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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

After 9/11, when the horror and trauma had subsided, Americans found themselves asking what had happened and why. Was it a disaster? A tragedy? A crime? An act of war? It did not seem to fit the pre-existing paradigms. And why had it happened? The question most often asked about Al Qaeda was, "Why do they hate us?"

In the wake of those events an American thinker Lee Harris wrote two books, Civilization and its Enemies and The Suicide of Reason[1] that were among the most thought-provoking responses of the decade. The reason for the questions and the failure to find answers, said Harris, was that we in the West had forgotten the concept of an enemy. Liberal democratic politics and market economics create a certain kind of society, a specific way of thinking and a characteristic type of personality. At their heart is the concept of the rational actor, the person who judges acts by their consequences and chooses the maximal option. He or she believes that for every problem there is a solution, for every conflict a resolution. The way to achieve it is to sit down, negotiate, and do on balance what is best for all.

In such a world there are no enemies, merely conflicts of interest. An enemy, says Harris, is simply "a friend we haven't done enough for yet." In the real world, however, not everyone is a liberal democrat. An enemy is "someone who is willing to die in order to kill you. And while it is true that the enemy always hates us for a reason, it is his reason, not ours." He sees a different world from ours, and in that world we are the enemy. Why do they hate us? Answers Harris: "They hate us because we are their enemy."

Whatever the rights and wrongs of Harris's specifics, the general point is true and profound. We can become mind-blind, thinking that the way we – our society, our culture, our civilization – see things is the only way, or at least that it is the way everyone would choose if given the chance. Only a complete failure to understand the history of ideas can explain this error, and it is a dangerous one. When Montezuma, ruler of the Aztecs, met Cortes, leader of the Spanish expedition in 1520, he assumed that he was meeting a civilized man from a civilized nation. That mistake cost him his life and within a year there was no Aztec civilization any more. Not everyone sees the world the way we do, and, as Richard Weaver once said: "The trouble with humanity is that it forgets to read the minutes of the last meeting."

This explains the significance of the unusual command at the end of this week's parsha. The Israelites had escaped the seemingly inexorable danger of the chariots of the Egyptian army, the military high-tech of its day. Miraculously the sea divided, the Israelites crossed, the Egyptians, their chariot wheels caught in the mud, were unable either to advance or retreat and were caught by the returning tide.

The Israelites sang a song and finally seemed to be free, when something untoward and unexpected happened. They were attacked by a new enemy, the Amalekites, a nomadic group living in the desert. Moses instructed Joshua to lead the people in battle. They fought and won. But the Torah makes it clear that this was no ordinary battle: Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven.' Moses built an altar and called it The Lord is my Banner. He said, 'The hand is on the Lord's throne. The Lord will be at war with Amalek for all generations.' (Ex. 17: 14-16)

This is a very strange statement, and it stands in marked contrast to the way the Torah speaks about the Egyptians. The Amalekites attacked Israel during the lifetime of Moses just once. The Egyptians oppressed the Israelites over an extended period, oppressing and enslaving them and starting a slow genocide by killing every male Israelite child. The whole thrust of the narrative would suggest that if any nation would become the symbol of evil, it would be Egypt.

But the opposite turns out to be true. In Deuteronomy the Torah states, "Do not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land" (Deut. 23: 8). Shortly thereafter, Moses repeats the command about the Amalekites, adding a significant detail:

Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey

[1] Lee Harris, Civilization and Its Enemies: The next Stage of History. New York: Free Press, 2004. The Suicide of Reason, New York: Basic Books, 2008.

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and attacked all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of G-d … You shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (Deut. 25: 17-19)

We are commanded not to hate Egypt, but never to forget Amalek. Why the difference? The simplest answer is to recall the rabbis' statement in The Ethics of the Fathers: "If love depends on a specific cause, when the cause ends, so does the love. If love does not depend on a specific cause, then it never ends."[2] The same applies to hate. When hate depends on a specific cause, it ends once the cause disappears. Causeless, baseless hate lasts forever.

