**S.A.L.T. – SUKKOT**

**PARASHAT VEZOT HA-BERAKHA –**

**PARASHAT BEREISHIT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Yesterday, we noted the question raised by *Tosafot* in Masekhet Sukka (9a) regarding the Gemara’s discussion of a *sukka* constructed from stolen materials. The Gemara established that such a *sukka* may not be used for the *mitzva*, based on an inference from the Torah’s formulation of the *mitzva* (“*…ta’aseh* ***lekha***” – Devarim 16:13). *Tosafot* ask why the Gemara resorted to a textual inference, given that a stolen *sukka* should seemingly be disqualified due to the general principle of *mitzva ha-ba’a ba-aveira*, which invalidates a *mitzva* performed via a transgression of Torah law. Why do we need a special source for the disqualification of a stolen *sukka*, once we have the general rule of *mitzva ha-ba’a ba-aveira* which invalidates *mitzva* acts performed through theft or other violations?

The Rebbe of Kotzk offered a clever answer to this question, by noting a scenario where the rule of *mitzva ha-ba’a ba-aveira* would be insufficient to disqualify a *sukka* whose construction involved theft. In contrast to the *Minchat Chinukh* (325), who, as we saw yesterday, postulated that the rule of *mitzva ha-ba’a ba-aveira* is inapplicable to the *mitzva* of *sukka*, the Rebbe of Kotzk suggested that this rule does, in fact, apply. However, there is one scenario in which the use of stolen materials for constructing a *sukka* would not disqualify the *sukka* by force of the rule of *mitzva ha-ba’a ba-aveira*, and for this reason, the Gemara cited a textual source establishing that even such a *sukka* may not be used.

The scenario envisioned by the Kotzker Rebbe is one where a *sukka* has two *tefachim* (handbreadths) of stolen *sekhakh* alongside two *tefachim* of materials which are unsuitable for *sekhakh*, such as metal (which is invalid as *sekhakh* because it does not originate from the ground). Generally speaking, the presence of invalid *sekhakh* occupying a space of less than four *tefachim* on top of the *sukka* may be ignored. As long as the space occupied by the invalid *sekhakh* is less than four *tefachim*, the *sukka* may be used. An empty space on top of the *sukka*, however, invalidates the *sukka* even if it is just three *tefachim* large. Thus, if a *sukka* has two *tefachim* of empty space in the middle of the *sekhakh* alongside two *tefachim*’s worth of invalid *sekhakh*, the *sukka* may be used, as it has neither three *tefachim* of empty space nor four *tefachim*’s worth of invalid materials.

With this mind, the Rebbe explained, we can understand why the Gemara needed a textual inference to establish that stolen materials are invalid for constructing a *sukka*. If it were only for the rule of *mitzva ha-ba’a ba-aveira*, then the *sukka* described above – with two *tefachim* of stolen *sekhakh* placed alongside two *tefachim* of metal – would be valid. The Kotzker Rebbe explains that if the space occupied by the stolen *sekhakh* had bene empty, then the *sukka* would be valid, since a two-*tefach* empty space does not disqualify a *sukka*. Therefore, using such a *sukka* does not constitute a *mitzva ha-ba’a ba-aveira* – a *mitzva* facilitated by sin – because the two *tefachim*’s worth of stolen materials have no impact upon the *sukka*. Since the stolen materials contribute nothing to the *sukka*, as the *sukka* would be perfectly valid without them, they do not facilitate the *mitzva* in any way. As far as *mitzva ha-ba’a ba-aveira* is concerned, then, the *sukka* is suitable. The Gemara therefore inferred from a verse that stolen materials are inherently disqualified for use as *sekhakh*. Just as *Halakha* disqualifies as *sekhakh* materials that do not grow from the ground, for example, it similarly disqualifies materials obtained through forbidden means. Therefore, if two *tefachim*’s worth of stolen *sekhakh* are situated alongside two *tefachim*’s worth of materials that did not originate from the ground, this is a *sukka* with four *tefachim*’s worth of invalid *sekhakh*, and therefore the *sukka* may not be used.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Ve-zot Ha-berakha tells of the passing of Moshe Rabbenu, and the Midrash, commenting on this event (*Devarim Rabba* 11:5), describes a conversation that took place when the Angel of Death came to take Moshe’s life. The angel informed Moshe that the time had come for him to leave this world, whereupon Moshe protested, saying, “Go away from here…for I wish to give praise to the Almighty.”

