**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAETCHANAN**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Jeffrey Paul Friedman z"l

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לע"נ

יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל ז"ל

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

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Motzaei Shabbat

In the sixth verse of *Megilat Eikha*, Yirmiyahu describes how the distinguished noblemen of Jerusalem “were like deer who found no pasture; they went without strength before the pursuer.” Rashi explains this depiction as referring to the feeble condition of the formerly wealthy noblemen, who became like a deer that was once strong and fleetfooted, but as it could not find food, it managed only to weakly hobble as it tried to escape from a pursuing beast of prey. The noblemen, too, were starved and famished (presumably, as a result of the prolonged siege of Jerusalem), and lacked the strength to flee from the enemy.

Rav Yaakov of Lissa (the “*Netivot*”), in his *Palgei Mayim* commentary to *Megilat Eikha*, offers a much different explanation. He cites Yirmiyahu’s description elsewhere (Yirmiyahu 14:5) of a deer that gives birth but is forced to abandon its young in order to go find pasture. Perhaps, then, in this verse in Eikha, too, Yirmiyahu draws an analogy to a deer that abandons its young as it searches for pasture. This is an apt description of the nation’s leaders, Rav Yaakov of Lissa writes, because they abandoned their constituents like a deer forced to abandon its young. The leadership failed to meet its responsibility to teach, guide and motivate the people, and for this they were punished by being forced to flee from their enemies without the strength to escape.

Developing this analogy one step further, we might suggest that this verse speaks of the leaders’ neglecting their responsibilities due to their frantic search for “*mir’eh*” – “pasture,” greater wealth and comfort. Like the deer abandoning her young to look for food, the leaders abandoned the people under their charge in the pursuit of their own gratification, of wealth and luxury. They were too preoccupied with their own selfish interests to properly fulfill their responsibilities to the people whom they were supposed to lead.

All of us, on one level or another, are “leaders,” in the sense that there are people who depend on us, or people whom we are in a position to help in some way. The analogy in this verse, as understood by Rav Yaakov of Lissa, warns us not to neglect these responsibilities in our search for “pasture” – for greater wealth and comfort. We are to tend to our duties to those under our charge, or those who could benefit from our assistance, even at the expense of “pasture,” even if this entails a degree of material sacrifice. Whether it’s our families, our communities, or anyone else who relies on us, we must ensure to devotedly fulfill our responsibilities despite the sacrifices this often requires.

Sunday

In the eighth verse of Eikha, Yirmiyahu describes how those who had once held the city of Jerusalem (and the Jewish Kingdom generally) in high esteem now looked upon it degradingly: “All who respected her now scorned her, for they have seen her nakedness.” Rashi explains “*ervatah*” (“her nakedness”) in this verse to mean “her disgrace,” referring to the humiliation brought to the kingdom when Jerusalem was plundered by ruthless enemies who seized its treasures, killed its inhabitants, and set its buildings ablaze.

Rav Yaakov of Lissa (the “*Netivot*”), in his *Palgei Mayim* commentary to *Megilat Eikha*, offers a creative interpretation of this verse, suggesting that “*mekhabedeha*” (“those who respected her”) refers to the *mitzvot* performed by the Jews of the time. Normally, *mitzvot* are a great source of pride, dignity and respect for a person; they invite admiration and esteem. However, when a person is publicly disgraced and humiliated on account of his grievous sins, then his *mitzvot* are a source of shame, not honor. If a person is found guilty of grave indiscretions, then the righteous acts he had performed become repugnant. Rav Yaakov of Lissa draws an analogy to beautiful jewelry placed on a woman whose face is covered with filth. The jewelry does not add any beauty; to the contrary, it invites ridicule and scorn. Likewise, if a person is covered by the “filth” of depravity, then his *mitzvot*, like fine jewelry, are unattractive, and in fact disgraceful. They bring him no honor, and instead add further shame.

On this basis, Rav Yaakov of Lissa explains the first half of the verse – “Jerusalem has committed a sin, and so she has become a *nidda*.” *Targum* and Rashi explain “*nidda*” to mean “wandering,” referring to the decree of exile issued against the Jewish Kingdom on account of its wrongdoing, which turned the Jews into a wandering nation. Rav Yaakov of Lissa, however, suggests that the word “*nidda*” here is used in its more familiar meaning, referring to a menstruating woman. Yirmiyahu here compares Jerusalem to a woman covered by her own blood, in that her sins were public, on full display, noticed by everyone. *Am Yisrael* was mired in the “filth” of iniquity, and, as a result, their *mitzvot* were a source of additional shame and degradation, instead of a source of honor and pride. When we disgrace ourselves through improper conduct, even our *mitzvot* bring us shame, making us look like shallow, deceitful and hypocritical as we perform good deeds in a state of moral and spiritual decay.

