**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT RE’EH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Re’ei concludes with a discussion of the three pilgrimage festivals (Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot), emphasizing the requirement of *aliya le-regel* – to go to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and offer sacrifices on these occasions. In its discussion of the celebration of Sukkot, the Torah issues the famous command of “*ve-hayita akh samei’ach*” (16:15) – the obligation to rejoice and be festive on Yom Tov.

An insightful reading into this verse is offered by Rav Yisrael Yehuda Karfunkel, in his work *Chemdat Yisrael*. Rav Karfunkel notes that the word “*akh*” (literally, “only,” or “but”) is commonly understood by *Chazal* as implying a limit, or qualification, of what is being said in that context. In the command “*ve-hayita* ***akh*** *samei’ach*,” then, the word “*akh*” should perhaps be understood as in some way qualifying the extent of *simcha* (rejoicing) required on Yom Tov. Rav Karfunkel thus suggests (citing his son, Rav Yechiel Michel) that the Torah instructs that we should build our joy on Yom Tov gradually, one step at a time. If one immediately rushes into the joy of the holiday, instantly entering into some sort of ecstatic state, this joy will not likely have a lasting impact upon him or her. Authentic religious joy is experienced not as a spontaneous emotional outburst, but rather as a gradual process. And thus the Torah qualifies its command to rejoice on Yom Tov by adding the word “*akh*,” indicating that this rejoicing should be experienced gradually.

On this basis, Rav Karfunkel suggests explaining the deeper significance of *Chazal*’s halakhic inference from this verse. The Gemara in Masekhet Sukka (48a) interprets this verse – which, as mentioned, appears in the context of Sukkot – as indicating that the obligation to rejoice applies even on Shemini Atzeret, the festival celebrated the day right after Sukkot. Beyond the technical halakhic implications of the Gemara’s inference, Rav Karfunkel suggests that it expresses as well the ambitious goal of extending the joy and inspiration of Yom Tov into the coming weeks and months. We help assure the long-lasting effects of the Yom Tov experience by observing the celebration as a process of “*akh samei’ach*,” of developing within ourselves an authentic, deep-seated feeling of joy over our relationship with God. This feeling is one that must be built gradually, as opposed to an instantaneous rush of excitement, which seldom, if ever, endures. If we want the festivity of Yom Tov to have a significant impact upon us that will continue, one some level, well after the celebration ends, we must try to ensure that our joy is real and substantive, and not simply a fleeting rush of excitement.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Re’ei addresses the subject of “*besar ta’ava*” – meat which one decides to eat for enjoyment, and not as part of a sacrificial offering to God. Moshe tells *Benei Yisrael* that when they enter *Eretz Yisrael*, and would not live close to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* – the way they lived close to the *Mishkan* in the wilderness – they would be allowed to eat meat even outside the framework of sacrificial offerings (12:20-21). Rashi (12:20), following the view of Rabbi Yishmael (Chulin 17a), explains that in the wilderness, *Benei Yisrael* were forbidden from eating meat outside the framework of sacrificial offerings; the only meat that was allowed was the meat of sacrifices. Moshe now instructs that once *Benei Yisrael* enter the Land of Israel, they would be permitted to slaughter animals and partake of their meat even without offering sacrifices.

The Torah formulates the command by envisioning the people verbally expressing their desire for meat: “When the Lord your God expands your boundaries…and you say, ‘I shall eat meat,’ because your soul will desire meat, then you shall eat as much meat as your soul desires.” Rather than speaking simply about the time when the people wish to eat meat, the Torah speaks of the time when they will “say” that they wish to eat meat. The *Midrash Tanchuma*, interestingly enough, explains that the Torah refers here to a man expressing this wish to his wife. Commenting on this verse, the Midrash writes, “From here you learn that a person should not purchase [even] a *litra* of meat before consulting with his household.” In other words, the *Midrash Tanchuma* understood the verse as implying that one should first consult with his wife before deciding to purchase meat.

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in his *Oznayim La-Torah*, explains the Midrash as referring to the imposition involved in meat consumption. As meat was considered a luxury food item, and its preparation entailed a great deal of work, the Torah urged husbands not to purchase meat without first assuring that their wives were willing to put in the work necessary to prepare it.

