

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd the Lord spoke to Moses saying, 'Speak to Aaron and to his sons saying so shall you bless the children of Israel; say to them, may the Lord bless you and keep you...'” (Numbers 6:22-27)

There are very few passages of the Bible which are as well known as the "Priestly Benediction". In Israel the kohanim-priests rise to bless the congregation every single morning. However in the Diaspora the Ashkenazi Jews include this special benediction only on the Festivals. Nevertheless there are many life-cycle celebrations, such as circumcisions, redemptions of the first born, bar & bat mitzvoth and even weddings which are punctuated by this Priestly Blessing. In effect, the kohen-priest stands as G-d's representative, as the "agent of the Compassionate One", as the spiritual leader and as the Torah teacher-and in this function as teacher and guide-he calls upon G-d to bless the congregation. As Moses declares in his final blessing to the Israelites, "(The Priests and Levites) shall guard Your covenant, shall teach Your laws to Jacob and Your Torah to Israel..." (Deut. 33:9,10)

The Talmud (in the 9th chapter of Berachot) as well as our Prayer Liturgy declare "At the time of the priestly blessings, the congregation responds, 'Master of the Universe I am Yours and my dreams are Yours'. Apparently our Sages saw a profound connection between the dreams of the Congregation of Israel and the function of their priest leaders. Exactly what is the nature of that connection?

I would suggest that first and foremost a leader and an educator must inspire his students-congregants-nation, with a lofty vision, with an exalted dream. The Psalmist and sweet singer of Israel, King David declares in the Psalm which we recite each Sabbath and Festival before the reciting the Grace after Meals, "When the Lord returned with the restoration of Zion we were as dreamers"; after all, had the Jews not

dreamt of the return to Israel throughout their long exiles, we never would have returned to our homeland.

One sees the same idea from the opposite vantage point when one realizes the cause of the great tragedy of the Book of Numbers. In Numbers, the Jewish people descends from the great heights of the Revelation at Sinai to the disastrous depths of the sin of the scouts, the rebellion of Korah, the sin of Moses and the destruction of that entire generation in the desert. What caused such a mighty fall? The Bible itself begins its account of the descent with the words, "And it happened that the nation kvetched (mitonenim) evily." (Numbers 11:1) The 18th century Netziv explains the difficult Hebrew word mitonenim as meaning "wandering hither and thither" aimlessly and without purpose or direction, from the Hebrew *anna*. Simply put, this great Torah leader was saying that the Israelites had lost the dream and the vision which they felt at Sinai when they had cried out "We shall do and we shall internalize," when they accepted upon themselves the Divine mission of being a "Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation." They descended into destruction because they lost the dream.

Secondly, the Hebrew word for dream is *halom*, and-with a simple switch of letters, it spells *hamal* which means love and compassion. The priest leader who inspires with his dream must first and foremost love his nation; only if he loves the Israelites will they believe themselves worthy of being loved, will they believe in their ability to realize the dream and achieve the vision. Great leaders such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and David Ben Gurion lifted their respective nations to unheard of heights because they helped make them believe in themselves.

Thirdly, the Hebrew word *halom*-with another switch of letters spells *lohem* which means fighting, warring (if need be) to achieve the necessary goals. A great measure of imparting a dream is to impart idealistic sacrifice on behalf of that dream.

Fourthly, the Hebrew word *halom* also spells *lehem*; a dream must be nourished with the material necessities of program, tactics and strategy necessary to accomplish the dream.

Fifthly, the Hebrew word *halom* also spells *melah* or salt. Salt symbolizes tears-the tears of sacrifice and commitment-as well as eternity, since salt never putrefies. Salt is therefore the symbol of our

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חיה פינה בת ר' יעקב יוסף ז"ל

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Covenant with G-d, the Covenant which guarantees Jewish eternity and ultimate redemption.

And finally, halom is linguistically tied to halon, a window, a light to the outside world. The dream with which the priest-kohen must inspire the Israelites is a dream which encompasses the entire world, the dream of "Through you shall be blessed all the families of the earth", the dream of, " They shall beat their saws into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks".

Those who believe in a G-d who is invisible may well dare to dream the dream which is impossible but only those who dream the impossible will ever achieve the incredible. © 2006 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI LEVI COOPER

Prayer as a Strongbox

Is the identity of the authors of our supplications and their intentions of any significance when we stand in prayer before the Almighty? Perhaps the substance of our prayers is solely a function of the meaning we lend to the words we say? The Talmud appears to deem authorship important as it reports that Shimon HaPekuli arranged the order of 18 blessings that give the amida its synonomous title - the shemoneh esrei (the 18) (B. Berakhot 28b).

