**SALT – PARASHAT EKEV**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

In Parashat Eikev, Moshe recalls the sin of the golden calf, and the forty days he spent engrossed in prayer for *Benei Yisrael*, upon whom God decreed annihilation because of their betrayal. Moshe explains that all these prayers were necessary because he dreaded “*ha-af ve-ha-cheima*” – “the fury and the anger” which they aroused by worshipping a graven image (9:19).

The Gemara, in Masekhet Bava Batra (9b), cites this verse in substantiating its astonishing statement, “One who gives charity secretly is greater than our teacher Moshe.” As Moshe himself describes in this verse, he felt helpless in the face of the “*af*” and “*cheima*” which threatened *Benei Yisrael*. By contrast, the verse in Mishlei (21:14) promises that “*matan ba-seiter yikhpeh af*” – giving charity secretly, whereby one protects the recipient’s dignity, has the effect of “subduing fury.” Whereas Moshe needed to fear “*af*” and “*cheima*,” one who gives charity secretly is guaranteed protection from “*af*.” Hence, the Gemara determined, “One who gives charity secretly is greater than our teacher Moshe.”

*Tosafot* note that we may presume that Moshe, too, gave charity secretly. Why, then, did he feel threatened by God’s “*af*,” when protection is assured by the merit of the *mitzva* of discreet charity? *Tosafot* answer that evidently, although Moshe had performed the *mitzva* of secret charity, the merit of that *mitzva* had “expired” and could no longer work to his advantage as he pleaded on behalf of *Benei Yisrael*.

A number of commentators raised the question of why *Tosafot* assumed that Moshe gave charity. After all, the generation he led was miraculously cared for by God, who provided them with heavenly manna each day and a supernatural well of water. It seems difficult to imagine that under these circumstances, there would be needy people to whom Moshe would need to give charity.

A number of writers, including Rav Yaakov Ettlinger, in his *Minchat Ani* (Parashat Behar), explained that *Tosafot* refer here to the period before the Exodus, when Moshe assisted his enslaved brethren. Indeed, the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 1:27) tells how, when Moshe grew up and went to observe the slaves’ plight, he volunteered to assist them in their labor. *Tosefot* figured that these efforts must have included also “*matan be-seiter*” – inconspicuous efforts to help the people. This understanding of *Tosefot* also explains their ambiguous answer, that the merit for Moshe’s charitable acts had “expired.” As *Tosafot* refer to acts performed many years earlier, when Moshe was a young man, they posited that this merit no longer sufficed to protect against God’s anger after the sin of the golden calf.

Others suggested that Moshe’s efforts to teach and guide the people can also be considered “charity” of sorts. Devoting time and energy for the sake of imparting to people important information is no less “charitable” than sharing one’s material assets with those in need. Even before the sin of the golden calf, Moshe devoted a great deal of time to guiding the nation and resolving their disputes (Shemot 18:13), and this work perhaps qualifies as a kind of “charity.” And although this “charity” was not given discreetly, but was rather granted publicly, in full view of the people, it has been suggested that underappreciated favors can also be considered a “*matan ba-seiter*,” a charitable gift granted without the recipient’s knowledge. If we extend ourselves on behalf of somebody who does not fully grasp the magnitude of the sacrifice entailed, this, too, might fall under the category of “*matan ba-seiter*,” where the recipient is entirely unaware of the source of the gift. Therefore, *Tosafot* regarded Moshe’s limitless devotion to the people, who did not fully appreciate all that he did for them, as a “*matan ba-seiter*” that should have had the effect of subduing God’s fury.

(See Rav Tzvi Kreizer’s discussion in [*Aspaklaria*, Parashat Eikev, 5780](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/211_46_80.pdf), pp. 14-16.)

Sunday

In Moshe’s address to *Benei Yisrael* in Parashat Eikev, he exhorts them to obey God’s commands, and reminds them of the miracles they witnessed during their sojourn through the wilderness. One of the miracles Moshe mentions in this context is the death of Datan and Aviram, two prominent figures who joined Korach’s uprising against Moshe and were ultimately devoured by the ground. Moshe recalls, “…and that which He did to Datan Aviram…that the ground opened its mouth and devoured them, their households, and their tents,” adding that the ground also devoured “*kol ha-yekum asher be-ragleihem*” (11:6) – literally, “all the matter that was with their feet.” The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (110a), as Rashi cites, explains this unusual phrase as a reference to money and property. People’s material possessions are called “matter that is with their feet,” the Gemara explains, because a person’s property “sets him on his feet.”

At first glance, the Gemara refers to the sense of stability and security that financial blessing brings a person. Just as the firm ground underneath our feet enables us to stand with confidence without worrying about falling, similarly, having material assets helps us feel safe and confident.

