**SALT – TISHA BE-AV / PARASHAT VAETCHANAN**

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Motzaei Shabbat

In the prophecy read as the *haftara* on Tisha B’Av morning, the prophet Yirmiyahu (8:17) conveys to the people God’s warning, “For I am hereby sending upon you evil snakes which cannot be charmed, and they shall bite you.” The prophet here compares the destruction which *Benei Yisrael*’s enemies wrought to the bite of a poisonous serpent for which there is no remedy.

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Yirmiyahu 279) explains the significance of this analogy, viewing Yirmiyahu’s depiction of a snake as an allusion to the snake which lured Adam and Chava to sin in *Gan Eden*:

The Almighty said to Israel: “My children, if you disobey My will, then just as the snake provoked Adam and Chava and eliminated them from the world, so shall I provoke the nations of the world – who are compared to snakes – to rise against you…

But if you obey My will, then by My life, just as I humiliated the snake and cursed it…so will I, in the future, curse and humiliate them…

God warns us that if we disobey Him, then the enemy nations will rise against us just as the snake rose against Adam and Chava and successfully led them to sin, but if we faithfully obey God, then He will defeat our enemies just as He ultimately punished the snake.

The Midrash here draws an intriguing comparison between the frailty of the enemy nations, and that of the snake in *Gan Eden*. Just as our enemy nations might seem invincible, but will eventually meet their downfall, similarly, the snake was able to outsmart the most intelligent creatures – Adam and Chava – but was then punished and humiliated. The message being conveyed, perhaps, is that just as our enemies are not irrepressible as they might at first seem, and eventually, at one point or another, they become vulnerable and are defeated, the same is true of the “snake” – our sinful inclinations. Often, we might feel powerless against the lures and temptations that surround us, and decide that the obstacles to faithful observance of the Torah are simply insurmountable. The Midrash here draws our attention to the humiliation suffered by the snake in *Gan Eden*, comparing it to the ultimate downfall of our outwardly powerful enemies, to assure us that challenges to religious observance are not necessarily as difficult as they at first appear. We must live with confidence and trust in our ability to triumph over the “snake,” over the spiritual “enemies” that threaten us. Just as God assures us of the ultimate decline of our foes who wage war against us, so does He assure us that the challenges we face in religious life can be overcome, and are not as impenetrable as they seem.

Sunday

On Tisha B’Av morning, we read as the *haftara* one of Yirmiyahu’s mournful prophecies foreseeing the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire. In this prophecy, he wails, “If only my head were water, and my eyes a source of tears, and I would then cry day and night for the fallen of my nation” (Yirmiyahu 8:23). The simple meaning of this verse is that Yirmiyahu’s grief was so overwhelming that he wished he could weep incessantly, day and night, to give expression to his inconsolable pain and anguish. He depicts this feeling as a wish that his “head were water” and his eyes a fountain that continually gives forth water, so he could shed tears uninterrupted to mourn the catastrophe that was about to befall his nation.

However, Rav Leib Chasman (in his eulogy for Rav Moshe Mordechai Epstein) explained this verse differently. He noted that there are tears that flow from raw emotion, and tears that flow from the intellect, from a keen understanding of the magnitude of the tragedy that transpired. When one cries from the “head,” fully recognizing and appreciating what has been lost, then the tears flow “day and night.” Raw emotion eventually subsides, but one who understands the enormity of the loss will weep continually. And thus Yirmiyahu wished that his head would be “filled with water” – that his mind could fully grasp the magnitude of the calamity, and that his eyes would be a “source of tears” – that he would be able to clearly perceive the extent of the tragedy that was befalling *Benei Yisrael*.