Following this act, the leader of rabbinic Jewry, Rabban Gamliel of Yavneh (Eretz Yisrael, first-second centuries) turned to his colleagues: "Is there anyone who knows how to compile birkat haminin (the benediction against heretics)?" These dissenters whom Rabban Gamliel wished to censure were Jews who had been enticed by early Christianity and strayed from the path of tradition. Their presence within the community, coupled with their belief in Jesus, was seen as a threat to the fabric of Judaism. Rabbinic leadership decided that there was no place in Jewish society for such heretics and hence sought to denounce them in the amida.

The Talmud relates: Shmuel HaKatan (the lesser) arose and authored this, the nineteenth blessing of the amida. What was the challenge in composing this portion of the amida, and what expertise was needed to author this benediction?

If we contrast the new addition with the rest of the amida, we see that the entire amida is filled with

kindness and love, while the benediction censuring the heretics is the only section of the amida that contains destructive sentiments. Indeed, it is entirely natural that one who tries to uproot or dismember the faith of others will incur the wrath of those who hold those beliefs to be essential and sacred. A benediction against heretics, therefore, should have been the easiest portion to compose, as many people would have passionately despised these agitators.

Though such an angry reaction is to be expected, the first chief rabbi of the Land of Israel, Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook (1865-1935) writes that a benediction reverberating with negativity should only be composed by one who is pure of heart. Such a person will not blend personal feelings of hate into the canonized texts of the liturgy. Such an untainted person would author the benediction with wholesome motives, focusing only on the Divine plan.

Rabbi Kook continues explaining that it is for this reason that Shmuel HaKatan was truly suited to compose this portion of the amida decrying the heretics. Who was Shmuel HaKatan, and why was he the appropriate candidate? The Talmud relates that Rabban Gamliel invited a rabbinic quorum of seven sages in order to officially declare a leap year (B. Sanhedrin 11a). When the quorum assembled, they found that one had come uninvited.

"Who has come uninvited? Let him leave!" bellowed Rabban Gamliel.

Without hesitation, Shmuel HaKatan stepped forward: "It is I who have come uninvited. But I did not come to participate as a member of the quorum; I came to learn practical halacha." Rabban Gamliel responded with kind praise: "Be seated, my son, be seated. All the years are worthy of being made into leap years by you." The Talmud concludes the account by telling us that Shmuel HaKatan was not really the guilty party, yet he "owned up" in order to save the interloper from embarrassment.

Indeed, our sages offer some insight into the appellation Shmuel "the lesser" (Y. Sota 24b). According to one approach, Shmuel would diminish his own status and hence was known as HaKatan. Another approach suggests that Shmuel was only slightly lesser than the biblical prophet Shmuel. Either way, Shmuel HaKatan was clearly no small player.

A telltale aphorism of Shmuel HaKatan is found in the mishnaic tractate Avot (4:19): "Shmuel HaKatan says - 'When your enemy falls, do not exult, and when he trips, your heart should not rejoice. Lest the Lord see it and be displeased, and avert His wrath from upon him.' (Proverbs 24:17-18)." This adage of Shmuel HaKatan is indeed strange, for he merely quotes a verse without adding any additional insight. Yet herein lies the key to understanding the many aphorisms in Avot. The dicta quoted are clearly not the only words of the sage; we already know that Shmuel HaKatan's

contribution goes beyond this quote. Rather, the maxims represent sayings that each sage would harp upon, urging his community to carefully consider.

In the case of Shmuel HaKatan, he would exhort his followers to focus on this verse and its implications. Though the other might be your adversary, the downfall of this enemy is not a cause for celebration. It is this banner of Shmuel HaKatan that qualified him to compose birkat haminin.

Why is the intent of the author important? When we pray, we invest the words with meaning from our own meditative thoughts. The pure focus of the author - in this case Shmuel HaKatan - does not appear to be bound to the words of the liturgy. This idea might lead us to wonder whether those of us who are not pure of heart should even be reciting this portion of the amida.

Here, too, Rabbi Kook provides us with direction. He writes that we recite the words of the liturgy by right of the G-dly authors. Though we may be distant from these people of distinguished spirit, we lean on their lofty intent when we recite the prayers. The words of our prayers are umbilically connected to the intentions of the sages who authored those words.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for 'word' in talmudic parlance is teiva (pl. teivot). Teiva is also a box or container of sorts. The words of our prayers can each be seen as teivot, strongboxes containing the thoughts of the authors.

