**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT KI TISA 5777**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

One of the famous and startling rabbinic statements about the Purim celebration is the Gemara’s ruling in Masekhet Megilla (7b), “A person is obligated to become inebriated on Purim until he cannot distinguish between ‘cursed is Haman’ and ‘blessed is Mordekhai’.” Intoxication is strongly frowned upon by Torah tradition, and thus many writers struggled to explain how it could be that on Purim *Halakha* actually requires one to become inebriated. Why would the Gemara establish an obligation on Purim to drink until one’s rational faculties are impaired?

Among the many explanations offered appears in Rav Aryeh Tzvi’s Frommer’s [*Eretz Tzvi – Moadim* (p. 216)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20149&st=&pgnum=217&hilite=). Rav Frommer draws our attention to another famous Talmudic passage regarding Purim, namely, the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Shabbat (88b) that after the Purim miracle, the Jews reaffirmed their formal acceptance of the Torah. The Gemara’s discussion begins with the famous description of how God suspended Mount Sinai over *Benei Yisrael* at the time the Torah was given, threatening to kill them if they failed to accept it. Accordingly, the Gemara states, the Jewish Nation could have, in principle, later rescinded their pledge to obey Torah law, by claiming that their original commitment was declared under coercion. Since the acceptance of the Torah was forced, it cannot be considered legally binding. The Gemara comments that this was theoretically true until the aftermath of the Purim miracle, at which time the Jews reaffirmed their acceptance of the Torah – “*Hadar kibluha bi-ymei Achashveirosh*.” Although the initial acceptance was coerced, and thus could have potentially been abrogated, the Jews in the times of Achashveirosh wholeheartedly reaffirmed their commitment without any conditions or loopholes. Awakened by the great miracle they had just experienced, the Jews formally declared their devotion to Torah without coercion, out of pure, genuine love of God.

Rav Frommer explains the nature of Jews’ reaffirmation of their commitment by noting the Rambam’s famous comments in Hilkhot Geirushin (2:20) that the true, inner desire of every Jew is to fulfill God’s will. While it often seems as though we are naturally disinclined to submit to Torah authority, and our basic instincts pull us away from the proper mode of conduct, the Rambam asserted that to the contrary, our innermost desire is to devotedly serve God, and our sinful inclinations cause us to go against this inner drive. The *kabbalat ha-Torah* pronounced at the time of the Purim miracle, Rav Frommer explains, was a return to that innermost element in the Jews’ souls, the hidden desire deep inside their beings that is naturally and unconditionally committed to God. The extraordinary events they experienced at that time ignited that inner spark, and caused them to passionately embrace the Torah irrespective of the technical loophole that could have been used to absolve themselves of their commitment. The Purim miracle awakened that inner drive within the soul, that innermost desire to live in the devoted service of God, and thus the Jews of the time announced their commitment to Torah that did not depend on any legal technicalities.

On this basis, Rav Frommer explains the requirement to (somewhat) impair our rational faculties through intoxication on Purim. We reenact our ancestors’ *kabbalat ha-Torah* by deactivating our minds and returning to our innermost selves, the innermost recesses of our souls, the true essence of our beings, which desires to cling to the Almighty. By disengaging the mind, we are able to reveal our essence, and thereby reaffirm our commitment to Torah with pure sincerity and passion. And thus the *Zohar* compares Purim to Yom Kippur, noting that the term “Yom Kippurim” can be read as “*Yom ke-Purim*” – “the day like Purim.” Rav Frommer explains that just as on Yom Kippur the *kohen gadol* enters the *kodesh ha-kodashim*, the innermost sanctum of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, the holiest site on earth, on Purim we enter our personal “*kodesh ha-kodashim*,” the innermost sanctum of our souls, which is the holiest place of our beings. We reawaken that inner, instinctive desire for closeness with our Creator, and recognize that all our other drives and desires are, as the Rambam writes, external to our true selves. Like our ancestors in Persia, we acknowledge and affirm that while we are often led astray by societal pressures and influences or our own sinful inclinations, our true desire is to faithfully serve the Almighty and live with unbridled and passion devotion to His word.

