

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah gives us a profound insight into the spiritual direction of our present exile and final redemption. The haftorah begins with the prophet Zecharya experiencing a vision wherein the ordained High Priest, Yehoshua, was brought to a critical trial regarding his pending esteemed position. Zecharya says, "And I was shown the High Priest Yehoshua standing before Hashem's prosecuting angel." (3:1) The reason for this prosecution is stated shortly thereafter in the following words, "And Yehoshua was clothed with soiled garments." (3:3) Our Chazal explain that these garments refer to the wives of Yehoshua's descendants. Although Yehoshua was personally a very pious individual some of his children were adversely affected by the foreign environment of Babylonia. They strayed from their rich heritage of priesthood and married women prohibited to them due to their lofty ritual status. Because of this offense to the priesthood, Yehoshua's personal status of the High Priest was under severe scrutiny.

Suddenly, an angel of Hashem interceded on behalf of Yehoshua and defeated the prosecuting angel with the following statement of defense. "Is Yehoshua not an ember rescued from the fire!? (3:2) This response of defense was quite favorable in the eyes of Hashem and Yehoshua was immediately restored to his lofty position. The angel responded and said, "Remove the soiled garments from upon Yehoshua... See that I have removed his sin from him... Dress him with new garments." The prophet continues, "And they placed the pure priestly turban on his head." (3:4) Rashi (adloc.) explains that Yehoshua was granted the opportunity of rectifying his children's behavior and he successfully influenced them to divorce their wives and marry more appropriate ones. Once Yehoshua's garments-referring to his children's inappropriate spouses- were cleansed Hashem clothed

Yehoshua with the priestly garb and restored him to the position of Kohain Gadol.

What was the angel's powerful defense that produced such immediate favorable results? After his sons' disgrace to the priesthood, what outstanding merit could Yehoshua have possessed that secured his lofty position? The Radak explains that the angel argued that Yehoshua was "an ember rescued from fire." Radak understands this to mean that Yehoshua had been previously thrown into a fiery furnace. He sacrificed his life for the sake of Hashem and was miraculously spared from the fire. Through this heroic act, Yehoshua demonstrated total submission for the sake of Heaven offering his life for Hashem's glory. Such individuals deserve to prominently serve Hashem and His people. Such devotion and commitment must be inculcated into the blood stream of the Jewish people. Although Yehoshua's children veered from the straight path there remained much hope for them.

The shining example of their father could surely inspire them to return from their inappropriate ways. They too could eventually become devout servants of Hashem and attain lofty levels of priesthood. Through their father's guidance they could also rise above their physical and mundane pursuits and develop the purest qualities. In fact, Yehoshua was told that his children could potentially perfect themselves beyond normal levels of human achievement. Hashem said, "I will establish them superior to these angels standing here." (3:7) Yes, Yehoshua's submissiveness could produce untold results and certainly lead his children back to perfect spirituality.

This same lesson is taught to us in this week's parsha regarding the newly appointed judges. We read about the masses of Jewish people straying from the perfect path demonstrating serious leanings towards certain physical and inappropriate dimensions of life. They disgraced the Heavenly manna bread which Hashem sent them on a daily basis and expressed their physical cravings for substitute foods such as; melons, onions and garlic. They even complained about the Torah's strict standards of morality and sought freedom from its taxing and demanding life. Hashem responded with a severe punishment which ended the lives of many thousands of Jewish people. But at the same time Hashem responded to a plea from Moshe Rabbeinu and instituted a structure of seventy elders to share the judicial responsibilities. During this process

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Mrs. Ida Weisberg

חיה פינה בת ר' יעקב יוסף ז"ל

on her 13th yartzeit

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these hand-picked judges experienced an incredible transition. The Torah states, "And Hashem intensified the Heavenly Spirit which rested upon Moshe Rabbeinu and shared it with the seventy elders." (Bamidbar 11:25) In addition to their new position as judges, these elders received prophecy and merited for a short time, to actually serve as a sanctuary for the Divine Presence.