Monday

In Parashat Vaetchanan, Moshe recalls God’s pronouncement of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, the second of which is, “*Lo yihyeh lekha elohim acheirim al panai*” – “You shall not have any other gods in My presence,” which, as God proceeded to explain, forbids making or worshipping any perceived deities.

Rashi offers two explanations to the phrase “*al panai*” (“in My presence”) in this verse, suggesting that it refers to place, or time. According to the first explanation, God here emphasizes that one may not worship a foreign deity anywhere in the world, and He thus specifies that this prohibition applies “in My presence” – which of course includes the entire universe. Secondly, Rashi writes, “*al panai*” means that this command applies for as long as God exists, meaning, for all eternity. In his commentary to the Ten Commandments in Sefer Shemot (20:2), Rashi explains (based on the *Mekhilta*) that one might have assumed that the prohibition against idolatry applied only to that generation, which witnessed the Revelation at Sinai. God therefore made a point of emphasizing that one may not worship other deities at any time.

Why would anyone have made this mistake – of thinking that idol-worship was forbidden only for the generation that stood at Mount Sinai at the time of the Revelation?

The Rambam famously teaches in the beginning of *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* that idol-worship began with the mistaken notion that God wants people to worship the natural forces. The origins of idolatry lie not in the rejection of the belief in a single Creator, but rather in the belief that the Creator expects us, the lower creatures, to serve the loftier creatures, such as the sun and the oceans. Just as a king delegates power and authority to his officers and noblemen, and expects the commoners to show them respect and reverence, it was similarly believed that God expects human beings to worship the forces of nature. Eventually, the Rambam explains, this led people to forget about God altogether, and to ascribe divine powers to various objects. The source of this mistake, it would seem, is the fact that God conceals Himself behind the veil of nature. We do not clearly see God’s governance of the world, which appears to us as though it is controlled solely by the natural forces which were put into place at the time of creation. This is likely what led people to assume that God wants them to serve these forces, rather than serve Him. They figured that since God withdrew, in their perception, from the world, entrusting it to the natural forces He created, this meant that He no longer has any interest in the world or its inhabitants, and so our obligations are not to Him, but rather to the forces that govern the world.

At Mount Sinai, all *Benei Yisrael* beheld the revelation of God, as Moshe describes here in Parashat Vaetchanan: “The Lord spoke with you face-to-face at the mountain from amidst the fire” (5:4). They were shown unmistakably that God communicates with us, that He remains interested in the world and wants a relationship with human beings. They heard Him pronounce the Ten Commandments, proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that He has not withdrawn from the earth, that He demands that we serve Him.

According to Rashi, the phrase “*al panai*” emphasizes that this conclusion must guide all future generations, even millennia after the Revelation at Sinai. Even though subsequent generations will not be clearly shown God’s interaction with the world, which will always be hidden behind the natural order, we are to continually believe that we must serve God alone. “*Al panai*” emphasizes that God remains present and involved in the world and in our lives even when His presence and involvement are not easily discernible, and that we must remain committed to serving him despite His concealment, without ever thinking that He has withdrawn from the world and thus no longer matters.

One of the reasons why we often find ourselves drawn to things other than the service of God is because we feel their impact far more easily than we feel God’s impact. We are lured by the physical and material delights of the world because the gratification is immediate and experienced very strongly. By contrast, God’s impact upon our lives is not experienced directly, thus allowing us to think that He does not matter, that He has no impact or control over our lives. The challenge of “*Lo yihyeh lekha elohim acheirim al panai*” is to recognize God’s impact upon us even when it cannot be directly felt, to firmly believe that He remains intimately involved in our lives even though we cannot perceive Him with our senses, and thus recognize that all our loyalty and commitment must be directed solely towards Him, and not to anything else in the world.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Vaetchanan Moshe’s exhortation to *Benei Yisrael* that they must never forget the event of the Revelation at Sinai: “But be careful, and guard your souls exceedingly, lest your forget the things which your eyes saw, and lest they leave your heart, all the days of your life…the day when you stood before the Lord your God at Choreiv [Sinai]…” (4:9-10).

The Rambam, in *Hilkhot Rotzei’ach U-shmirat Ha-guf* (11:4), surprisingly cites this warning as a command to care for one’s physical wellbeing, and to remove any hazards and refrain from dangerous activities. When the Torah here commands us to “be careful” and “guard” our “souls,” this means that we must act safely and avoid danger.