The Egyptians oppressed the Israelites because, in Pharaoh's words, "The Israelites are becoming too numerous and strong for us" (Ex. 1: 9). Their hate, in other words, came from fear. It was not irrational. The Egyptians had been attacked and conquered before by a foreign group known as the Hyksos, and the memory of that period was still acute and painful. The Amalekites, however, were not being threatened by the Israelites. They attacked a people who were "weary and worn out," specifically those who were "lagging behind." In short: the Egyptians feared the Israelites because they were strong. The Amalekites attacked the Israelites because they were weak.

In today's terminology, the Egyptians were rational actors, the Amalekites were not. With rational actors there can be negotiated peace. People engaged in conflict eventually realise that they are not only destroying their enemies: they are destroying themselves. That is what Pharaoh's advisers said to him after seven plagues: "Do you not yet realise that Egypt is ruined?" (Ex. 10: 7). There comes a point at which rational actors understand that the pursuit of self-interest has become self-destructive, and they learn to co-operate.

It is not so, however, with non-rational actors. Emil Fackenheim, one of the great post-Holocaust theologians, noted that towards the end of the Second World War the Germans diverted trains carrying supplies to their own army, in order to transport Jews to the extermination camps. So driven were they by hate that they were prepared to put their own victory at risk in order to carry out the systematic murder of the Jews of Europe. This was, he said, evil for evil's sake.[3]

The Amalekites function in Jewish memory as "the enemy" in Lee Harris's sense. Jewish law, however, specifies two completely different forms of action in relation to the Amalekites. First is the physical command to wage war against them. That is what Samuel told Saul to do, a command he failed fully to fulfil. Does this command still apply today?

The unequivocal answer given by Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch is No.[4] Maimonides ruled that the command to destroy the Amalekites only applied if they refused to make peace and accept the seven Noahide laws. He further stated that the command was no longer applicable since Sennacherib, the Assyrian, had transported and resettled the nations he conquered so that it was no longer possible to identify the ethnicity of any of the original nations against whom the Israelites were commanded to fight. He also said, in The Guide for the Perplexed, that the command only applied to people of specific biological descent. It is not to be applied in general to enemies or haters of the Jewish people. So the command to wage war against the Amalekites no longer applies.

However, there is a quite different command, to "remember" and "not forget" Amalek, which we fulfil annually by the reading the passage about the Amalekites command as it appears in Deuteronomy on the Shabbat before Purim, Shabbat Zakhor (the connection with Purim is that Haman the "Agagite" is assumed to be a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites). Here Amalek has become a symbol rather than a reality.

By dividing the response in this way, Judaism marks a clear distinction between an ancient enemy who no longer exists, and the evil that enemy embodied, which can break out again at any time in any place. It is easy at times of peace to forget the evil that lies just beneath the surface of the human heart. Never was this truer than in the past three centuries. The birth of Enlightenment, toleration, emancipation, liberalism and human rights persuaded many, Jews among them, that collective evil was as extinct as the Amalekites. Evil was then, not now. That age eventually begat nationalism, fascism, communism, two World Wars, some of the brutal tyrannies ever known, and the worst crime of man against man.

Today, the great danger is terror. Here the words of Princeton political philosopher Michael Walzer are particularly apt: Wherever we see terrorism, we

[2] Mishnah Avot 5: 16.

[3] Fackenheim, Emil L., and Michael L. Morgan. The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim: A Reader. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1987, 126.

[4] Rabbi N L Rabinovitch, Responsa Melomdei Milchamah, Maaleh Adumim, Maaliyot, 1993, 22-25.

should look for tyranny and oppression … The terrorists aim to rule, and murder is their method. They have their own internal police, death squads, disappearances. They begin by killing or intimidating those comrades who stand in their way, and they proceed to do the same, if they can, among the people they claim to represent. If terrorists are successful, they rule tyrannically, and their people bear, without consent, the costs of the terrorists' rule.[5]

Evil never dies, and like liberty it demands constant vigilance. We are commanded to remember, not for the sake of the past but for the sake of the future, and not for revenge but the opposite: a world free of revenge and other forms of violence.

Lee Harris began Civilization and its Enemies with the words, "The subject of this book is forgetfulness," and ends with a question: "Can the West overcome the forgetfulness that is the nemesis of every successful civilization?" That is why are commanded to remember and never forget Amalek, not because the historic people still exists, but because a society of rational actors can sometimes believe that the world is full of rational actors with whom one can negotiate peace. It is not always so.