Others, however, explained the Midrash differently, in light of the Gemara’s comments about this verse later in Masekhet Chulin. The Torah, as cited, speaks here of a time when “the Lord your God expands your boundaries” – referring, on the simple level of interpretation, to geographic expansion, which made it unfeasible to bring an animal sacrifice each time one wished to eat meat. However, the Gemara (Chulin 84a), as Rashi cites in his comments to this verse, interpreted this phrase as referring more generally to wealth and comfort. According to the Gemara, the Torah here alludes to the fact that one should not indulge in luxuries – such as meat – unless he enjoys “*rachavat yadayim*” – material comfort. We should exercise fiscal discipline and live within our means, rather than crave comforts which we cannot easily afford, and thus the Torah indicates that “*besar ta’ava*” is allowed only after God “expands your boundaries” in the sense of blessing the people with material prosperity. If, indeed, the Torah speaks of a time when people enjoy a degree of wealth and thus seek to enjoy meat, then the teaching that one must consult his or her spouse before purchasing could be understood in this light. Namely, the Gemara teaches a simple measure of *derekh eretz* (common courtesy), that even when money is available for luxuries, a spouse should not take the liberty to make these decisions without the other spouse. This is a decision that should be made jointly, and not imposed by one spouse over the other.

Monday

In his address to *Benei Yisrael* in Parashat Re’ei, Moshe instructs the people that after taking possession of the Land of Israel, they were to dismantle and destroy the Canaanites’ temples and sites of pagan worship, which were found “upon the high mountains and upon the hills, and underneath every lush tree” (12:2). He then warns, “*Lo ta’asun kein le-Hashem Elokeikhem*” – “Do not do so to the Lord your God” (12:4). From the subsequent verses, which command *Benei Yisrael* to bring all their sacrifices to the exclusive site of sacrificial worship which God would choose, it emerges that the warning “Do not do so to the Lord your God” refers to the Canaanites’ designation of many different sites of worship. As Rashi (12:4) explains, Moshe warns the people that unlike the Canaanites, who erected altars and temples throughout the land, on every hilltop and underneath every large tree, they were to bring their sacrifices only to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, which would be built at the site chosen by God. (Rashi then proceeds to cite a different interpretation, explaining this verse as a prohibition against destroying sacred property the way *Benei Yisrael* were to destroy the pagan idols and temples.)

A Chassidic reading of this verse is cited in the name of the Chozeh of Lublin. He suggested that the word “*kein*” could be understood as referring to rigid, inflexible consistency, an insistence on following the same routine without any room for exceptions. The Chozeh taught that it is vitally important to allow flexibility into one’s “religious schedule.” While we certainly must have a set, familiar routine, we must also be open to making changes when necessary, such as being prepared to disrupt our study schedule to help somebody in need. The Chozeh thus understood the command of “*Lo ta’asun kein le-Hashem Elokeikhem*” to mean, “Do not always insist on doing the same thing for the Lord your God.” We must not assume that the precise same thing is expected of us every day. Different situations and circumstances impose upon us different responsibilities and obligations, and we must therefore be flexible and open to change our routine and habits when necessary.

As mentioned, the plain meaning of this verse commands establishing one central location of sacrificial worship, rather than following the example of the ancient pagans, who set up places of worship throughout the land. Whereas the pagans did not have to travel to offer sacrifices, and always enjoyed the convenient option of a “local” site of worship, God demands that we journey to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* to sacrifice to Him. The message perhaps being conveyed is that serving the Almighty requires hard work and effort, and demands that we leave our “comfort zone,” our natural instincts and preferences, for the sake of fulfilling His will. The Chozeh of Lublin taught that this means not only compromising our physical comforts and enjoyment to serve God, but also to occasionally leave what we might call our “religious comfort zone.” We are all used to doing things a certain way, following a certain routine of religious life, but sometimes we need to break that routine and act differently from the way we normally do. Just as serving God often requires sacrificing physical comfort and convenience, it similarly oftentimes requires sacrificing the comfort and convenience of a set, familiar routine and behavior pattern, demanding the flexibility to “shift gears” when necessary as circumstances change.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Re’ei speaks of the case of an *ir ha-nidachat* – a city whose population was found to have entirely embraced idol worship. In such a case, the Torah commands, the entire population of the city must be killed, and all its property must be destroyed. The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (71a) famously teaches that there never was a city that met all the Torah’s conditions of an *ir ha-nidachat*, nor will there ever be such a city. The Torah nevertheless issued this command for the purpose of hypothetical study, in order to learn the theoretical laws and gain insight from this information.

In describing the situation of an *ir ha-nidachat*, the Torah tells of a time when “you hear” about a city that has decided to worship idols (13:13). The *Sifrei*, commenting on this verse, writes, “*lo ha-chizur min ha-mitzva*” – there is no command to actively probe and inquire to ensure that there are no such cities. The obligation to take action against an *ir ha-nidachat* applies only once the information about such a city happens to reach the ears of the nation’s leaders. It does not require the leaders to preemptively examine the nation’s cities and investigate to determine if any qualify as an *ir ha-nidachat*.