Later writers (for example, *Minchat Chinukh*, 546:11) noted two Talmudic sources for this interpretation. First, the Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (32b) tells of a gentile nobleman who approached a certain Jew as the Jew prayed, and was startled by the fact that the Jew ignored him and kept praying. The nobleman reprimanded the Jew for endangering his life by ignoring him, and noted that the Torah requires protecting one’s physical wellbeing, citing this verse from Parashat Vaetchanan. The Rambam, apparently, felt that the Gemara brought this story because the nobleman was correct – this verse indeed establishes an obligation to care for one’s physical safety. Secondly, the Gemara in Masekhet Shavuot (36a) cites this verse as a source of the prohibition against cursing oneself – indicating that the Torah here commands us to avoid danger, including the danger that could potentially result from a curse.

Of course, as many have noted, it seems difficult to understand how this command can be viewed as introducing an obligation to care for one’s physical wellbeing. It is very clear that the warning of “*hishamer lekha u-shmor nafshekha me’od*” – “be careful, and guard your souls exceedingly” – is referring to forgetting the event of *Ma’amad Har Sinai* (the Revelation at Sinai). How, then, can the Gemara (or the Roman nobleman…) infer from this verse an obligation to care for one’s health and safety? Indeed, some writers concluded that this verse is not the actual source of the obligation to care for one’s wellbeing, and that this verse is cited as an “*asmakhta*” – a subtle allusion in the text (see *Be’er Ha-gola*, C.M. 427:70).

Regardless, we might suggest a possible connection between the command to remember the event of the Revelation and the obligation to care for one’s wellbeing. If a person neglects his health or his personal safety – and certainly if he denigrates himself through a curse – this bespeaks inadequate appreciation of his own worth, value and greatness. If we truly understood and recognized just how precious our lives are, and how vitally important a role we have on God’s earth, we would then hold ourselves in such high esteem that we would never consider doing anything to harm or endanger ourselves, and we would likewise never curse ourselves. We all have people in our lives who are very important and dear to us, whom we would never think to cause harm or endanger, and whom we would always want to protect and keep safe. We must view ourselves the same way. After all, if we are alive, this means that God Himself wants us alive, that our presence in His world is very important to Him, as it were. As such, we have no right to cause ourselves any sort of harm, or to engage in any sort of self-deprecation, such as placing on ourselves a curse.

The Revelation at Sinai, when God appeared to and spoke to all *Am Yisrael*, is the clearest demonstration of our worth, our importance, and our potential. If God made a point of revealing Himself and speaking to human beings, this is because He considers us important and He believes in us. He gave us His Torah because He values our service and our commitment, because He recognizes our potential and deems us capable of making a significant contribution to His world.

Therefore, Moshe’s warning to exercise extreme care not to forget the event of *Ma’amad Har Sinai* may perhaps include a warning to never forget our worth and our potential. We must consider ourselves important – because God Himself considered us important enough for Him to reveal Himself and give us His law. And for this reason, perhaps, the obligation to care for our wellbeing is associated with the command to remember *Ma’amad Har Sinai*. We must never forget how much we are loved and esteemed by God – and this constant realization must motivate us to take very good care of ourselves so we can fulfill the indispensable role that we are to serve on the Almighty’s earth.

Each morning, right when we awaken, we recite, “*Modeh ani*,” thanking God for “restoring” our souls after a night’s sleep. We conclude, “*…rabba emunatekha*” – “great is Your faith.” This has been explained to mean that God has great faith in us, as evidenced by our having woken up in the morning. The very fact that we are alive for yet another day proves that God believes in us, that He believes we have something valuable to contribute, that our lives are valuable and meaningful. We make this pronouncement each morning as we begin our day to remind ourselves of our obligation to protect our lives and our wellbeing, and to work towards ensuring that we fulfill our potential and live up to God’s high expectations of us.

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted Moshe’s command to *Benei Yisrael* in Parashat Vaetchanan (4:9-10) never to forget the event of *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, when God revealed Himself to the entire nation and proceeded to give them the Torah. The Ramban, both in his commentary to this verse and in his critique to the Rambam’s *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, famously considers this admonition a Biblical command.

