

Yad Avraham Institute
Weekly Torah Commentaries Series
The Portion of
Tazria/Metzora

April 23, 2009

Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkofa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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Yad Avraham Institute
New York
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B"H

Tazria/Metzora

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Dean

1. The Spiritual Rehabilitation and Advancement of the Jew

The Midrash tells us that there was a dialogue between Rebbe Akiva and Tornistropis, the Roman governor of Jerusalem (who was the one who ultimately had Rebbe Akiva put to death); “Tornistropis had asked Rebbe Akiva, ‘Whose accomplishments are more perfect – G’d’s or man’s?’” Rebbe Akiva responded, ‘Man’s accomplishments are more perfect.’ Tornistropis asked, ‘Could man replicate the creation of heaven and earth?’ Rebbe Akiva replied, ‘We are not discussing something that is beyond the human capacity. Rather, regarding something that is relevant to man, it is man’s accomplishments that are more perfect.’ Tornistropis asked, ‘Why do you Jews circumcise yourselves?’ Rebbe Akiva replied, ‘I understood from the beginning that this was the intent of your question. It is because of this that I responded that man’s accomplishments are more perfect than G’d’s.’ Rebbe Akiva then placed before him sheaves of wheat and fully baked loaves of bread. He said, ‘The sheaves of wheat are the handiwork of G’d and the finished loaves of bread are the product of man’s accomplishment. Which of the two is more perfect? The unprocessed sheaves of wheat or the finished loaves of bread?’ Tornistropis replied, ‘If G’d intended the Jew to be circumcised, why did He not create him to be born in a circumcised state?’ Rebbe Akiva responded, ‘G’d gave the Jewish people the mitzvos in order to perfect themselves and be purged from impurity. As it states in Psalms, ‘The Word of G’d purges and perfects ...’ G’d presented man with an imperfect world and gave the Torah to the Jewish people in order to facilitate its perfection.’”

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that Adam was initially created without a foreskin; however, as a result of partaking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, which innately possessed evil, it developed. The foreskin was a direct outgrowth of the impurity that Adam had brought within himself. The foreskin, which is a covering of the

male organ, represents impurity and spiritual blockage. G’d gave the Jewish people the mitzvah of circumcision to remove the foreskin, which is the impediment to their spirituality. Thus, the mitzvah of circumcision was given to the Jew to facilitate his perfection. It was only because of the failing of Adam that this mitzvah was necessary. G’d’s initial Handiwork contained no impurity. It was Adam, who through transgressing His Will, assimilated impurity into existence. Consequently, G’d endowed the Jewish people with the mitzvos of the Torah in order to spiritually rehabilitate and perfect the world that had been spiritually putrefied.

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh continues, “The negative commandments are intended to remove the illness of the soul. The positive commandments are intended to enlighten and illuminate the soul. As a result of the sin of Adam, the illumination of the soul was darkened. By adhering to the negative commandments of the Torah, the blemish is rehabilitated; however, illumination does not return to the soul. By fulfilling the positive commandments, the soul is illuminated. As King Solomon states in Proverbs (Mishlei), ‘*Neir mitzvah v’Torah ohr* – the mitzvah is the fuel and the Torah is the light/illuminator.’” Since man was the one who brought darkness upon himself, it is therefore incumbent upon him, through the observance of the mitzvos to bring about illumination. The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos states, “One, who attempts to purify himself, will be assisted (by G’d)...”; however, this is predicated on one’s own initiative. With this we are able to understand the verse in Psalms, “Remove yourself from evil and do good.” Firstly, one must rehabilitate himself from his spiritual illness by removing himself from evil (by not transgressing). Then, one will be able to fully be able to benefit from the performance of the positive commandments, which provides illumination to the soul.

It is interesting to note that Chazal tell us that a woman has mitzvos that are unique to herself. Two of these mitzvos are: the kindling the Shabbos and Yom Tov

lights and the tithing the dough (taking challah). Although the man is no less obligated than the woman, in a family setting the woman has the priority to kindle the lights and tithe the dough. The Midrash explains that the reason for this is that “Since she (Chava/the wife of Adam) extinguished the light of the world. She must rekindle that light. Since she contaminated ‘chalaso shal olam’ (the dough that is tithed from the batter which is holy), she must restore it.” Chava had offered the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge to her husband Adam and suggested that he should eat it. Adam being the handiwork of G’d radiated holiness on a very special level. Chazal tell us that the radiance of Adam was such a degree that the angels in heaven had mistaken it for the radiance of G’d. As a result of eating from the Tree, that radiance was extinguished. The diminishment of Adam’s spirituality was the equivalent of extinguishing the light of existence. When the woman kindles the Shabbos/Yom Tov lights, she is reinstating that light. Prior to eating of the Tree of Knowledge, Adam was considered the “most pure and holy being in existence (*chalaso shel olam*).” However, after eating the fruit of the Tree he became contaminated. The woman’s obligation is to reinstate a semblance of what she had caused to become spiritually tainted. Thus, challah is considered her personal mitzvah.