Rarely was a biblical message so relevant to the future of the West and of freedom itself. Peace is possible, implies Moses, even with an Egypt that enslaved and tried to destroy us. But peace is not possible with those who attack people they see as weak and who deny their own people the freedom for which they claim to be fighting. Freedom depends on our ability to remember and whenever necessary confront "the eternal gang of ruthless men," the face of Amalek throughout history.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And the Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out [in prayer] to Me? Speak to the children of Israel and let them move forward" (Exodus 14:15). Chapters 14 and 15 of the Book of Exodus are among the most significant in the Bible from a theological perspective, defining for us the fundamental difference between monotheism and idolatry. The first opens with G-d's instructions that the Israelites: "Turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahirot [the gateway to the Temple of Horus] between Migdal and the sea, before the Baal [master] of the North....by the [Reed/Red] Sea."(Ex. 14:1).

How strange that the description of their resting place - which will become a sacred shrine marking the most wondrous miracle of the Exodus, the splitting of the Sea - is associated with two major idols, Horus and Baal Zephon; to add insult to injury, the very same description is repeated only eight verses later! (Ex. 14:9).

I would argue that the Bible is here contrasting two different attitudes, one that is representative of idolatry and the other that refers to G-d's miracles. The Israelites have just left Egyptian enslavement, but the slave mentality has not yet left the Hebrew psyche. They are just at Pi-Hahirot, at the gateway to freedom (herut), but they are still engulfed in the paralysis engendered by the idolatrous Horus Temple; they are still under the power of the master-god of the North (Baal).

Idolatry, you see, enervates its adherents, renders them powerless before the gods whom they created in their own image; these gods are simply more powerful creatures, filled with foibles and failings of mortal beings - only on a grander scale. It is these gods who rule the world; the only thing that the human being can hope to do is to bribe or propitiate the gods to treat them kindly.

Moses is still at the beginning of his career; he has much more to learn about Jewish theology. Hence he tells the nation, frightened by the specter of pursuing Egyptians behind them and a raging sea in front of them, "Stand still and you shall see the salvation of the Lord... The Lord will do battle for you and you shall remain silent" (Ex. 14:13-14)

G-d then steps in, countermanding Moses's words. "Why do you cry out in prayer at Me?" G-d asks, meaning: I, the omnipresent Lord of the Universe, empowered you by creating you in My image; I expect people to act, to journey forward, to take responsibility for human - Jewish - destiny. Now that they are at the cusp, or gateway to freedom, let them move ahead, no matter the risk.

G-d wants Moses and all of Israel to understand that He is not another idol, not even the greatest or most powerful of the idols, who renders humans powerless and awaits human gifts of propitiation and prayers. G-d is rather non-material Spirit, best (but imperfectly) described as Love (the four-letter name JHVH), Compassion, Freely-giving Grace, Long-suffering, Loving-Kindness and Truth (Ex. 34:6) who created human beings in His image, empowers them to act in history as His partners, expects them to develop His Divine traits of character and charges them to bring freedom and security to all the families of the earth.

The Israelites are learning this lesson as they stand at the gateway to freedom (pi-herut) and nationhood witnessing the splitting of the Re(e)d Sea. They dare not stand still and silent waiting for a deus ex machina to extricate them from a seemingly impossible situation.

They must initiate the action.

And so G-d commands them to "move

[5] Michael Walzer, Arguing about War, Yale University Press, 2004, 64-65.

forward," to jump into the waters, risking their lives for freedom; only then will they truly deserve to live as free human beings under G-d. Our Sages maintain that indeed they learned this lesson at the sea, when they sang out: "This is my G-d, ve'anvehu" (Ex. 15:2); even a maidservant at the sea saw what the later prophets did not see" (Rashi ad loc citing the Mekhilta.)

Apparently, their lesson is to be understood from the Hebrew word ve'anvehu. What does this word mean? Some commentaries suggest it means "I will glorify Him" either by building Him a Temple (Targum, naveh), or by singing His praises (Rashi) or by beautifying (na'eh) His commandments (a beautiful succa). The Midrash Mekhilta renders the text as two words, Ani ve'hu, I will be like Him, loving, compassionate, truthful etc. But both of these sources stress either what we will do for G-d or whom we will become for G-d; in either case, G-d is at the center.

