Bemachashavah Techilah

To achieve taharah, we need to accomplish both goals: to use the physical world as a tool, instead of being used by the physical around us, and we need to reorder our priorities, to do teshuvah, to restore the white wool to its original state.

This week’s parashah opens with a discussion of oaths and vows. The Torah writes, “A man, when he makes a neder LaShem [oath to Hashem], or gives a shevu’ah [vow] to prohibit something al nafsho [on his living soul].” (30:3) It is a fundamental principle of Torah study that not a single word is wasted. So, while this verse may appear repetitious, it is not. There must be some distinction between a neder to Hashem and a shevu’ah on one’s nefesh.

The Gemara provides one difference. It defines a neder as “when he prohibits an object to himself.” It changes the state of the object, or in Brisker lomdus jargon, the chefza. A shevu’ah, however, is “when he prohibits himself from an object”. Here, it is the gavra, the individual, who is affected. For example, if a person were to say, “This thing shall be a korban for me,” it would be a neder. With his words, he is sanctifying the object, and thereby prohibiting it to everyone. On the other hand, if he were to say, “I will not eat this thing,” he is making a shevu’ah. He is changing himself by giving himself a new prohibition. To the rest of the world, the animal may be eaten.

The Or Hachaim on our pasuk makes a second distinction. A neder involves sanctifying something. It focuses on enforcing the desire to do something good. A shevu’ah is about prohibiting that which is wrong. To continue this thought, David HaMelech advises, “sur meira va’asei tov – avoid evil and do good”. A shevu’ah is a means for avoiding evil, a neder, for doing good.

I would like to suggest that both of these are manifestations of a single underlying conceptual difference. One that ties together themes developed through much of Sefer Bamidbar.

In the past several weeks’ columns we have been discussing various mitzvos, and understanding them in light of a particular model of the human condition. We have shown that Chazal often portray man as being composed of three parts: the physical, animalistic being; the spiritual being; and a mind, a self-aware free will, whose task it is to choose between these two forces.

Tzitzis, involving sky-blue and the number eight – one beyond the 7 of creation – are to remind a person to channel his conscious, creative being to serve the higher goals of his spiritual self. The free tassels beyond show the appropriateness of creative individuality, but within that loftier context.

We later looked at the parah adumah, the redness and earthiness of our physical selves, and how in the ideal – unlike the parah adumah – they are harnessed to be a tool of everything human within us. That tum’ah is the state in which the conscious self is adulterated by the desires and values of the animal within. To quote again the Ramchal:

Taharah is the correction of the heart and thoughts... Its essence is that man should not leave room for the inclination in his actions. Rather all his actions should be on the side of wisdom and awe [for the Almighty], and not on the side of sin and desire. This is even in those things that are of the body and physical. (Mesilas YeSharim Ch. 16)

These three points paralleled the three basic duties of the Jew, as described by the Maharsha based on how the Gemara understood the famous pasuk from Micha, from the

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1 Nedarim 2b


4 Makos 24a

5 Micha 6:8
The beginning of Parshas Masei is primarily a list of the different places that the Children of Israel traveled from and to in their 40 year journey from Ramsais (in Egypt) to the plains of Moav, on the other side of the Jordan River from Yericho (Jericho). Many things happened along the way, but since the purpose of the animals. So, when our pasuk writes about “shevu’ah to place a prohibition on his nefesh” the pasuk is describing something very specific. Here, all activity is within the nefesh, to reign it in, to place it under control of the seventh, the intellect.

This distinction is akin to the symbolism we gave for two of the ingredients of the parah adumah, in our column on parashas Chukas. The red cow itself represents the animal side of man. It is unworked and unyoked; yet it is supposed to be a beast of burden. The tola’as shani is white wool died red. This is the intellect, which through the forces of habit acquired the redness of the physical being. To achieve taharah, we need to accomplish both goals: to use the physical world as a tool, instead of being used by the physical around us, and we need to reorder our priorities, to do teshuvah, to restore the white wool to its original state.

These two kinds of oaths also address these two needs. The neder is a way to take an animal and make it kodesh. The intellect is in control of the physical world and uses it as a tool to do good. The shevu’ah creates a new prohibition for oneself. The nefesh, the physical creature, is in control; we are not in a position to be in the role of creator. Instead we do teshuvah, vow to avoid the temptation when it next faces us.

**Rabbi Dov Kramer**

**Bakeish Shalom**

this list is to delineate their journey,1 no details (other than the
names of the places they stayed) are given.

There are, however, several exceptions. We are told how far into the desert of Aisam they traveled to get to Marah (33:8), that in Eilim there were 12 springs of water and 70 date trees (33:9), that there was no water for them to drink in Refidim (33:14), that Aharon died on Hor Hahor (33:38), and that word of his death reached some of the Canaanites (33:40). There is no mention of the public revelation at Mt. Sinai, nor of any of the misdeeds that occurred (i.e. the “golden calf,” the “spies” or any of the others). And while the lack of water mentioned in Refidim hints towards the miracle of the well that followed the nation through the desert, there is no mention of the man (manna) that fell from heaven every day but Shabbos. Aharon’s death is described, but the passing of his sister Miriam is not.

