

Parshas Eikev

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1. Understanding G-d's Kindness

On the morning of Tisha B'Av we read from the Portion of Va'eschanan, **“When you beget children and grandchildren and will have been long in the Land (*ve'noshantem*), you will grow corrupt and make a carved image of anything, and you will do evil in the eyes of Hashem, your G-d, to anger Him...you will surely perish quickly from the Land...”** Rashi cites the Gemara, which explains that, the word “*ve'noshantem* – you will be long (in the Land),” is an allusion to the fact that the Jewish people were going to dwell in the Land for 852 years. After that time, they would be destroyed. 852 is the numerical value of “*ve'noshantem*”. However, the Gemara continues to say that Hashem however caused the Jews to be exiled two years earlier, after being in the Land for only 850 years so that they should not be destroyed.

The Gemara in *Tractate Sanhedrin* cites a verse from Daniel regarding the exile and destruction of the First Temple, “Hashem expedited the tragedy (*rah*) (upon us) because Hashem our G-d is a tzaddik (righteous).” Had the Jewish people not been exiled from the Land two years earlier, they would have been destroyed. This is the meaning of the words of Daniel.

Sforno explains at the beginning of the Portion of Bamidbar that the Negative Commandment given to the Jewish people upon entering the Land was that no one from the seven Canaanite nations was permitted to remain alive (should be killed). Why did the Canaanites need to be destroyed? Were they so evil? Sforno explains that initially the Jewish people were to enter into the Land soon after their exodus from Egypt. However, because of the sin of the spies, Hashem decreed that they wander in the desert for 40 years. Since the Jewish people did not enter the Land until after 40 years, the Canaanites remained in the Land during this period and continued to sin. Because for an additional 39 years the Canaanites sinned in the Land of Israel, which is the “Holy Land,” they needed to be destroyed.

Chazal tell us “Being in the Land of Israel is similar to being in the palace of the King.” There is a difference when one sins in the Land of Israel (in the presence of the King) or outside. Had the Jewish people entered into the Land immediately after the Exodus, the Canaanites would not have been deserving of annihilation. They would have simply left Canaan to allow the Jews to occupy it.

Had the Jewish people remained in the Land for the full 852 years (the numerical value of *ve'noshantem*) and not have been exiled earlier, they would have become corrupted for an additional two years. If this had been the case, they would have degenerated spiritually to a point that they would not deserved being spared. Therefore, Hashem would have destroyed the Jewish people. However, since Hashem is righteous, He hastened the exile by two years to prevent an additional year of spiritual failing in the Land.

It is written in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers), “Whoever initially fulfills the Torah despite his impoverished state (enduring great difficulties) ultimately he will fulfill the Torah in a state of wealth. However, if one nullifies the Torah initially in a wealthy

state, Hashem will ultimately bring upon him a state of impoverishment.” If one is in a position to study Torah without having to be preoccupied with material needs and does not study, then Hashem will deny him blessing. This is actually a *chesed* (kindness) of Hashem that is being bestowed upon this individual because had the person retained his wealth and not fulfilled the Torah, then the claim against him would be grave. The reason one is endowed with wealth is so that he should be able to study Torah without distraction and focus on its precepts. If Hashem withdraws His blessing of wealth from this individual, then the claim against him is reduced. It should not be perceived as a punishment when one’s wealth is taken from him when he is abusing Hashem’s blessing; but rather, it should be seen as a *chesed* to cause the person to be less culpable.

Contrastingly, one who is dedicated to Torah study and mitzvos but is in an impoverished or difficult state, Hashem will provide with material blessing to alleviate his difficulty so that he should study Torah without distraction.

The Mishna in Tractate Taanis tells us that one of the reasons the day of Tisha B’Av was designated as a day of tragedy for the Jewish people throughout history was because of the sin of the spies. The Gemara in Tractate Taanis tells us that Hashem had said, “Because you cried when you had no reason to cry, I will designate that day as a day of crying for you throughout history for all time (Tisha B’Av).” Why do the Jewish people mourn on Tisha B’Av?

One of the reasons we mourn is to commemorate the destruction of the two Temples. The First Temple was destroyed because the Jews had violated the three cardinal sins; the Second Temple was destroyed because of *sinas chinam* (baseless hatred). The mourning and grieving on this day came about because we had failed spiritually and thus were deserving of severe punishment. Since the Jewish people sinned and needed to be punished, Hashem chose the day of Tisha B’Av to mete out the appropriate punishment. If the basis of mourning and grieving on Tisha B’Av is a consequence of our sins, what did Hashem mean when He said, “Because you had cried when you had no reason to cry, I will give you reason to cry.” The reason we cry on Tisha B’Av is not because we initially cried when we had no reason, but because we failed in a serious manner.