Rav Chanoch Henoch of Alexander, in his *Chashavah Le-tova*, suggests that this command require more than simply remembering the event of *Matan Torah*, and is relevant also to the quasi “*Matan Torah*” events that we occasionally experience. Every so often, the Rebbe of Alexander writes, we receive some inspiration, or we feel invigorated, or we arrive at some new insight, an “epiphany,” that gives us a new degree of clarity and understanding about how we should act and who we should be. In short, there are certain occasions when we feel especially strong motivation and ambition to reach higher. The Rebbe of Alexander describes these moments as a type of “*kabbalat ha-Torah*” – a personal “*Ma’amad Har Sinai*” of sorts, when we, in a sense, again receive the Torah from God. These moments are gifts and opportunities for us to utilize for the purpose of growth and self-improvement. And thus the Rebbe of Alexander writes that just as the Torah commands us not to forget the original *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, similarly, we must never forget our personal “*Ma’amad Har Sinai*” experiences, those occasional moments of inspiration and motivation. We must seize those opportunities and utilize them as catalysts for growth and advancement, rather than allow them to pass us by without leaving any impact.

It is very easy to be distracted and lured away from our religious obligations and ideals. We are constantly challenged by competing trappings and temptations that catch our attention and draw our interest. The Rebbe of Alexander here teaches us that in this ongoing struggle, we must, at very least, capitalize on those rare moments when we are “lured” in the proper direction, when we feel motivated and driven to elevate ourselves. Just as we must remember *Matan Torah*, the time when as a nation we were given our mission and the direction we must follow, likewise, we must look to our personal moments of inspiration as defining our life’s mission and establishing the goals that we should strive to reach throughout our lives – even when we don’t feel as driven and motivated.

Thursday

The *haftara* for Shabbat Parashat Vaetchanan, the Shabbat after Tisha B’Av (“Shabbat Nachamu”), is a prophecy from Sefer Yeshayahu (40) in which the prophet assures the people that God is capable of bringing them back from exile. God calls upon the prophet to first announce to *Benei Yisrael* His intention to bring them back to their homeland, and then to remind them that God is all-powerful, with unlimited capabilities, and thus as impossible as redemption and restoration might appear, it is going to happen.

Towards the beginning of the prophecy, the prophet announces, “A voice calls: In the desert, clear a path for the Lord; pave a road in the Arava for our God!” (40:3). The call continues in the next verse, ordering that all hills be flattened and all valleys elevated so that the road back is traversable. As *Targum* and Rashi explain, although the call speaks of a path “for the Lord” and “for our God,” the intent is for God’s nation. The prophet speaks here of the road that is being prepared for *Am Yisrael* so it can return from exile to its homeland. During the period of exile, the “road” to redemption seems untraversable; the obstacles standing in the way of our nation’s revival and return to its homeland appear insurmountable; the path to our return looks unviable. The prophet therefore assures us that God can and will remove all obstacles, that He is fully capable of clearing a path for our national redemption and our return to *Erez Yisrael* (as we are privileged to witness and experience in our generation).

Rav Shlomo of Radomsk, in *Tiferet Shelomo*, finds in the aforementioned verse an allusion also to the “path for our God” that we must strive to “pave” throughout our lives. The word “Arava” – which, in its plain meaning, refers to the desert region in southern Israel – is understood by the *Tiferet Shelomo* as an allusion to the delights of the world, as the root *a.r.v.* denotes “pleasant” or “enjoyable.” Accordingly, he suggests, the phrase “pave a road in the Arava for our God” can be read as an exhortation to find a “path for our God,” a means of connecting with the Almighty, even in the “Arava,” as we enjoy worldly pleasures and delights. Although we need to spend a great deal of time tending to our mundane, physical needs, we are instructed to find a “path for our God” even while conducting our ordinary affairs, to bring meaning and spiritual substance to our everyday activities such that our entire lives are lived in the devoted service of God.

Just as the road from exile to redemption seems unviable, but we are assured that it will be paved and traversable, likewise, we sometimes find ourselves in circumstances where there is no viable “path for the Lord,” there is no possibility of connecting to the Almighty. The *Tiferet Shelomo* here teaches us that just as the prophet assures us of God’s ability to bring redemption, no matter how impossible it may seem, we must feel confident in our ability to pave our path to God in all situations and under all circumstances, no matter how impossible it may seem. Even when we engage in our ordinary, mundane affairs, and even when we feel uninspired, unmotivated and distant from God, we must make an effort to “pave” the “road” to spirituality, and serve God to the best of our ability under the challenging circumstances.

Friday

In Parashat Vaetchanan, Moshe recounts the Revelation at Sinai, and describes how the people were frightened by the spectacle and told Moshe that they did not wish to hear God speak to them directly. Instead, they asked that Moshe alone hear God’s commands and then convey to them the information. God approved, and instructed Moshe, “Go tell them, ‘Return to your tents,’ and you stay here with Me…” (5:27-28).