The angel then replied, “Moshe, why are you boasting? He [God] already has those who give Him praise – the heavens and the earth praise Him at every moment, as it says, ‘The heavens tell the glory of God’ (Tehillim 19:2).”

Moshe, however, persisted, telling the angel, “I will silence them and give Him praise…”

This unusual exchange has been interpreted by a number of writers as an allegorical depiction of an argument made by some against the need for “Moshe” – for the laws of the Torah which Moshe brought us. They argue that those who accept and practice religion are “boastful” in thinking that religious observance is a necessary means of “praising God,” of maintaining awareness of a Creator, of a higher meaning and purpose of life. In their view, the “heavens and earth,” the natural world, suffices to achieve this objective. They reject the need for a lifestyle governed by a strict set of laws, feeling that the natural framework of the world and human instincts are enough. The Angel of Death’s retort to Moshe in this Midrashic account expresses the view that the wonder of nature, and the human being’s innate sense of goodness, suffice to lend meaning and significance to life, and there is therefore no need to keep “Moshe” alive, to preserve the Torah which he brought us.

This insight brings to mind Rashi’s comment regarding Moshe’s burial site, which the Torah (34:6) says is situated “opposite Pe’or.” Based on the Gemara (Sota 14a), Rashi writes that Moshe was buried at that site to atone for the sin of *Ba’al Pe’or*, when *Benei Yisrael* engaged in relations with the women of Moav and worshipped that nation’s deity, Pe’or (Bamidbar 25). Rav Yehuda Amital explained this to mean that the Torah brought to us by Moshe stands in eternal opposition to the culture and ideology of Pe’or, a deity which, *Chazal* teach, was worshipped by defecating on the idol (see Rashi, Bamidbar 25:3). This mode of worship, Rav Amital explained, reflected the belief that nature needs no refining, that people should be allowed to follow their rawest instincts without any interference or restraint. The sin of *Ba’al Pe’or* involved public defecation and rampant, unrestrained promiscuity because this is precisely what the adherents of this belief advocated – the worship of natural instinct, and a rejection of the need for refinement and discipline. Moshe was buried opposite the site of Pe’or as an eternal reminder of our firm opposition to this ideology, of our belief in the Torah which seeks to elevate us by regulating our behavior and channeling our instincts and drives towards the service of the Creator.

In response to the angel’s insistence that it suffices for “heaven and earth” – the natural order – to bring glory to God, Moshe argued, “I will silence them and give Him praise…” This has been explained to mean that human beings are capable of “silencing” the “praise” of the natural order, of abusing the natural order to disgrace, rather than glorify, the Almighty. We therefore need the Torah of Moshe, the religious lifestyle which it demands, to govern our conduct and thereby elevate our lives so that we live in a manner which brings glory to God at every moment.

Monday

We read in the final verses of the Torah that Moshe’s burial site has remained unknown ever since his death (34:6). The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (13b-14a) relates in reference to this verse that there was a time when the Roman government dispatched a delegation of officials to the region where Moshe is buried to search for the gravesite. The mission was unsuccessful, the Gemara tells, because “when they stood above, it appeared to them down below; [when they stood] below, it appeared to them above.” When they climbed high on Mount Nevo, the mountain where Moshe was buried, the grave appeared to be lower, but when they descended, the grave suddenly appeared higher. No matter how hard they tried, they could not reach the elusive site.

