**S.A.L.T. - Chol HaMoed Pesach 5776 - Acharei Mot – 2016**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

**Dedicated in memory of Rav Daniel Beller z"l. A man of powerful personality, personal interest and caring, commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people. An exemplary communal leader. We lost a very special person this past week. Condolences to his wife Arnie, to his beloved children, and to all the family.**

Motzaei Shabbat

 The first chapter of the *Hallel* text, which is the 113rd chapter of Tehillim, concludes by describing how God “lifts the destitute person from the dust; he raises the impoverished person from the trash heaps; to have him sit among the noblemen…” At first glance, the reference to “dust” and “trash heaps” is intended to illustrate the dire straits of the individuals who are then assisted and rehabilitated by God. Even if a person sinks to the lowest depths of destitution, God is still capable of lifting him from the “dust” and “trash heaps” to which he has fallen, and catapulting him to the greatest heights of wealth and prestige.

 Another possibility, however, emerges from Abarbanel’s reading of this chapter, which he presents in [his commentary to Sefer Malachi (1:11)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14368&st=&pgnum=254). In the third verse, the Psalmist proclaims that God’s Name is praised “*mi-mizrach shemesh at mevo’o*” – from East to West, meaning, among all people in the world. Abarbanel explains that God’s existence and might are practically universally recognized, and not only among *Am Yisrael*. The difference, however, lies in the next verse: “The Lord is high above the nations; His glory is in the heavens.” The pagan nations viewed God as “high above,” and “in the heavens,” and thus dissociated from our lowly world. They recognized God, but presumed that He is too powerful and exalted to concern Himself with the affairs on Earth. The Psalmist then proceeds to note the distinction between this perception and that of *Am Yisrael*: “Who is like the Lord our God, who resides up high, but who lowers Himself to see, in the heavens and Earth.” We see no contradiction whatsoever between God’s loftiness and His interest and direct governance of our world. Despite His transcendence, and His being infinitely greater than anything in our universe, He nevertheless mercifully “lowers Himself” to manage and control all the affairs of our world. Abarbanel adds that the next chapter of Tehillim – “*Be-tzeit Yisrael mi-Mitzrayim*” – appears here because it speaks of the Exodus, the clearest example of God’s Providence over the world’s affairs.

 Accordingly, we might suggest that the Psalmist depicts the poor wallowing in the “dust” and “trash heaps” not just to emphasize the depths of their misery, but to note the extent to which the Almighty will lower Himself, as it were, for the sake of assisting the needy. The starkest illustration of the contrast that is (according to Abarbanel) the theme of this Psalm is the image of God coming to the aid of a pauper rummaging through the trash in search of food. Despite the fact that “*al ha-shamayim kevodo*,” that His glory spans the entire expanse of the universe, and beyond, there is nowhere too low or too unseemly for Him to go when His assistance is needed. He will descend anywhere in our lowly world, including the “dust” and the “trash heaps,” in order to assist a poverty-stricken individual.

 The lesson, of course, is that we, like the Almighty, must not allow our pride or our perceived stature to get in the way of assisting those in need. We should never see ourselves as too important or distinguished to go to the “trash heaps,’ to do whatever is needed to help our fellow. Just as God descends to our lowly world to help us, we, too, must “descend” from whatever stature we assign to ourselves in order to lend assistance to those who need it.

Sunday

 The Gemara in Masekhet Menachot (65a) discusses the debate that raged during the Second Temple period regarding the *mitzva* of *ketizrat ha-omer* – the first harvest, which was brought as an offering in the *Mikdash*. The Torah, in Sefer Vayikra (23:11), requires bringing this offering “*mi-machorat ha-Shabbat*” (“the day after Shabbat”), which *Chazal* understood as a reference to the 16th of Nissan, the day after the first day of Pesach. The heretical Baytusi sect, however, argued that the word “Shabbat” in this verse must be understood to mean the weekly Shabbat. In their view, then, the *korban ha-omer* was brought on the first Sunday after the 15th of Nissan, and not necessarily on the 16th of Nissan.