R. Hamma in the name of R. Hanina suggests that the word v'anvehu means that I learn from the Bible to act in the manner in which He acts towards humanity: "Just as G-d clothes the naked, so must we; just as G-d visits the sick, so must we; just as G-d comforts the mourner, so must we" (Sota 14a).

It's not what we do for G-d which is cardinal, it is not even the character traits which we develop which are cardinal; it is rather what we do, and we are empowered by G-d to do for our fellow human beings in order to perfect the world in the Kingship of G-d. This is true ethical monotheism.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There are many different types of songs familiar to human society. There are songs of triumph and of resignation and acceptance. There are songs of joy and love and anthems of hatred and violence. There are songs of nostalgia and remembrance and songs of hope in future greatness. There are also hymns of faith and melodies of rebellion and change. In short, in human history, one can almost identify with the events of the time by hearing the music and songs that were then prevalent and popular.

In this week's Torah reading, we encounter a song that is all of the above and yet none of the above. It is an ancient song recited or sung by the Jewish people on a daily basis for over 3300. At its heart, it is a song of faith, of belief, and survival and of the promise of eternal greatness and continuing challenge. At the beginning of Jewish history, it already establishes the equation of the relationship of the Jewish people to the rest of the world and to historical events.

Because of its emphasis on the eternity of G-d and of Israel, it is not confined to any one time period or historical era. It was a song sung at a particular moment in time but its essence and message is timeless and constantly pertinent and relevant. The words of the song delineate the struggle for survival in which Jews will always be engaged, against enemies who never completely disappear but rather morph into new forms and ideologies. The most uplifting message of the song is its timelessness and relevance. The most depressing part of the song is also its timelessness and relevance.

There is another song recorded for us in the Torah that is similar to this type of message and outlook. It is the song that concludes the great oration of Moshe to the Jewish people in the last days of his life in the desert of Sinai. That song, which appears in parshat Haazinu is also a song of survival and eventual success in the never-ending struggle that we call Jewish history. This week's song and that later song of Moshe really constitute the bookends of the Torah and of the Jewish story generally.

We are bidden to know and understand these songs and their import. We are to teach them to our children and to all later generations of the Jewish people. These songs are to be as unforgettable thousands of years from now as they were when first composed and sung. Jews who have somehow forgotten these songs – or perhaps even worse, never knew of their existence – will find it difficult to identify with G-d's Torah, His people and His holy land.

Song is a tool for remembrance and prophecy – for an appreciation of our wondrous past and a commitment to our promised and even more spectacular, future. That is why we are bidden to recite it day in and day out, in all times and places, for it contains within it the essential kernel of Jewish life and existence. We should therefore pay attention carefully to its words and message and sing along with Moshe in this great anthem of Jewish and world history.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"What is this crying out to Me; speak to the Children of Israel and they should travel" (Sh'mos 14:15). The nation was trapped between the Sea of Reeds and the Egyptians, with no place to go. It certainly seems as if this would be an ideal time to beseech G-d for help! After all, the Midrash (B'reishis Rabbah 65:20) tells us that when the "voice of Yaakov" (see B'reishis 27:22) is weak, then the "hands of Eisav" are effective against us, whereas when the "voice of Yaakov" is "chirping," then the "hands of Eisav" are not effective against us. Since praying would protect the nation from the Egyptians, doing so should have been considered extremely

worthwhile. Why did G-d give Moshe an argument for praying to be saved if asking G-d for help when we are in trouble is precisely what we are supposed to do?

Numerous answers have been suggested; in the "answers section" of Iyun HaParasha #31 (http://hebrewbooks.org/49783, pages 74-85) there are 22 approaches presented. I would like to focus on Rashi's second answer (which, for some reason, is not included among the 22).

