

מתוקים מדבש

*Dei'ah, Binah and Haskel on the weekly parashah*

RABBI GIL STUDENT

Bemachashavah Techilah

“G-d spoke to Moshe saying, ‘When you take a census of the Children of Israel... this shall they give – everyone who passes through the census – a half shekel of the sacred shekel (*shekel hakodesh*)’” (Shemos 30:11-13). The method with which Moshe conducted the census was having each person contribute half a shekel and then counting the resulting donations. The currency used is specifically called *shekel hakodesh*, which is a common enough term in Chumash,¹ but is quite curious in itself. What about this *shekel* causes it to be called *hakodesh* – the sacred.

Ramban² explains that these *shekalim* were considered sacred because they were used for holy purposes. The funds gathered by this census were donated towards the construction of the *Mishkan*, where G-d’s presence manifested itself and where sacrifices were brought. What could be a holier purpose than that? Similarly, *shekalim* that were used for purchasing animals and utensils for the sacrificial order, as well as for physically maintaining the *Mishkan* were also referred to as “*hakodesh*” because they were also used for a

sacred purpose. Any currency that is utilized in the performance of a mitzvah is money that is serving a holy usage and, therefore, can be justly called *shekel hakodesh*. Thus, money used for *pidyon bechorim* – redemption of the firstborns – is also sacred currency because it is used for a mitzvah. Similarly, money used to pay for *arachin* – the monetary equivalent of the donation of a person

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to the *Mishkan* – is also called *shekel hakodesh*. As Rabbeinu Bachya³ elaborates, “Since all *mitzvos* are the core of holiness and some *mitzvos* require this currency,” the currency takes on a holiness corresponding to its use.

Similarly, Ramban continues, Hebrew is called *lashon hakodesh* – the holy language – because it was and continues to be used for holy purposes. It was in Hebrew that G-d said “Let there be light etc.” (Bereishis 1:3) and created the world. The Torah itself was given to us in Hebrew, as well as all of the prophecies and other biblical books. At Mount Sinai, G-d spoke directly to

the entire people of Israel in Hebrew and it was in this language that our forefathers were named. Because Hebrew has been used for holy purposes it is considered to be a sacred language.

As the Ramban (Nahmanides) duly notes, Rambam (Maimonides) has a very different understanding of why Hebrew is called *lashon hakodesh*. In Moreh Nevuchim,⁴ Rambam explains that Hebrew is called sacred because it has no specific words for uniquely male and female body parts nor for the acts that lead to conception of a child. Nor does it have precise terms for emissions and excretions. Rather, other

terms are used euphemistically when the Hebrew user needs to refer to such concepts. The language itself lacks such crude terms and that – its purity and loftiness – is why it is called the holy language.

I once heard R’ Shimon Romm – a renowned student and *darshan* in the pre-war and Shanghai Mirrer Yeshiva, then a rabbi in Tel Aviv, and later a rabbi in Washington Heights and a rosh yeshiva in Yeshiva University until his passing – explain this dispute between Rambam and Ramban as being a fundamental disagreement over the nature of *kedushah*, holiness. According to Ramban, holiness is attained when

¹ The Even Shoshan Concordance (Jerusalem: 1988), p. 1204 lists 25 places in Shemos, Vayikra, and Bamidbar in which the term is used.

² Ad loc.

³ Ad loc.

⁴ Part 3, ch. 8

something is used for a holy purpose. When currency is used for a mitzvah it becomes sacred and when a language is used to create the world and convey the Torah it becomes sanctified. *Kedushah* is defined by supplementary attainments and not by inherent status. Something must become holy by going beyond its natural state and being taken to a holy level.