The illumination of existence is restored in the ultimate sense through the study of Torah, as King Solomon states in Proverbs, “*Neir mitzvah v’Torah ohr* – the mitzvah is the fuel and the Torah is the light/illuminator.” It is through the study of Torah that one is motivated to perform the mitzvos. As the Gemara in Tractate Kiddushin states, “Great is study (of Torah) because study brings to actualization.” Tornistropis did not fully grasp what Rebbe Akiva had said to him. Rebbe Akiva was referring to the perfection of one’s spirituality, which only the Jew has a capacity to do. However, Tornistropis the gentile, whose essence is not spiritual but rather physical, processed Rebbe Akiva’s response within a physical context.

2. Torah, Under Duress

The Torah states, “...**When a woman conceives and gives birth...**” The Midrash cites a verse from Psalms, “ ‘Before and after You have restricted me (*achar v’kedem tzartani*)...’ Adam had said, ‘After G’d had created all of the animals, birds, insects, and creatures, He created me.’ Meaning, Adam had understood that before he was created, G’d had brought about all existence to accommodate him...Similarly, the fetus before it leaves the womb of its mother, G’d commands it, ‘This you are

permitted to eat and this is not permitted to eat. This is contaminating to you and this is not contaminating to you.’ Only after the fetus had accepted upon itself all of the commandments of the Torah, does G’d allow it to be born. This is the reason the Portion of Shemini, which discusses all of the permitted and forbidden species, precedes the portion of Tazria, which discusses the conception and birth of a child.” Thus, the sequential order of the Portions teaches us that the child is first taught all of the laws regarding what is permitted and forbidden, and then it comes into existence.

This is similar to what is stated in the Gemara in Tractate Nidah, that a child in-utero is taught the Torah in its entirety by an angel. While the child is in the womb, it has a level of clarity that enables it to “see from one end of the world to the other.” A moment before the child is born, the angel makes it take an oath to adhere to all of the mitzvos that it was taught. Only then is it allowed to be born.

It is interesting to note that the Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that at the time of the giving of the Torah at Sinai, G’d held the mountain over them. G’d had given them an ultimatum saying, “If you accept the Torah it shall be good for you. If not, there shall you be buried.” If the Jewish people had not accepted the Torah, the world would have reverted back to a state of preexistence. The Gemara concludes that because of this ultimatum, it is considered that the Torah was given under duress. Is this truly considered under duress? If one wishes to be hired for a position that requires an unusual level of commitment, it is understood that the employee must meet its requirements and responsibilities. This employment is not considered to be under duress, because the employee agrees to meet all of the conditions of the employer. G’d’s only objective in creating existence was that it should be the setting for the Jewish people to fulfill the Torah. If they had chosen not to accept the Torah, then the sole objective of creation would never be met. It is understood that G’d would cause the world to revert to a state of non-existence, if the Jewish People did not accept the Torah. With this understanding, duress assumes another connotation. Rather than understanding it to mean “being forced” to do something against one’s will, it becomes appreciating the reality of one’s predicament and then acting wisely.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) states, “...against your will you are formed, against your will you are born, against your will you live, against your will you die...” As was explained by the Gemara in Tractate Nidah and the Midrash, the child in-utero has no

choice but to accept the Torah that it was taught. This is replicating the setting of Sinai. Just as the Jewish people understood with clarity, the consequences of rejecting the Torah, so too does the child, because of its level of understanding, accepts the Torah.

When one understands the consequences of his actions with absolute clarity, he has no choice but to act wisely – doing the Will of G'd. This is the commonality between the child in-utero and the Jewish people at the foot of Sinai. However, one must aspire to transcend this level of understanding and accept the Word of G'd not for the sake of existence, but rather, to feel privileged to be able to serve his Master.

3. G'd Providing Opportunity

The Torah states, “...**When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male...If she gives birth to a female...**” The Midrash states, “If the woman had ovulated by the time of cohabitation, the child conceived will be a male. However if she had not yet ovulated at the time of cohabitation, the child will be a female. Reb Chiya Bar Aba says, ‘From this we see that the (conception of) male (child) is dependant on the female and the (conception of a) female (child) is dependant on the male.’... As it states, Avraham was informed ‘**Milka (female) had given birth to sons to Nochor, your brother...**’ We see also from the verse, ‘**Bisuel (Male) had fathered Rivka.**’ Thus, the female identifies with the conception of a male and the male is identified with the conception of the female.” Why did G'd create the world in this manner – that the conception of the male is determined by the woman and the conception of the female is determined by the man?