Some have added that later in this prophecy (9:16), Yirmiyahu relays God’s call to invite professionals to deliver eulogies and dirges, to whom He refers as “*chakhamot*” – “wise women.” The mourning for the destruction should conducted with wisdom, with the mind, and not only with raw emotion. It requires thought and contemplation, a study of the events and an analysis of their significance so we fully understand their gravity. To properly mourn for Jerusalem, we need to fill our “head” with “tears,” to learn and think about the implications of the tragedy of the *churban* to the point where we are overcome by grief and a genuine longing for the return of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

Monday

Toward the beginning of Parashat Vaetchanan, Moshe briefly recounts the experience of *Ma’amad Har Sinai* – the Revelation at Sinai – emphasizing that *Benei Yisrael* did not see any physical image of God (4:15). Moshe proceeds to warn them not to make the same mistake as the pagans and worship graven images, commanding that just as they saw no image of God at the time of the Revelation, so must they avoid worshipping any sort of image.

The Chozeh of Lublin (cited by Rav Meir of Dzikov in *Imrei Noam*) suggested that this emphasis might serve not only as a warning not to worship graven images, but also to convey an additional message. Just as God did not assume any non-physical form when He came to *Benei Yisrael* at Sinai to forge a covenant with them, so must we not attempt to assume any “non-human” properties in our quest for a relationship with Him. God revealed Himself to our ancestors as a God without appearing as a human; by the same token, we are to connect with Him as human beings, without pretending to be anything beyond. The Chozeh applied this concept to explain why we are not required, or even allowed, to compromise our physical safety or wellbeing for the sake of performing a *mitzva*, and must continue caring for our bodies even as we involve ourselves in the sacred service of God. Although the performance of *mitzvot* connects us to the Almighty, who is entirely non-physical, nevertheless, we are to connect to Him as physical beings, and it thus behooves us to concern ourselves with our physical welfare even as we seek to build this relationship. Our bond with God requires neither His compromising His Godliness, nor our compromising our humanity. We serve Him and connect with Him even as frail, complex, physical creatures. Therefore, we must never assume that our human weaknesses and frailty disqualify us from building a relationship with the Almighty, because to the contrary, we are to connect with Him precisely as human beings, with all our complexity and flaws.

We might extend this chassidic teaching to apply also to our relationships with other people. Just as we are to build a relationship as physical beings with a non-physical God, similarly, we can and should strive to build relationships with other people without us or them having to change their essence and nature. We are able to bond even with those who are significantly different from us, and thus we should not limit our interactions and friendships to those who closely resemble us. The special bond between God and His beloved nation shows that close, meaningful relationships can be built even between two drastically different parties, and that we can bond with people without changing for them or expecting them to change for us.

Tuesday

Parashat Vaetchanan includes the first paragraph of *Shema*, the text which the Torah commands us to recite each day “when you lie down and when you arise” (6:7). We are required to read *Shema* both in the morning and in the evening, each day. The Mishna in Masekhet Berakhot (13a) explains that we recite the first paragraph of *Shema* for the purpose of formally accepting “*ol Malkhut Shamayim*” – the “yoke” of God’s Kingship – whereas in the second paragraph, we commit to “*ol mitzvot*” – the “yoke” of the commandments.

Rav Yitzchak of Vorka (in *Shemuat Yitzchak*) notes the particular significance of the requirement to recite *Shema* during the nighttime hours, as one prepares for sleep. Proclaiming one’s commitment to God in the morning, as he begins his day, is intuitive and readily understandable. As we embark on a new day, it behooves us to declare our subservience to God, and thereby affirm that our activities throughout the day will all be performed in accordance with His will. Making such a proclamation in the evening hours, however, is far less intuitive. We would not have expected that as we prepare for sleep, a state of inactivity and unconsciousness, we must reiterate our subservience to God’s Kingship. Rav Yitzchak of Vorka explains that this obligation alludes to us the importance of committing ourselves to God even in periods of decline and stagnation. All of us experience occasions of “nighttime,” of spiritual regression, when we feel unable to achieve. Often, these periods precede – and lead us to – the “daytime,” periods of vigor and progress. The obligation of the nighttime *Shema*, Rav Yitzchak of Vorka teaches, shows that we must try to retain our commitment even in our “darker” periods. We must not wait until “morning,” until we feel inspired, motivated and invigorated, to devote ourselves to God’s service. Even in the “nighttime,” when we feel unenthusiastic and lack motivation, we must proclaim our commitment to do the best we under the circumstances. When we find ourselves in “darkness,” feeling spiritually weary and frail, we must nevertheless accept upon ourselves “*ol Malkhut Shamayim*” and “*ol mitzvot*,” committing ourselves to perform God’s will to the best of our ability, even as we anticipate the “morning,” the motivation and energy we need to achieve to our fullest potential.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Vaetchanan (4:41-42) tells of Moshe’s designation of three cities east of the Jordan River as *arei miklat* – cities of refuge for inadvertent killers. God had commanded (Bamidbar 35:14) setting aside three such cities east of the Jordan, the region that was permanently settled by the tribes of Reuven and Gad, and three cities for the other tribes west of the river, in *Eretz Yisrael*. Moshe, having been informed that he would pass before *Benei Yisrael*’s crossing into the Land of Israel, designated the three cities in the region east of the river. The Torah names these cities as Betzer, Ramot and Golan.