According to Rambam, however, holiness is not due to a positive usage but to a lack of diminution of its purity. A language is inherently sacred and only loses that status when it contains less than holy words. Hebrew, Rambam claims, is the only language that has not lost its holiness but, theoretically, any language that retains its purity could have been sacred. Similarly, presumably, the Rambam would explain that the *shekel hakodesh* is called holy because, as the Rambam himself suggests at the beginning of his comments, the *shekel* coins used in the Torah were entirely pure, lacking all dilution. This purity of content, rather than its sanctity of use, is what earned for these coins the title of holy because they have not been defiled of their inherent sanctity.

R' Romm continued that this same disagreement can be found in

the famous dispute at the beginning of Parashas Kedoshim. The Torah⁵ commands us to be holy (“*kedoshim tihyu*”) but remains unclear regarding exactly what that obligation entails. Rashi⁶ explains the command to mean, “Separate yourselves from forbidden relationships and from transgression” while Ramban⁷ explains the mandate to be an obligation

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to distance ourselves even from that which is permissible but excessive. According to Rashi we fulfill this obligation by adhering to the strict prohibitions of the Torah while according to the Ramban we must go beyond the laws and create our own stringencies.⁸ In other words, Rashi understands that we are inherently holy and we can fulfill the mandate of *kedoshim tihyu* by refraining from defiling our sanctity through sin. As long as we do not violate a pro-

⁵ Vayikra 19:2

⁶ Ad loc.

⁷ Ad loc.

⁸ Cf. R. David Pardo, *Maskil LeDavid* who tries the bridge the gap between Rashi and Ramban.

hibition we are, according to Rashi, holy. This, R' Romm explained, is similar to Rambam's position we saw above that Hebrew is inherently holy because it has not been defiled by impure words. Indeed, we see in Rambam's halachic magnum opus *Mishneh Torah* that *Sefer Kedushah* contains the laws regarding prohibited relations and foods while *Sefer Mada* – specifically *Hilchos Dei'os* – contains the concepts of going beyond the requirements of the law.⁹ *Kedushah* is attained by conforming to the prohibitions of the Torah and not by striving above that to abstinence.

Ramban, however, is consistent with his earlier position and contends that holiness must be attained through additional behavior. Merely conforming to the Torah's prohibitions does not raise someone to the status of holiness. Rather, he must go beyond that natural state and “sanctify himself in what is permissible to him.”¹⁰

⁹ This last point about *Sefer Kedushah* is not something I heard from R' Romm but is my own thought. Cf. R' Ya'akov Kamenetsky, *Emes LeYa'akov*, Vayikra 19:2 for a very different take on the Rashi and Ramban.

¹⁰ Yevamos 20a

RABBI MICHA BERGER

Bakeish Shalom

Yemei Teshuvah but do not have perfect years. In fact, the entire concept does not seem to fit; are we really saying an unrepentant murderer simply recite a couple of verses and be forgiven?

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook describes two ways of doing *teshuvah*.¹ The first is sudden, “coming

¹ Oros haTeshuvah, ch. 2

“**R**abbi Yochanan said, ‘Were it not written in the verse, it could not be said. It teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped Himself like a *sheli'ach tzibbur*, and showed Moshe the order of prayer. He said to him, ‘Whenever Israel sins, let them perform this order before Me and I shall forgive them.’... Rav Yehuda said, ‘A covenant is made over the thirteen attributes, that they are never

ineffectual. As it says, “Behold I am making a covenant” (*Shemos 34:10*)’” (*Rosh Hashanah 17b*).

Based on this gemara, the Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy were made into the centerpiece of *selichos*. After all, they come with a guarantee of forgiveness.

And yet... we all know people who say these words with deep conviction and with every fiber of their being in *Elul* and the *Aseres*

from some kind of spiritual thunder that centers the soul. In one moment he recognizes the evil and repulsiveness of sin, and turns into a new person.... This sort of *teshuvah* comes from some influence of inner gift, by some great spiritual influence, that it is worthy to seek its roots in the deepest of mysteries.... The higher *teshuvah* comes from the thunder of universal good, the Divine Good which underlies all the worlds..."