Sunday

The *Terumat Ha-deshen* (111) comments that the obligation of *mishloach manot* on Purim was established in order to ensure that everybody has goods with which to enjoy a proper, lavish feast, as is required on Purim. Many have noted that this appears to be the view of the Rambam, as well. In Hilkhot Megilla (2:15), the Rambam delineates the requirements of the Purim feast, and then adds in that very same passage, “Likewise, a person is obligated to send two portions…to his fellow…” The Rambam incorporates the obligation of *mishloach manot* within his presentation of the laws relevant to the Purim feast, suggesting that these two *mitzvot* are interrelated, as *mishloach manot* is intended to help facilitate the feast. (Although one fulfills the *mishloach manot* obligation even by sending to a wealthy person, who does not need assistance, it has been suggested that this requirement is fundamentally geared towards assisting the needy, but in order not to bring shame to the poor, it was instituted as a general obligation to share food with others.)

In truth, however, there seems to be an important difference between the way the *Terumat Ha-deshen*’s explains this requirement and the Rambam’s formulation. Whereas the *Terumat Ha-deshen* understood *mishloach manot* as intended to facilitate the recipient’s fulfillment of the feasting obligation, the Rambam, curiously, seems to imply that sending *mishloach manot* is included within the sender’s requirement to feast. The Rambam in this passage lists the specific requirements of the *mitzva* to feast on Purim, and in this list he includes the obligation to send gifts of food to one’s fellow – suggesting that one must send *mishloach manot* not to help his fellow fulfill his *mitzva* to feast, but rather as part of his own *mitzva* to feast.

The explanation of the Rambam’s comments likely emerges from his famous remarks elsewhere, in Hilkhot Yom Tov (6:18), where he emphatically asserts that the obligation of *simchat Yom Tov* – rejoicing on Yom Tov – includes lending assistance to the needy. If one enjoys himself in the company of his family without sharing his blessings with others, the Rambam states, he experiences not “*simchat mitzva*” – joy that fulfills a *mitzva* – but rather “*simchat kereiso*” – “the joy of his stomach.” Indulging without sharing and helping is mere indulgence, which does not fulfill any religious requirement. In order for feasting to fulfill a halakhic requirement to celebrate, it must include charitable giving and sharing one’s joy with other people, for true joy, the Rambam writes, is achieved through bringing joy to those in need.

This notion appears to underlie the Rambam’s presentation of the *mishloach manot* obligation, as well. In order to properly feast on Purim, one must send gifts to other people. Our celebration, joy and festivity are incomplete, and even inappropriate, if they does not include *mishloach manot*, sharing our blessings with other people and looking out for those in need of assistance. We cannot experience the true joy of Purim simply by eating and drinking; we need to also show concern for, and lend assistance to, our fellow Jews, and only then will the special joy of the Purim celebration be complete and meaningful.

(Based on an [article](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=12733&st=&pgnum=23) by Rav Avraham Yosef Schwartz in *Ha-pardeis*, February, 1993)

Monday

Parashat Ki-Tisa begins with the *mitzva* of *machatzit ha-shekel*, the half-shekel silver coin that *Benei Yisrael* donated at Mount Sinai, with which the foundation of the *Mishkan* was built and through which they were counted. The *Midrash Tanchuma*, cited by Rashi (30:13), comments that God showed Moshe a “coin of fire” and instructed that this was the coin *Benei Yisrael* were to donate. It is commonly understood that Moshe had difficulty identifying the kind of coin that should be used for the *machatzit ha-shekel*, and so God showed him a prophetic vision of the required coin.

[The Klausenberger Rebbe](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36048&st=&pgnum=100&hilite=) offered a symbolic approach to the Midrash’s comment, explaining that Moshe’s quandary related not to the physical properties of the coin, but rather to its function. In presenting this command, God mentions several times that this half-shekel donation served as a means of atonement, and this is what troubled Moshe. For a person of his stature, for whom money had little importance, it was difficult to imagine a silver coin having the power and capacity to bring atonement. How, Moshe wondered, could something insignificant as money be invested with so much value that it could atone for a person’s grave mistakes and spiritual failings?

