**S.A.L.T. – ROSH HASHANA 5779**

**PARASHAT VAYELKH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Mishna in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (16a) famously states that on Rosh Hashanah, all people on earth pass before God like “*benei maron*,” and the Gemara (18a) cites three different interpretations of this phrase. The first is that the Mishna refers to sheep, who pass through the entrance to the corral one-by-one. Rashi explains that the Gemara speaks here of the tithing process, in fulfillment of the command of *ma’aser beheima* – to bring one-tenth of one’s sheep each year as sacrifices. The herdsman would count each sheep as it passed by, marking every tenth sheep as *ma’aser beheima*. The Gemara’s second interpretation is that “*benei maron*” refers to a certain narrow road that led up a steep incline, which could be traveled only one person at a time. The third explanation is that the Mishna refers to the soldiers in King David’s army, who were counted one-by-one as they went out to battle.

According to all three explanations, the Mishna’s intent is to emphasize that we are each judged individually, based on our personal conduct over the course of the past year. Still, we might wonder about the particular significance of these three images – sheep, travelers walking up a narrow, steep road, and soldiers.

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Mussar Ha-mishna*, discerned a certain progression in these three explanations of “*benei maron*,” with regard to the standards demanded of those passing through. When it comes to *ma’aser beheima*, the vast majority of sheep are included in the count to determine the tithe; the only ones which are excluded are a *tereifa* (animal with a terminal condition) and those born under rare, unusual circumstances (see Mishna, Bekhorot 57a). The second image – the narrow, steep incline – involves a potentially dangerous trek, upon which only healthy, able-bodied individuals can safely embark. The third situation – that of King David’s soldiers – speaks of a superior army, whose troops quite obviously needed to be in outstanding physical shape.

If so, then the Mishna perhaps challenges us to aspire to the highest standards we can as we “pass through” the judgment of Rosh Hashanah. Rather than resigning ourselves to the standard of “sheep,” and feeling content with being “good enough,” free of obvious, major blemishes, we should endeavor to be worthy of “King David’s army,” to achieve excellence, each person according to his or her capacity and in his or her own individual way.

On Rosh Hashanah, the day which commemorates the creation of the human being, the creature uniquely endowed with the divine image, we are to reflect on our personal potential and commit ourselves to realize it in full. We are to recognize our ability to achieve far more than what we’ve attained until now, and to follow higher standards than we’ve followed until now. And thus the Gemara urges us to aspire to be more than mere “sheep,” and to reach the level of “soldiers,” the level of greatness that we capable of reaching.

Sunday

Yesterday, we discussed the Mishna’s ambiguous remark in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (16a) that we all pass before God on Rosh Hashanah like “*benei maron*,” a phrase interpreted by the Gemara (18a) in three different ways. First, the Gemara explains this term as referring to sheep passing one-by-one through the entrance to their corral. The second interpretation is that this phrase refers to a particular narrow road which led up an incline, and could be traveled by only one person at a time. The Gemara’s third explanation is that we are judged like soldiers who are counted individually as they go out to war.

Reflecting on these different contexts, we might suggest that the Gemara speaks here of three different aspects of our lives that come under scrutiny as we stand in judgment before God on Rosh Hashanah.

The image of sheep perhaps symbolizes our day-to-day routine, our ordinary affairs, tending to our basic needs. Sheep do little more than try to survive, spending their time eating, drinking and procreating, and thus the Gemara’s first explanation of “*benei maron*” refers to the judgment of our normal routine. When we go about our regular daily affairs, caring for our basic physical and material needs – such as working, shopping, eating, sleeping, and tending to our households – do we ensure to follow the Torah’s laws and values, and carefully adhere to the demands of *Halakha* which govern daily life?

