**SALT – PARASHAT YITRO**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Yitro tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s arrival at Mount Sinai where they would behold God’s revelation and receive the Torah: “In the third month since the Israelites left the land of Egypt, on this day, they arrived at the Sinai desert” (19:1).

Rashi, based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, finds it significant that the Torah refers to the day of the nation’s encampment at Sinai “*yom ha-zeh*” – “this day,” as opposed to “*yom ha-hu*” – “that day.” The expression “*yom ha-zeh*,” Rashi writes, alludes to today, each and every day of our lives. He explains: “The words of Torah shall be new for you as if He gave them today.” The Torah speaks of our ancestors encamping at Sinai “on this day” to allude to the fact that we should view ourselves as encamping at Sinai and receiving the Torah anew each day.

Rashi’s comments are commonly understood as emphasizing the need to try to maintain zeal and enthusiasm in our study and observance of Torah. With time, Torah can easily become bland, routine, habitual and unexciting. Rashi here urges us to try to approach the Torah each day with rigor and energy, as though it is something new and fresh, a project we undertaking now for the first time.

Rav Avraham of Slonim, in *Nachal Eitan* (vol. 2, p.241), adds further insight into Rashi’s remark in light of his comments several verses later (19:5). God instructed Moshe before the Revelation to convey to *Benei Yisrael*, “And now, if you heed My voice and observe My covenant, then you shall be for Me a special treasure…” Noting the word “*ve-ata*” (“and now”) with which this statement begins, Rashi explains, based on the *Mekhilta*, “If you now accept upon yourselves [to obey My commands], it will be pleasant for you henceforth, for all beginnings are difficult.” God was assuring the people that although they will encounter struggle and hardship as they begin to obey God’s laws, it will gradually be “pleasant” and enjoyable. The Rebbe of Slonim writes that if, indeed, “*kol hatchalot kashot*” – “all beginnings are difficult,” then when Rashi earlier urges us to approach the Torah each day “as if He gave it today,” this requires us to regularly endure the hardship of new beginnings. We might have thought that once we’ve reached a certain level of familiarity and comfort, we can then enjoy the “pleasantness” of Torah learning and observance without ever having to experience the struggle of starting it anew. Rashi therefore instructs, “The words of Torah shall be new for you as if He gave them today” – that we are to take upon ourselves the challenge of newness rather than remain in our comfort zones, continuing our regular routines. Once we’ve reached a state of “pleasantness,” the Rebbe of Slonim writes, a point where what we had begun learning and doing has become routine and does not entail struggle, we should then look for a new challenge, set for ourselves a new goal towards which to strive. In order to continually grow, we must always be prepared to experience “*kol hatchalot kashot*,” the struggle of new beginnings, without ever being afraid of new challenges and new, ambitious endeavors.

Sunday

Parashat Yitro begins with the story of the arrival of Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, at the Israelite camp at Sinai. The Torah relates that Moshe came to greet his father-in-law, and told him about the great miracles God had performed for *Benei Yisrael*. Yitro then offered sacrifices to God, and “Aharon and all the elders of Israel came to eat bread with Moshe’s father-in-law…” (18:12).

Rashi, citing the *Mekhilta*, raises the question of why this verse makes no mention of Moshe. Earlier (18:7-8), we read that Moshe greeted Yitro and spoke with him, but now, after Yitro offered sacrifices, it was only “Aharon and all the elders” who joined Yitro in his feast. Rashi cites the *Mekhilta* as answering that Moshe was present, but he did not participate in the feast, as “*haya omeid u-meshameish lifneihem*” – “he was standing and serving them.” Rather than sitting and enjoying the feast, Moshe was on his feet, serving Yitro and the other guests.