After quoting the M'chilta, which says that the problem wasn't praying for help but the length of the prayer, Rashi (paraphrasing one of the many other approaches brought in the M'chilta, but with significant differences) seems to be saying that prayer was inappropriate in this situation since it was "upon Me" (G-d). The implication is that in most cases it is not "upon G-d" to make what we want happen, but up to us, so asking G-d to help us succeed is appropriate; in this situation, though, it was only G-d's responsibility to get the nation out of their dangerous predicament, so prayer wasn't warranted. However, aren't all situations ultimately in G-d's hands? Why was this one be different? Additionally, since one of the purposes of prayer is to get us to acknowledge that G-d is the Source of everything (as evidenced by the fact that we are asking Him for the things we think we need), why wouldn't it be appropriate to ask G-d to save us, which would emphasize the point that He was the Source of our salvation?

There is a profound difference between most situations we find ourselves in, and the situation the Children of Israel were faced with as they were camped by the sea. Although everything is under G-d's control, there are many "indirect" factors that contribute to situations we are faced with (see http://tinyurl.com/q6tkbsu). Our own choices (whether those choices lead to G-d directly punishing us or to our being in a less than ideal situation based on not deserving divine protection) also contribute greatly to being in a situation where we need help. Under these circumstances (which includes almost all situations), asking G-d for help is both appropriate and necessary, as ideally we wouldn't be in this predicament, and we weren't purposely and specifically placed in this situation by G-d, unless it was specifically meant as a wake-up call (in which case turning to G-d for help is the best first step). In the specific situation where Moshe was taken to task for praying, on the other hand, everything had been specifically set up by G-d in order to save the nation from Egypt.

G-d took us out of Egypt, and purposely led us into the desert towards the Sea of Reeds (Sh'mos 13:18), leading them with His "cloud pillar" (13:21) to the specific locations where He wanted them to go. This included a slight retreat to mislead Pharaoh, in order to get the Egyptians to chase after them (14:1-4). When these things were all put into place, the end result was that the nation seemed trapped between the sea and the Egyptians. Nevertheless, knowing that G-d had purposely led them into this situation, the proper response should not have been to panic, and therefore cry out to G-d for help (even if the proper response to panic is to cry out to G-d), but not to panic, instead trusting that G-d had something planned, and they were not in trouble.

The nation had also cried out to G-d (14:10), but they weren't taken to task for doing so, since they didn't have first-hand knowledge of what G-d's instructions were, and did not have full confidence that Moshe was following G-d's instructions (rather than it being G-d who was complying with Moshe's requests). They didn't fully believe in Moshe until after the Egyptians had drowned in the sea (14:31, see K'sav Sofer, see also http://tinyurl.com/noz7e2u). Moshe, on the other hand, knew that this situation had been specifically and precisely part of G-d's game plan, so he shouldn't have been concerned about their predicament, just waited for G-d's further instructions (or ask G-d what to do next, see Ramban on 14:15). Crying out to G-d at this point was inappropriate for Moshe, and further eroded any confidence the nation had that G-d had taken them to this point. After all, if G-d had told Moshe to go exactly where they were, why was Moshe worried about what might happen?

Although Ibn Ezra prefers to understand the verse to also mean that it was the entire nation crying out (because Moshe himself shouldn't have been concerned), most understand the singular version of "cried out" (in 14:15, as opposed to the plural version in 14:10) to refer to Moshe the individual, not the nation. And this is not the first time Moshe was guilty of underestimating G-d's plan, nor would it be the last. Moshe had complained that G-d made things worse by sending him to Pharaoh (5:22), rather than trusting that since he had followed G-d's instructions exactly, it must be part of G-d's plan that things get worse before they got better. This lack of trust prevented Moshe from leading the conquest of Canaan (see Rashi on 6:1), and reared its ugly head again when Moshe spoke to the rock and nothing happened (see Rashi on Bamidbar 20:11). Rather than just trusting that G-d might not have wanted the water to come out right away (or considering that he had spoken to the wrong rock), he hit the rock, a mistake that prevented him from leading the nation into the Promised Land (Bamidbar 20:12; notice that Moshe is blamed for having a lack of faith). There seems to be a pattern (noted by Rav Aharon Kotler, zt"l, in Mishnas Aharon) of Moshe being concerned with seeing the outcome he expects (or hopes for) rather than just following G-d's instructions and trusting that He will take care of the results.

