**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NITZAVIM - VAYELEKH**

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Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Vayelekh of the *mitzva* of *hakhel*, the nationwide assembly that is to be conducted in Jerusalem every seven years during Sukkot following the septennial *shemita* year, for a public reading of the Torah. The Torah emphasizes that all members of the nation must participate in the *hakhel* assembly – men, women and children (31:12).

The Gemara, in a famous passage in Masekhet Chagiga (31:12), tells that Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya raised the question of why even young children are to attend *hakhel*. The question, seemingly, is that the children are incapable of understanding the content of the reading, such that there seems to be no purpose served through their participation. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya’s answer to this question is somewhat ambiguous: “To give reward to those who bring them.” At first glance, this seems to mean that there is, in fact, no practical benefit from including the young children, but the Torah nevertheless included them in *hakhel* in order to increase the parents’ reward, as they fulfill an additional *mitzva* by bringing their children with them to *hakhel*.

A bold approach to explaining Rabbi Elazar’s comments was advanced by the Tolna Rebbe. He suggested that Rabbi Elazar questioned not the value of including the children per se, but rather the value of the parents’ *hakhel* experience if it is accompanied by the need to tend to their children. Seemingly, the children’s attendance would compromise the impact of the *hakhel* experience upon the parents, who would be encumbered by their children’s needs throughout the *hakhel* assembly. The purpose of *hakhel*, as the Torah says (31:12), is to instill fear of God, to inspire the nation to commit themselves to the Torah’s laws. Why, then, would parents be required to bring young children, which would undermine their ability to focus on the reading and receive the full emotional impact of the experience?

Rabbi Elazar’s answer, the Rebbe explained, is that parents earn reward for tending to their children even – or especially – when this comes at the expense of their own spiritual growth. Parents are responsible to take the time to care for and educate their children despite the limits this work imposes on the time and energy available for their own quest for greatness. Rabbi Elazar thus noted that the Torah’s command to include children in *hakhel* should come as no surprise, for parents are indeed expected to lower their own spiritual ambitions for the sake of caring for their children.

On this basis, the Tolna Rebbe explained the account in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Chagiga 1:1) of Rabbi Yehoshua’s enthusiastic reaction upon hearing Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya’s comment about the children’s inclusion in *hakhel*. Rabbi Yehoshua exclaimed, “A generation in which Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya lives is not orphaned.” The simple meaning, it would seem, is that Rabbi Yehoshua extolled Rabbi Elazar’s brilliance, and thus noted that Rabbi Elazar’s generation is fortunate to have a great scholar and teacher, such that it cannot be considered “orphaned.” Additionally, however, the Tolna Rebbe explained that when we apply Rabbi Elazar’s teaching, we ensure that the young generation will not be “orphaned,” and detached from the previous generation. We ensure the perpetuation of our tradition and the continuation of the chain of Torah when we are prepared to make great sacrifices for the sake of educating the younger generation, including sacrifices in our personal spiritual ambitions. Rabbi Elazar’s comments regarding *hakhel*, Rabbi Yehoshua observed, bears great relevance to Torah education generally, emphasizing the extent of the sacrifice we must be prepared to make in order to teach the next generation of Jews, to ensure that they will not be “orphaned,” and will instead be inextricably linked to the preceding generations.

Sunday

Parashat Nitzavim begins with Moshe announcing to *Benei Yisrael* that they were entering into a formal covenant with God, committing themselves to observe His laws. He opens this announcement with the words, “*Atem nitzavim hayom kulekhem lifnei Hashem Elokeikhem*” – “You are standing today, all of you, before the Lord your God.”

Rashi (to 29:12), citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, associates the word “*nitzavim*” (“standing”) with the word “*matzeiva*” (“monument”). He explains, “As Yisrael were transitioning from one leader to another leader – from Moshe to Yehoshua – he therefore made them into a monument, in order to motivate them.” What does Rashi mean when he describes Moshe as turning *Benei Yisrael* into a monument?

Rav Avraham Tchareck, in his [*Divrei Avraham*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=31082&st=&pgnum=106), explains that Rashi speaks here of the concern that Yehoshua would be unable to inspire and impact upon the people as effectively as Moshe did. Yehoshua was Moshe’s greatest disciple, but still fell far short of his esteemed mentor’s stature and capabilities. Moshe feared that as Yehoshua – and, presumably, future leaders – would not be as effective in guiding and inspiring the people, they would decline. He therefore sought to turn *Benei Yisrael* into a *matzeiva* – that is, to make them strong enough to maintain their commitment on their own, without relying on somebody providing them with inspiration. Moshe wanted *Benei Yisrael* to become spiritually self-sufficient, to be strong and resolute in their faith and devotion to the point where they would not need an inspiring figure continually sustaining their religious fervor.