The *Sifrei* then turns its attention to the Torah’s command that after hearing about an idolatrous city, “You shall thoroughly inquire, investigate and question” (13:15), commenting that the Torah here warns against being “*ratush*” – indifferent, or languid, in response to the news of the idolatrous city. Once the information has become known, the leaders must get to work and take responsible action against the wayward population.

*Chazal* here teach us of the delicate balance that needs to be maintained between vigilance in condemning evil, on the one hand, and, on the other, unwarranted suspicion. Our desire to confront wrongdoing should not lead us to thirstily “hunt” for violators, to actively seek out opportunities to condemn and criticize. Certainly, we need to respond sternly to news of wrongdoing perpetrated in our midst, but this should not lead us to “*chizur*” – to search for such news. *Chazal* urge us to view our fellow Jews from a favorable disposition until we have compelling reason to view a person or group of people with suspicion, rather than eagerly searching for opportunities to criticize.

Wednesday

In the beginning of Parashat Re’ei, we read Moshe’s command to *Benei Yisrael* to eradicate the pagan temples of the Canaanites after their conquest of the Land of Israel. He concludes, “*ve-ibadetem et shemam min ha-makom ha-hu*” – “you shall eradicate their name from that place” (12:3).

This phrase bears strong resemblance to a phrase in an earlier verse, in Parashat Eikev (7:24), where Moshe assures *Benei Yisrael* that God would lead them to victory over their enemies in the Land of Israel. He guarantees them that God would enable them to vanquish the Canaanites to the point of “*ve-ha’avadeta et shemam mi-tachat ha-shamayim*” – “you will eradicate their name from under the heavens.” The grammatical difference between these two phrases lies in the verb construction. The verse here in Parashat Re’ei employs what is known as the “*pi’el*’ verb form, producing the word “*ibadetem*,” whereas the earlier verse employs the “*hif’il*” form of this verb, yielding “*ha’avadetem*.”

The difference between the “*pi’el*” and “*hif’il*” constructions is that, generally speaking, the former is direct whereas the latter is causative. An action depicted in the “*pi’el*” form is done directly, whereas an action depicted in the “*hif’il*” form is one which indirectly causes an effect. Accordingly, Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha’kabbala*, explains the difference between the command of “*ibadetem et shemam*” and the promise of “*ha’avadeta et shemam*.” The Gemara (Avoda Zara 46a), as cited by Rashi here in Parashat Re’ei, interprets the command “*ibadetem et shemam*” to mean that *Benei Yisrael* were to give derogatory names to the Canaanites’ sites of pagan worship, in place of the names by which the Canaanites referred to them. Rav Mecklenberg writes that *Chazal* arrived at this interpretation on the basis of the use of the “*pi’el*” form in this verse, which implies a direct “eradication” of the names of the pagan temples. Moshe here commands *Benei Yisrael* to do away with these names by coming up with different names for these pagan sites. In the earlier verse, however, where Moshe promises “*ha’avadetem et shemam*,” he means that *Benei Yisrael* will cause the names of their enemies to be eradicated through their resounding military triumph.

Interestingly, Rav Mecklenberg adds that this distinction led *Chazal* to a very significant halakhic conclusion. Immediately following the command of “*ibadetem et shemam*,” Moshe warns the people, “*Lo ta’asun kein le-Hashem Elokeikhem*” – “Do not do so to the Lord your God.” The Gemara (Makkot 22a) interprets this command as the Biblical source of the prohibition against destroying sacred property, such as dismantling the altar or other portions of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, or burning sacred texts. (Accordingly, the Rambam lists this command as one of the 365 Biblical prohibitions – *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, *lo ta’aseh* 65.) In Masekhet Shabbat (120a), the Gemara quotes these two adjacent verses – the command of “*ibadetem et shemam*” and the warning of “*lo ta’asun kein*” – and infers from them that the prohibition of “*lo ta’asun*” applies only to directly destroying sacred property. Thus, for example, at least according to one view, one who has the Name of God written on his skin is allowed to bathe, even though this would indirectly result in the erasure of the Name. Since this erasure is caused indirectly, the Gemara comments, it does not violate the Torah prohibition of “*lo ta’asun kein*,” which forbids only direct destruction of sacred property or sacred writ. Rav Mecklenberg explains that the prohibition of “*lo ta’asun kein*” forbids doing to our sacred articles that which *Benei Yisrael* were required to do to the pagans’ sacred articles. Therefore, the prohibition is defined as “*ibadetem*” – direct destruction, such that indirectly destroying sacred property would not fall under this Biblical prohibition.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Re’ei introduces the obligation to offer loans to paupers in need of money, and issues a special warning against withholding loans in advance of the *shemitta* year (15:9). As we read several verses earlier (15:2), the Torah commands lenders to cancel outstanding debts during the *shemitta* year, a requirement which might naturally lead prospective lenders to refuse to grant loans as the *shemitta* year approaches. The Torah forbids refusing to grant loans, warning that if one refuses to grant a loan to a person in need, “he shall call out to the Lord about you, and you will be guilty of sin.”