Here too, despite Moshe being fully aware that G-d had purposely put the nation in the situation they

were in, he beseeched Him to save them, as if they were in trouble, rather than trusting that this was just part of His plan and awaiting further instructions. And for this, he was reprimanded.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

"Where is G-d?" asked Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, one of the great Hasidic masters. "Everywhere," replied his students. "No, my children," he responded, "G-d is not everywhere, but only where you let Him enter."

The Kotzker's answer reinforces a distinction that Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik makes between two terms of redemption-both relate to being saved-hatzalah and yeshuah. Hatzalah requires no action on the part of the person being saved. Yeshuah, on the other hand, is the process whereby the recipient of salvation participates in helping him or herself.

In the portions read during the last few weeks, the Torah describes how the Jewish people, emerging from Egypt, experienced the process of hatzalah. Note G-d's words -- ve-hitzalti etchem. (Exodus 6:6) G-d and G-d alone, says the Hagadah, took us out of Egypt. Just as a newborn is protected by her or his parents, so were the newly born Jewish people protected by G-d.

Much like a child who grows up, the Jewish people, having left Egypt, were expected to assume responsibilities. While Moshe thought that the process of hatzalah would be extended into the future, G-d does not concur-the sea will split, but you will be saved only if you do your share and try to cross on your own. (Rashi on Exodus 14:15) As the Jews stand by the sea, the Torah suddenly shifts from the language of hatzalah to that of yeshuah as it states va-yosha Hashem. (Exodus 14:30)

I remember my son Dov, as a small child at the Seder table, asking: "Why do we have to open the door for Eliyahu (Elijah) the prophet? He has so much power! He gets around so quickly and drinks a lot. Couldn't he squeeze through the cracks?"

At the Seder table, in addition to re-enacting the redemption from Egypt we also stress the hope for future redemption. This part of the Seder experience begins with the welcoming of Eliyahu, who the prophet says, will be the harbinger of the Messianic period. But for the Messiah to come, says Rav Kook, we must do our share and so we open the door and welcome him in. Sitting on our hands and waiting is not enough.

I often asked my parents where their generation was seventy years ago when our people were being murdered and destroyed. Although many stood up, not enough people made their voices heard. Let us bless each other today that when our children and our grandchildren ask us similar questions such as, "Where were you when Jews were mercilessly murdered in Israel" we will be able to answer that we did stand up and did our best to make a difference.

Let us pray that we will have done our share and opened the door to let G-d in. We must recognize that we can't only ask for hatzalah, where G-d alone intervenes, but we must also do our share to bring about a new era, one of genuine partnership between heaven and earth-- a true yeshuah.

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "The entire assembly of the Children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron in the Wilderness... "You have taken us out to this Wilderness to kill this entire congregation by famine." G-d said to Moses, "Behold! -- I shall rain down for you food from heaven; let the people go out and pick each day's portion on its day." (Ex. 16:2-4).

Rabbi Mendel of Rimanov taught that the manna was a necessary precursor for accepting the Torah. The Torah forbids stealing and coveting others' possessions. It forbids lying, cheating, taking usury and all methods of unlawful enrichment. These laws are in opposition to the innate acquisitive drives within people. How can people abide by laws that defy innate drives?

The manna served as a lesson that a person would get only that which he actually needed. If he had less, G-d would increase his portion to meet his needs. If he took more than his needs, his greed would result in the excess portion rotting. Once the Israelites developed the trust that G-d would provide for their needs and that accumulating excess was futile, they could accept laws that opposed their acquisitive drives.
Excerpted from Twerski on Chumash by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D.

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Out of Bounds

In this week's parsha the B'nai Yisrael are given the manna. It falls every day from Heaven -- except on the Sabbath. The Jews may not collect it on the Shabbos and thus a double portion falls from heaven on Friday. "See that Hashem has given you the Sabbath; that is why He gives you on the sixth day a two-day portion of bread." In addition the Torah proscribes the Jews from traveling distances on the Shabbos. "Let every man remain in his place; let no man leave his place on the seventh day" (Exodus 16:29).

Rashi explains that this refers to the t'chum Shabbos, a Shabbos ordinance that confines one's boundaries under certain settings to 2,000 cubits from the initial point of origin. One cannot walk farther than

that distance on Shabbos.