Rashi comments on this incident and reveals the secret identity of the seventy elders. He quotes Chazal who explain, "These were the Jewish policemen in Egypt who were beaten mercilessly instead of their Jewish brethren." (Rashi to Bamidbar 11:16) These elders refused to enforce upon their brethren the unreasonable Egyptian demands and opted to accept torturous Egyptian blows on behalf of their brethren. This previous heroic act of self negation now served as a meaningful merit and lesson for the Jewish people. The recent outburst of the Jewish people revealed that they were embarking upon an immoral path, focusing on pleasure and self pursuit. Hashem responded to this by elevating a host of their own peers to the lofty position of leadership. These elders were not ensnared by self pursuit but were instead perfect role models of self negation. Their interest lay in spiritual association with Hashem and their selfless efforts brought them to the lofty achievement of personal sanctuaries for the presence of Hashem. With such personalities at the head of the Jewish people their direction could be effectively reversed. Their self sacrifice could secure the Jewish survival and hopefully remind the Jewish people never to plunge into self pursuit and immorality.

In our present times we hear repeated vibes of similar physical calls to immorality. We realize that our predecessors were also embers rescued from the fiery furnace—the fires of Europe—and their self sacrifice for the sake of Hashem surely serves as an everlasting merit for us. Our recollections of their total devotion to Hashem is a significant factor in the incredible transition for many of us from total physical pursuits to a sincere yearning to become sanctuaries of Hashem. May this new development continue to flourish and contribute to the hastening of Mashiach we so anxiously await.

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah reading of this week emphasizes to us the rule in life of seizing the moment of opportunity. Moshe tells the Jewish people that "we are traveling now to the place that the Lord has promised" to give to us as our national homeland. But this proposed victorious march somehow unravels. There is an incident with Yitro, the father-in-law of Moshe himself, who does not agree to accompany his adopted nation to its destination, the Land of Israel. Moshe's entreaties to him are of no avail. He has what to him are legitimate, if not even holy reasons to return to his home and abandon Israel. His behavior makes an impression, albeit only subconsciously on the psyche of the Jewish people in the desert. Their optimism and self-pride is weakened. They begin to complain about their present conditions in the desert. Having given up on their future, they can think only of their present.

One's present is always frustrating and fraught with problems. Now, the manna that fell from heaven daily is no longer an acceptable menu. When one is in a bad mood no food can taste good in one's mouth. A wife may have prepared the tastiest gourmet meal for her husband's supper, but if he arrives in a foul mood carrying his work's problems home with him, then the meal will somehow be unsatisfying. The complaints regarding the manna will lead directly to the disaster of the spies that will appear in next week's Torah reading. And the result of that debacle is that Moshe's grand march to the Land of Israel will never take place for the generation that escaped Egyptian bondage and lived under miraculous conditions in a vast wasteland.

Every human being, and nations as well, has moments of opportunity that are present to be grasped. No opportunities in life are permanent except for the ever present ability to repent and improve. Opportunities that we allow to pass us by will, in the main, never return. This is true in commerce, personal health, family relationships and all other areas of life as well.

The rabbis in Avot taught us that every person has "his hour" - his particular opportunity for advancement and accomplishment. The wise and holy person recognizes such moments and opportunities and acts immediately upon them. The fool and the lazy let these opportunities escape them. Rabi Akiva said that one should never procrastinate or postpone Torah learning for the opportunity may not arise again. Judaism is about action, optimism, and enthusiasm.

The national tragedies that the Torah deals with in this week's reading and in next week's parsha as well all stem from weakness of self and demoralization. If we do not believe in ourselves then nothing can be good, even manna from heaven. A

generation of complainers and naysayers eventually becomes a generation of tragedy and doomed hopes. Our generation has been blessed with many great opportunities, not the least of which is the ability to study Torah and to live in the Land of Israel. These opportunities should be grasped and treasured. © 2007 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 DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

The Levi'im had three primary roles in the Mishkan. They were the singers, singing G-d's praises while the offerings were brought; the protectors, guarding the Mishkan from those who shouldn't be there (such as those who were ritually impure); and the transporters, packing up the Mishkan when it was time to travel, carrying it to the new location and setting it up once they arrived at their new location. Their tour of duty ended when they turned 50, as it says, "and from 50 they return from the army of the work, and they shall work no more" (Bamidbar 8:25). Or did it? The very next verse says, "and they shall serve [with] their brethren in the Tent of Meeting to watch over what needs watching, [but] they shall not work." Obviously, then, their retirement at 50 wasn't a complete retirement, only a partial one. Which tasks they must retire from and which they could still do is a matter of much discussion.