The Gemara in Masekhet Makkot (12a) draws a connection between the first of these towns – Betzer – and Botzra, a city in Edom which is mentioned by the prophet Yeshayahu (63:1) as a place where God will avenge the crimes committed by that kingdom against *Benei Yisrael*. Yeshayahu compares God to a warrior whose garments are stained with blood after successfully waging battle against his enemies, describing God as emerging from Botzra “*chamutz begadim*” – “in crimson garments.” Commenting on this verse, the Gemara relates that in the future, *saro shel Romi* – the “angel” representing the Roman Empire, which is commonly associated with Edom – will try to seek refuge in the city of Botzra. However, God will nevertheless kill him to avenge Rome’s persecution of *Am Yisrael*, as the city of Botzra will not offer protection. The Gemara explains that the angel’s effort to find refuge in Botzra will be predicated on three mistakes. First, the angel will be confusing Botzra with Betzer, a city especially designated as a place of refuge. Betzer offered protection to killers, but Botzra will not. Secondly, the cities of refuge offer protection from the victim’s angry relatives only if the murder was accidental, whereas the kingdom of Edom is guilty of countless intentional murders. Finally, the cities of refuge were designated to protect human beings, and not angels.

How might we understand the Gemara’s account of the three mistakes that will be made by *saro shel Edom*? What might be the symbolic meaning of these peculiar “mistakes” made by an angel?

The kingdom of Edom was established by Eisav, and thus the “angel” of Edom spoken of here by the Gemara is *saro shel Eisav*, Eisav’s “angel,” which is mentioned in other contexts and is commonly understood as a reference to the *Satan*, the negative forces and instincts to which we are subject. (Indeed, Rashi, in his commentary to Masekhet Makkot, identifies this angel as Samael, a reference to the *Satan*.) If so, then perhaps the Gemara here anthropomorphizes the tendency we have to seek emotional “refuge” after we’ve acted improperly. Like *saro shel Edom*, we occasionally try to “protect” ourselves from uneasy feelings of shame and guilt the wrong way.

First, just as *saro shel Edom* is depicted as seeking refuge conveniently, in a city in Edom, without going through the trouble of journeying to one of the cities of refuge in or near the Land of Israel, we, too, might seek a convenient, “quick-fix” method of erasing our guilt. We might try to put the incident behind us too quickly, to simply, without learning from the experience and doing all we can to rectify the mistake. Secondly, we might try to “protect” ourselves from guilt by excusing the mistake as accidental, when in truth we bear accountability. We must ensure not to dismiss our wrongdoing as an innocent mistake unless it was, indeed, innocent.

Finally, we must remember that the cities of refuge are for “people,” and not for “angels.” The more we grow and achieve, we are held to a higher standard. The same mistake might be entirely excusable for one person, but less so for someone of a different stature. The more “angelic” we become, the higher we climb, the greater our expectations of ourselves must be. We are therefore warned not to easily excuse ourselves for mistakes which should not be made by “angels” – by people of our background and stature, even if they can be easily excused for others.