After the Sinai experience, the Jewish people attained a level of spirituality and clarity, which should have caused them to perceive and process their experiences correctly. The spies should have not have interpreted what they had witnessed in a negative manner. The Jews after hearing the reports of the spies should have rejected them because of their level of clarity. During the First Temple period, the Jewish people should have had a level of clarity that would have caused them to be far removed from any behavior, which has any relevance to the three cardinal sins. During the Second Temple period, because of their level of clarity, they should have recognized that their claims against one another were baseless and not have succumbed to *sinas chinam*. Throughout these periods, the Jewish people should not have encountered situations that would cause them to fail since their spiritual strength was attributed to Hashem’s Divine Assistance (which caused their clarity). These failures came about only because G-d withdrew His special assistance.

The baseless crying at the time of the spies is similar to what is stated in Pirkei Avos (cited earlier). Hashem withdrew the blessing of clarity from the Jewish people because despite the relationship they had with Him, which should have caused them to understand that the reports of the spies were baseless, they chose to believe them. This caused them to have a greater level of culpability. Therefore, Hashem withdrew the

greater level of clarity so that they should be less culpable – as the wealthy man has his wealth taken from him so that he should be less culpable.

If one adheres to the Torah and its mitzvos despite his personal difficulties, he will merit blessing from Hashem to enable him to succeed in his spiritual quest. However if one has the opportunity to advance spiritually because of the blessing with which he was endowed and he chooses not to do so, Hashem will withdraw that blessing. This is not only a punishment, it is simultaneously an expression of G-d's chesed (kindness) because when Hashem withdraws blessing, He puts the individual in a position of lesser culpability.

2. The Determining Factor for Blessing

The Midrash Tanchuma at the beginning of the Portion of Eikev cites a verse from Tehillim (Psalms). Dovid HaMelech (King David) writes, “Why should I be fearful in the days of evil? The sins of my heel surround me.” The Midrash explains, “Hashem has given the Jewish people 613 mitzvos. Among them, there are those, which seem to be more severe and those, which are less severe. Because there are mitzvos that are less severe (seemingly less important), people tend to throw them under their heels to be trampled upon as if they are to be taken lightly.”

Dovid HaMelech said to Hashem, “Master of the Universe, I am not concerned about the more severe mitzvos (because I understand their great importance); however, I am concerned about the less severe mitzvos. Perhaps I have violated one of them because I related to them as if they were of lesser importance. You Hashem have said, “One must be as careful in the observance of the lighter mitzvah (less severe) as one is with a more stringent mitzvah. Therefore I am concerned that the sins that I have thrown under my heel will come to condemn me on the Day of Judgment.”

It is important to understand and appreciate what Chazal are telling us regarding Dovid HaMelech's concern. Dovid refers to himself in Psalms as “chassid (scrupulously pious).” If this were the case then why would he be concerned about violating the less stringent mitzvah?

It is stated in Pirkei Avos that one should serve the Master not for the sake of receiving reward. Only when one serves the Master for the sake of doing His Will, he does not differentiate between less and more stringent mitzvos because they are equally the Word of Hashem. For example, wearing tefillin on a daily basis is no less important than fasting on Yom Kippur because they are both the Word of Hashem. Evidently, as we see from the words of Dovid in Psalms, that despite his exceptional level of spirituality, he was nevertheless concerned about failing in this particular area.

Every human being has a strong susceptibility to self-interest. As we see – a witness, even if he would be as great as Moshe or Aaron, would be disqualified from testifying if had a conflict of interest. This is because there is a continuous subconscious level of self-interest. As great as Dovid was and as much as he revered the Word of Hashem, he was concerned that because of this human handicap, he may have differentiated between the seemingly less stringent mitzvos. Thus, indicating that his observance of mitzvos was not solely for adhering to the Word of Hashem; but rather, for self-interest, which would cause him to be condemned on the Day of Judgment. .

The Torah states at the beginning of the Portion of Eikev, **“This shall be the reward when you hearken to these ordinances, and you observe and perform them;**

Hashem, your G-d will safeguard for you the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers. He will love you, bless you and multiply you..." Hashem says that if one meticulously observes even the mitzvos that one regards as less stringent and does not trample upon them, one merits the greatest level of blessing. Why is this case? If one treats all of the mitzvos with the same degree of value, it is an indication that his motivation is to adhere to the Will of Hashem and not for the sake of self-gain. Therefore, one is deserving of the greatest degree of blessing to assist him in fulfilling his proper objective in existence.