 The Gemara documents an exchange on this subject between Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai and a Baytusi leader, who suggested an explanation for his sect’s position. Offering the *korban ha-omer* – and thus beginning the seven-week *omer* period – on Sunday meant that Shavuot, the day following the 49th and final day of the *omer*, always falls on Sunday. The Baytusi scholar thus contended that “our teacher Moshe was a lover of Israel,” and he therefore commanded us to observe Shavuot specifically on Sunday, so we can enjoy two consecutive festive days of rest – Shabbat and Shavuot. Rabban Yochanan countered, “If our teacher Moshe was a lover of Israel, why did he have them stay in the wilderness for forty years.” If Moshe was truly interested in our comfort and enjoyment, Rabban Yochanan argued, then he would have led us direcly to *Eretz Yisrael* without any delay, rather than have us wander in the wilderness for forty years.

 Of course, as Rashi comments, Rabban Yochanan did not present this rationale as a serious argument. He said it as a “*dichui be-alma*,” a silly retort to a silly claim. Nevertheless, we might wonder whether perhaps there is some significance to the implied association between the traditional interpretation of “*mi-machorat ha-Shabbat*,” and the forty years of travel in the wilderness.

 By insisting on beginning the *omer* period immediately after the day celebrating the Exodus, our tradition loudly proclaims that the two events – the Exodus and *Matan Torah* – are inextricably bound to one another. Our belief is that our emergence as a free nation cannot be separated in any way from our acceptance of the Torah at Sinai. God granted us freedom from Egypt so we could become subservient to Him, and not simply to be “free.” As such, the seven-week period between the Exodus and *Matan Torah* was not merely the time needed to journey from Egypt to Sinai; it was a period of growth and preparation. Since the purpose of the Exodus was for us to receive the Torah at Sinai, these weeks were necessary as a time for us to prepare ourselves for the experience of *Ma’amad Har Sinai*.

By the same token, we could not enter *Eretz Yisrael* immediately. The purpose of our becoming a nation was to follow God’s laws and represent Him to the world, and so we could not enter the land and establish our country before undergoing the necessary process of preparation. Just as *Benei Yisrael* required seven weeks of preparation before accepting the Torah, they required forty years of preparation before entering *Eretz Yisrael* and beginning to build their country.

 The Baytusim argued that Moshe’s “love” for *Am Yisrael* would be expressed in his legislating a “long weekend” in the form of Shavuot always falling on Sunday. Our tradition, however, believes that Moshe’s “love” was manifested through, among other things, his role as teacher and guide, patiently and devotedly leading us along the difficult, complex process of growth that we needed before receiving the Torah and entering *Eretz Yisrael*. This, perhaps, is the fundamental message underlying our tradition’s interpretation of “*mi-machorat ha-Shabbat*” – that we achieved our freedom not for our personal comfort and enjoyment, but rather to undergo the long but ever so meaningful process of growth so we can become worthy servants of our Creator.

Monday

 One of the most syntactically difficult verses in the narrative of the Exodus is one which we cite on several occasions at the *seder*. Just after *Benei Yisrael*’s departure from Egypt, Moshe presents to the nation a number of commands intended to eternally memorialize this event, including the obligation to tell one’s child that “*ba’avur zeh asa Hashem li be-tzeiti mi-Mitzrayim*” (Shemot 13:8). This verse is very difficult to translate, as it literally means, “because of this the Almighty acted for me when I left Egypt.”