Rashi says that the only task that could not be done after 50 was the physical carrying from place to place. Singing, protecting, and even loading the wagons, however, could be done even after the Levi turns 50. He then tells us that even though the verse that refers to working after 50 can be translated as "serve his brethren," i.e. working for them personally, not in the Mishkan, the correct translation is that they "serve with their brethren," i.e. alongside them in the Mishkan. One may wonder why, if this is the correct translation, the Torah didn't say "with" explicitly (i.e. "im," instead of "es").

The Ramban, because of numerous questions he poses on Rashi's explanation, says that they were not allowed to sing after 50, but agrees that they could load the wagons and be "gatekeepers." The central issue that needs to be resolved according to Rashi is why, if the only task that can't be done after 50 is the physical carrying from place to place, are all three families of Levi'im counted from ages 30-50 if only one of those families (Kehas) actually carried the vessels? Gershon and Merari, who transported the parts of the Mishkan they were responsible for by wagon, could do everything they had done before 50 after 50 as well.

Why give them a retirement age at all if they never really retired?

When the Torah tells us (Bamidbar 4:47) that the Levi'im that were counted from ages 30-50 were "all who came to work the 'work of work' and the 'work of carrying' in the Tent of Meeting," Rashi explains "work of work" to be the singing, which is "work done for a another work," since it accompanies the offerings. How can Rashi tell us that they can sing even after they turn 50 if the Torah specifically says that they only did the "work of work" until 50?

The Talmud (Erchin 11a) tells us that each Levi was given a specific task, such as being a gatekeeper or a singer, and one Levi is not allowed to do the task of another Levi. When were they assigned their tasks? Initially, it was when the Mishkan was first erected, as described in Bamidbar 4. Then, as each Levi turned 30, they would be "drafted" into the "army" of Levi'im and given their specific job. When they retired, they would no longer be in charge of that task, and it would be assigned to another Levi from the same family (perhaps to one who just turned 30).

What function would the new retiree have? "G-d commanded the Levi that after 50 years he should no longer work the work that had been designated for him previously, as it says in Parashas Beha'alo'secha, 'and from 50 years he should return from the army of the work and not work anymore.' And it was taught in the Sifri, '[when the verse says], 'and he shall serve [with] his brothers,' it teaches us that he returns to closing [the gates] and the work of the sons of Gershon,' meaning to work that was not previously designated to him" (Yerayim #346). Although not assigned a specific task, the "retiree" now assists other Levi'im in their (assigned) tasks.

The Brisker Rav learns this from the double wording of the verse. "It is telling two things. First, that from 50 and on they are no longer allowed to 'carry on their shoulders' (i.e. transporting the vessels), and according to the Ramban also [invalidated] from singing. And this is what is meant by 'and they should not work anymore,' that they become invalidated by [their] age. Second, that even for the work of the sons of Gershon and the sons of Merari, which is not invalidated by years, nevertheless they were only counted from 30-50. And these are the ones who are the army of the work who were appointed permanently, 'each person on his work and on his load.' But from 50 and on he must return from the army of the work, for even though they are eligible [to work], they are not included in the army of the work. And this is what is meant by 'and he will serve with his brothers,' as he himself is not part of the army of the work, for he is not appointed [to be] in the army of the work except when he is between the ages of 30 and 50."

We can now explain Rashi rather easily. Even though the only work that could no longer be done after

50 was the carrying of the vessels of the Mishkan (which was done by the sons of Kehas), only those between 30 and 50 were counted because they were the only ones that were assigned specific tasks (and not allowed to help with other tasks). Once they reached 50, they no longer were in charge of that task, including those who were assigned to be singers (the "work of the work"). However, they could then assist other Levi'im in their tasks, even (and perhaps especially) tasks that they had not done beforehand. They weren't really working "with" their brethren, because they were only assisting them, but they weren't working "for" them (personally) either. Instead, they continued to work for G-d in the Mishkan by working with the other Levi'im (when they could use their help and guidance).