3. The Value of Completing What One Begins

The Torah tells us that Moshe spoke to the Jewish people saying, **"The entire commandment that I command you today you shall observe to perform, so that you may live and increase..."** The Torah could have simply stated, "The commandment that I command you today"; however, Moshe says **"The entire commandment."** How do we understand this?

Rashi cites Chazal who explain this verse is teaching us that if one begins a mitzvah, he should complete the mitzvah because the mitzvah only identifies with the individual who completes it. As the Torah states, "The remains of Yosef, which were taken out of Egypt by the Jewish people, were buried in Shechem." Despite the fact that Moshe was the one who actually sought out, retrieved the remains of Yosef, and took them out of Egypt, the Torah credits the Jewish people with performing that mitzvah. It is because Moshe could not complete the mitzvah by entering the Land and burying the remains, that he is not credited with the mitzvah. We see from this that the mitzvah identifies with the individual who completes it. Because of this Moshe told the Jewish people, **"The entire commandment (mitzvah)..."**

It is interesting to note that Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) refers to Moshe in Proverbs as *"Chacham lev yikach mitzvos - the wise of heart is he who took the mitzvos"* because he was the one who sought out the remains of Yosef while the remainder of the Jewish people were borrowing the wealth of the Egyptians. Moshe understood that the Jewish people could not leave Egypt without the remains of Yosef. However, the mitzvah of taking the remains out of Egypt is not identified with Moshe but rather with the Jewish people who completed it.

The Torah states at the beginning of the Portion of Lech Lecha, **"Hashem said to Avraham: ...And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing."** In the first blessing of the Amidah (silent prayer) we identify Hashem as, "The G-d of Avraham, the G-d of Yitzchak, and the G-d of Yaakov;" however, we conclude the blessing with, "Blessed are You Hashem, Shield of Avraham" because Hashem said, "and you shall be a blessing." It is inferred from the concluding statement of the verse, that if Hashem had not said, "You (Avraham) shall be a blessing," one would have thought that the blessing included all three Patriarchs – Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, since they, founding fathers of the Jewish people are the Patriarchs.

According to the principle that a mitzvah identifies with the one who completes it, the blessing should have concluded with Yaakov since he was the Patriarch who actually fathered the twelve tribes *"shivtei kah – the tribes of G-d"* If so then why does Hashem say that the blessing should conclude with Avraham?

Although a mitzvah is identified with the one who completes it, nevertheless it has

infinite spiritual value. For example, the Jewish people would not have been able to leave Egypt had Moshe not removed the remains of Yosef. However, since he was not the one to complete the mitzvah by burying the remains in Israel, the mitzvah identifies with the Jewish people who did complete it.

Regarding the founding of the Jewish people it was Avraham our Patriarch who established the foundation for the holy people. Avraham re-introduced Hashem into existence by his espousal of monotheism. It was because of this and his spiritual achievements that a foundation was established upon which the other Patriarchs could build. Once Avraham established the spiritual foundation for the Jewish people, then Yitzchak and Yaakov our Patriarchs were able to affect their development. Avraham's contribution towards the development of the Jewish people was all encompassing because the foundation that he established had relevance even to the most advanced level of spirituality. Therefore the blessing concludes with Avraham because it was his contribution that enabled the others.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos states, "Greater is the one answers (Amen) than the one who recites the blessing." When one responds with "Amen" after the blessing of another, the "Amen" has greater value than the blessing itself. How do we understand this? A blessing is a declaration of one's belief. For example, "Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who creates the fruit of the tree." This blessing identifies Hashem as the One who is responsible for creating the fruit of the tree. This declaration only gains credibility when another confirms it by responding "Amen." It is through this third-party confirmation that the declaration gains credence because another party concurs with the belief. Therefore, it is considered inappropriate if one recites "Amen" to his own blessing.

The one who responds with "Amen" is greater than the one who initiates the blessing not only because he confirms the declaration of the blessing (giving it credibility), but also because he is the one who is actually completing the mitzvah.

4. The Commonality between Yom Kippur and the 15th of Av

The Mishna in Tractate *Taanis* states, "Reb Shimon Ben Gamliel says, "There was never two greater holidays for the Jewish people other than Yom Kippur and the 15th day of Av." The Gemara asks, "It is understandable that Yom Kippur is considered a special holiday for the Jewish people because it is a day of forgiveness and Hashem gave the second set of tablets (indicating that the Jewish people were reinstated after the Sin of the Golden Calf). But what is so special about the 15th of Av that it should be equated to Yom Kippur?"