However, *Keli Yakar* explains the Gemara’s comment differently. He suggests that the phrase “sets him on his feet” is intended as a pejorative description of people’s relationship to money. Just as we human beings tread with our feet on the ground, we are to exert complete control and mastery over the material world. We walk with the physical earth beneath our feet to symbolize the expectation that we harness the earth’s resources for our benefit. Too often, *Keli Yakar* laments, the precise opposite happens, and one’s physical assets “set him on his feet.” Instead of controlling our property, the property controls us. Many people are denied the freedom to utilize their time meaningfully, productively and in a fulfilling manner because of their subservience to money and assets. They feel compelled to devote all their time to the pursuit of money, which they then feel compelled to use to purchase assets which then demand more time and attention to be protected and properly maintained. Rather than controlling their assets, their assets control them, by consuming time and energy which could otherwise be used far more productively. *Keli Yakar* here urges us to never allow material possessions or the pursuit of material possessions to “set us on our feet,” and to instead always ensure that we exert full control over them, and that they help us and not hurt us.

Monday

Parashat Eikev begins with Moshe assuring *Benei Yisrael* that they would be rewarded with prosperity and health for faithfully observing God’s commands. One of the blessings he mentions is “*Lo yihyeh bekha akar va-akara u-vi-vhemtekha*” – there would be no sterile male or female among the people or their animals” (7:14). The simple reading of this verse is that it refers to literal fertility – that no person or animal would experience sterility. However, as the preceding verse already promised that God would bless the nation and their animals with fertility, *Chazal* interpreted this verse allegorically. In Masekhet Bekhorot (44b), for example, the Gemara explains this verse to mean that our prayers would not be “sterile,” and would rather yield the desired results.

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 3:6) brings a different explanation in the name of Rabbi Yonatan, who explained this verse as promising that nobody would be “sterile from *teshuva*.” The word “*teshuva*” in this context appears to mean not “repentance,” but rather “answer,” as the Midrash proceeds to tell that Rabbi Yonatan was once travelling and was posed a difficult question which he was unable to answer, but his wagon driver was. This story seems to have been told as an example of the promise that no one will be “sterile from *teshuva*,” as even an unlearned driver had the knowledge and insight to answer difficult questions. According to the Midrash, it seems, the Torah here promises not only physical wellbeing and material prosperity, but also knowledge and wisdom, to the extent that even the less educated among the nation will be blessed with scholarship and intelligence.

Some, however, suggested explaining the Midrash’s comment as referring to the other meaning of “*teshuva*” – repentance. Rav Chaim Palagi, in his *Zekhira La-Chaim*, while acknowledging that the word “*teshuva*” here likely means “answers,” writes that this passage could also be understood as a reference to repentance. He notes the Gemara’s famous teaching in Masekhet Yoma (86b) distinguishing between two kinds of repentance – repentance undertaken out of fear of punishment, and repentance performed out of love for God. When one repents out of fear, the Gemara states, then “*zedonot na’asot lo ki-shgagot*” – his intentional violations are regarded retroactively as inadvertent violations. But if one’s repentance is driven by genuine feelings of love for God, then “*zedonot na’asot lo ki-zkhuyot*” – his intentional violations retroactively become sources of merit. Hence, Rav Chaim Palagi suggests, when the Midrash interprets the promise here in Parashat Eikev to mean that nobody will be “sterile from *teshuva*,” it means that the people’s repentance will be driven by love and will thus “bear fruit,” producing new sources of merit. The Torah promises that when *Benei Yisrael* generally obey the Torah’s commands, then even when they occasionally err and sin, they will succeed in retroactively transforming their mistakes into blessings, into catalysts for growth and positive change. According to this reading, the Midrash teaches us that even our sins can be made “productive” if we learn from them and grow from them. Confessing wrongdoing and committing never to repeat the sin marks the critical first stage of *teshuva*, but if the process stops there, then the mistake remains “sterile.” We are encouraged to follow a more ambitious approach to *teshuva*, endeavoring to not only recover from our failings, but to see how this process of recovery can “bear fruit,” propel us forward and make us even better than we were before.

(A different explanation of the Midrash’s comment is offered by Rav Tzvi Frommer of Kozhiglov, in *Eretz Tzvi*.)

Tuesday

In the opening verses of Parashat Eikev, Moshe enumerates a number of blessings which God would bestow upon *Benei Yisrael* in reward for their compliance with His commands, including protection from illness. Moshe assures the people that “all the terrible ills of Egypt which you know about – he will not place them upon you, but will rather place them upon all your foes” (7:15).