The Torah used a term that can mean "for" or "with" ("es") to show that they weren't full equals in the work with those in the army of workers, but were working as their assistants. They were no longer the assigned singers after 50, even though they were still allowed to sing. And they were all counted from 30-50 because that was their tour of duty in the "army" of Levi'im that was assigned specific tasks. © 2007 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 'Make two trumpets of silver; make them of hammered work. They shall serve you to summon the community (edah) and cause the camps (mahanot) to journey (Numbers 10:1,2)... And when you shall come to wage war in your land, against the enemy who is oppressing you, you shall sound the broken staccato, sighing, weeping sound (t'ruah) with your trumpets... and on the day of your rejoicings, on your festivals and your new moons, you shall sound the firm, fixed, exultant sound (t'kiyah) with your trumpets...(10:9,10)."
<> Our Biblical portion this week uses two separate words to describe the assemblage of the Israelites and two separate words to describe the sounds which is to emanate from their trumpets: the trumpets shall summon the "camps" (mahanot) of Israel as well as the "community" (edah, literally the group bearing witness) of Israel, and in time of war they shall sound the broken, weeping t'ruah sound whereas in times of Festival they shall sound the firm, exultant t'kiyah sound. My revered teacher Rav. J.B. Soloveitchik ztz"l distinguished between the encampment of Israel, which herded the Israelites together as a form of protection against the external elements of warring enemies and difficult climatic and topographical conditions, (mahaneh is Biblically used for protective army encampment, as in Genesis 32:8,9), and the edah or community of Israel which suggests a positive, united - commonality of purpose, testimony or mission to the

world; similarly, the t'ruah, a broken, weeping sound signals tremble or fear whereas the t'kiyah a firm, fixed and exultant sound resonates resolve, commitment and victory.

These different terms - and realities - hark back to two Biblical covenants which formed our national and religious being as a distinct people; The Covenant between the Pieces and The Covenant at Sinai. The Covenant between the Pieces (Genesis 15) established the nationhood of Israel . It guarantees Abraham progeny and delineates the boundaries of the homeland which his descendants would inherit. It comes following a war, contains an element of great, black fear (15:12), foretells a period of servitude and affliction in a foreign land but guarantees eternal survival and eventual occupation of the Promised Land. This is what Rav Soloveitchik calls the covenant of fate. After all, an individual neither chooses the family or nation-state into which he/she is born nor the external persecution he/she may be singled out to suffer. The familial solidarity and the haven of secure boundaries of a national state will enable us to survive despite the external challenges and obstacles.

The Covenant at Sinai (Exodus 19, 20) infused and inspired our nation with a singular purpose and goal, a system of commandments which would enable us to serve G-d and eventually bring the world to peace and redemption. This Covenant was not inflicted upon us externally; indeed, it is only when we voluntarily cried out that we would perform and internalize the laws that the Almighty ratified this second covenant. (Ex. 24:7,8).

The first covenant was our covenant of fate, the formation of the encampment of Jacob, the fearful, trembling sounds of the t'ruah which encourages us to seek refuge in the solidarity of a family-nation-State united against inimical forces threatening our destruction. The second covenant was our covenant of destiny, the formation of Israel as G-d's witnesses, the exultant, victorious sounds of the t'kiyah which express the resolve and commitment of a people imbued with a Divine mission, united in order to perfect the world in the Kingship of the Divine. From this perspective, we can well understand the initial definition of the Rosh Hashanah sound of the shofar as being described as "a day of the broken, weeping sound" (Yom t'ruah yiheyeh lakhem - Numbers 29:1), since Rosh Hashanah - the anniversary of the creation of the world - brought us into an incomplete, imperfect and not-yet- redeemed world, replete with suffering and tragedy. On Rosh Hashanah we take the exultant t'kiyah sound from the promise of the Jubilee year, when everyone will be free and secure in his/her own homestead and which serves as our metaphor for world redemption (Leviticus 25: 8-10, with the word shofar - meaning beautiful, complete - referring to the t'kiyah sound, according to our Talmudic Sages), in order to remind us that by means of our

repentance we have the mandate as well as the ability to perfect the world under the Kingship of the Divine. Rav Soloveitchik maintains that both in national as well as in personal terms, our greatest challenge is to transform fate into destiny, to turn bitter lemons into sweet lemonade, to develop our persecuted encampment into a nation of G-d's witnesses dedicated to redeem the world with love and peace.

I would merely add that these two covenants, our national covenant "between the pieces" and our religious covenant at Sinai, are not two separate and distinct covenants, the first being the covenant of fate and the second being the covenant of destiny, with the national homeland of Israel serving as our ultimate destination whereas the Bible and its laws are our true calling and destiny. No, the two covenants must amalgamate into one since both are inter-related and even inter-dependent.