Excessive shame and guilt can be debilitating and destructive, but avoiding these feelings altogether can stunt our growth and progress, as they play a crucial role in helping us improve and ensuring that we do not repeat our misdeeds. The Gemara here warns of three common mistakes that we must avoid after recognizing our failings, three ways that we might unjustifiably wish to save ourselves from the uncomfortable feelings of remorse and shame that are vital for us to grow from our mistakes and become better people and better servants of God.

Thursday

Parashat Vaetchanan begins with Moshe recalling his impassioned plea to God, “*Ebera na ve-ereh et ha-aretz ha-tova*” – “Let me, please, cross and see the good land” (3:25). God had decreed that Moshe would die before *Benei Yisrael* enter the Land of Israel in response to his sin at *Mei Meriva*, when he angrily struck a rock after God had instructed him to calmly speak to it to produce water. Now, after the nation’s successful conquest of the region east of *Eretz Yisrael*, which marked the first stage of settling the land, Moshe beseeched God to repeal His decree and allow him to experience the next, final stage. However, God denied Moshe’s request, and informed him that he would not enter *Eretz Yisrael*.

The Midrash (*Devarim Rabba*, 7:10) tells of a seemingly peculiar exchange that transpired between God and Moshe at this time. After Moshe begged, “*Ebera na*,” God replied that He had already granted Moshe’s request of “*Selach na*” (Bamidbar 14:19) – that God forgive *Benei Yisrael* for the sin of the golden calf. (The prayer of “*Selach na*” was actually recited at the time of the sin of the spies, but the Midrash, apparently, assumes that Moshe recited these words also when advocating for the people after the sin of the golden calf.) The Midrash relates that God accused Moshe of seeking “to grab the rope by both ends,” and said, “If you are asking, ‘*Ebera na*,’ then retract ‘*Selach na*,’ and if you are asking, ‘*Selach na*,’ then retract ‘*Ebera na*’.” God insisted that Moshe could have only one request granted but not the other; if he wished to enter the land, then he must retract his request that God annul the decree to annihilate *Benei Yisrael* for worshipping the golden calf. Moshe unflinchingly responded, “Master of the world! Let Moshe and a hundred like him die rather than the fingernail of one of them be harmed!” A selflessly devoted leader, Moshe readily accepted God’s decree that he should perish in the wilderness if this was necessary to spare *Benei Yisrael*.

Several writers addressed the question of why God insisted that only one of these two requests could be granted. Why was God not prepared to accept both of Moshe’s prayers – to forgive the people for their wrongdoing, and to allow him to enter the Land of Israel?

One possible answer might be suggested in light of theory famously advanced by the Rambam, in his *Shemona Perakim* (chapter 4), in explaining the nature of Moshe’s sin at *Mei Meriva*. Amidst his discussion of the particular importance of avoiding anger, the Rambam asserts that Moshe sinned by growing unnecessarily angry at *Benei Yisrael*. Although they had disrespectfully protested the lack of fresh water (Bamidbar 20:3-5), God was not angry at the people, and simply ordered Moshe to assemble the nation and announce that God would miraculously produce water from a rock. Moshe, however, angrily berated the people, crying, “Listen, please, O rebellious ones: will we produce water for you from this rock?!” (Bamidbar 20:10) – and it was for this angry outburst, the Rambam claims, that Moshe was punished.

If so, then we can perhaps understand why, according to the Midrash, God refused to forgive both Moshe and *Benei Yisrael*. Moshe’s punishment was necessary to preserve the people’s honor, to demonstrate that notwithstanding their inappropriate complaints, their behavior was excusable under the circumstances. Forgiving Moshe for his unwarranted castigation of the people would amount to an affirmation of his charge – that they were “rebellious” and unworthy of God’s kindness and compassion. If so, then God would then need to rescind His forgiveness granted after the sin of the golden calf. If *Benei Yisrael* deserved kindness and sensitivity, then Moshe’s outburst could not go unpunished; and if they did not, then they were to be fully punished for betraying God.