 Rashi explains that the word “*zeh*” (“this”) in this verse refers to the *mitzvot* mentioned in the previous verses, namely, the various laws associated with the Pesach observance. The Torah instructs parents to explain to their children that the purpose of the Exodus is for us to fulfill God’s *mitzvot*. This verse thus means, “It is for this – the performanc of the *mitzvot* – that God acted for me by taking me from Egypt.” This also appears to be the approach followed by the *Haggadah*, which interprets the phrase “*ba’avur zeh*” as indicating that the obligation to tell the story of the Exodus applies only on the night of Pesach, “at the time when *matza* and *marror* are placed before you.” The word “*zeh*” (“this”) is generally understood by *Chazal* as a reference to something readily visible, and thus the *Haggadah* explains that when the Torah commands parents to tell their children, “*Ba’avur zeh*,” it refers to the time when the *mitzva* objects are in front of them – meaning, at the *seder* table. The clear assumption underlying this inference is that “*ba’avur zeh*” refers to the *mitzvot* of the *seder*, in accordance with Rashi’s explanation.

 A seemingly simpler explanation is offered by Shadal, who notes that the word “*zeh*” is sometimes used in Biblical Hebrew to mean “which,” as opposed to “this.” For example, God proclaims through the prophet Yeshayahu (43:21), “*Am* ***zu*** *yatzarti li tehilatekha yesapeiru*,” which likely means, “The nation **which** I created for Myself shall tell of My praise.” Similarly, in the *Az Yashir* song of praise sung by *Benei Yisrael* after the splitting of the sea, they speak of “*am* ***zu*** *ga’alta*” (Shemot 15:16), which would seemingly be translated as, “the nation **which** you redeemed.” Another example noted by Shadal is the verse in Tehillim (104:8), “*el mekom* ***zeh*** *yasadeta lahem*” – “to the place **which** You established for them.” Accordingly, he writes, we might explain the phrase, “*ba’avur zeh asa Hashem li*” to mean, “because of that which the Lord did for Me,” and this is how parents are to explain their children the significance of the *mitzvot* of Pesach.

Tuesday

 The *Mishna Berura* (498:9) writes that when one counts the *omer* after the sixth day, when reference is made to both the number of days and the number of weeks, the word “*shavua*” must be pronounced “*shAvua*,” with a *kamatz* vowel, and not “*shEvua*,” with a *sheva* vowel. (Presumably, this would apply also to the plural form “*shavuot*,” which must be pronounced “*shAvuot*,” and not “*shEvuot*.”) The reason, as explained by Rav Efrayim Greenblatt in his *Rivevot Efrayim* (5:344), is that the word “*shevua*” means “oath,” and not “week,” and is thus incorrect in the context in the *sefirat ha-omer*.

 In his discussion of this topic, Rav Greenblatt writes that in his view, one who mistakenly says “*shevuot*” has not fulfilled his obligation, and must repeat the counting, since he mispronounced the vitally important word “*shavuot*.” However, he cites other authorities with whom he had corresponded about this subject who disagreed, and ruled that the *mitzva* is fulfilled even if one mistakenly recited “*shevuot*.” One correspondent, Rav Shushan Mazuz, noted the fact that, as the *Mishna Berura* (489:7) mentions, some authorities ruled that one who counted only the days (for example, “Today is the eighth day of the *omer*”) without mentioning the weeks (meaning, he did not add, “which is one week and one day”), has nevertheless fulfilled his obligation. These *poskim* include the *Magen Avraham*, the Chid’a, the *Chok Yaakov*, the *Elya Rabba*, and others. In light of the different views on the subject, the *Mishna Berura* ruled that one who omitted mention of the weeks should repeat the counting, but without a *berakha*, in order to satisfy all opinions. In the case of one who mistakenly recited “*shevuot*,” Rav Mazuz writes, we can factor in the lenient view noted by the *Mishna Berura*, as well as the fact that it is uncertain whether the mispronunciation of “*shavuot*” undermines the counting of weeks. Therefore, although it would be preferable for the individual to repeat the counting without a *berakha*, he has fulfilled his obligation.

