

Parshas Devarim

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1. Utilizing our Gifts Properly

At the beginning of Devarim, Moshe Rabbeinu recounts several locations where the Jewish people had traveled – **“Arabah, opposite the Sea of Reeds between Paran and Tophel, and Laban, and Hazereth, and Di-zahav.....”** Rashi cites Chazal that Reb. Yochanan researched all of the verses in the Torah and was unable to find the locations mentioned. Rather, the references that are delineated by Moshe are allusions to various failings of the Jewish people from the time of the Exodus until the present. One of the references mentioned by Moshe is “Di-zahav (enough gold),” which Rashi explains was in fact a rebuke to the Jews for failing with the Golden Calf. Rashi cites the Midrash explaining that what Moshe actually said to the Jews was that it was because of the *Gold* that the Jews failed with the Golden Calf. As it is stated in the verse “I (Hashem) gave them (the Jews) an abundance of Gold and Silver and they went and worshipped the Baal.”

The Gemara in *Tractate Avodah Zarah* tells us that there were two spiritual failings, one on a communal level and one on an individual level. The individual failing that the Gemara refers to is that of Dovid HaMelech (King David) who asked G-d to test him. Although Dovid had totally negated his Evil Inclination he wanted to be challenged with temptation in order to overcome it. He was presented with the temptation of Batsheva (as it is stated in Prophets) and he failed. The example of the communal failing was that the Jewish people failed with the Golden Calf although they were at the pinnacle of their spirituality. Logically the latter should not have taken place given the spiritual level of the people at that moment.

How was it possible that after hearing and experiencing G-d as such a reality, that the Jewish people could succumb to the Sin of the Golden Calf. The answer is that despite their most advanced level of clarity, Hashem allowed them to experience a degree of uncertainty regarding their belief in His Omnipotent Power. The Gemara (*Avodah Zarah*) explains that creating the setting for the failings of Dovid with Batsheva and the Jewish people with the Golden Calf at Sinai was necessary. These instances set an example for future generations to understand that regardless of the degree of spiritual failing, on an individual or communal level, if one is sincere and does teshuvah (repents) he will be fully reinstated.

The *Gemara in Tractate Berachos* tells us that after the Golden Calf when G-d wanted to destroy the Jewish people, Moshe Rabbeinu came to their defense by saying “Di-zahav.” This means that the Jews cannot be fully faulted for the Sin of the Golden Calf and Hashem is partially responsible. The Gemara compares Hashem’s giving of the over abundance of wealth which the Jews possessed at that particular time, to a father who dresses his son in the finest clothing, provides him with perfume which omits the most beautiful fragrance, places a purse of gold around his neck and tells him to pass by the entrance of the brothel and not to enter. Is it possible in that context for the son not to succumb to temptation and enter into the brothel? Identically, Hashem who had given the Jews so much wealth facilitated the state of mind for the Jews to be enticed by the Golden Calf. As a result of Moshe’s defense, Hashem agreed not to eliminate the Jewish people.

It is interesting to note that the same words that Moshe used as a point of rebuke, “Di-zahav,” when he redressed the Jewish people, were the same words that he used forty years earlier to defend the Jewish people. How do we understand this?

The answer is that both interpretations of “Di-zahav” are valid. Being given this level of

overwhelming wealth is like walking a tightrope. On one hand this gift of G-d was meant to be used for the building of the Mishkan where an enormous amount of gold was needed. Being given so much gold enabled the Jews to contribute to the building of the Mishkan without great difficulty. However, simultaneously, there is a possibility that by receiving such an abundance of wealth, the Jews could lose focus by becoming intoxicated by all of this material. However, if one is given so much blessing to facilitate his service of Hashem without great difficulty, how does he use that blessing to bring about such failure? On the other hand, that particular setting which Hashem created for the Jews is the equivalent of putting one's son before a brothel.

The Talmud tells us in Tractate Megillah that Hashem always provides the remedy even before the ailment takes place. As a result of providing this over abundance of wealth for the Jews, Moshe had a basis of defense to avert the destruction of the Jewish people.

Every person has his own test. The wealthy person's trials and tribulations are different than the less fortunate person. The Klal Yisroel had the choice to utilize the blessing in the service of Hashem and the building of the Mishkan, or invest it in an enterprise that was the antithesis of the Will of Hashem. The gift of genius can be used to justify anything that a person chooses to justify. Or it can be used to advance himself and the world around him.

2. What Causes One to be Appreciative and Introspective?

The Portion begins, "***Ayleh HaDevarim...(These are the words of Moshe...)***" The Commentators explain that the word "Ayleh" has the numerical value of thirty-six indicating that these were the last thirty-six days of Moshe's life. During his last days, Moshe admonished the Jewish people. Rashi cites Chazal that there are four reasons why a person should only give mussar close to the time of his passing. One of the reasons given for this is so the rebuke will not be repeated more than once.