Rav Mordechai Aryeh Horowitz of Banila, in *Be-sheim Mordekhai* (cited in Rav Efrayim Fishel Stein’s *Otzar Efrayim*), finds it significant that Rashi describes Moshe as not just serving his guests, but also “*omeid*” – “standing.” Understood simply, Rashi means that instead of sitting comfortably, Moshe stood on his feet and went through the trouble of serving Yitro, Aharon and the elders. Rav Horowitz, however, suggests that the word “*omeid*” might have a deeper connotation. The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (127a) famously comments, “Welcoming guests is greater than greeting the divine presence.” As evidenced by the story of Avraham interrupting his prophetic vision for the purpose of welcoming and serving wayfarers (Bereishit 18:1-3), the Gemara establishes that the *mitzva* of hospitality takes precedence over communion with God. The *Ba’al Shem Tov* (cited by his disciple, Rav Yaakov Yosef of Polonne, *Toldos Yaakov Yosef*, p. 209b) explained this to mean that it is worth temporarily stunting our spiritual growth for the sake of assisting others. Helping people in need often comes at the expense of one’s personal advancement, but we are expected to make this sacrifice. In light of this principle, Rav Horowitz writes, we might revisit Rashi’s description of Moshe “standing” and serving his guests. “Standing” can be understood as not only the opposite of sitting comfortably, but also the opposite of walking, progressing, moving forward. Rashi’s remark perhaps alludes to the fact that Moshe “stood in place” for the sake of serving his guests, taking time out from his own personal advancement for the sake of serving food to Yitro and to the nation’s other leaders. He recognized the value of extending kindness and hospitality even at the expense of religious growth. And so “*haya omeid*” – he stood in place, interrupting his spiritual advancement, in order to tend to his guests.

Monday

We read in Parashat Yitro of the Revelation at Sinai, in preparation for which God spoke to Moshe and instructed him to convey to *Benei Yisrael* the terms of the covenant between them and God. He told the people that if they faithfully obey His commands, then “*vi-hyitem li segula mi-kol ha-amim*” – “you shall be for Me a special treasure” (19:5).

Rashi translates the word “*segula*” in this verse as “*otzar chaviv*” – “a cherished treasure.” To support this interpretation, Rashi cites a verse from Sefer Kohelet (2:8) in which King Shlomo says that he had amassed “*segulat melakhim*” – “the treasure of kings.” Rashi explains that this refers to “valuable utensils and precious stones which kings hide.” Similarly, the word “*segula*” here in Parashat Yitro should be understood to mean that *Am Yisrael* is God’s precious “treasure.”

Rav Avraham of Strikov (in *La-chazot Be-noam Hashem*) cites his grandfather, Rav Elimelech Menachem Mendel of Strikov, as noting that Rashi speaks specifically of treasures “which kings hide,” which are kept private and not publicly displayed. The special quality of *Am Yisrael*, the Rebbe of Strikov explained, is often hidden and concealed. The “*segula*” of our people, collectively and individually, is not always apparent. Rashi’s understanding of the word “*segula*” reminds us that even when we do not at first see our fellow’s greatness, we must remember that each and every member of *Am Yisrael* has within him or her a “*segula*,” a spiritual “treasure,” regardless of whether or not it is readily discernible. The promise of “*vi-hyitem li segula*” teaches that sometimes, a person’s sanctity and spiritual potential lies hidden beneath the surface. We must therefore always trust in our fellow’s capacity to achieve and attain greatness, and always endeavor to discover the unique “*segula*” within every person’s soul.

Tuesday

Before the Revelation at Sinai, God spoke to Moshe and instructed him to convey to *Benei Yisrael* the basic terms of the covenant into which they were now entering. He proclaimed that “*im shamoa tishme’u be-koli*” – “if you heed My voice,” and obey His commands, then *Benei Yisrael* will be His treasured nation.

The double expression “*shamoa tishme’u*” appears several times elsewhere in the Torah, as well – most famously, perhaps, in Parashat Eikev (Devarim 11:13), in the opening of the second paragraph of the *Shema* text: “*Ve-haya im* ***shomo’a tishme’u*** *el mitzvotai*” (“It shall be if you heed My commands…”). Rav Pinchas Menachem Alter of Ger (in *Penei Menachem*) creatively suggests explaining the meaning of this expression by comparing it to the similar phrase “*hasheiv teshiveim*” (“you shall return them” – Devarim 22:1), the formulation with which the Torah requires returning lost objects which one finds to their owners. In Masekhet Bava Metzia (31a), the Gemara explains this repetitious phrase as implying “*afilu me’a pe’amim*” – that one must return a lost object “even one hundred times.” This means that if one comes upon someone’s animal that had escaped, and he returns it, but the animal then escapes a second time, the finder must again return it. One must return a lost object no matter how many times it is lost, and this is the implication of the double expression “*hasheiv teshiveim*.” Applying this interpretation to the expression “*shamo’a tishme’u*,” the *Penei Menachem* suggests that this requires obeying God’s commands “even one hundred times” – no matter how many times we have slipped and failed to fulfill His will. Parallel to the situation of an animal that repeatedly escapes from its owner, which the finder must return each and every time, the phrase “*shamo’a tishme’u*” alludes to the situation of a person who has acted wrongly on multiple occasions. Even after numerous repeated infractions, the individual is expected to renew his or her commitment, to reaffirm his or her subservience to God’s authority.