 Another consideration, which Rav Greenblatt cites from Rav Yosef Bar Shalom, is that even one who mistakenly recited “*shevuot*” clearly meant to say “weeks,” and not “oaths,” and thus he has fulfilled the *mitzva* despite the mispronunciation. Rav Bar Shalom added that according to Rabbenu Yerucham, the requirement to mention the weeks in the counting to begin with applies only on the level Rabbinic enactment (even if *sefirat ha-omer* nowadays applies on the level of Torah obligation), so there is certainly room for leniency in this regard.

Wednesday

 This year (5776), as the seventh day of Pesach falls on Friday, communities in Israel will observe the next day, Shabbat, as an ordinary Shabbat, whereas Diaspora communities will observe that day as the eighth and final day of Pesach. Hence, Israeli communities will read on that Shabbat Parashat Acharei-Mot, following the standard sequence of weekly Torah readings, whereas in the Diaspora, a special section will be read for the Yom Tov (the end of Parashat Re’ei). This discrepancy will result in a “gap” between Israel and the Diaspora, with Diaspora communities lagging one parasha behind. This gap will continue until after Shiva Assar Be’Tammuz, when Israeli communities will read Parashat Matot and Parshat Masei separately, rather than combining them as is normally done. Diaspora communities will combine these two parashiyot, thereby “catching up” to the communities in Israel.

 Rabbi Dr. Chaim Simons, in [an in-depth article on the subject](http://chaimsimons.net/divreichamishah02), cites an account when this circumstance presented itself, and the Chief Rabbi of Aleppo, Syria ruled that his city’s community should combine Korach and Chukat, which are read several weeks before Parashat Matot. The advantage of this policy is that it allows the Diaspora communities to get back in sync with Israeli communities earlier, rather than waiting several more weeks until Parashat Matot.

Of course, this ruling is exceptional, and it is not customary to ever combine Korach and Chukat. However, Diaspora communities do, on occasion, combine Parashiyot Chukat and Balak. (This is done when Shavuot falls on Friday, and thus Diaspora communities fall behind because they observe Shabbat as the second day of Shavuot and thus do not read the regular weekly parasha.) The question thus arises, why do Diaspora communities in situations such as this year combine Matot and Masei, instead of Chukat and Balak, thereby prolonging the period of discrepancy?

In truth, we should ask even a stronger question. Why do Diaspora communities not “catch up” to Israeli communities immediately on the Shabbat after Pesach, by combining Parashat Acharei-Mot and Parashat Kedoshim, two parashiyot which are generally read together in non-leap years? And even if there is some reason we can find for why they do not combine these parashiyot, why do they not combine Behar and Bechukotai?

The answer to this question, as discussed by the Maharit (2:4), lies in the time-honored practice, rooted in the Talmud, to read Parashat Bamidbar on the Shabbat immediately preceding Shavuot. The Gemara in Masekhet Megilla (31a) tells of Ezra’s enactment that Parashat Bechukotai – the final parasha in Sefer Vayikra – should be read before Shavuot. *Tosafot* explain that the custom is to read Parashat Bechukotai not the Shabbat immediately preceding Shavuot, but rather one week earlier, in order not to juxtapose the *kelalot* (“curses”) found in Parashat Bechukotai with Shavuot. This is, indeed, the accepted practice, and thus Parashat Bechukotai is generally read two Shabbatot before Shavuot, and Parashat Bamidbar on the Shabbat immediately preceding Shavuot. The exception to this rule is situations such as this year, in Israel, when Parashat Naso will be read on the Shabbat preceding Shavuot. The schedule of Torah readings here in Israel this year leave no alternative to reading Parashat Bamidbar two Shabbatot before Shavuot. In the Diaspora, however, the lag created by the eighth day of Pesach allows communities to maintain the custom of reading Parashat Bamidbar right before Shavuot even this year. As such, they do not combine Acharei Mot and Kedoshim, or Behar and Bechukotai, which would have the effect of distancing Parashat Bamidbar from Shavuot. The interest in maintaining this practice overrides the benefit of being synchronized with the communities in Israel, and so Diaspora communities do not combine Acharei-Mot and Kedoshim or Behar and Bechukotai.