Seforno explains that these “ills” mentioned by Moshe in this verse are contagious diseases. According to Seforno, Moshe here promises that although *Benei Yisrael*’s foes, who live in their vicinity and with whom they would engage, will contract these illnesses, God would protect *Benei Yisrael* from the contagion. Seforno compares this verse to the description in Sefer Tehillim (91:7) of how one who places his trust in God is protected, to the extent that even during a ravaging plague, “…one thousand will fall to your side, and ten thousand to your right, but it will not reach you.” Similarly, Seforno writes, here in Parashat Eikev, Moshe assures *Benei Yisrael* that if they faithfully obey God’s commands, they will be protected from contagious illnesses affecting the surrounding peoples.

Beyond the straightforward, literal meaning of this verse as understood by Seforno, we might suggest that more generally, it speaks of our nation’s unique capacity to resist surrounding influences. Just as God promises to protect us from literal illnesses, so are we endowed with the ability to protect ourselves from “contagious” moral and spiritual maladies. Even when values, beliefs, ideas and ideals spread through other nations, we are able to – and are thus expected to – stand our ideological ground and firmly maintain our loyalty to our faith, our principles, our laws, and our way of life. Even when “ten thousand to our right” – everyone around us – adopts beliefs and practices which our tradition deems unacceptable, we are guaranteed the strength to resist the pressure to embrace these beliefs and practices and remain steadfastly devoted to our values.

Earlier in Sefer Devarim (4:3-4), Moshe tells *Benei Yisrael*, “Your eyes have seen that which the Lord did at *Ba’al Pe’or*, that every person who followed *Ba’al Pe’or* – the Lord your God destroyed him from your midst. But you, who cling to the Lord your God – you all are living this day.” This refers to the incident related in Sefer Bamidbar (25:1-9) where the men of *Benei Yisrael* were lured by the women of Moav to engage in illicit sexual relationships and worship Moav’s god, *Ba’al Pe’or*. God responded by delivering a plague upon the nation that killed 24,000 people. During that period, *Benei Yisrael* came under enormous pressure to violate their most basic and cherished values and principles, and many yielded to this pressure. Moshe lauds those whom he describes as “*ha-deveikeim b-Hashem Elokeikhem*” – “who cling to the Lord your God” for retaining their fealty in the face of overbearing pressure. Our faith and resolve empower us to “cling” to God, to remain devoted to Him even when external forces threaten to pull us away. No matter what “illnesses” surround us, we are to trust in our strength to avoid them and cling to our authentic Torah values and ideals.

Wednesday

Toward the beginning of Parashat Eikev, Moshe instructs *Benei Yisrael* that after they take possession of the Land of Israel, they must destroy the Canaanites’ idols and statues, adding, “Do not bring an abomination into your home… You shall regard it as detestable and regard it as abominable…” (7:26).

The simple meaning of the verse, seemingly, is that these “abominations” are the idols left by the Canaanites, which *Benei Yisrael* were not to bring into their homes and were to instead regard as “repulsive” and “abominable.” Seforno, however, explains differently. He writes that Moshe here speaks of the lavish ornaments with which the Canaanites would decorate their statues, which Moshe mentioned in the previous verse: “Do not desire the silver and gold which is upon them [the statues] and take them for yourselves, lest you be ensnared by it…” Commenting on that verse, Seforno explains that if *Benei Yisrael* would make use of the gold and silver ornaments which had decorated the idols, they might become successful through the use of these articles, and they would then attribute their success to the power of the pagan deity. Therefore, Moshe warned them to refrain from not only the idols, but also from their lavish ornaments. In this second verse, Seforno explains, Moshe proceeds to command the people to go even further, and to regard these ornaments as “repulsive” and “abominable.” Although these ornaments are made from precious metals, and have a radiant, exquisite appearance, the people were nevertheless to consider them thoroughly objectionable.

Seforno’s understanding of this verse is relevant to the many different fads, ideas, beliefs and lifestyles which the surrounding society values and ascribes great importance to, but which we are to firmly reject. These are often “adorned” with “gold and silver,” made to look appealing and compelling, but if they are contrary to our faith and values, then we must not be misled by the “glitter,” and instead staunchly adhere to our principles. While some foreign values are self-evidently objectionable, others are “decorated” and packaged in a way which could easily attract us. Like the gold and silver ornaments discussed by Seforno, they might seem to offer us great benefits and bring us happiness and success. The Torah’s admonition of “*shakeitz teshaketzenu*” – “you shall regard it as detestable” – calls upon us to steadfastly adhere to our values and principles even when contrary values and principles seem alluring and superior.