Numerous writers understood this description as referring to the inability to find the “burial” of Judaism, the way to eliminate Torah observance. Enemies of the Jewish religion have tried different methods over the course of history to put an end to Jewish observance, to locate Moshe’s “grave,” Torah’s Achilles’ heel which they could exploit to defeat it, but have been unsuccessful.

To explain the description of the officials searching from higher and lower positions, some have suggested that this refers to their mistaken assumption that Torah could be observed only under certain conditions. First, the officials thought they could locate Moshe’s “grave” up high, that Torah could not survive under conditions of wealth and power. Torah, they thought, served as a source of solace and succor for the downtrodden Jews, a place where they could seek refuge and find comfort when they suffer poverty and persecution. But once they enjoy prosperity and prestige, they would no longer need to resort to Torah as a source of comfort and encouragement, and so Torah would then be “buried” and turned into an ancient relic. In truth, however, it was discovered that even in times of prosperity, Torah remains alive, as Jews consider the Torah relevant and binding even when they enjoy success. The other possibility, then, was that the Torah’s demise could be found “down below,” in periods of persecution and hardship. If the Jews remain committed to the Torah in times of success and prosperity, the official figured, then this must mean that it can be practiced only amid conditions of safety and comfort, but not when hard times strike. To their astonishment, however, the Jews displayed steadfast devotion to Torah even under conditions of destitution and oppression, despite the hardships entailed. When they saw the Jews’ commitment from “below,” in the harshest circumstances, it appeared that Moshe’s “gravesite” is high up, that Judaism is a religion only for people under duress, and not for those enjoying prosperity.

The Gemara’s comment thus teaches us of the everlasting and unconditional relevance and binding nature of the Torah, that it applies to us under all circumstances, in every time and place, both in times of good fortune and in periods of hardship.

Tuesday

Parashat Ve-zot Ha-berakha tells of Moshe’s blessings to all the tribes before his passing. In his blessing to the tribe of Gad, Moshe makes mention of the fact that “*va-yar reishit lo*” (33:21)– Gad chose the “first,” referring, presumably, to Gad’s having chosen to permanently settle the region east of the Jordan River. Rather than waiting together with the rest of *Benei Yisrael* until the nation crossed the Jordan into Canaan, the land promised to their forefathers, Gad (and Reuven) preferred to make their permanent home east of the river, in the land seized from the kingdoms of Sichon and Og.

Moshe then explains that Gad preferred this region because “*sham chelkat mechokeik safun*.” This clause is difficult to translate, and indeed, we find different explanations among the commentators. Ibn Ezra claims that this refers to the large, luxurious castles that had belonged to the Emorite noblemen before *Benei Yisrael* conquered the area. In other words, Gad desired the land in order to benefit from the luxuries it offered. Ibn Ezra then explains the remainder of the verse as prophetically speaking in praise of Gad’s fulfilling their commitment to join the other tribes in battle across the Jordan River. Although Gad settled in the rich, fertile region where they enjoyed material prosperity, they nevertheless remained committed to their fellow tribes and fought in the front lines in their battle against the enemy nations in Canaan.

Rashi, however, based on the *Sifrei*, explains this verse differently. He writes that Gad wished to permanently settle east of the Jordan because the tribespeople realized that the “*mechokeik*” (“lawgiver”) – would be buried (“*safun*”) in that territory. Unwilling to part with Moshe Rabbenu even after his passing, the tribe of Gad expressed their desire to make the area of his burial site their permanent place of residence.

The *Sifrei*’s explanation appears to run in direct opposition to the account in Sefer Bamidbar (32), which states explicitly that the tribes of Reuven and Gad requested rights to permanently settle the territory of Sichon and Og due to the abundance of pasture. These tribes had especially large herds of cattle, and so they asked to make this verdant region their permanent home. Moshe initially excoriated Reuven and Gad for what he perceived as their cowardice, requesting to settle east of the Jordan out of fear of battle against the Canaanites, but these tribes then clarified that they fully intended to join the rest of the nation in the campaign to conquer Canaan. In any event, it is clear from the narrative there in Sefer Bamidbar that Gad and Reuven sought permanent residence in Trans-Jordan because of their cattle. How, then, did the *Sifrei* claim that they sought to reside there because they wanted to live near Moshe’s burial site?