The second sort of *teshuvah* is gradual. "He feels that he must progress and improve his ways and his lifestyle, his desires, his thought patterns. In his travels on this path he conquers, bit by bit, the ways of righteousness, repairs his *middos*, improves his actions, teaches himself how to become more and more proper until he reaches the pinnacle of brightness and repair."

The first *luchos*, "G-d's manufacture they were, and the writing was G-d's writing" (Shemos 32:16). They were a "thunder from heaven", spirituality as a gift from the Almighty. As something unearned, there was no guarantee that they could be kept. Bnei Yisrael sought to maintain this lofty experience; they had a need for further inspiration that could not await Moshe's return. They built the calf, and it all unraveled. That which was quickly gained was just as quickly lost.

For the second *luchos*, Moshe was told to "quarry for yourself two stone

tablets like the first" (ibid 34:1). Man must take the first step. This is the gradual, incremental path. It is not a thunderous gift from Hashem; it is a call to which Hashem responds. He "will write on the *luchos* the ideas that were on the first *luchos*" (v. 2). But man must invest the effort.

The misunderstanding of the covenant of the Thirteen Attributes as being about their recitation is assuming that it is about the first

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approach. It is the notion that redemption originates from G-d, as a gift to be requested. However, the covenant itself is more of a manifestation of "Open for me an opening like the eye of a needle, and I will open it for you so that wadons and carriages can pass through."²

To be guaranteed real life change, though, one must invest significant effort. It is a slow, sometimes tiring process. We start, Hashem responds. Moshe quarries and shapes the stones, and Hashem writes upon them.

It is not enough to learn the Gemara and see the first *middah*, "Hashem ... – before man sins" (Rosh Hashanah, ibid.) One must take the

² Shir HaShirim Rabbah 24

lesson to heart. Am I kind to others before I have any interaction with them? I might be inclined to be nice to "one of our own", but how am I toward outsiders, toward strangers? "... Hashem – after he sins and repents" Do I really forgive someone when I accept his apology? Do I violate the prohibition against taking revenge, and feel justified in wronging those who wronged me? Or, do I sin in the reverse, by making a point of telling the person that I will not wrong them as they did to me?

To approach Hashem with the Attributes does not merely mean to use them to petition Hashem for mercy. Rather, it is the development of the self so as to better embody those attributes. Gifts are unreliable; what was given can always be lost. It is someone who is working toward earning that change who is guaranteed not to be left empty handed.

These are not quick and easy changes. Each *middah* can take years of effort. But through effort we earn and acquire our *teshuvah*, we guarantee its permanence.

This is a hard message to accept, particular living in the culture that we do. The Alter of Kelm, Rav Simcha Zisel Ziv, reassures us. "The work is long, it will take a lifetime. But that is exactly why you were given a lifetime in which to do it."

REB JONATHAN BAKER

Sefasai Tiftach

Rabbi Micha Berger wrote last week about the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei*.¹ He

¹ Sefasai Tiftach in Mesukim MiDevash, Tetzaveh 5764 < <http://www.aishdas.org/mesukim/tetzaveh.pdf> >

spoke about the primary importance of the phrase "*haKel haGadol haGibor vihaNorah*", as it describes how Hashem directs His power to the world and to us as individuals, and gives structure to the entire *berachah*. It expresses our confidence in G-d's

omnipotence. But it was not always thus.

The Gemara in Yoma 69b brings a very interesting account of this phrase's use. It originated with Moshe in Devarim 10:17. While he exhorts the people to do "the right thing," he

tells them it is because Hashem is the Great, Mighty and Awesome G-d. Berachos 33b takes this as the *ne plus ultra* of praise of G-d, the full reason for our adherence to Him and His Will.

But the verse is quoted by two later prophets, under vastly different conditions than obtained in the Plains of Moab, on the verge of entering the Land.