The Gemara (Mo’ed Katan 7b and elsewhere) interprets the phrase “Return to your tents” to mean that the people were allowed to resume marital relations. During the three days before the Revelation, the people were commanded to abstain from intimacy (“*al tigeshu el isha*” – Shemot 19:15). Now, when it was decided that the Revelation would end, and God would communicate the Torah only to Moshe, the people were permitted to resume marital life. And thus Moshe was to announce to the people that they could return to their “tents,” referring to the resumption of marital life.

Rav Meir Simcha Ha-kohen of Dvinsk, in his *Meshekh Chokhma*, boldly suggests that this verse marks the Biblical source for a well-known and far-reaching *halakha* relevant to conversion. He brings the question posed by *Chatam Sofer* (in his commentary to Masekhet Avoda Zara) as to where the Torah introduces the concept of “*ger she-nitgayer ke-katan she-nolad dami*” – that a convert is halakhically considered “born anew” with respect to familial relationships. As far as *Halakha* is concerned, once a gentile undergoes conversion, he is no longer “related” to any of his biological relatives, as his conversion is regarded as a halakhic “birth.” This principle is mentioned in a number of contexts in the Gemara, but the Gemara never identifies a Biblical source for this rule. Rav Meir Simcha suggests that the source might be the permission granted to *Benei Yisrael* after *Ma’amad Har Sinai* (the Revelation at Sinai) to resume marital relations with their spouses. From a number of sources, Rav Meir Simcha writes, it seems that before the Torah was given, *Benei Yisrael* did not adhere to the restrictions of *arayot*, which forbid marrying certain relatives. For example, Amram – Moshe’s father – was married to his aunt, Yokheved (Shemot 6:20). And, the Midrash (cited by Rashi, Bamidbar 11:10) relates that *Benei Yisrael* later complained about the *arayot* laws which restricted their prospects for marriage – clearly indicating that before the Torah was given, they did not abide by these restrictions. Yet, after the Torah was given, God had Moshe tell the people, “Return to your tents” – allowing them to resume marital relations with their spouses whom they had married before *Matan Torah*. Although some marriages were now forbidden by Torah law, it seems that these marriages were allowed to continue after the Torah was given. The only explanation for this permission, Rav Meir Simcha contends, is “*ger she-nitgayer ke-katan she-nolad dami*.” When *Benei Yisrael* stood at Sinai and entered into a covenant with God, this constituted their “conversion,” such that they were considered “born anew,” and hence no longer halakhically related to their biological kin. Therefore, nobody was halakhically related to one another, and so the *arayot* prohibitions did not forbid marriages between people born before *Matan Torah*. Rav Meir Simcha thus postulates that this verse – “Return to your tents” – marks the Biblical source of the principle of “*ger she-nitgayer ke-katan she-nolad dami*.”

As a number of later writers noted, this theory runs in direct contrast to the comments of the Maharal of Prague, in his *Gur Aryeh* (Bereishit 46:8), where he asserted that the rule of “*ger she-nitgayer ke-katan she-nolad dami*” did not apply to *Benei Yisrael*’s “conversion” at the time of *Matan Torah*. The Maharal writes that unquestionably, *Benei Yisrael* were not allowed to marry their relatives after receiving the Torah, as they were still considered halakhically related to their kin. Although in general a convert halakhically loses his familial relationships, this was not true of *Benei Yisrael* at the time they received the Torah. The reason for this distinction is developed by Rav Meir Dan Platzky, in his *Keli Chemda* (Parashat Vayigash, 2), where he explains that a gentile who converts to Judaism dissociates from his people and his family, and for this reason he is considered “born anew.” But when *Am Yisrael* collectively “converted” at the time of *Matan Torah*, they underwent the process that they were destined to undergo since the time of the patriarchs, and this did not involve any kind of dissociation from one other. Therefore, they were still considered halakhically related to one another.

In any event, Rav Meir Simcha clearly disagreed, and maintained that *Benei Yisrael* indeed were considered “born anew” after *Matan Torah*, such that they were permitted to marry relatives who were alive at the time of *Matan Torah*.

As for the resumption of marital life after *Matan Torah*, it is very possible that indeed, those who were married to family members whom the Torah forbids marrying needed to divorce after the Torah was given. This point is made by Rav Chaim Nachum Lichtenstein, in his *Avnei Nachal* (p. 321), where he cites the Tosafists (*Da’at Zekeinim*, Bamidbar 11:27) as writing explicitly that after *Matan Torah*, those among *Benei Yisrael* who were married to relatives whom the Torah forbids marrying were required to divorce. It stands to reason that when God instructed the people to return to their “tents” and resume marital life, this referred only to those whose marriages were valid according to Torah law.

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