The Gemara’s second interpretation speaks of a grueling hike, a challenging project which one undertakes. Symbolically, then, it signifies the pursuits to which we devote a great deal of time, energy and attention. Which challenges do we choose to take upon ourselves? Which ambitious goals have we set? What do we prioritize in budgeting our time, money, energy and focus? Do we strive and exert effort in the pursuit of moral and religious excellence, or in the pursuit of vanity?

The final judgment mentioned by the Gemara concerns the role of “soldiers” which we often choose to fill, the various battles which we wage. Which battles do we choose to fight? What makes us angry and upset? Are the causes that we fight for legitimate and worth the struggle, or do they inflict unnecessary harm? Do we wage battles and take on causes out of sincere motives, or for self-aggrandizement or personal interests? When we complain and protest, are our grievances valid, or petty?

The Gemara here stresses that the judgment of Rosh Hashanah is all-encompassing, covering the totality of our lives – both our ordinary, day-to-day affairs, as well as the ambitious undertakings and struggles in which we choose to involve ourselves. We are called upon to carefully assess the entirety of our conduct and all the decisions we make to determine whether we have truly devoted ourselves to the faithful service of God and to fulfilling His wishes to the very best of our ability.

Monday

The Gemara in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (33b), in addressing the nature of the *teru’a* sound which is blown with the *shofar*, notes Onkelos’ translation of the word “*teru’a*” in the Torah as “*yevava*.” The meaning of this word, the Gemara explains, can be found in Sefer Shoftim (5:28) which describes how the mother of the Canaanite general Sisera wept – “*va-teyabeiv*” – when her beloved son did not return swiftly from battle. She peered out the window eagerly anticipating Sisera’s return, but as the minutes passed, she cried, fearing that he had been killed (which was, in fact, the case). On the basis of this association, the Gemara determines that the “*teru’a*” sound resembles the sound of crying, and different views exist as to the precise nature of this sound.

The *Arukh* extends this association further, claiming that the widespread custom to blow one hundred sounds with the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is based upon the tradition that Sisera’s mother wailed one hundred times waiting in vain for her son to return from battle. Sisera’s mother’s cries form the basis of not only the type of sound blown as a *teru’a*, but also the number of *shofar* blasts that are traditionally blown on Rosh Hashanah.

Several writers sought to identify the precise point of connection between Sisera’s mother’s weeping upon waiting for her son, and the Rosh Hashanah experience. One explanation that has been offered is that Sisera, as the general of the leading military power in the region, had always returned from battle swiftly in the past. His mother had likely grown accustomed to his son’s army soundly and easily vanquishing its foes, such that Sisera never delayed in returning home. On the day of the Canaanites’ failed battle against *Benei Yisrael*, however, Sisera’s mother knew that her son’s prior phenomenal success did not necessitate the same result on that occasion. She realized that although Sisera was always victorious in the past, he might have suffered defeat during the current campaign – which was, in fact, the case. A similar feeling of uneasiness must characterize our mindset as we stand in judgment on Rosh Hashanah. We cannot enter the new year with the assumption that everything we’ve been given will remain with us during the coming year, that we are “owed” all the blessings we currently enjoy, and our only concern is whether we receive even more. The concept of judgment on Rosh Hashanah means that as we start the new year, we are entitled to nothing, and must earn everything. We should not take our current blessings for granted, and assume that we will continue enjoying them all during the coming year. We need to earn them anew as we begin each year, and we thus implore God to judge us favorably so we will continue being worthy of His grace and kindness.

The Gemara earlier in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (16b) teaches, “Every year that is poor in the beginning becomes wealthy at the end.” Rashi explains this to mean that we earn God’s assistance during the year if at the beginning, on Rosh Hashanah, we plead to God like helpless paupers. Developing this point further, the Brisker Rav (Rav Velvele Soloveitchik) is cited as explaining that when the new year begins, we are to see ourselves as “poor” in the most literal sense of the term, as having and deserving nothing at all. Everything we received until now was granted to us for the year that just ended; now that the new year is beginning, we must earn everything again from scratch.