The first is Yirmiyahu (32:18), during the final siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Yirmiyahu is in prison, for prophesying the downfall of the Judean kingdom. He has just been given a symbol of the return from exile, buying tribal land from his cousin Chanamel and burying the deed in a jar. He prays to G-d, praising Him as “the great and mighty G-d”, but not as awesome. Why? Rashi cites our Gemara, that “non-Jews are dancing in the courtyard of Your Temple, the place of your Awe on Earth; how can I describe You as Awesome?” He emends Moshe’s praise to fit the current situation.

Daniel then quotes our verse, in the depths of the Babylonian exile. Thinking that the seventy years of Jerusalem’s desolation were nearing their end, he prays to G-d that He send the deliverance soon. As we now know is normal in prayer, he opens with praises of Hashem, “the great and awesome G-d”, but not Mighty. How can he praise G-d as Mighty, when G-d is hidden, we are exiled among, and enslaved to, non-Jews? And we paraphrase the conclusion of his prayer in our Selichos (Dan. 9:17-19).

Then the Anshei Knesses HaGedolah came, including in their number several prophets as well as the non-prophetic rabbis who would succeed the prophets as authorized Carriers of the Tradition, and in constructing the text of the daily prayers, restored Moshe’s praise to its full glory. How, when the Second

Temple was not fully functional, when the Jews were subjugated to foreign powers?

They reinterpreted the *pshat* in the verse. According to the Chavos Yair:

“If the simple translation makes no sense and we have to explain it in a way that makes sense – that explanation is called *Pshat* and not the simple translation.”²

They reinterpreted Mighty to describe Hashem’s restraint in not fully expressing His anger and destroying the sinful Jews, only demolishing their Temple. Awesome was taken to mean inspiration of the fear of G-d, without which it would have been impossible for the Jews to continue to exist while exiled among other nations. Thus they wholeheartedly restored the full praise of Moshe into the thrice-daily fundamental prayer.

The Gemara concludes with the troubling question:

“How could our Rabbis (Rashi: the prophets Jeremiah and Daniel) do this, uprooting the takkanah of Moshe? R’ Eliezer said, ‘because they knew that G-d was the G-d of Truth, therefore they could not lie about Him.’”

The decree of Moshe, the perfect qualification of G-d’s praise, was uprooted by later and lesser prophets, because the simple meaning of the verse bothered them, and seemed untrue. Only later did the even lesser Rabbis “restore the Crown to its former glory”.

The Maharsha puts it most poignantly. The prophets could not lie to their generations. However, the Anshei Knesses HaGedolah, with the perspective of the end of exile, including among their number Mordechai, instrumental in the Jews’ survival through hidden miracles,

² Mar Kashisha p. 29, quoted by R’ Daniel Eidensohn in Avodah vol. 2 no. 55
<<http://www.aishdas.org/avodah/vol02/v02n055.shtml#14>>

could see that G-d’s greatness consisted of withholding His anger, that His Awesomeness consisted of inspiring fear to maintain the connection between the Jews and Himself. The Anshei Knesses HaGedolah were thus called “HaGedolah” because they, through reinterpretation of *pshat*, magnified the perception of G-d’s strengths and attributes, restoring meaning to all of the attributes given by Moshe.³

What latitude does that give our Biblical commentators? Quite a lot, it seems, given the wide variety of interpretations all passing for “*pshat*” in the past 2500 years of Biblical interpretation. That possibility apparently continues today. Never let it be said that the Tradition is static, frozen in some pre-modern mold. The time-honored model of innovative interpretation, from its source in the *aggados* of Chazal and its continued practice throughout the ages, includes reinterpretation of non-legal material to fit the tenor of the times (see Meiri’s commentary to Avot 3:15 for guidelines).

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I am indebted to R’ Reuven Cohn of Newton, MA, who pointed out this gemara to me.

³ [See also the essay at http://www.aishdas.org/toratemet/en_devarim.html – ed.]

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