We can understand why none of the latter details are mentioned, as this is not supposed to be a synopsis of what happened over the 40 years. But why are any details given at all? And why specifically these?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that the wells and trees at Eilim are mentioned because it was such an oddity finding an oasis in order to emphasize that this was the one exception. Otherwise, water was scarce, or, after they reached Refidim, nonexistent. And they had been protected from the harsh desert conditions by the “clouds of glory” until Aharon died, as it was in his merit that they had been there. Once Aharon died and the clouds were gone, the nation was now vulnerable, subject to attack. Because Arad’s attack shows that the “protective clouds” were gone, the Torah mentions it along with Aharon’s death.

When the Torah wanted to describe the traveling done by the nation, it was important to portray the conditions under which they traveled. Sure, the trials and tribulations they faced were important in their growth and development, but they were not as directly related to the retelling of the actual trip as the environment of that trip.

This concept also holds true in our travels through life, as we try to find the path of spiritual growth. Each decision we make – every battle we fight – helps define who we are and which road we are taking. But they do not compare with the decisions we make that affect our environment- the conditions under which we will fight our future battles.

For example, the decision to keep kosher may be a tough one, and there may be times that one must struggle to maintain the ideal kashrus standards. However, the decision to live in a community where kosher food is readily available makes it much easier to keep those standards. Similarly, while it is important to learn Torah every day (and every night, and at every available opportunity), setting aside a specific time that is devoted to Torah study (and allowing nothing else to supercede), and arranging to learn with a chavrusa (study partner), will help create the atmosphere within which the learning will thrive.

Just as the Torah felt it necessary to tell us about the conditions under which the nation traveled on their way to the Promised Land, so too is it important for us to build an environment most conducive to our spiritual growth.

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2 See Rosh Hashanah 3a, that without the “protective clouds” they were now visible, and that Arad thought permission was now given for other nations to wage war with them

3 See Rashi
However, they were composed in order to be the means to fulfill the obligation “and you will eat, you will be satisfied, and you will bless Hashem your G-d.”

The fourth berachah stands in stark contrast to that moment. Our (the third) berachah was written by David, during the period of his frustrated desire to build Jerusalem and the first Beis HaMikdash. The following berachah was written in a moment of despair, when the Emperor Hadrian had the Temple Mount plowed over, a time when people wondered if it was the final end of Jerusalem. Bar Kochva’s forces fell at Beitar, taking with them our chance of restoring autonomy. Hashem provided us, in the midst of this darkness, one favor to let us know that He was with us. The Romans did not let the bodies of the fallen be buried, to serve as warning to other potential rebels. For three years they lied and the bodies of the fallen were decay and disease.

Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian writes that the Vilna Gaon omitted the word “berachamay – through His Mercy.” As the navi writes, “Zion will be redeemed through justice, and her people who repent, with righteousness.” We may pray that Hashem in His Mercy allow us to witness the event. “Vesechezenah eineinu beshuvcha leTzion berachamim – may our eyes see when You return to Zion in Mercy.” But the actual building will be an act of justice and righteousness, not mercy.

This makes our line identical to the closing of the fourteenth berachah of Shemoneh Esrei, “bonei Yerushalayim.” But it also makes the phrase ambiguous. This is a general point with present-tense verbs. Does the first berachah of Shemoneh Esrei say that Hashem is protecting Avraham, or a statement about what He is, “the shield of Avraham”? Furthermore, since the phrase “the one who is” can be left implied, the line between adjectives and nouns is equally blurry; “HaKel haGadol haGibbor vehaNorah” could mean “the Great, Mighty, Awe Inspiring G-d” or “the G-d, the Great One, the Mighty One, the Awe Inspiring One.” The present tense, adjective and a noun are overlapping concepts. This is a feature that should be unsurprising in a language used by a Being Who is above time to communicate with people who live within it.

Also implied is a deep statement. An action is not divisible from the one acting. Someone cannot say I just got angry, but I am not an angry person. You are what you do.

Are we saying, as the Sefas Emes holds, that Hashem “is building Jerusalem” or that Hashem is “the Builder of Jerusalem”? The message of the language is that in truth there is no difference. Since Hashem is perpetually building Jerusalem, He constantly is its Builder. Whether during the period of David’s anticipation before the building, or of the Hadrianic destruction. Every event is a step toward the ultimate goal of history.

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2 Devarim 8:10
3 Berachos ibid.
4 Siddur Sefas Emes, Shemoneh Esrei
5 Tefillas Chanah ad loc
6 Yishayahu 1:27
7 See our discussion of this phrase in Mesukim MiDevash vol 1 no. 17, <http://www.aishdas.org/mesukim/5764/tetzaveh.pdf>

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