Symbolically, the desire to permanent reside east of the Jordan, effectively expanding the boundaries of *Eretz Yisrael*, represents bold innovation, expanding into new territory, pushing beyond familiar boundaries. Indeed, Moshe begins his blessing to the tribe of Gad with the proclamation, “*Barukh marchiv Gad*” – “Blessed is the one who expands [the territory of] Gad.” Gad is associated with expansion, reaching beyond current limits and extending outward. Innovative expansion often bespeaks scorn and disdain for the previous limits, a rejection of the old system and a desire to break free from what is perceived as stifling constraints. The introduction of something new quite often reflects a revolt against the current framework, rather than a desire to strengthen it. It is for this reason, perhaps, that *Chazal* spoke of Gad’s longing to settle in the region of Moshe’s gravesite. They may have sought to emphasize that Gad did not look to reject the initial boundaries that Moshe had envisioned. This was not a rebellion against Moshe and his leadership, but rather a desire to expand the sanctity and special quality of *Eretz Yisrael* outward. Their request did not stem from any disrespect towards Moshe, but rather with an intention to incorporate the new region within the Land of Israel. They spoke out of deep love and respect for Moshe, not out of disdain.

“*Barukh marchiv Gad*” – the Torah acknowledges the legitimacy, and value, of bold initiatives and expansion as part of the effort to strengthen and enhance religious observance. One of the critical, indispensable conditions, however, is that this is done out of deep respect and fealty to, and not out of rejection of, our tradition. It is only when we display the kind of devotion and loyalty to “Moshe Rabbenu” as the tribe of Gad did that our efforts to expand are deemed valid and worthy of being blessed.

Wednesday

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In Moshe’s blessings to the tribes of *Benei Yisrael* just before his death, he likens the tribes of Yosef to an ordinary ox with the horns of a *re’eim* (a wild ox): “*Bekhor shoro hadar lo ve-karnei re’eim karnav*” (33:17). The *Sifrei*, cited by Rashi, explains that an ox has great physical might, but its horns are unseemly, whereas a *re’eim* is graced with beautiful, majestic horns, but lacks physical strength. In this blessing, Moshe speaks of his successor, Yehoshua, a descendant of Yosef, who would feature great physical might, leading *Benei Yisrael* to resounding victory over the nations of Canaan, but also beauty and splendor, like a *re’eim*.

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Yalkut Yehuda*, offers an insightful explanation of the *Sifrei*’s comments, suggesting that it refers to the moral “beauty” that must accompany military campaigns. Normally, when fighting like an “ox,” with fierce determination and an unrelenting desire to triumph over the enemy, the army is “unseemly” – cruel and heartless. The blessing to Yehoshua was that in leading *Benei Yisrael* in battle against the peoples of Canaan, he would be both powerful and beautiful, ensuring victory without compromising the standard of morals, dignity and refinement which Torah values demand.

The message of this imagery applies not only to actual warfare, but to all the various different “battles” that we are occasionally called upon to wage. Sometimes we have no choice but to “fight,” to oppose ideas and practices that run contrary to our beliefs and values. *Chazal* here urge us to ensure that while we wage these battles, we combine the strength and fortitude of the ox with the grace and beauty of the *re’eim*. When we find ourselves forced to go out to oppose our detractors, we must ensure to fight with “*karnei re’eim*,” with dignity and grace, and not like an ox, with a harsh, brutish style and demeanor. Moshe’s blessing to Yosef teaches us that we can and must struggle with firm resolve without compromising our ethics or our dignity, and stand strong in support of what we believe in without diminishing one iota from the beauty and grace that ought to characterize God’s special nation.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Bereishit lists the descendants of Adam down to Noach, and in mentioning Noach’s great-grandfather, Chanokh, the Torah states that Chanokh was especially righteous (“Chanokh walked with God” – 5:24) and was taken from this world at a relatively young age.

