuda – that eat together.  If such a group would eat an amount in between a *ke-zayit* and a *ke-beitza*, an uncomfortable situation would arise, as some participants would consider themselves obligated to recite *birkat ha-mazon* and others would not.  In order to avoid this tense situation, the students would ensure to eat either less than a *ke-zayit* or at least a *ke-beitza*, in order that there would be no disagreement.  They would either eat less than a *ke-zayit* so that according to all views they would not need to recite *birkat ha-mazon*, or eat a *ke-beitza* so that according to all views they would need to recite *birkat ha-mazon*.  This way, they avoided a situation whereby some felt required to recite the blessing and others did not.

This special level of caution to avoid tension and strife, Rav Yehoshua of Kutna suggests, is what renders us worthy of God’s special favor.  Other measures of piety do not confer upon us “favored” status in God’s eyes, but this practice – going out of our way to avoid friction and conflict with our fellow Jews – does.  Even though God does not generally treat anybody as His “favorite,” and He holds all people equally accountable for their actions, we earn “favored” status by exercising particular care to stay away from conflict and to live peacefully with our fellow Jews, including those with whom we disagree.

Sunday

In Parashat Eikev, Moshe recounts the events of *cheit ha-eigel* – when *Benei Yisrael* worshiped a golden calf less than six weeks after the Revelation at Sinai, a sin to which God responded by decreeing annihilation. As Moshe recalls, after burning the golden calf he climbed back up Mount Sinai and spent another forty days atop the mountain praying on the people’s behalf, after having initially spent forty days receiving God’s laws.

Curiously, Moshe emphasizes in this context the pristinely nonphysical nature of his existence during this period: “I fell before the Lord like the first time, for forty days and forty nights. I did not eat bread and did not drink wine, because of all of your sin which you committed…because I dreaded the anger and fury…” (9:18-19). It appears that Moshe makes this point as part of his effort to stress the gravity of this sin, drawing the people’s attention to the pains he needed to take to save them from the repercussions of their misdeed. He “complains” that he needed to live an angelic existence for yet another forty days, after having already lived this way for forty days when receiving the Torah from God.

Rav Shlomo of Radomsk, in his *Tiferet Shelomo* (Rosh Hashanah), wonders why this aspect of Moshe’s efforts would be the subject of his “complaint” to the people. Wouldn’t Moshe relish the opportunity to spend yet another forty-day period in the heavens, living like an angel, in a state of pristine closeness to God? Can we not reasonably assume that for a righteous person like Moshe Rabbeinu, the greatest possible privilege would be spending time basking in God’s presence in the heavens?

Apparently, the Rebbe of Radomsk notes, this assumption is incorrect. The greatest privilege of all is not living an angelic existence in the heavens, but rather living a noble, sacred existence within the confines of human existence here on earth. The highest level of sanctity and religious achievement is not living as an angel, free of physical needs and desires, but rather living as a human being who struggles to balance physical satisfaction with spiritual commitment. Moshe did not want to live as an angel in the heavens; he wanted to live as a human being on earth, devoting his life to the service of God within the constraints and amid the complexities and struggles of human existence.

The Rebbe of Radomsk here reminds us that we should not despair during periods of struggle and failure, as this process is precisely the way we are meant to serve God – as frail, imperfect human beings. We need to balance our desire for perfection with a recognition of the human reality, that God created us as flawed beings and expects us to serve him as such. Our mistakes and failings should not discourage us, but rather motivate us to try harder, with the recognition that we were created to serve God as complex human beings, and not as perfect, pristine angels.

Monday

Moshe devotes a portion of his remarks in Parashat Eikev recalling the sin of the golden calf and its aftermath, including his shattering the stone tablets upon seeing the people worship the calf. This necessitated his carving a new pair of stones, upon which God then engraved the commandments which had been written on the original tablets.

