

## מתוקים מדבש

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

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**Bemachashvah Techilah**

As Rav Yehudah Halevi describes it, when the king of the Khazars asked a rabbi what he believes in, the Rabbi answered, "I believe in the G-d of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yisrael, who lead Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt with signs and miracles, ... who sent Moshe with His law, ..." <sup>1</sup> The king was taken aback by this reply. He expected the rabbi to reply about Hashem being the Creator, the Master of all. Instead the rabbi spoke of the Jewish people's experience.

Rav Saadia Gaon opened *Emunos VeDei'os* with a definition of G-d that fits the king's expectations. <sup>2</sup> This philosophical approach to *emunah* is also central to the Rambam's definition of *emunah*. Much of the second section of *Moreh Nevuchim* is his proof that there is a First Cause, and then that the First Cause fits the Jewish description of our G-d. <sup>3</sup> The first 5 of his 13 principles of faith <sup>4</sup> define Hashem as the Creator, Absolutely singular, non-corporeal, preceding time, and Master of all and the only appropriate One to worship, but the Rambam only refers to revelation

<sup>1</sup> Kuzari I, par. 10

<sup>2</sup> *Emunos veDei'os* sec. I - II

<sup>3</sup> Sec. II, introductory postulates, ch. 1-3

<sup>4</sup> Peirush haMishnayos lehaRambam, Sanhedrin, introduction to chapter "Cheileq".

and history when discussing the centrality of prophecy and of Moshe's prophecy in particular.

However, the Kuzari takes a very different approach. In response to the king's question, he has the rabbi later explain, "In the same manner that Moshe responded to Par'oh when he said to him 'The G-d of the Hebrews sent me to you.... I answered you as is fitting for the whole of Yisrael who knew these things, first through personal experience, and afterwards through uninterrupted tradition, which is equal to the former.'" <sup>5</sup> The unique revelation of the *Aseres haDiberos* to the entire nation in this week's *parashah* becomes a key element of Jewish epistemology, the foundation of our entire belief.

As the argument is usually presented, no one could invent a story about all of his audience's ancestors. They would question why he possessed such a story whereas they had never heard of it. National revelation, and the weight of tradition in general, rests on the impossibility of falsifying the testimony of millions. As Rav Yehudah Halevi writes, "An arrangement of this kind eliminates any suspicion of a lie or a plot. Ten people could not discuss something like this without disagreeing, and someone disclosing their secret agreement. Nor could they refute

<sup>5</sup> Kuzari I par. 25

someone who tried to establish the truth in a matter like this one. How is it possible where such a quantity of people is concerned? ... Is it likely that anyone today could invent false statements concerning the origin, history, and languages of well known nations?" <sup>6</sup> The debate in the Kuzari, according to this understanding, is an entirely different kind of philosophical argument than Rav Saadia's or the Rambam's metaphysical proofs from first principles.

However, I believe that Rabbi Yehudah Halevi's intent is an even greater departure from *Emunos VeDei'os* and *Moreh Nevuchim*. In response to the king's surprise at his focus on our national experience rather than arguing from first principles, the rabbi went as far as questioning the value of philosophical proofs altogether. "You are discussing religion based on speculation and system, the research of thought, but this is open to many doubts. Ask the philosophers, you will find that they do not agree on a single action or principle, since some positions can be established by arguments that are only partially compelling, and still much less capable of being proved with certainty." <sup>7</sup> For every position backed by a philosophical argument, there is a philosopher who

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* par. 48,49

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* par. 13

feels his argument demonstrates an opposing viewpoint. The mind is a wonderful organ for justifying conclusions the heart already reached. If we turn the weight of tradition into a philosophical argument about the impossibility of falsifying such traditions, we similarly reduce its value. There will always be those who feel that their opposing argument is more compelling.

The rabbi later told the king of the Khazars that the Greeks lack certainty because they come from the north, descending from Yefes, whereas the Adamic tradition resides with Shem. The king of the Khazaras then asked, "Does this mean that Aristotle's philosophy does not deserve any credence?"

The Rabbi answered, "Certainly. He exerted his mind, because he had no tradition from any reliable source at his disposal..."<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Yehudah Halevi considers the role of debate and proof to be secondary, a back-up for people who have no tradition on which to rely.

This is borne out by experience. Few are the *ba'alei teshuvah* who accepted *Torah* and *mitzvos* because some argument convinced them. At most, the dialogue intrigues someone enough to experience their first Shabbos. It is that first-hand experience upon which we build our *emunah*.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. par. 64,65

Rabbi Shalom Carmy, a prominent professor of philosophy, writes, "The people who keep insisting that it's necessary to prove things about G-d, including His existence, seem to take it for granted that devising these proofs is identical with knowing G-d. Now if I know a human being personally the last thing I'd do, except as a purely intellectual exercise, is prove his or her existence."<sup>9</sup>

The experience of a sunset is unquestionable. So should be our relationship with G-d.