Thursday

We read in the beginning of Parashat Eikev Moshe’s assurances to *Benei Yisrael* that God would help them vanquish the enemy nations in Canaan, and take possession of the land. Moshe notes in this context, however, that the period of conquest would unfold gradually: “The Lord your God will vanquish these peoples little by little; you cannot eliminate them quickly, lest the beasts of the field overwhelm you” (7:22). This was told to Moshe by God many years earlier, at Mount Sinai, as we read in Sefer Shemot (23:29-30): “I will not drive them away from you in one year, lest the land be desolate, and the beasts of the field will overwhelm you. I will drive them away little by little, until you propagate and settle the land.” If the enemies were eliminated too swiftly, the land would be scarcely populated, resulting in its being overrun by wild animals. God therefore informed *Benei Yisrael* that the process of seizing the land would occur slowly, to allow them time to reproduce and populate the land.

A famous Chassidic interpretation of this verse was offered by Rav Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub, the second Rebbe of Modzhitz (*Imrei Shaul*, p. 272), who suggested reading the phrase “*chayat ha-sadeh*” (“beasts of the field”) as an allegorical reference to “animalistic” character traits. If *Benei Yisrael* would defeat their enemies too quickly, the Rebbe explained, then their characters would be overrun by “*chayat ha-sadeh*” – violent and cruel tendencies. They would become like beasts of prey, losing their qualities of refinement, kindness, compassion and sensitivity. The process needed to unfold gradually to protect not only the land, but also the people’s hearts, safeguarding against the loss of morality and empathy.

The Rebbe of Modzhitz here speaks specifically of the risk that continuous, rapid military victories could compromise the people’s moral characters, but his allegorical reading of this verse might be extended to the broader dangers of instant success and achievement. Ambitious undertakings almost invariably proceed slowly and gradually; significant achievement can hardly ever be realized without a prolonged process, and without setbacks and struggles. Just as the land would be overrun by beasts if the inhabitants would be vanquished too swiftly, likewise, if we had been given the ability to succeed quickly and effortlessly, our characters would overrun by the “beasts” of arrogance and overconfidence. We would feel too assured of our capabilities, and we would feel superior to others who lack our skill. God created the world such that anything we seek to accomplish must be done “little by little,” so that we learn humility and uncertainty, that we recognize our limits and understand that we all are the same – frail, limited, and dependent on God’s grace and assistance in order to achieve.

Friday

Toward the beginning of Parashat Eikev, Moshe draws *Benei Yisrael*’s attention to the miraculous nature of their existence in the wilderness, how God cared for them through supernatural means. He then warns that after they cross into the Land of Israel, where they would work to produce food, dig reservoirs and build homes, the must not attribute their success to their own efforts, but rather recognize God’s hand in enabling them to achieve financial and material success.

Amidst Moshe’s description of the miracles which occurred throughout the people’s sojourn through the wilderness, he mentions, “Your garment did not wear off of you” (8:4). *Benei Yisrael* had no possibility of making or acquiring new clothing, and so God supernaturally preserved their garments such that they remained intact throughout the years of travel. Rashi, citing the Midrash (*Pesikta De-Rav Kahana*, Beshalach), explains that the *ananei ha-kavod* – the protective “clouds of glory” which encircled *Benei Yisrael* in the wilderness – laundered and ironed the people’s clothing. Ibn Ezra suggests that the preservation of the people’s clothing was a function of the manna, the heavenly food which they ate, and which perhaps had special qualities which prevented perspiration, such the clothing was not ruined.

Chizkuni associates this verse with Moshe’s warning several verses earlier (7:25) that the people were not to take the gold and silver ornaments with which the Canaanites decorated their statues. Moshe commanded the people to destroy all the articles of pagan worship in the land, adding, “Do not desire the silver and gold that is upon them and take them for yourselves…” Even the idols’ ornaments were forbidden for use, despite their having been made from precious metals, which made them very valuable. Moshe urged the people to withstand their desire to enrich themselves with these ornaments, and abstain from them. Chizkuni writes that Moshe’s emphasis on the miraculous preservation of the people’s clothing is intended to reinforce this command. Moshe here assures *Benei Yisrael* that they do not need to worry about or fret over forfeiting this rare income opportunity, because God can adequately care for them with what they already have. Just as God had their garments last for many years in the wilderness, so is He fully capable of sustaining them under any and all circumstances. They should not hesitate to refrain from forbidden property, even from forbidden property which seems to assure them financial security, because God can and will assist them and provide them with their needs just as He cared for them in the wilderness.

Chizkuni’s comments remind us not only of the importance of abstaining from forbidden activity even if it offers the promise of wealth, but also, perhaps, to appreciate the possessions we already have, rather than constantly seek to attain more. According to Chizkuni’s understanding, Moshe here seeks to draw the people’s interest away from the precious gold and silver ornaments by evoking their appreciation for the garments they wore, which have served them well for many years. We often find ourselves looking lustfully at the “gold and silver” all around us, at the riches we do not have but wish we did. This verse perhaps calls upon us to recognize the value of the possessions we already own, at the benefit we have received and continue to receive from what we already have, and this realization will, hopefully, eliminate the insatiable desire to acquire more.