Immediately after recalling this incident and God’s engraving the commandments on the second pair of tablets, Moshe then briefly recounts the death of his brother, Aharon (10:6) – which occurred thirty-nine years after the golden calf. Different explanations have been offered to explain the point of connection between these two events. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Yoma 1:1) writes that this juxtaposition teaches us “that the death of the righteous is as harsh before the Almighty like the breaking of the tablets.” These two events are related in juxtaposition to one another, the Yerushalmi comments, to draw a comparison between the death of a righteous person (like Aharon) and Moshe’s shattering of the stone tablets in the wake of the golden calf.

Rav Naftali of Ropshitz (in his eulogy for the Chozeh of Lublin) suggested an explanation for this parallel drawn by the Yerushalmi. He noted that although the tablets broken by Moshe were immediately replaced, the new tablets were of lesser stature than the first. Whereas the first set of tablets are described as “*ma’aseh Elokim*” – the handiwork of God, prepared entirely by the Almighty Himself (Shemot 32:16), the second tablets were carved by a human being, Moshe Rabbeinu. Similarly, the Rebbe of Ropshitz commented, great religious figures are, generally speaking, substituted by worthy successors, but their stature of greatness can never be fully replaced. God saw to it that the shattered tablets would not mark the permanent end of the covenant which they represented, but even so, the replacement fell short of the original. And this is true of great people, as well. Even if the roles they served could be adequately filled by another outstanding figure, a truly great person never be entirely replaced.

This insight should perhaps remind us of the unique worth of every individual, how we are each endowed with a special set of qualities and capabilities that we share with nobody else. No individual who uses and maximizes his or her unique talents, potential and opportunities can ever be considered “replaceable.” Sure, most of the roles we fill in our lives can also be satisfactorily filled by others. But when we utilize our God-given skills and characteristics to their very fullest, we lend each and every role that we serve a unique dimension that cannot be achieved by anybody else. We are thus reminded to make the most of every moment, every opportunity, and ever talent we have, recognizing that we each have something special to contribute to the world that cannot ever be provided by any other person.

Tuesday

Parashat Eikev begins with a description of the blessings God promises to bestow upon *Benei Yisrael* in reward for their compliance with His laws, including the promise, “…and He will bless the fruit of your belly and the fruit of your land” (7:13). The Midrash (*Devarim Rabba* 3:5) finds it significant that the Torah juxtaposes the blessing of children and the blessing of agricultural success, suggesting a link between these two blessings. Interestingly, however, the Midrash offers two opposite explanations for this link. It first comments, “The Almighty said: Just as the fruit of your land has refuse, so does the fruit of your belly have refuse.” The Midrash here appears to make the point that just as even the tastiest agricultural produce first emerges together with “refuse,” with dirt and other undesirable matter which needs to be removed, similarly, all people emerge from the womb with “refuse,” with negative traits that need to be eliminated. However, the Midrash then comments, “Alternatively: Just as the fruit of your land have no sin or iniquity, similarly, the fruit of your belly shall have no sin and no iniquity.” According to this reading, the Midrash underscores the obligation to try to ensure that children will grow to be faithfully committed to God’s laws, and will live without “sin or iniquity.”

While at first it might seem jarring that the Midrash offers two such drastically different, and even opposing, perspectives on this association, in truth, the two readings go hand-in-hand. The Midrash here seeks to teach us precisely that the reality of “refuse,” that we enter this world with ingrained, negative characteristics and tendencies, does not in any way absolve us of the need to work towards living our lives free of sin and iniquity. The Torah’s demands are not imposed only upon those who are without “refuse,” who are naturally pure and spiritually inclined. To the contrary, the Torah recognizes the fact that few, if any, such people exist. The Torah’s commands are intended specifically for us, for complex beings who must occasionally – and often – struggle with our sinful tendencies in an effort to remain faithful to God’s commands.