Though this is not the forum for a discussion of the intricate laws of Sabbath borders, including certain limitations to the restrictions, one basic question arises: There are many intricate laws regarding Shabbos activities. None were yet mentioned. Why discuss the concept of confinement to an approximate one-mile radius before the Jews learned about the most basic prohibitions of the Sabbath such as lighting new fires or carrying in the public domain? In fact, this law of t'chum does not carry the severe penalties associated with other transgression. Why, then, is it the first Shabbos law that is introduced?

Once a religious man came to the Brisker Rav, Rav Yitzchok Zev Soleveitchik, and asked him whether he should join a certain organization comprised of people whose views were antithetical to Torah philosophy. Well intentioned, the man felt that his association would perhaps sway the opinions of the antagonists and create harmony among the factions. He would be able to attend meetings and raise his voice in support of Torah outlook.

The Rav advised him not to get involved. The man unfortunately decided to ignore the advice. Within a few months, he was in a quagmire, because policies and actions of the theologically-skewed organization were being linked to him, and were creating animus toward him throughout the community.

For some reason he could not back out of his commitments to the organization. He was torn. How could he regain his reputation as a Torah observing Jew and ingratiate himself to his former community? He returned to the Brisker Rav and asked him once again for his advice.

The Rav told him the following story. There was a young man who aspired to become a wagon driver. He approached a seasoned wagoneer and began his training. After a few weeks, he was ready to be certified.

Before receiving an official certification the veteran decided to pose a few practical applications.

"Let's say," he asked his young charge, "that you decide to take a shortcut and deviate from the main highway. You cut through a forest on a very muddy trail. Your wheels become stuck in the mud and your two passengers become agitated. The horses are struggling to pull out of the mud. They can't seem to get out. What do you do?"

The young driver looked up in thought. "Well," he began, "first I would take some wooden planks and try to get them under the wheels. "Ah!" sighed the old timer, "you made a terrible mistake!" "Why?" retorted the neophyte driver, "I followed procedure in the precise manner! What did I do wrong?"

The old man sighed. "Your mistake was very simple. You don't take shortcuts into muddy forests!"

The activist understood the Brisker Rav's message.

Rav Moshe Feinstein of blessed memory explains that before the Jews were even given the laws of Shabbos they were taught an even more important lesson in life. Before you can embark on life's journeys and even approach the holy Shabbos, you must know your boundaries. So before discussing the details of what you can or can not do on Shabbos, the Torah tells us where we can and cannot go on Shabbos. Sometimes, keeping within a proper environment is more primary than rules of order. Because it is worthless to attempt to venture into greatness when you are walking out of your domain.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Beshalach includes the famous splitting of the Sea (14:21), where Moshe led them into the water, and the sea split for them. Psalms 114 offers that "the sea saw, and ran", and commentators explain that what the sea saw was Yosef's remains, and withdrew in their merit. As Rabbi Shmulevitz asks, what was so special about Yosef's remains that the sea split because of them, rather than because of Moshe or the Jews?

Rabbi Shmulevitz answers by introducing a fundamental concept in Judaism: avoiding temptations. Yosef was in a position where he might have been tempted to sin (with Potifar, and generally living in Egypt as the only Jew), and rather than be placed in a position to overcome his urges, he avoided those urges altogether, even placing himself in danger by leaving an article of clothing behind. This great act is not only an example for us today, but it's also the reason why the Jews were faced with crossing the sea in the first place. Had human logic prevailed, the Jews would have headed straight to Israel, which would have taken them 4 days. However, that might have tempted the Jews to consider returning to Egypt, so G-d had them go the long way, which included crossing the sea. The splitting of the sea and Yosef's life join efforts in conveying a critical lesson: Avoid conflict as much as you can. Whether it's our internal temptations, friends, parents, spouses or those we share borders with, the Parsha offers us 3,000 year old advice that we still holds true today: Avoid conflict and temptation by minimizing confrontations.

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

In this week's parashah, we find the beginning of the giving of the Torah. On the verse (15:25), "There He established for [the nation] a decree and an ordinance, and there He tested it," Rashi z"l comments: "He gave them a few sections of the Torah in order that they might engage in study thereof -- the sections

containing the command regarding Shabbat, the red heifer and the administration of justice."