Of course, this concept has a positive, and exciting, aspect, as well. The end of the year and the beginning of the new year offers us the opportunity to restart ourselves, as it were, to create a new beginning in our lives. As we commemorate the creation of the world, we have a chance to create ourselves anew, to give ourselves a fresh start, and to enter the new year one step closer to being the kind of people who we should and want to be.

Tuesday

The Mishna in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (26a) cites the majority view among the *Tanna’im* that a cow’s horn is disqualified for use as the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah. The Gemara explains this ruling based on the concept of “*ein kateigor na’asa saneigor*” – “a prosecutor does not become an advocate.” The *shofar* of a cow brings to mind the sin of the golden calf, a source of “prosecution,” so-to-speak, against the Jewish People, and it would thus be inappropriate to include it as part of our Rosh Hashanah service, as an “advocate” on behalf of our nation on this day of judgment. The Gemara later comments that although the rule of “*ein kateigor na’asa saneigor*” usually applies only to rituals performed inside the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, it nevertheless applies to the *shofar*, which is sounded outside the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Since the *shofar* is blown “*le-zikaron*” – to bring our “remembrance” before God, sounding the *shofar* is deemed equivalent to rituals performed inside the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

In discussing this *halakha*, the Gemara raises the question of why the special Yom Kippur atonement sacrifices included a bull (Vayikra 16:3). Seemingly, a bull brings to mind the sin of the golden calf no less than a cow’s horn. Why, then, does the Torah require offering a bull on Yom Kippur for atonement, while disqualifying a cow’s horn as a *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah? The Gemara answers that only the cow’s blood is brought inside the *Beit Ha-mikdash* (the rest of the sacrificial process is performed in the Temple courtyard), and the blood is different from the bull itself. Once the animal has been slaughtered, and its blood was collected for sprinkling inside the *Mikdash*, the animal has undergone a significant enough of a change that the blood does not bring to mind the golden calf.

The question arises as to why this logic does not also apply to the horn of a grown cow or bull, which does not resemble a young calf. In Masekhet Bava Kama (65b), the Gemara establishes that if somebody stole a young calf, and the stolen animal remained in his possession until it reached maturity and became an adult, the thief becomes the owner. The Torah requires returning an object which one has stolen to its owner, but only if the object has not been transformed; if it was transformed, the thief becomes the owner, and must pay the victim the value of the stolen item, as opposed to the item itself. We might, then, ask, why is an animal’s maturation considered a significant change with respect to the laws of theft, but not in regard to the principle of “*ein kateigor na’asa saneigor*”? If a thief assumes ownership of the stolen calf once it becomes an adult, why is a cow considered the same as a calf with regard to the status of its horn vis-à-vis the *shofar* obligation?

Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlap (*Mei Marom*, vol. 7, p. 172) answered that apparently, different standards of “transformation” are required in these two different contexts. When it comes to theft, it is sufficient for the animal to have undergone the natural process of growth and maturity for it to assume a new identity such that the thief now owns it. But with regard to the process of atonement, a “prosecutor” must be thoroughly and fundamentally changed before it can become an “advocate.” The natural progression from youth to adulthood does not suffice; only a complete transformation, such as when an animal is slaughtered and its blood is used for sprinkling, qualifies as a “change” to allow a “prosecutor” to be brought before God in our effort to earn atonement.

Rav Charlap explains that symbolically, this rule shows us the extent of the “transformation” that *teshuva* demands. When we come before God to ask for forgiveness, we must strive to undergo a thorough transformation, to no longer resemble in any way the person who was capable of committing the wrongs which we have committed. Our goal must be not merely to naturally mature, but to make a proactive effort to improve ourselves, to become better people and better servants of God, wholeheartedly devoted to fulfilling His will. The change we undergo must be intrinsic and thorough, and not just superficial and fleeting.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Vayeilekh of God’s command to Benei Yisrael to write down the poem of “Ha’azinu,” which is presented in the next parasha and predicts the calamities that will befall Benei Yisrael once they abandon God and worship idols. God commanded the people, “…kitvu lakhem et ha-shira ha-zot” – “…write for yourselves this poem” (31:19). The Rambam, in Sefer Ha-mitzvot (18) and in Hilkhot Sefer Torah (7:1), based on the Gemara (Sanhedrin 21b), interprets this verse as a command to write the entirety of the Torah, such that this verse introduces the obligation upon each Jew to write a Torah scroll.