To be sure, we aspire to open the vaults of prayer and access the intentions of the authors. If we do not succeed in retrieving the original connotations and subtext and we find ourselves mumbling words, these words are nevertheless invested with meaning by the great authors who bequeathed these prayers - words and intentions - to us. © 2006 Rabbi L Cooper. Rabbi Levi Cooper is Director of Advanced Programs at Pardes. His column appears weekly in the Jerusalem Post "Upfront" Magazine. Each column analyses a passage from the first tractate, of the Talmud, Brachot, citing classic commentators and adding an innovative perspective to these timeless texts.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**M**ay G-d raise His face towards you,” i.e. bestow favor upon you (Bamidbar 6:26). The Talmud (Nidah 70b) asks how G-d could instruct the Kohanim to bless the nation this way, implying that if G-d follows through with the blessing/request He will do things for them that they don't really deserve, when another verse (Devarim 10:17) says explicitly that "G-d does not bestow favor." The Talmud answers that before a decree has been made G-d does in fact "bestow favor" (as indicated by the first verse), while afterwards He does not.

Tosfos asks why the Talmud gives a different answer than the answer given elsewhere (Berachos 20b). The administering angels asked G-d how, if the Torah says that G-d does not bestow favor, can He bestow favor upon the Nation of Israel, as indicated by the priestly blessings. G-d responds by asking how could He *not* favor them, being that they have accepted upon themselves to thank Him for their food (by saying Birchas Hamazon) even when they are not full (as long as they have eaten a minimal amount of bread, i.e. a kezayis or a kebaya), despite only be required to say it when satiated. Shouldn't the Talmud be consistent when answering what seems to be the same question?

The Sefer HaPardes (Shaar haAsiri) asks a more fundamental question. If bestowing favor (i.e. treating some better than others, and/or treating anyone better than they deserve to be treated) is not something that G-d does, then no matter what "chumra" (extra stringency) the nation took upon itself, G-d should not cut them any slack. And if G-d does bestow favor, why would the Torah warn us that He doesn't? Providing a reason why He would or should treat us better than we deserve to be treated does not address the issue of His supposedly not putting *anyone* "above the law," no matter what.

The Rashba (in his Chidushay Agados) explains that G-d does not play favorites, but goes straight down the line based on what is deserved. What G-d was telling the angels was that they were mistaken. They thought that G-d treated the nation better than they deserved to be treated, so G-d explained to them why they were being treated exactly as they deserved to be. Since they went beyond the letter of the law and said Birchas Hamazon even when they hadn't been required to, strict justice dictated that He treat them better than He otherwise would have. It was no longer "bestowing favor upon them" to treat them better; He was merely treating them exactly as they deserved to be treated.

Based on this Rashba, we can try to answer Tosfos' question. The angels had asked about the "contradiction" between how G-d said He would treat everyone and how He actually treated some, based on their erroneous understanding of what was actually deserved. However, even after their misunderstanding was cleared up, we still have to explain the apparent contradiction between the two verses. After all, what the angels thought to be "bestowing favor" turned out not to be, so couldn't be what the priestly blessings are referring to. Therefore, the Talmud, despite knowing the conversation between G-d and the angels, had to explain how one verse can indicate that G-d does not bestow favor while the other indicates that He does. The Talmud provided one possible answer and the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 11:7) provides several others, while several commentators (e.g. Rashbam) explain why there's really no contradiction at all.

May G-d bestow His favor upon us, and bless us all with peace. © 2006 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI BEREL WEIN

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The tribe of Levi was counted independently in the desert of Sinai, apart from all of its fellow Israelites. Almost from its onset, the tribe of Levi was deemed to be special. Even though it had a violent start in its history, as Levi himself was one of the chief instigators of the rift between Joseph and the brothers as well as being a destroyer of the city of Shchem, the tribe of Levi, already in Egypt, began to redefine itself almost exclusively in terms of pious leadership and service within Israel. It became the miniature "kingdom of priests and holy nation," the prototype for all of the other tribes and individual families of the Jewish people. Therefore, after the debacle of the Golden Calf in the desert, the first-born Jews forfeited their original priestly role and the tribe of Levi was then designated as their successors "for the [holy] work and the burden [of public service]." The tribe of Levi was "given over" to G-d's service, to engage in the holy work of the Temple, and perhaps even more importantly, to become the teachers of Torah and the role-models of life-behavior and values for their fellow Jews. As such, the tribe of Levi was separated from ordinary life. It owned no property in the Land of Israel, it was freed from most taxes and national service burdens, it was supported by the tithes and contributions of its fellow Jews, and it devoted itself exclusively to the fulfillment of its G-dly charge of spiritual example, education and inspiration in the midst of the Jewish people. Being a Levite was thus a distinction and an honor but it carried with it grave responsibilities, high expectations and constant demands. In the eyes of the rest of Israel, a Levi had to behave as a Levi. Failure to do so, was deemed to be a desecration of the holy name of G-d itself.