The holocaust tragically proved to us that we cannot exist as a religion alone without the necessary backing and protection of a nation-state, replete with secure boundaries and an Israeli Defense Force; and it is only through the medium of a nation-state, where we must tackle the very real issues of poverty and unemployment, peace and war, democracy and despotism, that we can ever hope to fulfill our ethical mission of teaching the world the importance of universal freedom and peace. It is for this reason that the Biblical introduction of the Divine revelation at Sinai reads: "And now if you will hearken, yes hearken, to My voice and observe My covenant, then you shall be for Me a treasure amongst all nations, since I am concerned about the entire earth. And (then) you shall be for Me a Kingdom of priest-teachers and a holy nation" (Ex 19:5,6). And as the Sforno interprets these words, "Since the entire world is Mine, and the righteous of all nations are precious to Me without a doubt... you must serve as priest-teachers to understand and teach every human being to call upon the name of the Lord and to serve Him shoulder to shoulder, as it is written, 'From Zion shall come forth Torah' (to the world)." (ad loc)

It is our mission as a nation not to merely be a nation like all nations but rather to teach the message of peace and freedom to all nations. © 2007 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak, Yeshivat Har Etzion

In two places in the Torah, people came to Moshe to ask for a halachic solution to a problem which they thought would lead to their being deprived unjustly. In this week's Torah portion, we are told about ritually impure people who could not offer the Pesach sacrifice (Bamidbar 9:6-14), and in the portion of Pinchas we are told about the daughters of Tzlofchad (27:1-11). The

Torah emphasizes the similarity between the two events by using similar language in describing them. Both cases begin in a similar way. In this week's portion it is written, "There were men who were impure because of contact with the dead... and they approached Moshe and Aharon" [9:6]. In Pinchas, it is written, "And the daughters of Tzlofchad approached ... and they stood before Moshe and before Elazar the Kohen" [27:1-2]. The claims are also similar: "Why should we be deprived from bringing a sacrifice?" [9:7], with respect to Pesach, and, "Why should our father's name be removed from within the family?" [27:4], for the daughters. And in both cases it turns out that the people are right. In this week's portion, "Speak to Bnei Yisrael, and say: If any man is impure by contact with the dead..." [9:10]. And in Pinchas, it is written, "Speak to Bnei Yisrael: If a man dies and does not have a son" [27:8].

However, in spite of the many similarities between the two cases, there is one important difference. In Pinchas, before G-d commands Moshe to speak to Bnei Yisrael about the matter of inheritance of a daughter, He tells him:

"Yes, the daughters of Tzlofchad are right, they shall be given a heritage among their father's brothers" [27:7]. The general passage with the command for all of Yisrael appears only after a specific answer was given to the request by Tzlofchad's daughters. In this week's portion, on the other hand, there is no specific reply to the questioners, and the passage begins with a command to Moshe of what he should teach Bnei Yisrael. What is the reason for this difference?

Evidently there is a very significant difference between the two passages. The daughters were right, but their question did not lead to any halachic innovation. What the daughters did was to clarify the laws of inheritance for Moshe, in that when a man has no sons his daughters are entitled to the inheritance. As Rashi writes, "This is the way this law is written for me in heaven? and this teaches us that the daughters with their eyes were able to see what Moshe himself did not see." In this week's portion, with respect to Pesach Sheini, the special Pesach sacrifice repeated one month late by those who missed the first opportunity, it appears that the request by the people acted as a trigger that caused a new law to be innovated, something which did not exist before.

This then is the essential difference between the two passages. Tzlofchad's daughters turned to Moshe and Aharon for their own personal benefit, and even though they were right their request was not a unique and special event. With respect to Pesach Sheini, on the other hand, the people turned to Moshe and Aharon out of pure motives, wanting that their service to G-d should not be curtailed, and that they should have an opportunity to offer a sacrifice to G-d. The true and honest feelings of these people led to a

new law for them and for all of Bnei Yisrael, one that is unique in the entire Torah? providing a second chance to perform a mitzva to anybody who missed the first opportunity.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Complaining to Moshe (Moses), the Israelites cry out that they remember the fish served to them in Egypt that they received without price, "hinam." (Numbers 11:5)

Could they really have received food with no strings attached? After all, these are the same Egyptians who refused to even give the Jewish slaves straw for bricks. As the Midrash asks: "If they wouldn't give them straw for naught, would they have given them fish for naught?"

Nachmanides believes that this is certainly possible because at the riverside, the Jews would be given small fish that had no value in the eyes of the Egyptians.

Ibn Ezra reflects this line of reasoning but adds that the term "hinam" should not be taken literally - it should be understood to mean inexpensive. They received fish at bargain basement prices.