A number of works cite a mysterious passage from the *Midrash Talpiyot* telling that Chanokh worked as a shoemaker, and as he stitched the shoes, “*haya meyacheid yichudim*” – he engaged in deep mystical thought. The conventional reading of this Midrashic passage is that Chanokh’s piety was expressed by his intensive spiritual focus even as he went about his regular, mundane affairs.

Rav Yisrael Salanter, however, is cited as offering the precise opposite explanation. In his view, it is inconceivable that a man described as being righteous would focus on anything while performing his work other than ensuring it is done properly. If a shoemaker is paid to make or repair shoes, his primary obligation at that time is to do everything he can to complete the job to the customer’s satisfaction. Accordingly, Rav Yisrael Salanter understood the Midrash’s remark to mean that to the contrary, Chanokh focused intently on doing his work properly, and this was as spiritually significant as engagement in deep mystical thought and meditation. The Midrash specifically seeks to instruct that tending to our basic responsibilities, which include serving customers and employers with integrity and to the best of our ability, is no less religiously meaningful than mystical meditations, and is a necessary prerequisite for piety.

This reading of the Midrash’s remark seems strained, and it is told that the *Chazon Ish* rejected Rav Yisrael Salanter’s interpretation and insisted that this passage be understood according to its straightforward implication (*Ma’aseh Ish*, vol. 1, p. 179). Nevertheless, the fact that Rav Yisrael Salanter felt compelled to interpret the passage in this fashion is itself significant, as it reflects the great importance with which he viewed fulfilling our basic responsibilities before proceeding to loftier spiritual goals. Rav Yisrael Salanter could not imagine a righteous person focusing his attention on anything but his work while tending to his professional duties – not even lofty spiritual matters – because a person cannot begin pursuing greatness if he or she does not first achieve goodness. It is only after we fulfill our basic obligations of decency and integrity that we can then seek to rise to greater heights of spiritual achievement.

Friday

Commenting to the opening verse of the Torah, which tells of God’s creation of the world, the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba*, 1) writes, “The Almighty would look into the Torah and create the world.” The Midrash interprets on this basis the first words of the Torah – “*Bereishit bara Elokim*” (literally, “In the beginning, God created”). Noting that the word “*reishit*” (“first”) is used elsewhere in reference to the Torah (“*Hashem kanani reishit darko*” – Mishlei 8:22), the Midrash understands this phrase to mean, “God created [heaven and earth] with the Torah.”

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Yalkut Yehuda*, explains the Midrash’s comment as intended to dispel the notion that Torah observance is incompatible with ordinary life here in this world. Some people might think that the Torah’s laws are so restrictive and overbearing that they prevent us from living normal, productive and fulfilling lives. Indeed, as Rav Ginsburg cites, the Midrash later (*Bereishit Rabba* 16:4) tells that during the period of Greek oppression, the Greeks ordered the Jews to inscribe on the horns of their oxen, “We have no share in the God of Israel.” The meaning of this decree, Rav Ginsburg writes, is that the Greeks waged war against Judaism because they perceived it as a force that undermines worldly progress. They set out to abolish Torah observance because they thought it could not accommodate normal pursuits such as agriculture, an industry symbolized by the ox. And so they ordered the Jews to proclaim that if they owned oxen, if they worked in agriculture, then by definition, they had no share in Jewish belief or practice.

To dispel this misconception, *Chazal* teach us that to the contrary, God created the world with the Torah in mind, with the objective that it would be studied and applied in normal living. The Torah does not undermine ordinary worldly living, but rather seeks to enhance it. It directs us to work towards developing the world within the framework of *avodat Hashem*, as opposed to directing us away from developing the world. *Chazal* here impress upon us that Torah lifestyle is fully compatible with worldly pursuits, and the two should never be seen as mutually exclusive.

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