Admonishment is no longer effective when repeated even if it is at the time of the rebuker's passing. This is because the recipient would say, "That is something I have heard before." People value and process new information with more attentiveness than information which they believe they already know. It is because of this that Moshe only gave mussar to Klal Yisroel at the very end of his life.

The Torah relates to us that when Moshe told the Jewish people that they needed to go to war with Midian, they resisted his request because they knew that after the destruction of the Midianite people, Moshe was meant to pass away. Rashi cites the Midrash, which states that we see from this how beloved are the leaders of the Jewish people. When it became evident to them that the passing of Moshe was imminent, they gained a new found appreciation for him. A person only realizes how special something is when he is about to lose it. Although over the forty-year period the Jews were contentious with Moshe and many times behaved in a disrespectful manner, they now understood that his days were numbered and therefore saw him in a different light. Because of the special appreciation which the Jews had for Moshe at this moment they were more attentive to his words of mussar. Thus they were affected to a greater degree.

The Talmud tells us in *Tractate Taanis* that the three special gifts (continuous flow of water from the wellspring, the Clouds of Glory, and the Mann) that the Jews benefited from in their fortieth year in the desert were in the merit of Moshe. Because of their reality the Jews understood that when Moshe passed away their existence would be in question. Therefore at that moment they were more attentive and receptive to the words of Moshe.

Chazal explain that the Matriarchs (Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah) were barren because Hashem desires the fervent prayers of the devoutly pious (tzadikim). Even the greatest tzadikim, who are devout and righteous, pray to G-d differently when they have that sense of need. Whatever we have is continuously Willed by Hashem. Therefore if a person realized that his present situation is not guaranteed and that at any moment it could change, then he would be beholden and indebted to Hashem. The question is – how can we put ourselves in a mindset that will allow us not to take

things that we have for granted? Unfortunately, it is only when we are in need that we become appreciative and understand the value of what we had just as the Klal Yisroel became attentive and appreciative of Moshe Rabbeinu at the point they were going to lose him.

We must ask ourselves – “Do we have more abundance in our lives than previous generations because of our worthiness? Are we more worthy than they were?” Clearly, this is not the case. Hashem has His reasons for providing us with such bounty, which is not based on our merit. The moment we realize that the blessing we receive from Hashem is not due to us but rather because of his Beneficence, then we would realize that the affluence that our society experiences is not forever. Only then would we become appreciative and beholden to Hashem for his Kindness.

As it is stated in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers) that a person should do teshuvah on the last day of his life. Meaning, we should live every day as if it were the last because then we would realize how precious and ephemeral life truly is.

3. The Importance of Proper Judgment

In the Portion of Devarim, Moshe announces to the Jewish people that he will be appointing judges to assist him in adjudicating their issues. He said, **“I cannot carry you alone. Hashem, your G-d, has multiplied you and behold!...Provide for yourselves distinguished men, who are wise, understanding, and well known to your tribes, and I shall appoint them as your heads.”** Rashi cites Chazal who asks, “Is it possible that Moshe was unable to adjudicate the issues of the Jewish people alone? He was the one who took the Jews out of Egypt, Split the Sea on their behalf, and provided them with the Mann and the sluv (quail) in the desert.” Meaning that Moshe had demonstrated that he was a person of unlimited abilities and was able to function in a capacity that was beyond the norm.

Chazal tell us that the reason why Moshe appointed judges to assist him in the adjudication of the Jewish people was because he wished to share the awesome responsibility with other qualified individuals. It was not because it was beyond his ability, but rather because “Hashem holds the judge responsible to give the proper judgment.” Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon), the wisest man to ever live says, “Hashem, who could judge your people who are so difficult.” Chazal explain that a Jewish judge is different from a non-Jewish judge because if the latter is corrupt it does not have serious ramifications. However, if a Jewish judge renders a corrupt decision, then Hashem says he will take his life. The standard to which the Jewish judge is held is far beyond that of the non-Jewish judge. The question is why is the corrupt behavior of the Jewish judge so much graver than that of his non-Jewish counterpart?

Chazal state,” If there is justice below, there is no need for justice from above. However if there is no justice below, then there will be justice from above.” Meaning, that if there is human justice issued by the Court, then there is no need for Divine Justice. However, if the human court does not render proper decisions, then there will be Divine Justice. Rashi in his commentary at the beginning of Sefer Bereishis cites the Midrash which says that Hashem wanted to create the world with the Attribute of Justice. As it is stated in the Torah, “*Bereishis bara Elokim* (In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth).” However G-d recognized that the world could not survive the scrutiny of the Attribute of Justice because it is an exacting level of continuous judgment. Therefore He synthesized the Attributes of *Rachamim* (Mercy) and Justice and thus established the Attribute of Mercy.