Ksav Sofer (the son of the Chasam Sofer) explains that since the female is not obligated in many of the mitzvos that the man is obligated to perform, she is denied the spiritual benefit of those mitzvos from which she is exempt. For example, while a man is obligated in the study of Torah, which in relationship to other mitzvos is the ultimate, a woman is not. G'd created existence in a way to allow each person to be able to be a spiritual beneficiary of all the mitzvos. Thus, by allowing the female to be the cause of the conception of the male, she is in essence the one responsible from bringing him into existence. Therefore, all the spiritual accomplishments that the son will achieve in his lifetime will accrue to the mother who initially conceived him. It is in this manner that the woman can reap the merit and spiritual benefits of the mitzvos that do not pertain to her. Similarly, there are many mitzvos that pertain only to the woman, such as the laws of family

purity (counting days towards purity, emersion in a mikvah, etc.). to which the male has no relevance. Therefore, G'd allowed the male to be the cause of the conception of the female in order for him to be a beneficiary of his daughter's spiritual accomplishments.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin states, ‘The son brings merit to the father but the father does not bring merit to the son.’ Meaning, if the father was evil and he had a righteous son, he would be a beneficiary of the spiritual accomplishments of his son. However, if a righteous father were to have an evil son, the son's spiritual record will not be enhanced by the spiritual accomplishments of the father. Although the evil son may be presented with special spiritual opportunities in his lifetime, because he is the son of a righteous individual; the righteousness of his father will not be attributed to him. This is because the father is the cause of the son's existence, which is not the case regarding the son versus the father.

Based on the principle that a son brings merit to the father, the Mishna in Tractate Bava Metzia tells us that if one comes upon the lost object of his father and the lost object of a third party, returning the object to the father takes precedence over the other. Because, “His father had brought him into existence.” The Mishna continues - if one finds the lost object of his father and the lost object of his rebbe (spiritual mentor), returning the object of his mentor takes precedence, because “His father brought him into the physical world; however, his rebbe gave him relevance to the world to come ...” Eternal existence has greater value than the limited existence in this world. Therefore, the rebbe takes precedence over the father.

Ramah writes in his glosses on the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) that if one provides for the Jewish education of another, he is considered to be the equivalent of his mentor (*rabo muvak*), although he never engaged in the study of Torah with the recipient of his support. This is because without the benefactor's financial support, the student would have never been able to develop as a Torah Jew. He is thus directly responsible for the spiritual development of the student. Consequently, all the spiritual accomplishments of the student accrue to the benefactor.

Chofetz Chaim writes that if one provides the means for an individual or a family to become more observant and they actually advance spiritually, the initial supporter will reap all the merit that will be generated by the family until the end of existence. This is because the

benefactor was the catalyst that allowed the spiritual advancement to come about.

G'd provided the Jewish people with a setting and mechanism that allows them to reap maximum benefit from mitzvah performance. Regardless of how removed one may be from the actualization of the performance of the Torah Itself, the benefactor who supports it will be the beneficiary of all that came about as a result of his support. Similarly, G'd created the male and the female in a way that each of them will be the beneficiary of the other gender's mitzvah performance.

4. The Objective of Life

The Portion begins with the laws pertaining to a woman who conceives and gives birth to a male. King David writes in Tehilim (Psalms), "Later and earlier You formed me..." The Midrash explains regarding this verse from Tehilim, "Later" refers to the fact that the human being was the last to be created in the order of creation. "Earlier" is referring to the fact that the human being was the first and only creature to be held culpable for his actions because he possesses free choice. If one succeeds because he fulfilled his objective in life by investing himself in spirituality, "they will say to him- You preceded all existence." Why is this so? It states in the verse (in the Portion of Bereishis), "The Spirit of G'd was hovering over the waters..." This refers to the soul (*neshama*), which was created before existence. However if one follows the path of materialism and is oblivious to his spirituality, "they will say to him – the flea preceded you in creation."

If one were to share this Midrash with any rational individual he would have difficulty comprehending the profundity of this message and seemingly, rightfully so. It is true that the flea may have preceded the human being in creation; however, the human species is more advanced in every aspect of his existence. Intellectually, creatively, and experientially, the human being far surpasses this insignificant creature, the flea.

Rabbeinu Bachya explains in his introduction to the Portion of Shimini, that the fact that man was introduced into creation only after it was completed is an indication that he is the most special. It is analogous to a builder constructing an elaborate home; only after the structure is fully completed and livable will he summon its residents. Thus, since all existence preceded man, it is an indication that it was created only for his sake. If so, it is

understood that the flea was created before man. How then do we understand the words of King David?

Chazal tell us that the average person when he passes away has not even fulfilled half of his life's material desires and aspirations. As much as the individual persevered to fulfill his material desires, he will not succeed in accomplishing half of them. It is one's strong desire for material that drives and motivates him to pursue his aspirations despite the fact that he may not attain them at all. If one were able to extricate himself from his need to satisfy his desire, he would be able to objectively assess and understand the futility of the pursuit of a life that is singularly based on the material.