God answered Moshe’s question by showing him a “coin of fire.” The Rebbe explains that the imagery of fire is often used to represent the *yetzer ha-ra*, our base human desires that interfere with our spiritual ambitions. God’s response to Moshe was that while he did not afford much value or importance to money, most people “burn” with a lust for money. The natural human tendency is to crave wealth and material luxury, and this desire rages like a furious fire within them, driving them to expend vast amounts of time and effort in the pursuit of money. And thus for the overwhelming majority of people, indeed, the donation of a half-shekel of silver brings atonement. For them – for us – parting with money is a significant sacrifice and display of devotion and faith, and they thereby earn God’s compassion, grace and forgiveness.

Along these same lines, the Rebbe suggests explaining a different passage in the *Midrash Tanchuma* relevant to the command of *machatzit ha-shekel*. The Midrash tells that Moshe expressed his concern to God that after his death, he would be forgotten. God encouraged Moshe by responding, “Just as you stand now and give them the section of *shekalim*, and you raise their heads, similarly, each and every year, when they read it before Me, it is as though you stand here at that moment and raise their heads.” Moshe feared that after he departs this world, his memory will be lost because he will leave nobody behind like him. He felt that he failed by not producing anybody who came remotely near his spiritual stature, and thus he would not be leaving behind any legacy of his unique level. God informed him that to the contrary, his legacy will be forever preserved and cherished through the *machatzit ha-shekel*, through the small but ever so significant “donations” made by each member of *Am Yisrael*. A leader’s success is determined not by his creating replicas of himself, but by inspiring each person under his charge to give a “half-shekel,” to advance and progress to the best of his ability, according to his current level and standing. As a result of Moshe’s leadership, Jews throughout the ages have given a “*machatzit ha-shekel*,” have made significant sacrifices and expended significant efforts for the sake of the Almighty, and this is his greatest legacy.

The Midrash here reminds us that we are all expected to do the very best we can at our current level, with our current skills, and under our current circumstances. We are each called upon to give our “*machatzit ha-shekel*,” to achieve what we are capable of achieving, advancing one small step at a time along the road to excellence.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Ki-Tisa of the mysterious exchange between Moshe and the Almighty in the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf, during which Moshe asks God to show him His “glory” (“*har’eini na et kevodekha*” – 33:18). God responds that no man is capable of beholding His “face,” but He would instead show Moshe His “back” (33:20-23). Rashi, based on the Gemara (Berakhot 7a), explains that God showed Moshe the “*kesher shel tefillin*,” the knot of the Almighty’s *tefillin*. The knot of the *tefillin shel rosh* is positioned in the back of the neck, and this is what the Torah means when it says that Moshe was shown the Almighty’s “back.”

Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz, in his [*Mei Ha-shiloach*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=19936&st=&pgnum=61&hilite=), offers a symbolic explanation of the Gemara’s interpretation of the verses. *Tefillin*, which we bind upon our bodies, symbolizes the unbreakable bond between us and the Almighty. The Gemara earlier *)*Berakhot 6a) comments that God’s *tefillin* contains words of praise for *Benei Yisrael*, and the *Mei Ha-shiloach* explains that God gives us praise for our unconditional and unshakable connection to Him, symbolized by the *tefillin*. Just as we wear *tefillin* to express our unwavering love and devotion to God, He, too, remains unconditionally bound and devoted to us, and thus He, too, wears “*tefillin*,” so-to-speak. In the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf, after *Benei Yisrael* committed the most grievous of all sins, bowing to and worshipping a graven image, God showed Moshe the “*kesher shel tefillin*.” He indicated to Moshe that despite His angry response to the golden calf, He nevertheless remains eternally and unreservedly connected and devoted to His beloved nation.