Rashi offers a most insightful answer to this question. "Hinam," says Rashi, means "free of mitzvot (commandments)." In Egypt, without the commandments the Jews felt unencumbered; as they were free to do as they pleased. Here, after the giving of the Torah at Sinai, with all of its prohibitive laws, the Jews felt that there were strings attached as they felt restricted by the commandments. This seems to make sense. Freedom and limitation are antithetical. If, for example, I'm not allowed to eat a particular food my options are severely narrowed and no longer am I feeling "hinam" or free.

However, there is another way of understanding the presence of the commandments. The mitzvot, even the laws that seem to be the most restrictive, can often teach self-discipline. Self discipline is a passageway to freedom. Limitation is, therefore, a conduit to freedom.

Additionally, we commonly associate freedom with the ability to do whatever we want, whenever we want. Freedom is not only the right to say yes, it is the ability to say no. If I cannot push away a particular food-my physical urges may have unbridled freedom, but my mind is enslaved. What appears to be a clear green light, can sometimes turn out to be the greatest of burdens.

The opposite is also true. What appears to be a burden, can often lead to unlimited freedom. A story illustrates this point. When G-d first created the world, the birds were formed without wings. They complained to G-d: "we're small, and feel overpowered by the larger animals." G-d responds: "Have patience, you'll see."

In time, G-d gave the birds wings. The complaining even intensified. "It's worse than ever," cried the birds. "Until now we were all small, but still quick enough to elude the animals of prey. Now we have these appendages by our side and we feel weighed down.

G-d gently took the birds and taught them how to fly high and then higher. They were able to reach above the clouds and escape all threats from their animal adversaries.

The mitzvot are like the wings of the Jew. When not understood fully, they can make us feel stifled and weighed down. Yet, when explored deeply and given significance they give us new ways of looking at the world, and looking at our selves. They teach us meaning and self-discipline. With these gifts we then can truly fly high and far---we then can truly be free - "hinam." © 2007 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJ-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 NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF

Sfas Emes

The parsha begins: 'Beha'alo secha es ha'neiros...' (ArtScroll: 'When you kindle the lamps...') So far, so good. But Chazal react to this pasuk in a surprising manner. What is their reaction? In the second paragraph of Medrash Rabba on the parsha, we find Chazal quoting a pasuk from Yeshayahu (42:21): "HaShem chafeitz lema'an tzidko, yagdil Torah veyad'adir." (ArtScroll: "HaShem desired, for the sake of [Israel's] righteousness, that the Torah be made great and glorious.")

You see why I describe Chazal's reaction as 'surprising'. At this point, it is hard to see any connection between 'Beha'alo secha es ha'neiros' and 'HaShem chafeitz...' But let us be patient, confident that the Sfas Emes will put all the pieces of the puzzle together. And while we are being patient, note what this statement of HaShem-which is echoed by Yeshayahu, Chazal, and the Sfas Emes-has given us. A key feature of our relationship with HaShem is the many mitzvot that He has commanded us to perform. Apparently, having good values and having knowledge of HaShem is not enough to make a person a good Jew. HaShem also demands the concrete actions that are involved in performing the mitzvot.

Why does HaShem want us to do mitzvot? The pasuk just quoted provides one answer. By living our lives in accordance with His instructions-i.e., Torah and mitzvot-we make the Torah great and glorious. And by thus demonstrating our willingness to subordinate our will to His, we rise in righteousness and acquire merit in His eyes. Thus, we have an answer to the question posed earlier. HaShem has given us many commandments-and expects us to obey Him by doing

what He has commanded-to enable us to deepen our commitment and our relationship with Him.

A fair question at this point is: Why does the Medrash wait until Parshas Beha'alo-secha to give us this explanation of the reason for mitzvos? This issue is so important that one would have expected to find it at the very beginning of the cycle of Torah readings. Further, why does the Torah tell us this reason for mitzvos in this specific context: with the commandment to light lamps in the Sanctuary?

Apparently, these questions also bothered the Sfas Emes. How do I know? Because these are the questions that he proceeds to answer. To address these issues, the Sfas Emes needs one more piece of information, which he brings from a pasuk in Sefer Mishlei. The pasuk there (6, 23) says: 'Ki neir mitzvo ve'ohr Torah,' (ArtScroll: 'For a commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light.') Why is the information that this pasuk provides vital? Because this pasuk explicitly links the two themes that earlier seemed totally unconnected: kindling the neiros and 'HaShem chafeitz...'-'HaShem's desire that we live a life rich in mitzvos.