After the destruction of the Temple, the tribe of Levi lost much of its unique role in the Jewish world, though vestiges of its preferred status were retained as a reminder of its chosen standing. But the task of the Levites in being the nucleus of Torah knowledge and moral inspiration for the Jewish world still remained. Even though there was no longer a Temple, a Levi still had to behave as a Levi. Perhaps even more now than ever, in a "Templeless" exile, the Jewish people required spiritual teachers and role-models, people who operated above the mundane problems and requirements of every day life, and who therefore would introduce the spark and color of holy behavior into the drab and depressing world of Jewish exile. Apparently, in the new and more difficult Jewish world of exile, just the tribe of Levi alone would not be sufficient for the task. Therefore, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, in his monumental Mishne Torah, states that every human

being can now become a Levi. In his golden words: "Every person who enters this world, whose spirit moves him and his intellect instructs him, to separate himself [from the pettiness of the world] in order to stand before G-d, to truly serve Him, to be responsible to Him, to know Him, and to walk upright and straight in His paths as G-d created him; and he has freed himself from the yoke of petty human considerations that other people pursue - such a person has sanctified himself as being holy of holies, and the Lord is his share and inheritance for all time and all worlds, and he will receive in the World to Come his proper and fulfilling [reward] as G-d has given such to the Priests and the Levites."

Let us be on the lookout therefore to discern the true Levites in the Jewish and general world. Let us be aware of the Levi who behaves as a Levi, and give that exalted person due honor, recognition and emulation. Let us count those Levites separately from the whole nation and extend to them our appreciation and blessing. © 2006 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The very name of our portion Naso, encapsulates a central Jewish idea which resonates, especially during the difficult times in Israel today.

On the one hand, the word naso may be related to masa, which means "burden." From this perspective, naso means to be weighted down, to feel the pressure of the world. Naso could also mean to lift or to be above. While these definitions may be viewed as conflicting, they actually encompass a common message.

As a rabbi, I am constantly awed by individuals who seem to be so average, and yet, when faced with adversity, are able to reach beyond and overcome. This amazing phenomenon gives me strength to continue to believe, despite the fact that there is so much pain and suffering in the world.

This may be the confluence of naso as burden and naso as to lift. It is often the case that precisely when one feels burdened and weighted down, one finds the inner strength to rise above and to exceed one's grasp.

The ability of people, to do that which they never ever thought they could is an expression of the image of G-d in all of us. As G-d is infinite and endless, so too do we, created in the image of G-d, have the power to do the extraordinary.

We, here in America, should learn through our sisters and brothers in Israel. As they face adversity, we cannot allow ourselves to become the Jews of

silence. We must learn from them the message of courage and fortitude, and in the face of crisis, speak out.

Sometimes I think that there are no great people in this world. Rather there are only great challenges. When they arise, ordinary people reach deep down to accomplish the extraordinary. The word *naso* reflects this most incredible phenomenon. © 2006 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI ELIYOHU HOFFMANN

Olas Shabbos B'Shabbato

Hashem said to Moshe: Take a head count (lit.: Lift up the heads) of the sons of Gershon. Hashem commands Moshe, leader of Israel and shepherd of His flock, as He likewise says to all subsequent 'Moshes,' that they must (amongst their many other responsibilities) intervene on behalf of His children with their prayers and blessings, and elevate the heads of an otherwise broken (Gershon=divorced, exiled, unconnected) nation.

What form should their prayers take? Also them ('gam hem') -- beseech Me to give them more and more (the word *gam* in the Talmud always comes to include or increase [see Esther Rabbah 3:9]).

In what merit will Hashem find us deserving? In accordance with their families and their Father's houses-remind Me of their righteous ancestors, Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov; in their merit I will bring all forms of blessing and grace upon their descendents. [Be'er Moshe]

The Mishna (Bava Metzia 83a) tells the story of Rabbi Yochanan ben Masya, who sent his son to hire workers. He told them, "Come and work for us, and my father will take care of your meals." When he returned and related to his father what he was done, R' Yochanan told him, "My son, what have you done?! Even if you prepare for them feasts like those of King Solomon, you will not have fulfilled your obligation! After all, they are the descendents of Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov."