This might be the significance of God’s hiding His “face” from Moshe during this prophetic vision, while showing him His “back.” Just as we cannot discern much about a person’s appearance from the back, as it is primarily the face that lends a person his unique, distinctive appearance, similarly, there is far more about God that we cannot see and understand than what we can see and understand. God’s “face,” His true characteristics, will always remain hidden, even from Moshe Rabbenu. What He does show us, however, is the “*kesher shel tefillin*,” His unshakable love and commitment to *Am Yisrael*. We are assured that even in times of failure and spiritual collapse, the bond between us remains intact, and this is the aspect of God’s being that we are shown and that we need to recognize.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Ki-Tisa of God’s appointment of Betzalel and Ahaliav as the chief artisans for the project of constructing the *Mishkan*. In this context, God also tells Moshe, “and I have placed knowledge in the heart of everyone whose heart is knowledgeable, and they shall make everything that I have commanded you” (31:6).

The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (55a) points to God’s professing to have bequeathed knowledge to those “whose heart is knowledgeable” as a source for the dictum, “The Almighty grants knowledge to one who has knowledge.” As indicated by this verse, God grants wisdom to a “*chakham leiv*,” somebody who is already wise-hearted.

What exactly do *Chazal* mean by this teaching, and how might it be significant that this notion is inferred specifically from the verse describing the wisdom of the artisans who constructed the *Mishkan*?

Rav Dov Weinberger, in his *Shemen Ha-tov* (vol. 4), suggests that the explanation may be found in Rashi’s comment to this verse, noting the tribes to which Betzalel and Ahaliav, the chief artisans, belonged. Rashi observes that Betzalel belonged to Yehuda, the largest and most prominent tribe, whereas Ahaliav belonged to Dan, the smallest tribe that traveled at the rear of the Israelite camp. God specifically chose representatives from these two tribes to lead the construction of the *Mishkan*, it appears, in order to emphasize that the *Mishkan* served the entire nation, all members of *Benei Yisrael*, regardless of their background, stature or level of prominence. As this message forms the context of God’s proclamation that He has granted wisdom to the wise-hearted, Rav Weinberger suggests, we can perhaps explain the meaning of the Gemara’s statement. The Gemara is teaching that true wisdom is achieved by those who are prepared to work together with, and learn from, all people, regardless of their stature. Drawing upon the model of Betzalel, a man from a prominent family and tribe who worked together harmoniously with Ahaliav, who hailed from a far less prominent background, the Gemara notes the value, importance and rewards of humbly working with all people. Even when we feel we have reason to view ourselves as more accomplished and distinguished than another person, we must learn from Betzalel’s example and humbly recognize that we have much to learn from everyone. Even if we indeed “have knowledge,” the Almighty grants us additional knowledge and greater understanding when we fulfill the Mishna’s timeless maxim, “Who is wise? He who learns from all people” (Avot 4:1).

Thursday

Parashat Ki-Tisa begins with the command of *machatzit ha-shekel*, the half-shekel tax that was used as a means of a census, and also served to purchase the public sacrifices offered on the nation’s behalf in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The Gemara in Masekhet Bava Batra (10b) notes that the Torah formulates this command with the phrase, “*Ki tisa et rosh Benei Yisrael*” (“When you count the heads of the Israelites”), which literally can be read as, “When you lift the head of the Israelites.” On the basis of this formulation, the Gemara comments that God issued this command in response to the question, “*Ba-ma tarum keren Yisrael*” – “How will the pride of Israel be raised?” Our “heads” are lifted – we earn pride and prestige – through this donation.

The Gemara makes this remark in the context of its discussion of the importance and value of the *mitzva* of *tzedaka*. This passage appears amidst others that speak of the greatness of charitable giving to assist the needy, perhaps indicating that the Gemara speaks not specifically of *machatzit ha-shekel*, but rather of the general ideal of selfless giving. We might wonder, however, why the Gemara points to *machatzit ha-shekel* as a source of pride over our generosity and charitable quality. This donation was not given to the poor, but was rather necessary for the purchase of the nation’s sacrifices. Why, then, is specifically this donation a great source of national pride?