Many writers observed the different approaches taken to the mitzvah by two of the Rishonim. The Rambam (in the aforementioned sources) explicitly defines this requirement as an obligation to actually write a Sefer Torah. Moreover, as the Minchat Chinukh notes, the Rambam rules (Hilkhot Sefer Torah 7:1) that if one does not know how to write a Sefer Torah (which is the case for the vast majority of us today), he must find somebody to write one for him. The Rambam does not allow for fulfilling this obligation by purchasing a Sefer Torah or otherwise obtaining one; he requires writing a Torah scroll, or commissioning somebody to write one on his behalf. Clearly, in his view, the obligation is defined simply as a requirement to write a Sefer Torah.

By contrast, the Rosh (Halakhot Ketanot – Hilkhot Sefer Torah) famously establishes that in the post-Talmudic era, this mitzvah is fulfilled by obtaining texts of Torah literature. In his view, the mitzvah of writing a Sefer Torah is actually an obligation to have Torah texts from which to learn. Before the oral tradition was written down, this meant having a Sefer Torah, the only written text of Torah. After the writing of the Mishna and Gemara, however, we fulfill this mitzva by obtaining texts of the Talmud, its commentaries and the halakhic codes. Underlying the Rosh’s ruling is the view that the mitzva is essentially defined as a requirement to have a Sefer Torah available, as opposed to the Rambam’s perspective, viewing it as a requirement to actually write a Sefer Torah.

It should be noted that according to some Acharonim, the Rosh’s position is more complex than the way it was presented above. The Beit Yosef (Y.D. 270) and Taz (Y.D. 270:4) maintained that even according to the Rosh, the primary mitzva even nowadays is to write a Sefer Torah. They understood the Rosh to mean not that obtaining texts of Talmud and Halakha nowadays replace the writing of a Sefer Torah, but rather that it is also required, in addition to the writing of a Sefer Torah. According to their understanding, the new reality after the composition of the Talmud could not erase the obligation to write a Sefer Torah, which constitutes the primary requirement of this mitzva, and could only add the further requirement to obtain the texts that we now use for study. Others, however, including the Shakh (Y.D. 270:5), understood that according to the Rosh, obtaining Talmudic and halachic works actually supplants the obligation to write a Sefer Torah. Since, in the Rosh’s view, the obligation is defined as obtaining a Sefer Torah from which to study, and nowadays, we learn from other texts, and not from Torah scrolls, the mitzva does not require writing a Torah scroll at all, and is fulfilled instead by obtaining works of Torah literature.

(See Rav Asher Weiss’ [comprehensive discussion of this topic](http://www.torahbase.org/%D7%91%D7%9E%D7%A6%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%9B%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%91%D7%AA-%D7%A1%D7%AA/).)

Thursday

Parashat Vayeilekh begins with Moshe reassuring Benei Yisrael that God would assist them in their battles against the nations of Canaan, during which he instructs, “you shall do to them in accordance with all the commands I have given you” (31:5). It is unclear to what “commands” Moshe here refers. Instinctively, we might suggest interpreting this verse as part of Moshe’s effort to encourage the people, guaranteeing them that God would help them fulfill His command to take possession of Eretz Yisrael. Moshe here is simply assuring the people that they should be confident as they go to battle to possess the land as they were commanded to do, because God would help them in this campaign.