The Midrash here teaches us that we cannot rely on external factors, such as inspiring personalities, to keep us religiously committed. Certainly, we are often fortunate to have a “Moshe” figure come along and uplift us. Ultimately, however, we must make ourselves a sturdy, strong, stable “*matzeiva*” that can sustain itself. The inspiration to learn and observe the Torah must come from deep within ourselves, from our inner convictions, as only then will our commitment endure the various transitions and upheavals that we experience over the course of our lives, and remain strong and firm even when we have no “Moshe” or any other external factor motivating us to achieve.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Vayelekh introduces the *mitzva* of *hakhel*, which requires *Am Yisrael* to assemble in its entirety in Jerusalem during Sukkot following the *shemita* year, and hear the reading of the Torah by the king.

The *Sefat Emet* (Vayelekh, 5642) asserts that the *hakhel* reading was a supernatural event, in that the entire nation was capable of hearing the king’s reading. Naturally, there would be no possibility of one man’s voice reaching the ears of all the men, women and children of *Benei Yisrael*. The *Sefat Emet* explains that this miracle occurred in the merit of the *mitzva* of *shemita*, the people’s observing a year-long hiatus from agricultural work, during which all produce was declared ownerless and became freely available to all members of the nation. The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 1:1) famously comments that the verse in Tehillim (103:20), “…those powerful in strength, who perform His will” refers to those who faithfully observe the law of *shemita*, displaying extraordinary faith by refraining from all agricultural work during the seventh year. The *Sefat Emet* adds that the conclusion of this verse – “to listen to the sound of His word” – refers to *hakhel*, which takes place at the conclusion of the *shemita* year. In the merit of the “powerful strength” of faith and courage displayed by farmers during *shemita*, they “listen to the sound of His word” – they are capable of hearing the words of the Torah read by the king during *hakhel*.

The Torah explains that *hakhel* must be conducted “in order that they listen and in order that they learn to fear to Lord your God and ensure to perform all the words of this Torah” (31:12). The *hakhel* ceremony is intended to serve a source of inspiration, a means of injecting within the people fear of God and a desire to fulfill His laws. The *Sefat Emet*’s comments, symbolically, give us some perspective on this goal. How can the words of Torah reach and penetrate the hearts of every member of *Benei Yisrael*? How exactly does this work? The *Sefat Emet* answers this question by asserting that *hakhel* was the culmination of the process, not a catalyst. The special inspirational effect of *hakhel* was made possible by the people’s remarkable yearlong sacrifice and unparalleled display of devotion, abandoning their fields and placing their trust in God. Neither *hakhel* nor any other inspiring religious experience will have an effect if we are unwilling to make difficult sacrifices and invest effort. The inspiring experience of *hakhel* was incapable of evoking fear of God on its own; its effect came only after the people showed their devotion. The message being conveyed, then, is that no inspirational experience can substitute for hard work and sacrifice, that in order to grow and improve, we need to put in genuine effort, rather than wait for some inspirational experience to “magically” uplift us.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Vayelekh of God’s command to Moshe just before his passing: “Write for yourselves this song, and teach it to the Israelites; place it in their mouths” (31:19). According to the plain meaning of this verse, this command refers to the poem of *Ha’azinu*, which God dictates to Moshe in the next *parasha*. *Chazal*, however, understood this verse as a command to write the entire Torah.

Commenting on the phrase “*simah be-fihem*” (“place it in their mouths”), the Gemara in Masekhet Eiruvin (54b) infers that a teacher of Torah must present the material to the students “*ad she-tehei sedura be-fihem*” – in such a manner that it is “arranged in their mouths.” This appears to refer to the need to teach Torah in a clear manner, such that the student can digest and internalize the information properly, without confusion.

Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, in his [*Ha-ketav Ve-ha’kabbala*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14124&st=&pgnum=430), explains that the Gemara made this inference from the fact that the Torah here uses the verb *s.m.* for “place,” as opposed to the verb *n.t.n*. The difference between these verbs, Rav Mecklenberg asserts, is that whereas *n.t.n.* denotes any kind of “placement,” the verb *s.m.* has the specific connotation of a careful, calculated, orderly arrangement. Rav Mecklenberg draws proof to this theory from the Torah’s command in Sefer Vayikra (6:3), “*ve-samo eitzel ha-mizbei’ach*,” which requires the *kohen* to take the ashes from the top surface of the altar, where the sacrifices are burnt, and place them alongside the altar. *Chazal*, in *Torat Kohanim*, understood the word “*ve-samo*” to mean that the *kohen* performing this ritual must place the ashes calmly (“*be-nachat*”), in a manner which ensures that the ash is not scattered about. Rav Mecklenberg applies this same reading of the verb *s.m.* to the formulation here in Parashat Vayelekh regarding the teaching of Torah – “*simah be-fihem*.” *Chazal* understood that Torah must be taught in an organized, calculated fashion, ensuring that the information is not “scattered” in the students’ minds, but rather properly arranged. Sometimes, teachers might seek to flood the students with material, transmitting to them large volumes of knowledge, but the information is studied in a disorganized manner, which does not allow the students to properly assimilate it in their minds and understand how the various pieces of information fit with one another. The Gemara here compares the desired method of Torah instruction to the careful placement of ashes in a neat, orderly pile, urging educators to try as best they can to present the material slowly, patiently, and in an organized fashion, so that all the information can be properly understood and put into its proper context.

Wednesday

Moshe famously teaches *Benei Yisrael* in Parashat Nitzavim, “*Lo va-shamayim hi*” – “It is not in the heavens” (30:12), a proverb which has been understood as the origin of several fundamental beliefs regarding the Torah. According to one interpretation of this verse, which the Midrash (*Devarim* *Rabba* 8:6) cites in the name of Rabbi Chanina, Moshe here teaches that the Torah “has been given together with all its tools – its humility, its justness and its uprightness…”

Just as a laborer or craftsman cannot perform his work without first acquiring the necessary tools and instruments needed for the job, similarly, we cannot begin our work of learning and practicing Torah without certain “tools.” Rabbi Chanina identifies these tools as humility, decency and integrity. These are the basic qualities and character traits that we must attain before we proceed to try to excel in the study and observance of Torah.

Rabbi Chanina also teaches us that these “tools” were given to us together with the Torah. We cannot excuse ourselves from our Torah obligations by assuming that we are not endowed with the character traits that we need before we can strive for greatness in Torah knowledge and observance. We cannot decide that we are, by nature, arrogant or unethical, such that we lack the basic “tools” needed for Torah life. *Chazal* teach us that we have been given all the necessary “tools,” that we are fully capable, if we try, of achieving the basic qualities of humility, honesty and decency. Just as the Torah itself is not “in the heavens,” but is rather relevant and applicable to all of us at all times and under all conditions, similarly, its “tools,” the personality traits that the Torah demands, are readily attainable to one and all, and we must therefore work to achieve them so we can then reach higher and pursue the loftier levels of spiritual greatness.

Thursday

The Mabit (Rav Moshe of Trani), in his *Beit Elokim* (*Sha’ar Ha-teshuva*, chapter 6), raises the important question as to the status of a sinner’s genuine repentance if he later repeats the offense. Very often, we sincerely regret and confess our wrongdoing, and commit ourselves to never repeat the sinful act, but at some later point we find ourselves breaking our commitment and violating the transgression again. Does this retroactively render the repentance meaningless, demonstrating that the commitment was not sincere? Or, was the repentance sufficient to achieve atonement for the misdeed, and the repetition of the act is viewed as a new, separate offense?

The Mabit writes unequivocally that one who sincerely repents and makes a wholehearted commitment to avoid the transgression in the future achieves full atonement even if he later repeats the violation. He draws proof from a famous passage in the Gemara (Ta’anit 16a) which compares repentance to immersion in a *mikveh*. The Gemara comments that if a person confesses without repenting – meaning, he confesses to having acted wrongly, but does not resolve to avoid the misdeed in the future – then he is like a person immersing in a *mikveh* while holding a carcass that transmits *tum’a*. No matter how many times this person immerses, he will not divest himself of his impure status until he throws away the carcass. Likewise, if a person does not resolve to change his conduct, his confession is meaningless, and he does not earn atonement. But once a person genuinely repents, the Gemara writes, he is considered as having thrown away the carcass and then immersed, such that his immersion is effective. The Mabit notes that if we extend the Gemara’s analogy further, we can compare one who repeats his offense after sincere repentance to one who comes in contact with a carcass a second time after having attained purity through immersion. Clearly, in such a case, the person is deemed impure not retroactively from the time of his initial handling of a carcass, but only from the moment he touched a carcass the second time. By the same token, the Mabit writes, one who genuinely repented and then repeats the offense is considered as having sinned anew, and his repentance for the initial transgression is still deemed effective in achieving atonement.