The Gemara explains, "On the 15th of Av the tribes of Israel were permitted to marry one another. (Until this point the tribes were not permitted to intermarry with one another in order for each tribe to retain its portion in the Land)...On the 15th of Av the last of the generation of the desert passed away. (Because of the negative reports of the spies regarding the Promised Land, the Jewish people were relegated to wander the desert for 40 years. During this period, the generation (between the ages of 20 and 40) would pass away because they were not permitted to enter the Land.) Until the generation of the desert passed away, Hashem was not available to communicate with Moshe at the same level that He had done previously. After they passed away Moshe's level of communication with Hashem was restored...On the 15th of Av, the bodies of the Jewish people that were killed in the massacre of Beitar by the Romans were permitted to be

buried. (The Romans did not allow the remains of their victims to be buried for seven years. They remained in piles around the countryside)... On the 15th of Av, the family of Leviyim finished cutting the wood for the altar – it was known as the “day they broke the sickle. (The knife that was used to cut the wood was put away).”

Rabbeinu Gershom explains in Tractate Bava Basra the basis for the festivities on “the day they broke the sickle.” The primary involvement of the Tribe of Levy was Torah study. They, like the Kohanim, had no portion in the Land – Hashem was their portion. It was only during a certain time of year that they had to interrupt their Torah study to cut the wood for the Bais HaMikdash (Temple). The *simcha* (joy) of the 15th of Av was that it is the day the Leviyim completed their chore woodcutting and thus were able to return to their Torah study. This was a special holiday for the entire Jewish people. The question remains – why is the holiday of the 15th of Av equated to Yom Kippur as stated in the Mishna?

All of the reasons cited by the Gemara as to why the 15th of Av was considered a special holiday have a common thread. This common thread is what equates this day with Yom Kippur. Each of the reasons given by the Gemara has relevance to the spiritual growth of the Jewish people. For example, after the generation of the desert passed away, Moshe was able to communicate openly with Hashem once again. The relationship with the Jewish people was reestablished. On the 15th of Av, the tribes were able to intermarry. This restored the feelings of unity among the Jewish people. There were no longer any barriers between them. The bodies that had been piled because of Beitar were buried on the 15th of Av allowing the Jewish people to return to their normal lives and once again focus on their service of Hashem. On the 15th of Av, the Leviyim were able to return to their Torah study. Because of this, the entire Jewish people were able to benefit from the spirituality of the Leviyim not being taken away from their Torah study.

Maharal of Prague cites the statement, “(Yom) Kippur is *ki Purim* (like Purim).” One would think that there is no basis of comparison between these two seemingly diametrically dissimilar days. On Yom Kippur, one conducts himself in a somber manner. The day is one of fasting, physical deprivation, and teshuvah (atonement). Purim on the other hand is a day of rejoicing and feasting. Yom Kippur is complete spiritual emersion while Purim is replete with physical pleasure. How are they comparable?

Maharal explains that on Yom Kippur the Jew comes to a level of clarity and understanding that he has a special relationship with Hashem. G-d established Yom Kippur as a day of forgiveness, atonement and reinstatement. Prior to the events of Purim, there was a decree by the Persian Emperor to annihilate every Jewish man, woman, and child. It seemed to the Jewish people that their end was imminent and that they would no longer exist. However, all of this miraculously changed and the enemies of the Jews (Amalekites) were killed. Purim is the day that the Jewish people came to the realization that G-d has a special relationship with them – would not allow their demise. It was a demonstration of Hashem’s love for the Jewish people.

We can now understand the similarity between Yom Kippur and 15th of Av. Just as Yom Kippur is characterized as a day in which the Jew comes to the realization and clarity that he has a special relationship with Hashem, so too is the 15th of Av. Each of the incidents cited by the Gemara relating to the 15th of Av reflects this concept regarding the Jew’s special relationship with Hashem. All of the reasons given by the Gemara are a setting for the Jew to understand and appreciate his own spirituality. The Leviyim were

able to return to their Torah study, the bodies were buried in Beitar, the tribes were permitted to intermarry, etc. All of these distractions were removed – and thus Jews were able to re-invest themselves in their spirituality in a more favorable setting.

The 15th of Av is a day to understand and appreciate that we are Hashem's holy people. It is a time to reconnect with Hashem through Torah study and appreciate who we are.

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