So many of our prayers begin with the formula, "Elokeinu v'Elokei avoseinu/Our G-d and G-d of our ancestors." Perhaps due to its frequency, we often gloss over this introductory phrase, focusing instead on the entreaty that follows. If we appreciated the power invoking the merit of our great forefathers carries, and its potential to increase the efficacy of our prayers, maybe we would give these words more than just a cursory recital.

Descending from such giants of the spirit is itself a matter of immeasurable merit. How much more so if we not only invoke the righteous deeds of our ancestors, but also emulate their lives.

Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov, the Gemara relates (Bava Basra 17a), were all blessed with "kol/everything (i.e. there was no form of good they did not receive [Rashi])." Avraham: "And Hashem blessed Avraham ba-kol/with everything (Bereishis/Genesis 24:1)." Yitzchok: "And I have partaken mi-kol/from everything (Ibid. 27:33)." Yaakov: "And I have kol/everything (Ibid. 33:11)." This is the source to our prayer at the end of Birkas Ha-mazon (Grace after Meals): Just as our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov, were blessed-bakol-mikol-kol-so too may He bless us all together.

What did the Avos do to merit such comprehensive blessings? The Gemara (Sotah 5a) implies it came to them in the merit of their humility; when we humble ourselves, their blessings will be perpetuated in us: "The haughty will be reduced, while those who humble themselves, ki-kol/like all they will leap (Iyov 24:24)-like Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov, who merited the blessing of kol."

If the essence of arrogance is self-centredness, then the essence of humility must be its opposite-the realization that our purpose in life is not to serve ourselves but rather subservience to Hashem and to His people. The bolt that fastens the propeller to the airplane indeed plays a most critical role in its flight; without it, the aircraft would be doomed. Yet as critical as its role is, it's still just a small part of the overall picture. It would be foolish to say that the flight of a plane centres around its propeller-bolt.

Each Jew likewise has a critical and irreplaceable purpose in the function of the nation Israel which he must find, recognize and fulfill, and there's no arrogance in saying and believing this. It's when we start seeing our role and function as more critical than that of others that we part ways from the example of our holy ancestors. As long as we remember that we're 'gam hem/them too'-we're just a small piece of a giant puzzle that spans continents and millennia-then we will be firmly backed by the merit of their families and their Father's houses. [Ibid.]

The Gemara (Berachos 20b) relates a question (challenge) that the administering angels (mal'achei ha-shares) put to the Holy One, Blessed is He, regarding the Birkas Kohanim (Priestly blessings) found in this week's parsha:

Master of the Universe: Did You not write in Your Torah, 'Who does not show favour, and does not accept bribes (Devarim/Deuteronomy 10:17)?' Yet You do show favour to Israel, as it says, "May Hashem show favour to you, and grant you peace! (6:26)"

Replied the Almighty: How can I not show them favour? I wrote in the Torah (Devarim 8:10), "And you shall eat, and you shall be satisfied, and you shall bless Hashem your G-d." (I.e. the mitzvah to recite Birkas Ha-mazon only applies if one has eaten his full.) Yet they are particular to recite it even when they've eaten

only an egg-sized, or even an olive sized portion of bread!"

How does our scrupulousness to recite Grace even over a small portion explain Hashem showing us favour? R' Bunim of P'shischa explains: We evaluate the presents we receive based on two criteria; the size or worth of the present, and who it came from. Even a relatively small present can still be extremely valuable to its recipient if its giver is someone very special.

By reciting Grace after eating, we recognize that our food, along with everything we have, are the gifts of Hashem. Our added enthusiasm to bentsch over even small amounts of bread from which we are halachically exempt expresses the gratitude we feel to be the recipients of Hashem's kindness. The exact amount of food we've eaten is far less important to us than from Whom it came.