This does not, however, answer the question of why Diaspora communities wait until Matot and Masei to combine two parashiyot, rather than combine Chukat and Balak. Addressing this question, the Maharit explains, quite simply, that Parashiyot Matot and Masei are almost always read together, and thus communities preferred to read them together in our case rather than read them separately. Although here in Israel these parashiyot must be read separately (because of the leap year, as mentioned), the Diaspora communities are able to follow the normal practice of reading them together, and this is preferable to reading Matot and Masei separately and combining Chukat and Balak.

### (See also [Rav Reuven Spolter’s “Calendar Confusion: Why Will it Take So Long for Chutz L'aretz to "Catch Up" with Israel This Year?”](http://choppingwood.blogspot.co.il/2016/04/calendar-confusion-why-will-it-take-so.html))

Thursday

 Yesterday, we noted the customary procedure followed in years such as this (5776), when the seventh day of Pesach falls on Friday, and the following day – Shabbat – is observed as an ordinary Shabbat in Israel and as the eighth day of Pesach in the Diaspora. As we saw, this situation creates a “gap” between the communities in Israel and those in the Diaspora with respect to the weekly Torah reading, as the communities in Diaspora fall behind one parasha. We noted that this year, the gap is closed in the middle of the summer, when Diaspora communities will combine Parashat Matot and Parashat Masei, which will be read separately here in Israel.

 Our discussion yesterday referred specifically to situations such as ours, when the seventh day of Pesach falls on Friday during a leap year. Today we will address the situation that we faced last year (5775), which was not a leap year, when the seventh day of Pesach fell on Friday, resulting in a one-parasha gap between Israel and the Diaspora.

 Unlike during a leap year, in a non-leap year we generally combine three pairs of parashiyot in Sefer Vayikra – Tazria and Metzora; Acharei-Mot and Kedoshim; and Behar and Bechukotai. And, in a non-leap year, the Shabbat after Pesach is Parashat Shemini, the parasha immediately preceding Parashat Tazria. This means that on the day after Pesach in Israel, communities in Israel read Parashat Shemini, whereas Diaspora communities read a section relevant to the festivals. Seemingly, the gap between Israel and the Diaspora can be closed right after Pesach, by having Israeli communities read the next Shabbat only Parashat Tazria, while Diaspora communities read Parashat Shemini, and then the next Shabbat Israeli communities read Parashat Metzora, while Diaspora Jews read both Tazria and Metzora. This system, seemingly, would be most reasonable solution, as it results in the gap being closed very quickly. Yet, the custom in such a case is for Israeli communities to combine Tazria and Metzora, as they would in a normal non-leap year, and to also combine the next two parashiyot – Acharei-Mot and Kedoshim. The gap is closed only the Shabbatot thereafter, as Israeli communities read Parashat Behar and Parashat Bechukotai on separate weeks, whereas Diaspora communities combine them.

 The question naturally arises as to the reason for this delay. Why do Israeli communities break up Behar and Bechukotai, but not Tazria and Metzora, or Acharei-Mot and Kedoshim?

 Rav Yissachar Ibn Soussan of Tzefat, in his *Tikkun Yissakhar* (cited and discussed by Rabbi Dr. Chaim Simons in his [extensive article on the subject](http://chaimsimons.net/divreichamishah02)), suggested that when it comes to Tazria and Metzora, one could explain that there is a benefit to condensing them into a single reading. As these parashiyotdeal with various forms of afflictions, people preferred to complete this entire topic over the course of a single Shabbat, rather than have it spread over two Shabbatot. In principle, then, we can explain the practice to combine Tazria and Metzora despite the interest in synchronizing Israeli and Diaspora communities to the desire to read the entire section dealing with *tzara’at* in a single Shabbat. Clearly, however, this theory would not suffice to explain why we in Israel combine not only Tazria and Metzora, but also Acharei-Mot and Kedoshim.