Thus, only one of Moshe’s two requests could be granted. His pleas that God forgive the people could be accepted only if he faced the consequences of failing to treat them compassionately, and Moshe chose to accept his punishment so that the people would be spared theirs.

Friday

In Parashat Vaetchanan, Moshe recalls the Revelation at Sinai, when *Benei Yisrael* were frightened after beholding the awesome spectacle and hearing God’s voice. They approached Moshe and asked that he alone continue hearing God’s commands and then convey the information to them, rather than having God speak to them directly – an experience which they felt unable to withstand. Moshe recalls that God said to him, “*Heitivu kol asher dibeiru*” – “They did well with all that they spoke” (5:24), expressing His approval of the people’s request. He instructed Moshe to tell the people to return to their tents while he remained atop Mount Sinai to hear God’s commands.

The fact that God found it necessary to express His approval of the nation’s proposal indicates that there may have been some question as to whether it was appropriate. Indeed, Rashi (5:23) comments that Moshe felt disheartened by the request, seeing that the people preferred hearing God’s laws from him, rather than hearing them directly from the Almighty. God therefore emphasized that “*heitivu kol asher dibeiru*” – that the people’s request was actually praiseworthy, in that it demonstrated their great reverence for Him.

The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 32:2) draws a curious association between God’s reaction to *Benei Yisrael*’s request, and two rituals performed in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. One view says that the phrase “*heitivu kol asher dibeiru*” alludes to *hatavat neirot* – the preparation of the lamps of the *menorah* for kindling. According to a second view, this verse hints to *hatavat ha-ketoret* – the incense offering in the Temple. These views explain that God praised the people’s reaction as being as admirable as the kindling of the *menorah*, or as the offering of the incense.

Why would the Midrash link *Benei Yisrael*’s request that Moshe alone hear the commandments, and the *mitzvot* of the *menorah* lighting and *ketoret* (incense)?

The kindling of the *menorah* and the incense offering were the two rituals in the *Mikdash* which impacted the surrounding area. The *menorah* provided illumination, and the incense produced a scent which could be smelled and enjoyed from a distance. Symbolically, these two rituals perhaps represent the importance of exerting positive influence, how our “*Mikdash*,” the lives of sanctity and religious commitment which we build for ourselves, should impact upon our surroundings. Just as lamps were kindled and incense was offered in the *Mikdash* to spread light and fragrance far and wide, similarly, we should strive to have our “sanctuary” shine and emit a pleasant “scent” for the people around us.

However, a certain tension exists between the ambitious endeavor to exert positive influence, and the value of humility. We must carefully balance, as best we can, the boldness to go out and “shine” and produce a “fragrance,” to make a discernible impact, and the honest, humble recognition of our limitations. We need to know when to “kindle” a “light” and bring “incense,” in an effort to have an influence upon others, and when to humbly retreat and withdraw into our private domain.

It is this tension, perhaps, which underlies the Midrash’s comparison between *Benei Yisrael*’s request at the time of the Revelation, and the *mitzvot* of the *menorah* and *ketoret*. Upon beholding the Revelation, *Benei Yisrael* humbly recognized that they were not suited for such an experience. They felt they needed to withdraw, rather than boldly assume that they were capable of continuing to behold God’s presence. And so they retreated to their tents – as God commanded them, “Return to your tents” (5:27) – recoiling into the safety of their homes rather than remaining at the mountain with God. The Midrash here teaches that humbly acknowledging our limits, and retreating to our “tents” when we feel that we would otherwise be extending ourselves too far, is just as noble and admirable as the “lights” and “incense” of the *Mikdash*, the ambitious efforts to uplift and elevate our surroundings. As important as it is to boldly assert ourselves in an effort to spread the beautiful “light” and “fragrance” of the Torah, it is no less important to know our limits and when we need to withdraw from public activity back into our private sphere.