<sup>9</sup> Avodah vol. 7, no. 87  
<<http://www.aishdas.org/avodah/vol07/v07n087.shtml#07>>

#### RABBI DOV KRAMER

## Bakeish Shalom

Usually, the Torah tries to encourage us to come closer to G-d. Yet, in our Parsha, we find that G-d not only tells Moshe to warn the nation to *not* get too close,<sup>1</sup> but asks him to repeat this warning when the moment of G-d's revelation on Mt. Sinai arrives.<sup>2</sup> Although usually the closer one gets to G-d the better, apparently this is not always the case.

"One should not jump higher than the [spiritual] level that is appropriate for him." Rather than pushing to jump as high as one can, the Vilna Gaon<sup>3</sup> warns us to only take one (or two) steps at a time. Explaining the last verse in our parasha,<sup>4</sup> he compares growing in *ruchniyus* to a

ladder: You can climb up one rung at a time, or even two; but if you attempt to climb three rungs at once, you not only do not get to the third rung, but you risk falling all the way to the bottom

Healthy spiritual growth includes being able to sustain a level attained, or even a level comprehended. If you know where you eventually should be, but are not ready to be there just yet, any lesser accomplishments achieved will seem worthless. If one feels that he should know all of *Shas* already, how much satisfaction can learning just one page of Gemora bring? The sense of accomplishment over what was learned – which will help motivate continued learning – is replaced with a feeling of insignificance. There is now a danger that the next day's page will not be studied.

Rav Eliyahu Dessler<sup>5</sup> admits that this danger exists with mussar as well. Although without mussar one cannot "purify the heart," if one comprehends levels that can be reached – eventually – but not at this point, it can be detrimental. The example Rav Dessler brings is of doing things *shelo lishmah*, for less than perfect reasons. While it is obviously important to do *mitzvos* for the right reason, focusing on doing so prematurely can lead to a devaluing of *mitzvos* done *shelo lishmah*. Whereas until now the individual had been doing numerous *mitzvos shelo lishmah*, these *mitzvos* are no longer done at all. Certainly, it would be better to do them all *lishmah*, but if he is not at the point where he will do so, doing them *shelo lishmah* is far better than not doing them in any form whatsoever. Had this person not internalized the importance of doing

<sup>1</sup> Shemos 19:12

<sup>2</sup> 19:21

<sup>3</sup> Commentary to Mishlei 4:12

<sup>4</sup> 20:23, "And you shall not climb my altar by steps," but build a ramp instead.

<sup>5</sup> Michta Me'Eliyahu IV, p. 11

*mitzvos lishmah*, such a situation would not have come about.

Another danger that arises from understanding things too soon is the loss of awe and inspiration.<sup>6</sup> Usually, as one reaches a new level, it is accompanied by a greater understanding of the Creator and His world. This brings excitement to the journey, and anticipation as to what the next accomplishment will bring. However, if one has already peeked at the “enth” level, one will gain no new “revelations” along the way. Rav Dessler uses this to explain why Elisha ben Avuya went astray, and became “Acher.” During his trip through the *Pardes*<sup>7</sup> he caught a glimpse of the Divine Presence, something for which he was not sufficiently prepared.

Ironically, one of the most dangerous times of the year in this regard is Yom Kippur. On the one hand, we can reach a level that we can try to build on the rest of the year. On the other hand, though, we can get caught up in the spiritual excitement and spirit of repentance, and

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-10

<sup>7</sup> Chagigah 14b

fool ourselves into believing that we can accomplish things during the year that we are really not yet ready for. Promises made (even, or especially, to ourselves) that cannot be kept are far worse than promises never made in

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the first place.<sup>8</sup> A commitment to do something within reach can be kept; a commitment to do the impossible often precludes accomplishing even the possible.<sup>9</sup>

Is the risk of moving too slowly worth avoiding the dangers of moving too fast? Obviously there is a balance that must be reached, and only through trial and error can that balance be achieved. Recognition that pushing for too much *ruchniyus* can

<sup>8</sup> See Koheles 5:4

<sup>9</sup> See Toras Aish Vol. X Number 34 (Achrei Mos 5763), where I put forth the possibility that the offering to Azazel represents the recognition on Yom Kippur that we must take our evil inclination into account when setting goals for the coming year.

be the work of the *yetzer harah* is a good start.

During my first year studying in *Eretz Yisrael*, when we went to Masada, many of the guys decided to have a (foot) race up the mountain. I did not join the race, but decided to “race” against the clock instead, timing my ascent so that I could compare it to theirs. A few minutes after they started running up the snake path, I started to climb – but instead of running decided to walk briskly and keep moving – without stopping. Along the way, I passed most of the guys huffing and puffing, stopping to rest because they had tired themselves out. I just kept moving at my same pace. Although I wasn’t the first to the top, when I heard the “winner” boast about his time, I knew that I had made it up even faster.

The key is to keep climbing – moving in the right direction. A steady, constant pace, where each step along the way is within our grasp, would seem to be the best way to attain spiritual heights.

### RABBI YAAKOV FELDMAN

## Sefasai Tiftach

**I**t is reported that a terrible series of events had happened near Radin one year, and the Chofetz Chaim and his yeshiva were asked to daven for everyone’s well being. Every yeshiva bochur reached for a Sefer Tehillim and began to cry out when the Chofetz Chaim said something quite unexpected.