R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194-1270) writes: This is wondrous! Why doesn't the Torah spell out the laws as it does in other places: "Speak to Bnei Yisrael and command them, etc."? From Rashi's wording it seems that Moshe didn't teach these laws as "official" commandments; rather he told them that this is what they would be commanded to keep in the future, when Hashem would give them the Torah at Har Sinai. In this light, says Ramban, we can understand why the Torah calls these commandments a "test." Bnei Yisrael were being tested to see whether they could accustom themselves to mitzvot and accept them with joy.

R' Simcha Mordechai Ziskind Broide z"l (rosh yeshiva of the Chevron Yeshiva in Yerushalayim; died 2000) explains further: Ramban teaches (in his commentary to Sefer Devarim) that the Torah expects more of us than merely keeping the mitzvot. We are called upon to learn from the mitzvot what Hashem's Will is. For instance, the Torah tells us not to speak lashon hara, not to take revenge, and to stand up for our elders. From these and other examples of interpersonal behavior, we are supposed to learn how to interact with our fellow men. Thus, explains R' Broide, when Hashem taught the laws of Shabbat, the red heifer and the administration of justice in our parashah, the purpose was to see whether Bnei Yisrael would look behind those mitzvot to see the Will of Hashem that those laws represent. If Bnei Yisrael succeeded in doing that, it would indicate that they would know what to do with the other mitzvot as well. (Sahm Derech: Ha'yashar Ve'hatov p.19)

"Hashem said to Moshe, 'Pass before the people...'" (17:5)

Rashi z"l explains: In the previous verse Moshe Rabbeinu said, "Soon they will stone me." Therefore Hashem said, "'Pass before the people.' See if they will in fact stone you."

R' Shlomo Wolbe z"l (1914-2005) comments: Surely Moshe was not exaggerating; he must have had a genuine fear that he would be stoned. Nevertheless, Hashem was displeased with his choice of words.

The midrash Bereishit Rabbah states: "Better the anger of the Patriarchs than the humility of the children." Regarding Yaakov Avinu we read (Bereishit 31:36), "Then Yaakov became angered and he took up his grievance with Lavan; Yaakov spoke up and said to Lavan, 'What is my transgression? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me?'" When our Patriarch Yaakov became angry, he spoke humbly, "What is my sin?" In contrast, when Moshe felt threatened, he spoke accusingly, "Soon they will stone me." Similarly, King David is criticized for saying to Yehonatan (Shmuel I 20:1), "What have I done? What is my transgression and what is my sin before your father [King Shaul] that he seeks my life?" David did not have to express openly the fact that King Shaul wanted to kill him. Hashem doesn't want to hear criticisms of His people even when they are true. (Shiurei Chumash)

A related thought:

R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) writes: The great love that we love our nation does not blind us or prevent us from inspecting its faults. Even so, even after the most independent examination, we find its essence to be free of any blemish. "You are completely beautiful, My beloved, and there is no blemish in you" [Shir Ha'shirim 4:7].

R' Kook continues: Any statement in the Written Torah or Oral Torah that could weaken a Jew's love for the Jewish People, even for the completely wicked, is a test--a challenge to a person to increase his love of Hashem until he finds a path through the seeming contradictions, so that his love for the Jewish People and for all of G-d's creations will be alive and sustained in his heart with no doubts. (Orot Yisrael 4:3-4)

R' Zvi Yisrael Tau shlita (rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Hamor) explains: R' Kook is describing a love for the Jewish People that is not based on specific good deeds, but rather on an appreciation of the Jewish People's essence. Such love is not blind to the Jewish People's sins; rather, it is pained sevenfold by every spiritual blemish precisely because such blemishes are foreign to the Jewish People. (L'emunat Eetainu V p.10)

R' Nachman of Breslov z"l (1772-1810) writes: The saddest thing is when the holy Jewish Nation falls into sin, G-d forbid. The worst suffering in the world is nothing compared to the heavy burden of sin. Anyone who appreciates the holiness of the Jewish People, who knows where their souls come from, understands that the Jewish People are inherently distant from sin. Therefore, there is no heavier burden for a Jew to carry than the burden of sin. (Likutei Moharan II 7:3)