According to this chassidic reading of the verse, already before the Torah was given, God indicated to us that we must declare our commitment to His will “even one hundred times,” regardless of how many times we fail. From the outset, it was anticipated that we will not perfectly fulfill His commands, that we will make mistakes. And so He emphasized “*shamo’a tishme’u*,” that despite our past shortcomings, even if we have slipped numerous times, we must not despair. Like somebody who finds his fellow’s animal dozens of times, each time returning it only to have it escape again, we must repeatedly bring ourselves back to the path of Torah observance, no matter how many times we find ourselves veering from the path and getting lost.

Wednesday

The Midrash (*Midrash Tehillim*, Buber edition, 68) relates that at the time God decided to give *Benei Yisrael* the Torah, two mountains in Northern Israel – Carmel and Tavor – vied for the privilege of being the site where this event occurred. In the end, of course, God chose Mount Sinai as the site of *Matan Torah*. The Midrash later draws a curious association between Mount Sinai and Mount Moriah – the site of *akeidat Yitzchak*, where Avraham was prepared to sacrifice his beloved son in compliance with God’s command. Mount Sinai, the Midrash tells, actually originated from Mount Moriah, as God pulled off a piece of Mount Moriah to form Mount Sinai, the mountain upon which He would give the Torah to *Benei Yisrael*.

Rav Reuven Margoliyot, in *Devarim Be-itam* (p. 45), offers an insightful explanation for the meaning of this otherwise mysterious Midrashic passage. Tavor and Carmel would later be the sites of major triumphs – one military, and one spiritual. Mount Tavor, as we read in Sefer Shoftim (chapter 4), is where *Benei Yisrael* miraculously defeated the powerful army of Yavin, king of Chatzor, during the time of the prophetess Devora. Centuries later, the prophet Eliyahu, who waged a fierce religious battle against the prophets and followers of the pagan god *Ba’al*, assembled the nation at Mount Carmel to demonstrate the fallacy of this pagan worship. The prophets of *Ba’al* offered a sacrifice and received no response, after which Eliyahu offered a sacrifice to God, whereupon a fire descended and consume the offering, prompting everyone present to acknowledge the truth of monotheism. This marked a major theological triumph over an opposing religious belief.

Rav Margoliyot thus explains that the Midrash enlists these two mountains as symbols of successful struggles against external enemies – Tavor represents our struggle against enemy nations who threaten us, and Carmel represents our struggle against foreign beliefs and ideologies. God did not wish to give the Torah on these mountains, Rav Margoliyot writes, because the crux of Torah life is not the battles we wage against external threats. The primary struggle we must wage is the struggle against ourselves, against our internal resistance to living a life of subservience to God’s will. This struggle is symbolized by Mount Moriah, the site of *akeidat Yitzchak*, the paradigm of self-sacrifice and of absolute surrender to divine authority. The Torah was given on Sinai – depicted by the Midrash as a “piece” of Mount Moriah, the ultimate symbol of self-sacrifice – to instruct that this must be our primary point of focus in religious life. As important as it undoubtedly is to defend ourselves against external threats – both physical and spiritual – the greatest and most critical challenge we face as Torah Jews is to defeat our inner negative instincts, to overcome our own sinful tendencies, sacrificing our will for the will of God.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Yitro of how Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, observed Moshe spending the day – “from morning till evening” (18:13) – hearing the people’s civil disputes and issuing his rulings. Yitro expressed to Moshe his concern that bearing this burden singlehandedly would compromise his wellbeing, and he urged Moshe to appoint a network of judges to work alongside him. Moshe accepted his father-in-law’s advice, and set up a judicial network.

The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (10a), cited by Rashi, comments that Moshe did not actually sit as judge the entire day “from morning till evening.” This phrase, the Gemara teaches, should be understood as alluding to a connection between the judicial process and the world’s creation, about which the Torah says, “It was evening and it was morning…” (Bereishit 1:5). The Gemara establishes on the basis of this connection that a judge “*she-dan din emet la-amito*” – who judges with absolute truth – is considered “as though he has become the Almighty’s partner in the act of creation.”