In return, Hashem 'shows us favour' by rejoicing with and rewarding us handsomely for our Torah and mitzvos even when they're sub-optimum. He takes into account the fact that we are just lowly flesh-and-blood, with all kinds of complex problems and character flaws. He too looks at the who, and not at the what. [Arugos Ha-bosem]

Perhaps, based on what we discussed above, we can offer a different answer along the same lines. Another factor that may cause the recipient of a present to feel honoured and 'gifted' despite its size is when, in his extreme humility, he feels any gift at all is far more than he deserves. Obligating ourselves to bentsch over even a bite-sized portion, as much as it demonstrates our love of Hashem, also speaks volumes about our lack of self-centredness and egoism. Instead of the self-pity of one who always feels he deserves more, we recognize our place in the scheme of Hashem's universe: He calls the shots, and we're thankful for having the opportunity to be a bolt in His great machinery. We don't presume to expect or demand anything in return, and are sincerely thankful for anything we receive.

The Hebrew word for showing favour is "yisa Panav/He will lift His face to you." Picture a very busy and important businessman sitting at his elegant mahogany desk, his head buried in the important papers in front of him. Someone, perhaps a lowly clerk, enters his office to ask him a favour. If the supplicant finds grace in his eyes, he lifts up his face to listen to his request and grant him the favour. Perhaps, then, the idea of nesi'us Panim, Hashem so to speak lifting His face, implies Hashem showing us favour by listening to our prayers and granting our wishes.

We already established that in the merit of our forefathers-especially when we walk in their steps and emulate their modesty and humility-our prayers are answered and our wishes granted. They recite grace on even the smallest portion of bread-thereby expressing humility and appreciation that we're just a

cog (though remember the importance of each and every cog!) in Hashem's wheel. So how can I not lift My face to them-and answer their prayers whenever they call out to me?!

The Mishna (Shabbos 14:4) quotes the opinion of Rabbi Shimon (bar Yochai) that it is permissible to smear one's skin with rose-oil on Shabbos, even though under normal circumstances only royalty (b'nei m'lachim/sons of kings) would use such rare and expensive oil as an ointment. After all, says R' Shimon, "All Jews are the sons of kings!" Being sons of kings-our great and illustrious ancestors-carries some hefty benefits. It also carries the noble responsibility of remembering that our behaviour must reflect the lessons they bequeathed us, and give honour to the King Whom we serve. © 2006 Rabbi E. Hoffmann & torah.org

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah shares with us an incredible perspective on sanctity and self control. The focus of the haftorah is the heavenly message sent to the pious Manoach and his wife informing them of her miraculous conception of a special son, Shimshon. Manoach's wife, a righteous woman who was barren for many years was suddenly informed by an angel that she would bear a child. She was also given specific instructions during pregnancy restricting her from all wine and wine-related products. She was informed that her son would be dedicated to Hashem from the day he was born and could never shave off his hair. The angel also stated that Hashem would bring much salvation to the Jewish people through this precious boy.

This is the first chapter in the life of the famous Jewish leader, Shimshon. However, in the subsequent chapters of his life we discover the life's trials of the most perplexing leader in all of Jewish history. On the one hand, Shimshon was a powerful and effective judge who maintained the highest ethical standard. In fact, our Chazal (Yerushalmi Rosh Hashana 2:8) place Shimshon amongst the greatest of all Jewish judges paralleling him, in some ways, to Moshe Rabbeinu himself. Shimshon also merited that the Divine Presence of Hashem preceded him to secure his every step with success. And it was solely in Shimshon's merit that Hashem constantly protected the Jewish nation (see Sota 9b, 10a). Yet, at the same time we discover a man succumbing to physical passions being constantly enticed by Philistine women. Eventually Shimshon fell prey to the persuasion of his Philistine wife Delila and forfeited all his sanctity and greatness. How can this glorious, yet so tragic life be understood and explained and what can be learned from this perplexing story? (See Derech Bina to Shoftim by Rabbi Avrohom Shoshana)

We begin with the words of the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 10:5) in explanation of Shimshon's unique experience of Nezirus (restriction from wine). In general, one accepts the abstentions of a Nazir for a period of a month or two but never for an entire lifetime. This week's parsha reveals that the purpose for the short restrictive period of Nazirus was to serve as a model lesson for life. Typically, the Nazir briefly abstained from certain mundane activities to gain control over his physical passions and cravings. This was obviously not the case for Shimshon who was obligated in Nezirus since his birth. The above Midrash clarifies this matter and states, "Hashem, knowing that Shimshon's nature would be to stray after his eyes, restricted him from wine which leads to immorality." Chazal continue, "And if Shimshon albeit a Nazir did stray after his eyes one could only imagine what would have happened without the restriction of wine." Our Chazal share with us an important insight into the life of Shimshon. Apparently, his nature and consequent role in life revolved around an attraction to women and it was intended for the Nezirus restriction to hold him back from sin.