All existence was created to accommodate one's spiritual development. This is indicated by the fact that the creation of the Soul (*neshama*) preceded physical existence. However, regarding Man's relevance to purpose (which is the perfection of his spirituality), he was only introduced to creation when it was in a state of completion. However if one does not relate or understand his objective in existence, by pursuing the material, his level of accomplishment is even less than the flea that was created before him. The flea has minimal needs and functions fully as it is meant to do; thus, he achieves his purpose within material existence fully. However, the human who does not address his potential and lives as the intellectual animal – devoid of spirituality- he is culpable for his failing. His accomplishment is thus less than the flea that had preceded him.

The Midrash tells us that the human being has endless needs– whether it is on a developmental level or caring for his delicate requirements. He must be continuously assisted in attaining his sustenance and other personal amenities. An animal has no such difficulties. The human on the other hand was created to address his spiritual potential despite his physical context. Thus, it is in his best interest to invest his life in the pursuit of spirituality and not materialism.

5. Torah, Understanding the Blueprint for Existence

Rashi, at the beginning of the Portion of Tazria, cites the words of Reb Simlaee, "Just as the creation of man followed the creation of the domesticated, undomesticated animals, and the birds, so too the laws pertaining to these species (dietary laws) precede the laws pertaining to man." What is the profundity of Reb

Simlae's statement? The observation of Reb Simlae is seemingly obvious.

The Midrash in the Portion of Bereishis states, "He Gazed into the Torah and Created the world." The Torah itself is the blueprint for all existence. Maharal of Prague z'tl explains that the appellation "Torah," which was chosen by G'd Himself to identify it, conveys to us its inherent purpose and value. This is "l'horos," which means to give us direction in life. The Torah is not for the sake of intellectual pursuit; but rather, for understanding how one must invest his life in spirituality through its study and the observance of its mitzvos. If the Torah is a book of laws, which gives the Jew direction on how to lead his life, then what is its relevance to being the "blueprint" of Creation?

On the eve of the 15th of Nissan (Pesach), the Torah requires one to consume matzah, which is made with one of the five grains (wheat, barley, spelt, rye, and buckwheat). The grain that qualifies for the making of matzah must be susceptible to the leavening process; therefore, its chemical composition must have this nature. Only five grains qualify for the making of matzah. In order for the mitzvos of the Torah to be relevant and fulfilled, creation had to be tailored specifically to accommodate all the positive and Negative Commandments. Kosher species of animals must have hides because the Torah tells us that the only material that qualifies to be fashioned into tefillin is the hide of a kosher species. This is meaning of the words of Chazal - "He Gazed into the Torah and Created the world." Every aspect of creation only exists because it has some degree of relevance to the fulfillment of the Torah.

The Torah tells us that there is a Negative Commandment that one is not permitted to add or detract from the Torah. There is nothing lacking or superfluous in the Torah. It is perfect in every respect. Since existence was created only to be the setting for the fulfillment of the Torah, then it must be that there is nothing superfluous in creation.

The order of Creation signifies that all existence was created to accommodate man who was the last to be brought into existence. In order for man to fulfill his purpose, he needed to be introduced into a world that had all the elements that he required to fulfill his purpose. The Gemara in Tractate Rosh Hashanah tells us that G'd created birds with multicolored plumage and food with many tastes to accommodate the needs of man. Man could not function on an optimal level if the entire world was of uniform appearance and all his sustenance had the same

taste. The purpose of this variety is not to accommodate man's physical needs, but rather to create a setting for him to maximize on his potential as a spiritual being - who exists within a physical context. Just as the context of existence is only to accommodate the Torah, in a spiritual sense, so too the context of man is not for his physicality but rather to accommodate his spiritual needs.

Reb Simlae is communicating to us the understanding that just as all species which preceded man, have relevance to existence only within the context of the laws which pertain to them (which is the Torah itself, so too, the relevance of man to existence is not his physicality but rather the laws which pertain to him.

Rashi explains that until the creation of the human being, the appellation that is chosen for G'd is Elokim, which connotes the Attribute of Justice. However after the creation of man, the Torah refers to G'd as Hashem Elokim, which is the coalescing of the Attribute of Justice with the Attribute of Mercy because G'd saw that the world could not continue to exist within the context of Justice (because man is prone to fail). What relevance does the Attribute of Justice have to the creation of the world? As we had explained earlier, the Torah itself is perfect - there is nothing superfluous in it. It is exact and precise. Since the Torah is the blueprint for existence, the process of creation had to come about in the most exacting and precise manner- Attribute of Justice. This further demonstrates that the world was created in a state of perfection only to accommodate the Torah, which is perfect and complete. Material existence is only to accommodate our spiritual development.