The Midrash’s comments also remind us that we ought not feel ashamed or disadvantaged by our ingrained negative inclinations, by the numerous faults in our characters that we must so often struggle against in our quest to follow the Torah’s laws and values. The “refuse” in our beings is as natural as the chaff produced by the ground together with the grain. We should feel no more ashamed or disturbed by our natural human weaknesses than a farmer is about the dirt that needs to be separated from his produce. The process of personal growth is not all that different from the process of growing agricultural produce, as both involve a long process of hard work, effort and struggle, a process whose results invariably differ from one year to the next. The “refuse” that we need to eliminate is a natural, expected, and integral part of this process. *Chazal* here teach us that we should strive and work to overcome our sinful inclinations, rather than feel distressed over, or hampered by, these weaknesses. Religious life, like agriculture, is all about hard work, striving to produce the best possible yield given the numerous challenges and obstacles that arise over the course of the long, complicated process.

Wednesday

Moshe famously exhorts *Benei Yisrael* in Parashat Eikev (10:12), “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you, other than to fear the Lord your God…” The simple meaning of this verse, which appears after Moshe’s account of the grave incident of the golden calf and its aftermath, is that God did not impose any special demands to atone for this sin. Despite the people’s grievous betrayal of God, all He requested of them is their steadfast devotion going forward.

The Gemara, however, in Masekhet Berakhot (33b), famously cites Rabbi Chanina as inferring from this verse the principle, “*Ha-kol bi-ydei Shamayim chutz mi-yir’at Shamayim*” – “Everything is in the hands of Heaven except fear of Heaven.” Rabbi Chanina understood the phrase “what does the Lord your God ask of you” as referring to the only thing which is under our control and for which we are fully responsible. Although we are entitled and expected to try to care for our physical and material needs, ultimately, it is only God who determines our physical health and our level of material comfort. Our spiritual achievement, however, depends solely on us. We, not God, determine our level of devotion to God’s laws.

The *Tzelach* (commentary by the author of *Noda Bi-yehuda*) offers a deeper interpretation of Rabbi Chanina’s comment. He notes that the word “*sho’eil*” (“ask”) differs from other Hebrew words for “ask” in that it is sometimes used specifically to mean “borrow.” One who borrows something has no right to it at all, but asks for an undeserved favor. And it is in this sense, the *Tzelach* suggests, that the Gemara points to *yir’at Shamayim* – fear of Heaven – as the only thing which God asks from us. The *Tzelach* explains that generally, *mitzvot* are required of people who enjoy certain blessings. A person who marries must observe laws governing marriage and family life. A person who owns a home must affix *mezuzot*, among other obligations he must fulfill. A person who has food to eat must observe the numerous laws related to food consumption. A person who owns agricultural lands which he tills must observe the series of guidelines related to farming. A person who engages in commerce must abide by the Torah’s system of monetary law. A person who produces children is required to circumcise his sons, support his children, and educate them in the manner required by the Torah. As a general rule, the Torah addresses itself to one who has received from God a family, a home and material possessions, and it presents certain obligations relevant to those blessings. In a sense, most *mitzvot* are required as a form of “payment” for the blessings we’ve received. God gives us many things, and He demands certain things of us in return.

The exception, the *Tzelach* writes, is *yir’at Shamayim*, which does not depend on any factor in the world. The obligation to live with an awareness of God and our accountability to Him applies regardless of what a person has or hasn’t received. Whereas most *mitzvot* can be said to be “owed” to God, by virtue of our having received from Him certain blessings, *yir’at Shamayim* is something which He “borrows” – which He asks of us irrespective of what He has given us.

The *Tzelach* here draws a distinction between our practical religious obligations, and the general religious mindset with which we are to live. The former will naturally depend upon a person’s circumstances, but the latter does not depend on any circumstances. For example, the amount and level of Torah study, charity and community work expected of a person will depend on his or her skills and resources. In terms of practical religious activity, therefore, some are expected to do more and some less. The *Tzelach* reminds us, however, that the level of our *yir’at Shamayim* should not depend on our skills, resources, circumstances, or any other factors. This mindset, being aware and cognizant of our responsibilities to God – however different those responsibilities might be from our fellow’s – is required irrespective of who we are and what we have and don’t have, and must inform our decisions, our speech and our conduct at all times and under all circumstances.