The answer, it would seem, lies in the collective nature of the *machatzit ha-shekel* donation. It was given by each and every member of the nation, regardless of financial status or social or religious standing. This *mitzva* embodies the ideal of mutual responsibility, the need for every individual to see himself as an integral part of the nation, towards which he is obligated to contribute. The essence of *machatzit ha-shekel* is not the financial sacrifice per se, but rather the sense of communal responsibility. Each and every member of the nation must see himself as part of the collective, and must therefore commit himself to shoulder his share of the burden.

This, perhaps, is the “pride” to which the Gemara refers. The Gemara highlights here not the selflessness and generosity of charity, but rather the aspect of communal responsibility and obligation. As in the case with the sacrifices in the Temple, when it comes to charity, too, we must recognize our obligation as part of the collective of *Am Yisrael*. We must lend assistance to people in need not merely out of compassion and a desire to perform kindness, but also because of our sense of responsibility as members of the nation. If a fellow Jew suffers deprivation, then *Am Yisrael* bears a collective obligation to assist him, just as we bear a collective obligation to offer sacrifices to God in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. We earn pride not through the generous contributions made by certain individuals – valuable as those individual contributions are – but rather when all of us live with a sense of responsibility and obligation to the collective entity of *Am Yisrael*, and with a firm commitment to make our individual contributions, each to the best of his or her ability.

Friday

The *Midrash Tanchuma*, commenting to the beginning of Parashat Ki-Tisa, follows the view it takes throughout the latter part of Sefer Shemot, that the command to construct the *Mishkan* was issued in the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf. Although the command of the *Mishkan* appears in the text prior to the story of the golden calf, the *Midrash Tanchuma* asserts that the *Mishkan*, and everything associated with it, served as a means of atonement for that grievous sin. The *Tanchuma* here in Parashat Ki-Tisa applies this view to the *mitzva* of *machatzit ha-shekel*- the half-shekel tax that was used as a means of counting of the people, and for providing silver with which the foundation of the *Mishkan* was made. This donation, which the Torah explicitly describes as a means of atonement (“*kofer nafsho*”), served to atone for the sin of the calf.

In this context, the *Tanchuma* comments, “Come see how beloved Yisrael are, that their transgressions bring [them] to great heights.” The sin of the golden calf, the Midrash writes, resulted in the command to pay a half-shekel for their atonement. And thus, paradoxically, this grave sin led to the great privilege of the *Mishkan*. The Midrash points to another grave offense – the sale of Yosef as a slave – as another example of this phenomenon: “The single sitting at which the tribes [Yosef’s brothers] sat and unanimously decided to sell Yosef sustained the world for seven years.” This unspeakable crime against Yosef had the effect of enabling Yosef to store grain in Egypt ahead of the seven-year drought which later ravaged the region, and thus their grave sin ended up saving untold numbers of lives. The Midrash concludes, “If the great sin that they committed led to a *mitzva* and merit, then the *mitzvot* which they perform – all the more so.”

The Midrash here teaches us not to lose hope or fall into discouragement and despair after making mistakes, even grave mistakes. It notes “*chibatan shel Yisrael*” – the great love and affection that the Almighty has for us, allowing us the opportunity to retroactively transform our wrongdoing and failures into sources of elevation. When a child misbehaves or makes a mistake, the parent’s greatest wish is for the child to learn from the experience and improve. This is also the Almighty’s wish, as it were, when we err and fail – that we grow from the experience and use the mistake to improve ourselves. The *Tanchuma* views the command of the *Mishkan* in response to the golden calf as a symbol of the way we can use even our greatest failures as sources of growth and elevation. Just as the golden calf paved the way for God’s residence among *Benei Yisrael* in the *Mishkan*, similarly, we should approach our failings as opportunities for growth and advancement, and set our sights upon a future of greater achievement and greater efforts to inch forward along the road to perfection.

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