 Rav Yissakhar Ibn Soussan therefore posits a fascinating theory to explain this custom. He writes that it would be inappropriate for the communities in *Eretz Yisrael* to adjust their Torah reading schedule in order to follow the schedule in Diaspora, as this would appear as assigning a stature of superiority or primacy to the Diaspora. In Rav Yissakhar Ibn Soussan’s words, “*Ein nakhon la-asot mei-ha’ikarim tefeila*” – “It is improper to turn the primary into the subordinate.” On principle, then, Israeli communities do not deviate from the normal procedure of combining these pairs of parashiyot (Tazria and Metzora, and Acharei-Mot and Kedoshim) on a non-leap year.

 Why, then, do Israeli communities separate Behar and Bechukotai in such a case?

 Rav Yissakhar Ibn Soussan explains, quite simply, that this is necessary for the sake of ensuring that the reading of Parashat Bamidbar would take place on the Shabbat immediately preceding Shavuot. As we noted yesterday, the Gemara (Megilla 31a) tells of Ezra’s enactment to read Parashat Bechukotai before Shavuot, and *Tosafot* explain that Parashat Bechukotai is, ideally, read two Shabbatot before Shavuot, and Parashat Bamidbar is read on the Shabbat immediately preceding Shavuot. Therefore, when the seventh day of Pesach falls on Friday, one pair of parashiyot needs to be separated so that Parashat Bamidbar, and not Parashat Naso, would be read on the Shabbat just before Shavuot.

### (See also [Rav Reuven Spolter’s “Calendar Confusion: Why Will it Take So Long for Chutz L'aretz to "Catch Up" with Israel This Year?”](http://choppingwood.blogspot.co.il/2016/04/calendar-confusion-why-will-it-take-so.html))

Friday

 The opening section of Parashat Acharei-Mot outlines the *avodat Yom Ha-kippurim* – the special service performed by the *kohen gadol* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* each year on Yom Kippur. This service included two goats, one of which would be sacrificed as a sin-offering, with its blood sprinkled in the *kodesh ha-kodashim*, and another which would be sent “*la-azazel*” – into the wilderness east of Jerusalem, where it would be cast from a cliff. The Torah commands that the *kohen gadol* perform a lottery to determine which goat would be sacrificed and which sent into the desert.

 The Gemara (Shevuot 13b and elsewhere) comments that these two goats had to be similar in appearance, size and value. Although their respective destinies were polar opposites of one another – one offered as a sacrifice in the most sacred spot in the world, the *kodesh ha-kodashim*, and the other sent off a cliff in an uninhabited desert – they had to seem identical to one another.

 Some commentators (noted in [Rav Shmuel Alter’s *Likutei Batar Likutei*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=4117&st=&pgnum=125&hilite=)) suggested that symbolically, this *halakha* serves to convey the simple yet vital message that piety cannot necessarily be discerned based on outward appearance or image. Just as the two outwardly identical goats ended up in diametrically opposite places, likewise, seemingly similar people are not necessarily similar, because a person’s image does not always accurately reflect his true being and essence. As much as we often think we are able to definitively assess other people’s character and religious stature, the truth is that what we do not see far exceeds that which we do. Only God can judge and evaluate people with accuracy and precise fairness. As in the case of the two goats of Yom Kippur, only He decides who is “*le-Hashem*” and who is “*la-azazel*.”

 Practically, this insight should remind us to avoid casting judgment and reaching definitive conclusions about people based on our impressions of them. We must remember that there is so much about people that we do not know and that we will never know. The decision of “*le-Hashem*” and “*le-azazel*” should be left to the Almighty, while we do our job of judging people favorably and treating them as beloved children of God.