Thursday

One of the blessings which the Torah promises to *Benei Yisrael* in reward for their fulfillment of God’s laws is “*lo yihyeh vekha akar va-akara*” – there would be no infertile man or woman in the nation (7:14). Rashi comments on the word “*akar*” that this term refers to somebody “*she-eino molid*” – who does not beget children.

Rav Yehonatan Eibshitz, in his *Midrash Yehonatan*, raises the question of why Rashi found it necessary to translate this word for us. The feminine form of this term – “*akara*” – is already familiar to us from Sefer Bereishit (e.g. 11:30), and it would seem obvious that the masculine form – “*akar*” – refers to an infertile man. Why did Rashi bother to provide a translation for a word with which the reader is, presumably, already quite familiar?

Rav Yehonatan Eibshitz suggests an answer by noting the Gemara’s well-known remark in Masekhet Yevamot (64a) that God made three of the matriarchs (Sara, Rivka and Rachel) infertile for many years before they bore children, because He “desires the prayers of the righteous.” Eager to hear the heartfelt prayers of our saintly patriarchs and matriarchs, God saw to it that they would not conceive immediately, and would endure an extended period of infertility, during which they would implore God to bless them with children. In light of this Gemara, Rav Yehonatan Eibshitz writes, we might have wondered why the Torah promises in Parashat Eikev that there would be no infertility. A temporary state of infertility is not necessarily a bad thing; as the Gemara teaches, it could be an indication that God cherishes a person’s prayers. Why, then, does the Torah promise the absence of fertility problems as a reward? For this reason, Rav Yehonatan Eibshitz suggests, Rashi explains the word “*akar*” as referring to somebody “*she-eino molid*” – who does not beget children, ever. The elimination of even temporary infertility is not necessarily a blessing; therefore, if the Torah blesses us with the absence of infertility, it must refer specifically to the absence of lifelong infertility, of a condition that is never cured. This is what Rashi sought to clarify.

Rav Yehonatan Eibshitz’s comments on this verse reminds us that having all our wishes immediately fulfilled without delay is not necessarily a blessing. Sometimes we are specifically better off having to wait and yearn for the things we want. The greatest blessing is having our important wishes granted, but not necessarily having them granted right when we desire them. There is often great value in wanting something, praying for it, and patiently waiting for it to come – and even if we must wait for an extended period, this, too, is a blessing.

Friday

Towards the beginning of Parashat Eikev, Moshe urges the people not to fear the battles they would have to wage in Canaan to take possession of the land, assuring them that God would lead them to victory. He then adds that the conquest would proceed gradually, rather than take place instantaneously, “*pen tirbeh alekha chayat ha-sadeh*” – “lest the beasts of the field become numerous for you” (7:22). If the native population of Canaan would be vanquished too quickly, the land would be largely desolate, and thus quickly overrun by dangerous animals.

A classic Chassidic reading of this verse is offered by Rav Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub, the second Rebbe of Modzhitz (*Imrei Shaul*, p. 272). He suggests interpreting the warning of beasts allegorically, as referring to the “beasts” within the people, animalistic attributes such as ferocity and violence. The Rebbe explained that if *Benei Yisrael* would conquer the land too quickly, this would engender negative qualities within them. If the process of conquest would be too intensive, the people might become violent and inhumane. The process had to unfold in a slow, gradual manner due to the fear that the inner “beast” within the people, the selfish, aggressive, brutish and heartless tendencies to which all human beings are potentially prone, might otherwise overrun their personalities and characters.

The Modzhitzer Rebbe here teaches that even when we engage in inherently worthwhile and valuable pursuits, including the performance of *mitzvot*, we must be wary of the “beast” within us. Involving ourselves in important undertakings does not provide instant protection against “animalistic” tendencies. Even as we engage in matters of great religious significance, we must carefully guard ourselves – as we must always do – to ensure we act in a dignified, humane, sensitive and appropriate manner. We can never assume that this happens by itself simply by virtue of the value and importance of what we are doing.

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