To put this into perspective we refer to the words of the Radak (Shoftim 13:4) which explain the setting of Shimshon's times. Radak explains that the Jewish people's devotion to Hashem had severely fallen during those times. Because of this they did not merit total salvation by Hashem and remained under Philistine rule throughout this entire era. However, the Philistines deserved to be revenged for their harsh rule over the Jews and for this reason Hashem sent Shimshon to the scene. The Scriptures indicate (see Shoftim 14:4) that it was the will of Hashem that Shimshon mingle with the Philistines to cause them pain and strife from within their very own camp. It can be understood that for this reason Hashem actually sanctioned, in principle, Shimshon's marriage to Philistine women, given their conversion to Judaism. Although they did actually convert (see Radak adloc. and Rambam Isurai Beiah 14:14) the potential did exist for Shimshon to be influenced by their foreign ideals and allegiances of their past.

In essence, Hashem provided Shimshon with the appropriate nature for his role and he was naturally attracted to the Philistine women he encountered. This allowed Shimshon to be regarded as one of the Philistines and set the stage for a perfect inside job. The Radak explains that Shimshon's motive of bonding with Philistine Jewish converts to secretly attack the Philistine nation was a proper motive. However, this powerful drive to marry Philistine women served as a double-edged sword. And when Shimshon added to his pure motive small degrees of attraction to beauty his actions were disqualified. Granted that the overwhelming percentage of his motivation was proper and pure, nonetheless a subtle attraction to Philistine

women's beauty did accompany his thoughts. Eventually this soft physical drive overtook Shimshon, and after succumbing to his wife's seduction, lost his pure motives and forfeited all of his sanctity and greatness.

We now appreciate Shimshon's lifelong abstention period of Nezirus and its projected impact on his personal conduct. This perpetual state was intended to serve as an anchor for Shimshon to control and subdue his physical urges and steer him away from immorality. The comprehensive picture drawn from our haftorah is the following. Shimshon was ordained to live a life of sanctity from the moment of conception until the end of his life. His parents carefully protected him from all impurities and raised him in a perfect atmosphere of sanctity. This childhood groomed him to be a perfect candidate for the constant manifestation of the Divine Presence itself. However, as we painfully discover none of the above guarantees one from foreign immoral influences. And when, alongside the purest of motives, one includes physical drives and passions the result can be devastating. Even the pure Shimshon was then prone to plunging deeply into immorality and open to forfeiting all that life had in store for him. From this we learn the importance of pure motives and that any degree of intended personal gratification can undo all the good we seek to accomplish. © 2006 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF

Sfas Emes

The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar with a pasuk (and a Medrash) that come well into the parsha. The fact that the Sfas Emes skipped over other potential topics means that he saw special significance in the subject that he did select. The pasuk that the Sfas Emes saw as especially meaningful comes in Bemidbar (6:2): "ish oh isha ki yafli lindor neder nazir..." (ArtScroll: "... a man or a woman who shall dissociate himself by taking a Nazirite vow...").

The meaning of these words is not obvious, so the Sfas Emes elaborates. He explains that being a nazir means that a person separates himself from matters of olam hazeh (this world) even though in fact, he is involved in olam hazeh. That may sound like a contradiction. In fact, it is a contradiction. But the Sfas Emes does not hesitate to confront apparent cosmic inconsistencies. He explains that HaShem gives us the power to cling to the Source-of His Presence-which is present in all things. Thus, the Sfas Emes is telling us that this capacity to be part-of-yet separate from-olam hazeh depends on our maintaining contact with the chiyus (vibrancy, vitality) that HaShem put into all Creation. The Sfas Emes calls this phenomenon "pehle"- from the same root as a word in the pasuk-"yafli".

Clearly, the Sfas Emes regards the topic of the nazir as extremely important. And equally clearly, "pehle" is a key word for understanding what nezirus is all about. How does the Sfas Emes arrive at his reading: namely, that the word "pehle" refers to our capacity to maintain contact with the inner vitality that HaShem has placed in all Creation? A pasuk from the haftora of Parshas Naso (Shoftim, 13:18) provides some help. That pasuk contains the word "peli"-a word that all the commentaries render as "mechuseh" or "ne'ehlam"-i.e., hidden. That is to say: Our capacity to connect with ruchniyus even though we are involved in olam hazeh is a phenomenon beyond our understanding. Thus, we are dealing here with a familiar situation: our limited capacity to understand how the cosmos functions.

