

מתוקים מדבש

*Dei'ah, Binah and Haskel on the weekly parashah*RABBI MICHA BERGER**Bemachashavah Techilah**

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 Gemara¹ 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 *cheftza*. 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 Ha-Melech 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

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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.²

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.³ 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 Yesarim Ch. 16)

These three points paralleled the three basic duties of the Jew, as described by the Maharsha based on how the Gemara⁴ understood the famous *pasuk* from Micha⁵, from the

² Mesukim Midevash, *Shelach* 5764
<<http://www.aishdas.org/mesukim/5764/shlach.pdf>>

³ Ibid. *Chukas* <<http://www.aishdas.org/mesukim/5764/chukas.pdf>>

⁴ Makos 24a

⁵ Micha 6:8

¹ Nedarim 2b

haftarah for *parashas Balak*, as well as the second Mishnah in Avos. The Maharal elaborates on Avos⁶ that man lives in three worlds: the spiritual, the mental, and the physical. Each world enables a different kind of relationship and each relationship its own duties: *mitzvos* between man and his Creator, between man and other people within the physical world, and self-perfection in relationship to oneself.⁷

The midrash frequently points out five words often used in *Tanach* for the soul – three frequently mentioned alone and two others sometimes included. Rav Saadia Gaon tells us that these terms refer to the soul in terms of the different abilities it possesses.⁸ The first three, *nefesh*, *ru'ach* and *neshamah* (“*nara”n*”) are called by *mekubalim* the “*penimi’os*”, the inner abilities, the ones that comprise the self. The other two, *chayah* and *yechidah*, go beyond the limits of individuality. The Vilna Gaon⁹ identifies *nara”n* with the very model of self we have been exploring.

When we look at the words of the *pesukim* we quoted, *shevu’ah*, *neder* and *nefesh*, we find the core notions behind this triad.

The first type of oath is called a *neder LaShem*. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch comments on our *pasuk*¹⁰ that the root of the word *neder* \גנר\ is

⁶ Derech HaChaim 1:2

⁷ Mesukim Midevash, *Balak* 5764
<<http://www.aishdas.org/mesukim/5764/balak.pdf>>

⁸ Emunos VeDei’os 6:3

⁹ Peirush al Kama Agados, Koenigsburg edition 11b

¹⁰ The Hirsch Pentateuch, Numbers 30:3

related to that of *nazir* \גזר\, one who avoids certain physical temptations in order to seek spirituality. The Object of the phrase is *LaShem*, to Hashem. The *neder LaShem* is the taking of something physical and putting it into a new context, making it an instrument of service to Hashem. It is *tzitzis*-like in purpose. This is the mind in control, the creative being changing the environment around him. A *neder* is on the *cheftza* because it is the assertion of the higher self’s control over its environs. It is a means for *asei tov*, for constructive pursuit of goodness.

However, sometimes we are not ready to build. Sometimes we just need to recoup, to fortify our borders against evil, to achieve *taharah*, purity of the self. For this, we have the *shevu’ah*. The root of the word *shevu’ah* is *sheva*, seven. To Rav Hirsch, this is because the seventh represents that which is holy in the world around us. Shabbos, the seventh day, brings sanctity to the week; *shemita*, the seventh year, sanctifies the land. In his discussion on symbolism¹¹ he associates this number with the mental being, which is why the *menorah*, shining with the light of Torah, has seven branches. Notice that the *menorah* must be pure gold, which is called *zahav tahor*.

“*Nefesh*” refers to the animalistic drives, the soul as the keeper of life. This is why we read in *parashas Re’ei*, “*ki hadam hu hanefesh* – because the blood is of the *nefesh*.” We do not drink the circulatory blood of animals because it represents the drives of all living beings, the urges we share with

¹¹ Collected Writings vol III

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

¹ See Rashi on Bamidbar 33:1

The beginning of *Parashas 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

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 the desert; they came across nothing similar during the 40 years. He also says that the lack of water in Refidim signifies entering the heart of the desert, where they would no longer find water if not for the miraculous well. This may be so, but are these details that much more important than any

others, that the Torah mentions only these? And even if they are, why was it necessary to mention any details at all?

There is one characteristic shared by all of the details that the Torah adds that may help explain why they are included. While each is not relevant to the travel itself, they are all pertinent to the conditions under which they traveled – through the desert. They were not close to any inhabited lands, as they had gone three days into the Aisam desert (33:8). And there was always a shortage of water. The Torah mentions the one time they found an oasis in order to emphasize that this was the one exception. Otherwise, water was scarce, or, after they reached Refidim, non-existent. 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.² Because Arad’s attack shows that the “protective clouds” were gone, the Torah mentions it along with Aharon’s death.³

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.

RABBI MICHA BERGER

Sefasai Tiftach

are Torah origin.¹ These *berachos* themselves were written by Moshe, Yehoshua, and David, respectively.

¹ Berachos 54b.

The third *berachah* of *bentching* concludes with a statement about Hashem’s rebuilding of Jerusalem. How exactly do we translate the phrase “*boneih [berachamav]*

Yerushalyim. Amein.”

The obligation to recite the first three *berachos* of *Birchas haMazon*

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.”²

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 untended, and yet decay and disease did not set in. An epidemic was avoided. To thank Hashem for this spot of light, we say the *berachah* of “*hatov vehameitiv* – Who is good, and bestows goodness.” Being about Hashem’s presence during our fall, rather than about His gifts to us from which we just ate, the fourth blessing is not part of the Biblical *mitzvah* but is Rabbinic in nature. At the point we find ourselves (the end of the fourth blessing) we conclude the original commandment with “*amein*”.³

According to the Sefas Emes⁴ the word “*boneih*” is to be rendered “is building”. Hashem is building Jerusalem, presently. Even when we are unable to build Jerusalem, Hashem is collecting our merits, collecting them, piling one upon another like bricks, until the spiritual Jerusalem thus built justifies our building the physical one.

Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian writes⁵ that the Vilna Gaon omitted the word “*berachamav* – through His Mercy.” As the *navi* writes, “Zion will be

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.

redeemed through justice, and her people who repent, with righteousness.”⁶ 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 vahaNurah*” could mean “the Great, Mighty, Awe Inspiring G-d” or “the G-d, the Great One, the Mighty One, the Awe Inspiring One.”⁷ 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. A person who is telling a story, is, for at least that moment, a storyteller. 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>>