Although the world cannot survive the exactness of Divine Justice, it is a necessity for existence because there must be accountability to maintain order. Therefore Hashem communicated to Man that every society must have a judicial system. If human justice is meted out by the earthly court, there is no need for G-d to introduce His Divine Justice. However, if humankind fails and becomes corrupt, then G-d is forced to institute His Justice to maintain existence

With this principle we are able to understand the Gemara in Tractate *Sanhedrin*, which states, “ A person who renders a truthful judgment is a partner with Hashem in the act of Creation. However

if one renders a corrupt decision G-d says – I will take your life.” The question is - why is the judge who renders a truthful decision considered G-d’s “partner” in creation? The answer is – if the court metes out proper Justice, then G-d says “Since Justice is being implemented on the human level there is no need for Divine Justice to be instituted.” However if the converse is true G-d’s Justice is activated and brings about holocaust and destruction. Therefore, the judge who renders the proper and truthful judgment is in fact maintaining the existence of the universe. G-d considers this judge His partner in creation. Conversely, if he is corrupt and deviates from Justice as much as an iota, he deserves to have his life taken because (as slight as the deviation may be) he has disrupted and undermined human justice - thus causing great hardship and suffering for mankind through Divine Justice.

At the time of Sinai when G-d took the Jews as his people, they became responsible for the existence of the universe. The world’s ongoing function is determined by the spirituality of the Jewish people. This is why the Jewish people are held to a higher standard. For the same reason the Jewish judge who is responsible to maintain the standard of judgment and accountability of the world is culpable if he compromises on the standard of justice. This is what Moshe meant when he said, “It is too difficult for me to carry this burden.” He referred to the difficulty of having sole responsibility of maintaining justice. Therefore he wanted other qualified judges to be appointed to share in this responsibility.

There is a Positive Commandment that is incumbent on every Jew to judge his fellow properly by giving him the benefit of the doubt. If a Jew does not do this in cases where his fellow’s actions are questionable, he is in violation of this Positive Commandment. From this we see that the obligation of rendering proper judgment has relevance even outside of the judicial system. If Jews judge one another positively, then this is considered proper Justice on a human level and there is no need for Divine Justice. Consequently, mankind is a beneficiary of the Mercy of Hashem. On the other hand if we do not judge our fellow properly, this is considered a breach of Justice and then G-d forbid, it can bring about Divine Justice.

4. To See or not to See - That is the Question!

The Torah tells us that Moshe Rabbeinu said to the Jewish people, “***Re’eh nasati lifnaychem ha’aretz (You should see, I have given before you the land.)***” It is important to note that the word “***Re’eh (see)***” is written in the singular whereas the word “***lifnaychem (before you)***” is in the plural. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh asks – why is the word “***Re’eh (see)***” singular while “***lifnaychem (before you)***” is plural? The Ohr HaChaim answers that if multiple people are able to accurately “see” the same thing they will all see it as the same object or event. However understanding the significance of what is being seen is based on each individual. We all see the sun rising and we see its light; however, do we truly understand and appreciate its significance? Each person understands this at his own level. This is why “***Re’eh***” is singular and “***lifnaychem***” is plural.

It says in the Gemara Tractate Taanis, “When the month of Av enters one should diminish his engagement in joy,” because it is a month of tragedy for the Jewish people. The greatest tragedies that ever befell the Jewish people occurred during the month of Av. The Mishnah tells us that five of the greatest tragedies in the history of the Jewish people occurred on the ninth day of Av (Tisha B’Av). The First and Second Temple were destroyed on the ninth day of Av.

The day of Tisha B’Av is devoted to grieving over the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash and reflecting on the cause of its destruction. Through introspection one hopefully will come to a level of realization that will cause him to correct the spiritual deficiency that brought about its destruction. The Jerusalem Talmud tells us that any generation in which the Temple is not rebuilt it is considered as if it was destroyed. This means that each generation has the ability to correct the wrong which brought about its destruction. If they do not make the correction, it is considered that the Temple was destroyed in that generation.

Although many people acknowledge the ninth of Av as a day of tragedy, each person has his own

level of understanding of the true nature of the day. Some may even say, "True it is unfortunate that we do not have the Temple, but thank G-d my family is doing quite well." If one would truly appreciate and internalize the tragedy of Tisha B'Av, one could not feel complete without having the Bais HaMikdash restored – regardless of one's success and tranquility in life.

We may all be aware of not having the Bais HaMikdash and living in exile; however, the actual comprehension of this tragedy is very individualized – depending on one's perspective. The Mishnah Brurah states that if a child is too young to appreciate or understand what it means to mourn over the loss of Jerusalem, then the parent has no obligation to condition the child in the observance of Tisha B'Av (*chinuch*). If we today would have Jerusalem under our own control and the Jews in Israel living in relative peace with their Arab neighbors – how would one understand and relate to the meaning of the mourning of the Bais HaMikdash and Jerusalem?