One may, at least at first glance, question the Mabit’s attempt to prove his stance from the Gemara’s analogy. The argument for retroactively disqualifying a sinner’s repentance after he repeats the offense is rooted in the fact that the second offense perhaps reflects a fundamental deficiency in the initial repentance. Once the offender repeated the sin after allegedly repenting, we must conclude that his repentance was not wholehearted and sincere, and thus is retroactively deemed meaningless. This person immersed – he confessed – but did not actually throw away the carcass. How, then, could the Mabit draw a comparison between a repeated offense after repentance and contact with impurity after immersion? How does the Gemara’s comment prove that the repeated offense does not undermine the value of the initial repentance?

The answer is found in Rashi’s comments to the Gemara’s discussion, which the Mabit in fact cites in this context. Explaining the Gemara’s reference to the case of a sinner who confesses but does not repent, Rashi gives the example of a thief who confesses but does not return the stolen goods. The process of repentance includes repairing the damage done by the sin, whenever this is possible. Confessing a sin without taking measures to reverse the damage is akin to immersing while still holding onto the carcass, and is this ineffective and valueless. However, the Mabit notes, in other instances, where there is not any tangible damage caused by one’s sin which he could repair, all that could be expected is the genuine desire not to repeat the offense. Rashi gave the specific example of a thief because when it comes to sins which have no tangible damage to repair, sincere regret and resolve qualify as “throwing away the carcass,” such that the “immersion” – the repentance – is valid. The fact that Rashi resorted to this particular example – of a thief who confesses but keeps the stolen goods – demonstrates that otherwise, when there is no practical rectification to be made, sincere remorse qualifies as ridding oneself of his “impurity,” and the “immersion” is thus valid even if the “impurity” resurfaces subsequently through the repetition of the forbidden act.

Tomorrow we will *iy”H* discuss the Mabit’s position further.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted the Mabit’s discussion in *Beit Elokim* (*Sha’ar Ha-teshuva*, chapter 6) regarding the question as to the retroactive status of a sinner’s repentance if he subsequently repeats the offense. One might have argued that the repeated offense demonstrates that the repentance was inherently deficient, and, as such, it is retroactively deemed worthless. The Mabit, however, emphatically dismisses this argument, and asserts that as long as the individual sincerely repented and truly intended to avoid the forbidden act in the future, his repentance is valid even if he later repeats the misdeed.

In developing this theory, the Mabit cites and explains a pair of verses in Tehillim, in the prayer composed by King David after his sin with Batsheva (51:7-8): “Indeed, I was created in iniquity; and my mother conceived me in sin. Indeed, You desire truth in the mind.” King David here notes the inherent frailty of human beings, the fact that we are, by nature, inclined to sin, subjected as we are to all kinds of negative tendencies. In recognition of the human being’s innate complexity and weakness, all God requires of us is “*emet va-tuchot*” – sincerity of thought. As long as we are sincere in our desire to improve, to grow, to live on a higher standard in the future than we have in the past, then we are fulfilling our obligations and meeting God’s expectations of us. The Mabit explains that repentance cannot and will not reverse human nature, and eliminate all our negative inclinations. These tendencies are latent within us, and will always remain. And thus if we repeat a misdeed after repentance, this does not reflect a deficiency in the repentance; rather, the repeated offense is the result of a new, unrelated decision to yield to temptation.

The Mabit alludes in this context to an analogy to a person sitting at a meal and, after eating his fill, decides to eat some more. In describing the case of a penitent sinner who repeats the offense, the Mabit uses the term “*nimlakh*,” the halakhic term for a person who had finished eating and then changes his mind and eats more food. The halakhic significance of “*nimlakh*” is that the individual in this case must recite a new *berakha* over the food he now wishes to eat. Since the person had made the decision to stop eating, the *berakha* he had recited over his food cannot cover food which he eats subsequently. Therefore, if he then decides to eat more, a new *berakha* is needed. By using the term *nimlakh* in reference to a sin which one repeats after having repented, the Mabit appears to be comparing this situation to that of a person who decides to eat more after having completed his meal. *Halakha* does not view the person’s decision as reflecting any sort of deficiency in his earlier decision to end his meal. The fact that the individual must recite a new *berakha* proves that his decision to eat more food constitutes a new, independent choice, not a retroactive invalidation of his prior decision. As such, when it comes to sin, too, a decision to repeat a sin after repentance is viewed as detached from, an unrelated to, the individual’s prior sin. He is still regarded as having fully and truly repented, and his decision to repeat the offense is viewed as a new, separate act of wrongdoing. (See Rav Moshe Roberts’ *Beit Moshe* commentary to *Beit Elokim*.)

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