“Enough! That’s what Dovid HaMelech would have said,” he exclaimed. “Now we have to daven”

and he went on to call out, “Ribbono Shel Olam! Please, please help us...”<sup>1</sup>

The clear implication, of course, is that we should “speak for ourselves” when we daven to Hashem in dire circumstances; address Him on our own rather than depend upon set texts. Of course, that does not address how we are to approach fixed tefillah, but it does open a

<sup>1</sup> Cited in *Sh’ifos*, p. 229

window for us as to the attitude the holy ones thought we should assume when we daven in general.

In fact, Ramchal tells us that we should realize that, when we daven, we are “quite literally standing before Hashem” who is “listening to and hearing (us)”. It should dawn on us that we are “involved in a give-and-take with Him” then, and that it would do us well to speak to Him “the very way someone would carry on a conversation” – let’s say,

an *intense* conversation – with someone.<sup>2</sup> The example par excellence of that, of course, was Moshe Rabbeinu's experience in our parasha, at Har Sinai.

Since it is there that "Moshe went up to Hashem ... (who then) called to him" in response (Shemos 19:3); where Hashem said "Behold, I come to you in a thick cloud" (v. 9); and where "Hashem (indeed) came down" and "called Moshe up" (v. 20).

Now, imagine how daunting and undoing that must have been! Nonetheless, that is the sort of experience each and every Jew who was there had, Rav Yechezkel Levenshtein argues.<sup>3</sup> It follows then that it is the archetypical tefillah experience for which we are to strive.

Honestly, though, who could ever achieve that level day after day; shacharis, mincha, and mariv? And who could even get past "Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzchak v'Elokei Yaakov" in the Amidah – to say nothing of "Boruch Atta Hashem"?

So we will offer a way to at least utter "Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzchak v'Elokei Yaakov" with conviction in this essay, in the hopes that the impression left behind by our having said at least that in the right spirit will carry us further along in our tefillos.

Let us start off by offering another point that Rav Levenshtein makes. He says that the reason everyone at Har Sinai experienced the same thing that Moshe did was because they had all achieved his level of prophecy. So let us depict the prophetic experience for a bit and concentrate upon Moshe Rabbeinu's level. In fact, we have something of an obligation to strive for some semblance of prophecy

ourselves when we daven, since we are told to duplicate the efforts of the early pious ones who "came to divest themselves of physicality and to be so overtaken by reason (i.e., pure insight) that they nearly achieved prophecy"<sup>4</sup> when they davened.

Rambam said that prophecy was achieved when one's thoughts were "permanently attuned above", and one concentrated upon "understanding the pure and holy forms", and set out to gaze "upon Hashem's wisdom in its entirety ... and to see Hashem's greatness in them."<sup>5</sup>

Moshe's level, though, was a whole other order of prophecy. Rambam writes that "while the other prophets received their prophecies in a dream or vision, Moshe received his while awake and standing"; while "the other prophets were frightened (when they prophesied) ... Moshe was not"; etc. Rambam also adds a point which is central to our approach to this essay. He says that while "the other prophets received their prophecies through (the intercedence of) an angel ... Moshe, on the other hand, did not" (Ibid. 7:6). Yet we learn that early on in his "career" Moshe did indeed have a prophetic experience with the help of an angel. We are told in Parshas Shemos that "Moshe ... came to the mountain of G-d, to Horeb (and suddenly) *an angel of G-d appeared to him* in a flame of fire in the midst of a bush" (Shemos 3: 1-2). At that point "G-d called out to him out in the midst of the bush" (v. 4) and identified Himself as we address Him in our tefillos – as "Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzchak v'Elokei Yaakov" (v. 6). It is then that He enunciated the great and wondrous things He was about to do for our sake.

<sup>4</sup> *Shulchan Aruch*, Orach Chaim 98:1

<sup>5</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchos Dei'os 7:1

Hence, it is our contention that the following is the best way to foster the sort of intimacy required of us when we daven, which is to say, to stand face to face with Hashem and to engage in frank conversation despite the "scripted" nature of tefillah. And it is based on the stress the Baalei Mussar place on picturing things in your mind in order to be truly moved by them.

I suggest that we think of ourselves as novice prophets, if you will – rank beginners, still "wet behind the ears". And that we sally down the path to our place in shul, and imagine ourselves suddenly being struck by the sight of something ordinary yet miraculous (like a burning bush). Finally, we would do well to reflect upon the fact that the sight itself is an emanation of Hashem's will (as is everything), and that we concentrate upon the phrase "Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzchak v'Elokei Yaakov" with the sense that it was the phrase that Hashem Himself identified as the point of entry for a "good conversation". I personally have found this to be an effective means of renewing tefillah.

May the Ribbono Shel Olam grant us all the willingness to engage Him in frank give-and-takes our whole lives long.

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<sup>2</sup> *Messilas Yesharim*, Ch. 19

<sup>3</sup> *Ohr Yechezkel* vol. 7, p. 34