Ibn Ezra explains differently, claiming that this verse refers to the command to destroy the Canaanites’ sites of pagan worship. Moshe here instructs the people that when God leads them to victory over the nations of Canaan, they must not neglect the command to eliminate the altars and monuments which had been used for idolatry.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains this verse as referring more generally to all the laws governing warfare.  Earlier in Sefer Devarim, in Parashat Shoftim, the Torah presents numerous different laws relevant to waging war, and according to Rav Hirsch, Moshe in this verse simply impresses upon the people the need to carefully observe those laws.

Rav Shlomo of Radomsk, in his Tiferet Shelomo, suggests that Moshe speaks here of the people’s overall mindset and ambition as they go out to war. He sought to emphasize that they should not wage battle out of a lust for violence and confrontation, but rather purely for the sake of fulfilling God’s command. Their goal should not be pride, domination or the thrill of conflict, but rather the sacred desire to obey the Almighty’s will.

This insight of the Rebbe of Radomsk is relevant not only to actual warfare, but also to all the various different “battles” that we find ourselves needing to wage over the course of life. There are occasions when we need to “fight” to uphold our values and principles, to reject and to voice opposition to ideas which we find objectionable. The Tiferet Shelomo warns us to ensure that wee wage these “battles” with pure motives, that we are driven by genuine altruism and not by dark, base instincts. Ostensibly idealistic battles can often provide a convenient excuse to assert our superiority, to insult and offend others, and to relish the “excitement” of controversy. We must remember that when we go out to wage legitimate struggles, we must proceed “in accordance with all the commands I have given you,” purely and honestly as part of our genuine desire to serve God and fulfill His will, and not for the sake of any self-serving, egotistical interests.

Friday

We read in Parashat Vayeilekh that Moshe completed writing the first Torah scroll, whereupon he gave it to the Leviyim and instructed them to store it alongside the ark (31:24-26). As Rashi (31:26) cites, the Gemara in Masekhet Bava Batra (14b) brings two different views in interpreting this verse.  One opinion claims that the Torah was stored on a shelf protruding from the side of the ark, whereas the second view maintained that the Torah was actually kept inside the ark, alongside the stone tablets that Moshe brought from Mount Sinai.

The Torah in this context refers to the Leviyim as “the Levites, carriers of the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord,” specifying the role they served in transporting the ark during travel. On the simple level, this role is emphasized here because it is the reason why Moshe entrusted the Torah specifically to the Leviyim. Since they were the ones who handled the ark, they were assigned the job of ensuring the Torah scroll’s storage in (or alongside) the ark.

Rav Yehonatan Eibshitz, however, suggested a deeper reason for this emphasis. In Sefer Bamidbar (7:9), we find the rule of “ba-kateif yisa’u,” which required the Leviyim to carry the sacred articles of the Mishkan on their shoulders. Whereas the planks, curtains, tapestries and other components of the Mishkan were transported by wagons pulled by cattle, the ark, altars, table and menorah needed to be carried on the Leviyim’s shoulders, and not with wagons.  Rav Yehonatan Eibshitz explains (as do many others) that this halakha symbolically reflects the need for hard work and exertion to achieve success in Torah scholarship and spirituality. There are no “shortcuts” that we can take to achieve; we need to bear the burden of hard work, like the Leviyim transporting the sacred articles of the Mishkan, without looking for a quick and easy path to excellence.

And for this reason, Rav Yehonatan Eibshitz suggests, the Torah saw fit to emphasize that Moshe entrusted the Torah scroll to the Leviyim who transported the ark. The ones charged with the responsibility of preserving the Torah were the ones assigned the task in the desert of transporting the ark on their shoulders, symbolizing the indispensable need for the exertion of hard work and effort in religious life. The Torah here subtly alludes to us that the process of preserving our tradition is not easy, that we should not be discouraged by the challenges that arise, nor deterred by the effort entailed. We must be prepared the shoulder what is often the heavy burden of Torah study and observance, and put in the work necessary to proudly carry our tradition and successfully transmit it to the next generation.

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