The Sfas Emes sees much more in this pasuk that connects the two themes other than joint mention of the word 'neir'. In fact, he shows us how this pasuk clarifies the relationship between our awareness of HaShem and our obligation to perform mitzvos. He does this by pointing out a connection between the three realities of which the pasuk in Mishlei speaks: neir, ohr, and Torah. The connection between "ohr" and "Torah" is easy to see. Not only is the sound of the vowels similar, but the pasuk in Mishlei links these two words explicitly.

Likewise, the Sfas Emes notes a connection between 'neir' and 'ohr' (and hence, with Torah). The Sfas Emes sees the word 'neir' as a sort of hif'il -- a causative construction-of the word 'ohr'. That is, the neir brings forth light. Thus, the Sfas Emes explains, the mitzvos extend the light of Torah to the world of human activity (ma'aseh). For the mitzvos are from the Torah-i.e., from HaShem. As we perform the mitzvos, we connect with HaShem's Presence in all Creation.

Note that 'all Creation' just mentioned includes "Hester"-HaShem's hiding Himself. At the beginning of the parsha, Medrash Tanchuma tells us that Aharon had been despondent. Why? Because-unlike the nes'i'im of the other shevatim (the leaders of the other tribes) -- Aharon had not brought an offering at the inauguration of the mishkan (the Tabernacle). HaShem consoled Aharon by telling him: 'shelcha le'olam ka'yemes'. In its plain/literal meaning, this phrase translates as: 'Your service will endure forever.' By contrast, the Sfas Emes reads this phrase in non-pshat mode as: 'your service will penetrate the he'elam'-the Hester behind which HaShem hides from us.

The Sfas Emes had more to say about these issues. In his ma'amar for parshas Beha'alo-secha in the year 5641, he returned to this topic, and further developed his thoughts on the subject. The Sfas Emes works there with five parallel couplets: neir/ohr; mitzvos/Torah; action/knowledge; weekdays/Shabbos; guf/neshama.. Most Torah authorities view these couplets as implying either/ or decisions. That is., they see these phenomena as dichotomies-the more of one, the less of the other. By contrast, the Sfas Emes sees them as complementing each other-the more of one, the more of the other. The Sfas Emes gives an example.. He tells us that one cannot attain the heightened spirituality of Shabbos without the prior preparatory experience of yemei hama'aseh (the workdays)..

We can now sum up some of this ma'amar's themes. The Sfas Emes has told us that our mitzvos maintain the chiyus (vibrancy) of the Torah in the world of action. Without the mitzvos that we do with our actions, HaShem's Presence would be hidden in olam ha'asiya (the world of human activity). More generally, this ma'amar focuses on the connections between mitzvos and our spiritual state. The link between the neiros and the ohr-the lamp and light-is easy to perceive. For this reason, Chazal view the candle/light connection as the prototype of the purpose of mitzvos. But this particular link is only a more graphic example of the general phenomenon of mitzvos. By conducting ourselves in accordance with HaShem's commandments, we can come closer to HaShem.

In this vein, we find the Medrash at the beginning of the parsha reading the words "Beha'alo-secha es ha'neiros" in an unexpected way. The text's simple meaning is: "When you kindle the lamps...". But the Medrash-being the Medrash-is not constrained to stick with the text's simple meaning. Instead, the Medrash reads this phrase as: "When you elevate YOURSELF by lighting the lamps..."

A postscript. You may wonder: how can the Medrash arrive at the radically different reading just presented? Is it all arbitrary? Are there no rules? In fact, there are rules. In the present case, three perfectly legitimate innovations suffice to move from the pshat to the non-pshat reading. First, the Medrash takes the shorsh (root) of the word 'Beha'alo-secha' to be ayin/lamed/hei. That root means 'to go up'; and in its present, causative, construction, 'to lift up' ; i.e., to 'elevate'. Second, the Medrash understands the syllables "secha" in the word "beha'alo-secha" as indicating a reflexive construction; i.e., referring back to the person who is lighting the candles. This reflexive form gives us the 'yourself'. Third, the Medrash construes the pasuk's word "es" as meaning "with"-in the sense of: "by means of". And so, 'Beha'alo-secha es ha'neiros' becomes: "When you elevate yourself by lighting...". © 2007 Rabbi N.C. Leff & torah.org

DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi

The Torah discusses the laws of a person who could not bring the Pascal offering because he was either ritually impure or because he was at a distance from the Mishkan (or in later generations, from the Temple). He is to offer his Passover sacrifice a month later, on the 14th of Iyar.