To what exactly does the Gemara refer when it speaks of a judge “who issues a judgement that is absolutely truthful,” and why is such a judge considered God’s “partner” in creation?

Rav Meir Varshaviak, in *Imrei Kohen* (*Miluim*, Parashat Yitro), boldly suggests that the phrase “*din emet la-amito*” refers to reaching a conclusion that takes into account both truth and the reality of the situation. The term “*emet*” (“truth”), as Rav Varshaviak demonstrates, can sometimes be used in reference to something that is enduring and sustainable. A “*din emet la-amito*” might therefore denote a ruling that will be honored by the two parties. Sometimes, a judge might realize through intuition and his feel for the litigants that if he insists on the pristine truth, the losing party might reject the decision and resist. Under such circumstances, the value of truth must be slightly compromised for the sake of maintaining the authority of the judicial system, and the judge should strive to find some sort of compromise. The model for this sort of flexibility is the Almighty Himself. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 12:15), famously cited by Rashi in his comments to the opening verse of the Torah, teaches that God initially planned to create the earth on the basis of *midat ha-din* – the attribute of strict justice – but then decided to introduce as well *midat ha-rachamim* – the attribute of mercy and compassion. God recognized that the world could not be sustained if He governed with strict justice; some degree of compassion and flexibility is necessary for humanity to endure. And thus a judge who judges “*din emet la-amito*,” in a manner which delicately and carefully balances the two conflicting ideals of pristine truth and realism, is considered God’s “partner” in creation. Like God, he applies both “*din*” and “*rachamim*,” faithfully upholding the law but in a manner that accommodates practical realities, so as to ensure that the Torah’s laws and principles can be sustained and perpetuated in our very imperfect world. Just as God created the world on the basis of a complex blend between justice and compassion, so should a judge carefully balance strict justice with the occasional need for compromise when circumstances warrant it.

Friday

The opening verses of Parashat Yitro tell of the arrival of Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, at *Benei Yisrael*’s camp, and of the respect shown to him by Moshe, who went out to greet him and welcomed him to his tent (18:7).

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 27:2) relates that God had previously spoken to Moshe and urged him to warmly welcome Yitro, a former pagan who had now come to join *Benei Yisrael*. God told Moshe, “I am the One who said that the world should exist… I am the One who brings close, and I am the One who distances… I am the One who drew Yitro close and did not distance him. This person who came to Me came purely for the sake of Heaven, and came only to convert, so you, too, draw him close and do not distance him.” God informed Moshe that He has welcomed Yitro into *Am Yisrael* due to his sincerity, and instructed that Moshe, too, should warmly welcome him.

Rav Shaul Yedidya of Modzitz, in *Yisa Berakha*, raises the question of why God included in this statement to Moshe the fact that He had created the world. How is this point relevant to His instruction to Moshe to welcome his father-in-law into the nation, just as God had welcomed him?

The Rebbe of Modzitz suggests an answer based on a comment elsewhere in the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 5:8; a similar comment appears in the Gemara, Chagiga 12a) describing the end of the process of creation. Explaining the Name “*Sha-ddai*” with which God on occasion refers to Himself (e.g. Bereishit 35:11), the Midrash associates this Name with the word “*dai*” – “enough.” The Midrash tells that God in essence is saying, “I am the One who said to the heavens and earth: Enough! For if not, they would have continued expanding until now.” The great wonder of creation includes not only the sudden existence of matter, but also that the process ended, and did not continue ad infinitum. The Rebbe of Modzitz writes that the Midrash’s comment has been understood as referring to the fact that God created the world in such a manner that “heaven” – spirituality, a connection to God – is accessible to us earthly beings. God did not let the universe to “expand” to the point where the gap between heaven and earth would be unbridgeable, where the heavenly realm would be too distant for us to connect with. He created the universe such that we humans need to work, struggle and strive to reach the “heavens,” to transcend our physicality and become spiritual beings, but such that this goal can be achieved. The “distance” between our physical reality and spirituality is precisely suited to make spirituality attainable, albeit with effort.

This was God’s message to Moshe in preparation for Yitro’s arrival. Just as He created the world in such a way that “heaven” is reachable from earth, so must Moshe welcome Yitro, a former pagan, and welcome his efforts to connect to God by joining *Benei Yisrael*. “I am the One who said that the world should exist” – God Himself arranged for the possibility of us physical beings reaching the “heavens” and bonding with Him. This is an example which we must follow, by making spirituality accessible to all, regardless of their background and their past.