We find in the introduction to Midrash Eichah that when Titus (the Roman Emperor) destroyed the Bais HaMikdash he prided himself that he destroyed G-d's Temple. The Midrash tells us that when Titus was gloating over his victory, Hashem said to him, "You fool! The only reason you were able to destroy Temple was because My Presence left the Temple Mount. You were only destroying stones and wood. It is the equivalent of grinding flour that has already been ground." Meaning, that when the Divine Presence had departed from the Temple Mount, the Temple itself was the equivalent of a pile of stones and dirt. It is only the person who values his relationship with Hashem who could truly appreciate and understand the meaning of not having the Bais HaMikdash.

Dovid HaMelech (King David) in Psalms says, "Who could utter the strength of Hashem to be able to enunciate all of His praise?" The Maharal of Prague explains in the introduction to his work *Gevuras Hashem* what Dovid is saying. Firstly, it is impossible to fully appreciate or understand (in the quantitative sense) the strength of Hashem because there is so much existence of which we are not aware. Even that which we are aware of, we truly do not comprehend fully enough in order to enunciate the praise of Hashem. Our perspective and understanding is so limited that we are out of touch with most of existence. We see the ocean, but do we know what is contained in its depths? We look up to the heavens and we see stars but do we even begin to fathom the universe? The Maharal explains that there are many things that we do not see and even the things we do see we do not understand. If we "see" an apple, do we appreciate the genius in its creation or the Godliness that is its essence?

This is why Moshe said to the Jewish people "Re'eh (see)" in the singular and "lifnaychem (before you)" in the plural. We all "see" the same world but we all understand it based on our individual capacity. The question is how do we increase our capacity and develop a way to understand the world in a more profound and meaningful manner. King Solomon says in Mishlei, "*Ner mitzvah v'Torah ohr* (the mitzvah is the material which provides the fuel and the Torah is the light)" meaning the study of Torah gives one the depth and breadth of understanding to be able to appreciate existence. The Torah itself illuminates and elucidates. If a person's life is devoid of Torah study, then although he may be performing the mitzvos, he is lacking in understanding of many things because he does not have the Torah to shed light on his existence.

5. The Incalculable Value of a Mitzvah

The Torah states that Moshe addressed Klal Yisroel by saying, "We turned and ascended by way of the Bashan, and Og king of Bashan went out toward us, he and his entire people, for war at Edrei. Hashem said to me: Do not fear him, for in your hand have I given him and his entire people and his land..." Moshe, because of his faith in Hashem feared nothing. When he went to war against Sihon (also a giant), the son of Og, the Torah does not say that Hashem told Moshe not to fear him. However, when Moshe was to confront Og, Hashem assured Moshe with the words "Do not fear him." This indicated that in this case Moshe had to be reassured. Why was Moshe afraid?

Rashi cites Chazal that the reason why Moshe was concerned about Og was because he had a

special merit. He earned this for doing a kindness with Avraham Avinu (our Patriarch) hundreds of years prior to this moment. The Torah tells us in Sefer Bereishis (Book of Genesis) that when the Four mightiest Kings defeated the Five Kings, they took Lot, the nephew of Avraham, captive. Og, who narrowly escaped the battle with the Four kings, went to Avraham to inform him that his nephew had been taken captive. Upon hearing the information from Og, Avraham immediately gathered an army of 318 men to rescue Lot. Chazal tell us that in fact 318 is the numerical value of the name Eliezer, who was Avraham's servant. Meaning Avraham only needed to take Eliezer into battle with him. Miraculously, Avraham defeated the Four mighty Kings and rescued his nephew Lot. Since Og provided the information to Avraham (which facilitated Lot's rescue), he was rewarded with longevity and lived until the time of Moshe Rabbeinu.

Chazal tell us that Og's true intention was that Avraham should go into battle and be killed so that he could take Sarah (our Matriarch) as his wife. Og believed that because Avraham was a zealot that he would immediately go into battle to save his nephew regardless of the danger, ultimately causing his death. We see that regardless of Og's sinister intent to have Avraham killed, the Torah tells us that his act of chesed must be rewarded. Og remained alive for an additional 500 years because of this merit. So when Moshe had to confront him, he was concerned that his merit for the chesed (kindness) provided for Avraham was still in effect. Hashem therefore reassured Moshe, "Do not fear him" because that merit no longer exists.

We learn from this that despite the degree of deficiency in the performance of a mitzvah it nevertheless has value. If someone benefits from another's actions, there is merit in that action regardless of the intent behind it. A mitzvah has incalculable value and this is the reason why Mishnah Pirkei Avos tells us that we should even pursue the mitzvos that seem to be of lesser importance.