For further clarification of the word "yafli", the Sfas Emes sends us to an unexpected source. He directs us to a remark of the Rema in Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim, Siman 6. The Rema there comments on a phrase in the berocha- the blessing-of asher yatzar". The Rema observes that the phrase "umafli la'asos" (HaShem, "Who does wondrous things") refers to a unique creature that HaShem has fashioned with His boundless creativity. What creature does the Rema have in mind?

Human beings, can, in principle, combine ruchniyus (spirituality) with gashmiyus (corporeality). Thus, following the Sfas Emes's approach, we can translate the pasuk with which he began this ma'amar as: "If a person commits to doing that wondrous thing-something whose feasibility is to us, with our limited knowledge, hidden-that is, to take a Nazarite vow...".

Notice what the Sfas Emes is doing here. Earlier he defined a nazir as a person who is not involved in olam hazeh even though in fact he is involved in olam hazeh. That sounds paradoxical. But by introducing us to the concept and halachos of nazir, the Torah is telling us that such a combination is indeed feasible. And the Sfas Emes brings support for this view by citing a berocha that celebrates the reality of such a combination, which HaShem has built into all humankind. The take-home lesson is clear: being bahsar vedahm (flesh and blood) need not bar us from living a life of spirituality.

The Sfas Emes moves on now to another line of thought. He quotes the Medrash Rabba on our pasuk. The Medrash, in turn, brings a pasuk from Shir Hashirim (5:15): "Shokav amudei shesh... " ("The Torah's columns that support the world are marble... "). The Medrash (and the Sfas Emes) read "shokav" as coming from the same root as the Hebrew word "teshuka"-yearning. In other words, they read 'shokav' as "His yearning". Thus, the Medrash tells us that HaShem yearned to create the world. This perspective implies that the world is- or can be-a good thing.

The Medrash continues in the same vein, quoting a pasuk that we say in the Friday night kiddush (Bereishis, 2:1): "Va'yechu'lu ha'shamayim vaha'aretz..." In non-pshat mode, the Medrash chooses to read the word "va'yechulu" as coming from the root of another Hebrew word which also denotes yearning or longing. Thus we find a pasuk in (Tehillim, 74:3.) which says: 'nichsefa vegam kalsa nafshi...' (That is: 'My soul yearns for...') You see the link- by allusion-that connects "va'yechulu" and "kalsa".

So far, the Sfas Emes has had to add little to the discussion. The Medrash is so much in a Sfas Emes mode that he can let the Medrash say it all for him. But at this point, the Sfas Emes enters with comment on the pasuk (quoted above): "Shokav amudei sheish... " As noted above, the pshat (simple, literal) meaning of the word "sheish" in this context is: "marble". Hence, the literal meaning: "His columns that support the world are marble. " But in non-pshat mode, the Sfas Emes reads the word "sheish" as "six." Hence, the Sfas Emes can now read the phrase as "The six support the world." Thus, the Sfas Emes is telling us that during the six yemei hama'aseh (workdays), our ma'aseh (work) can connect us with HaShem!

The picture that the Medrash (and the Sfas Emes) give us is a picture in which HaShem, as it were, yearned to create the world. Further, the way He built the world, we can reciprocate His feeling. As the pasuk in Shir Hashirim (7:11) says: "ve'ahlai teshukaso" ("And I yearn for Him"). Taking the relationship a step further, the Sfas Emes endows that pasuk with a secondary meaning, "And His yearning for me depends on my yearning for Him".

Thus, the Sfas Emes views this world in a very positive light. HaShem had a yearning to create this world. (In fact, the Medrash uses a word much stronger than 'yearning': "ta'ava"). As you see, what we have here is a deep, heartfelt relationship between HaShem and the world that He has created- that is, with us.

I suggest that this heartfelt relationship also brings with it a potential danger. HaShem yearns for us. But what if we do not yearn for Him? As we know, spurned love leads to frustration, and frustration leads to anger. And anger can lead to acts of anger. Sad to say, Tanach recounts many such episodes. So too does our people's history in the post-Tanach years.

In any case, the Sfas Emes reminds us that on Shabbos we can come closer to HaShem. And our coming closer gives HaShem nachas (joy). We are told in Shemos, 20:1: "va'yanach ba'yom hashevi'i." (ArtScroll: "And He rested on the seventh day."). The Sfas Emes reads this pasuk as: "And He had nachas [joy] on the seventh day". When we say this pasuk in kiddush on Shabbos morning, let us try to have in mind that on Shabbos we can give HaShem nachas. © 2006 Rabbi N.C. Leff & torah.org