The *Sifrei*, cited by Rashi, proposes the possibility that when the Torah speaks of the pauper “calling out” to God after being refused a loan he desperately needs, it refers to a *mitzva*. Meaning, the *Sifrei* considers interpreting this verse to mean that the pauper in such a case is actually required to call out to God and protest the selfishness of the prospective lender who denied his request for a loan. But the *Sifrei* immediately dismisses this reading, noting a somewhat similar verse later in Sefer Devarim (24:15) regarding the prohibition against withholding a worker’s wages. There the Torah commands that an employer must pay his employee on time “so that he does not call out to the Lord about you, and you will be guilty of sin.” The *Sifrei* interprets the phrase “*ve-lo yikra alekha*” (“he shall not call out about you”) as indicating that the deprived employee is not required to call out to God to protest his employer’s crime. Netziv, in his commentary to the *Sifrei*, explains that if the Torah in that context does not require the employee to petition God about his employer’s misconduct, then this is certainly true in the case of a pauper who is denied a loan. In such a case, when the prospective lender did not actually commit any crime, as he denied the pauper his request for a loan, and not wages for work he performed, there is certainly no requirement for the pauper to protest to God.

It is worth noting the broader message conveyed here by the *Sifrei*, namely, that we should not be in the habit of complaining to God about the wrongs committed by our fellow Jews. The Torah recognizes that people in a state of desperation will, understandably, feel angry at those who take advantage of them or refuse to help them, and will express their anger to God. And, the Torah goes even further, warning of the consequences for the heartless individuals who cause them such pain. At the same time, however, *Chazal* clarify that there is no *mitzva* to react this way. God does not ask us to complain to Him about our fellow Jews who have wronged us. Desperate victims will feel the need to do so, which is perfectly natural and acceptable, but this does not represent the ideal. The ideal condition is one where we all think and speak positively of one another, and wish that God blesses everyone among our nation, including those against whom we have valid grievances.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Re’ei promises that in reward for *Benei Yisrael*’s observance of God's laws, they will not experience poverty: “But there shall not be among you any paupers, because the Lord will assuredly bless you…only if you heed the voice of the Lord your God, observing and performing all these laws…” (15:4-5).

Rashi, citing the *Sifrei*, notes that later (15:11), the Torah makes the precise opposite prediction: “Indeed, paupers will never cease from the land; I am therefore commanding you, saying: Open your hand to your brother, to your poor, and to your pauper in your land.” The explanation, Rashi writes, is that when the nation faithfully fulfills God’s wishes, they have no poor people among them, but when we fail to obey God’s laws, there are poor people for whom we must care. Simply put, the elimination of poverty is achieved as a reward for our compliance with the Torah’s laws.

Rav Moshe Sternbuch, in his *Ta’am Va-da’at*, offers a deeper insight into the *Sifrei*’s remark. He suggests that many people are “poor” in the sense of feeling anxious and deprived. Although their basic needs are fulfilled, they see themselves as “poor” because they have unrealized wishes and concerns about the future. Rav Sternbuch interprets the *Sifrei*’s comment to mean that when we commit ourselves to the Torah, and view ourselves and our lives from a Torah perspective, we can avoid this imaginary poverty. When our priority is serving God to the best of our ability, we will not be disturbed by the material comforts and luxuries that we lack. And when we trust in the Almighty’s unlimited ability to provide and in His unending love for His people, we will avoid crippling anxiety about the future. When we disregard the Torah, and fail to live with the proper perspective, we are more prone to suffering “poverty,” to feeling frustrated over what we have yet to receive, and to constantly fretting over our financial condition. *Chazal* here teach us that we can avoid the state of mental “poverty” that plagues so many people by passionately committing ourselves to fulfilling God’s laws, by making *mitzvot* the primary aspiration of our lives, whereby we make all other concerns and desires seem far too trivial and unimportant to cause us aggravation and anxiety.

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