"Speak to the Children of Israel saying: Any man of you or of your generations who will be impure or is on a distant way nevertheless, he shall bring the Passover sacrifice to Hashem." (Numbers 9:10)

"Or on a distant way"-Rashi: "There is a dot on the letter 'heh' (in the word 'rechoka'-distant-which means that the letter is then regarded as non-existent) and this tells us that the Torah means that the way need not really be a distant one but merely outside the threshold of the forecourt during the time of the sacrificing of the Passover offering."

Rashi explains the meaning of the dot on top of the letter "heh" in the word "rechoka" which we find in the Torah scroll. Whenever a word has one or more dots on top, the Talmudic Sages interpret the significance of this strange phenomenon. The rule is that when the majority of the letters of a word have dots above them, then the meaning of just these letters is interpreted. When a minority of the letters of a word have the dots, then only the undotted letters are interpreted.

In our case, only one letter is dotted, so it is dropped and the word is read without the letter. The word that remains is "rachok" which also means "distant" but is the masculine form of the word.

Rashi tells us the significance of this. It teaches us that the words "a distant way" refer to a subjective distance and not an objective one. So the person need not actually be distant from the Temple to be excused from bringing the Pascal offering-as long as he is merely outside the entrance of the Temple he is excused, since that "distance" was enough for him to be delayed in making the sacrifice. The journey itself was not distant; the man was.

The meaning of this interpretation is based on the fact that the Hebrew word "way" ("derech") is feminine while the word "ish" ("man") is masculine. Therefore, once the letter "heh" is dropped, the word "distant" becomes a masculine adjective and refers back to "man" and not to "way."

Considering the rules of dots on top of letters in the Torah, this is a reasonable interpretation.

But for a deeper understanding let us look at the Midrashic source of Rashi's comment.

In the Tractate Pesachim (93a) we find a dispute between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer on this issue. Rabbi Akiva says that the distance is as far as the town "Modi'in," which is about 15 miles from

Jerusalem, while Rabbi Eliezer says (based on the dot interpretation) that the distance here is only beyond the threshold of the Temple entrance.

The problem is that Rashi has chosen Rabbi Eliezer's interpretation, which is neither the law nor the closest to the simple meaning (p'shat) of the verse. Why would Rashi do that?

Can you think of an answer?

An Answer: It would seem that Rabbi Akiva's simple interpretation of the word "rechoka" as objectively distant (until Modi'in) would be the one that Rashi should have chosen for his commentary, since Rashi prefers p'shat interpretations. But he does not choose Rabbi Akiva's interpretation because Rashi characteristically sees p'shat in a unique way. He sees p'shat through the eyes of the Sages. And since the Sages have a rule about interpreting words that have dots on top of them, then Rashi too bases his interpretation on this principle. So Rashi is left with the word "rachok" (without the letter "heh" at the end) which must refer to a masculine noun-that is to "man" and not to "way." This interpretation also finds some support in the Torah text itself. See verse 13 where it refers to "way" but does not mention the word "distant." This would support Rabbi Eliezer's view that the journey need not actually be "distant."

So Rashi has chosen the p'shat interpretation considering the Sages' principle about interpreting the dots on top of letters in the Torah.

My daughter, Elisheva, has suggested another answer to the question: Why did Rashi not choose Rabbi Akiva's interpretation (distance means "until Modi'in") since it seems closest to p'shat and since the halacha is like Rabbi Akiva?

Her answer is that the verse (9:10) says: "Any man of you or of your generations" (see the complete verse above). Now the distance of Modi'in is about 15 miles from Jerusalem, while the complete Camp of Israel in the wilderness was only 12 miles square (see Rashi in the book of Joshua). So the verse cannot possibly mean "until the distance of Modi'in" as Rabbi Akiva said because Moses was speaking to "YOU" (meaning this GENERATION in the wilderness) and to future generations. So this generation had no Jews living at that distance (15 miles) from the Mishkan! So even according to p'shat Rabbi Eliezer (who says beyond the entrance of the Mishkan) would seem to fit the verse better than Rabbi Akiva.

I think that's a brilliant answer, even if I do say so myself! © 2007 Dr. A. Bonchek & aish.org

