

Parshat Behar-Bechukosai: Relinquishing the I

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Hershel Reichman

Rashi poses the famous question-Why does the Torah specifically mention the mitzvah of *shemitta* in connection with Mt. Sinai? Weren't all the mitzvot given at Mt. Sinai? He answers that just as the mitzvah of *shemitta* was given with all its details at Sinai so too the whole Torah was given to Moshe with all its details at Sinai. This still leaves us with a question. Why didn't the Torah make this point with another mitzvah?

The Shem MiShmuel explains that when the Jews arrived at Mt. Sinai, the Torah writes, "*Vayachanu bamidbar vayichan sham Yisrael.*" "and they camped in the desert and Israel camped opposite the mountain". The verse begins with *Vayachanu*-the collective and then switches to *Vayichan*-the individual. Why the switch of tense within one verse? The Shem MiShmuel notes that Hashem chose to give the Torah on Mt. Sinai because all the other mountains were filled with pride. Hashem has an aversion to *gaavah*, pride, because it blinds a person to his own faults. This prevents *teshuva*, repentance, which is the foundation of the development of a perfect human society. We all have failures, but if we cannot admit to our mistakes we cannot improve. We are doomed to repeat our errors again and again, and this prevents the redemption. Therefore Hashem selected Mt. Sinai who was humble. This does not refer to the physical mountain but to the angel that reflected the spirit of the mountain.

Torah is a process of learning, self improvement and step by step achievement which can only be attained with humbleness. The Shem MiShmuel points out that the place in which a person finds himself has a tremendous impact upon who and what he becomes. Some places breed greed, others pride, and still others acceptance of one's position in life. Therefore the Jews had to come to Sinai to absorb its influence of humbleness.

Why is it that since our inception as a nation, we have been wracked and crippled by internal strife? This stems from the fact that Hashem gave the Jewish nation a very powerful intellect in order to understand the Torah. The intellect is an individual quality. Every person thinks differently, which creates barriers. We have suffered greatly as a result of our internal disunity. What can we do to rectify this? The solution may be to lose our view of self as an individual and see ourselves rather as a little part of the collective soul of Israel. This can be achieved through the power of humility. Sinai taught us about the extraordinary impact of humbleness. Yet one must watch out not to become too humble as one can fall into the trap of depression. Self doubt can cripple. We need to maintain a dichotomy of "*yesh*" and "*ayin*" where we are confident in our individual abilities but still aware that we are really nothing. Hillel Hazaken said, "*Im ain ani li mi li u'chsheani l'atzmi mah ani*"-If I am not for myself who will

be for me and if I am for myself what am I. A person must realize that he is inherently great, but if he only thinks about himself he will remain weak, continue to make mistakes, never improve, and never achieve salvation. This was the paradox of Sinai. It was both great and humble. That is why the Torah was given on it and that is why the verse uses a double language of "*Vayachanu*" and "*Vayichan*." When the Jews came to Sinai they realized that they were individuals with tremendous potential but they also knew that as individuals they were nothing without connecting to the collective soul of Israel. Maintaining this duality is a serious challenge for us. The Jewish people have a great love for Hashem, but this fire is hidden deep inside their heart which is full of pride. *Gaavah* drives Hashem away. The key is to remove our pride and realize that only with Hashem can we achieve perfection.

Shemitta is a double level mitzvah. The farmer gives up his private land for the collective. In a sense he is saying, "I am nothing." The farmer needs to be very strong to counteract his powerful desire to want to hold on to his land. That is why the mitzvah of *shemitta* is specifically mentioned with Sinai. It's *gadlut ha'adam* combined with *shiflut* which produces the incredible Sabbatical year. May we merit as individuals to become a part of the great collective soul of Israel and in this way help bring the Geulah closer.

Sefirat Haomer: Affording Respect

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Hanoach Teler

The Gemara relates that Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students perished because they did not treat each other with respect. The lengthiest period of mourning in the Jewish calendar commemorates this tragic era. Even our mourning for the destruction of the Temple does not stretch as long, which teaches us that Hashem deals very strictly with *kavod haTorah*. Rav Hirsch notes that the word "*kavod*" means heavy or satisfied. It is a misguided attitude of not needing others, of being disinterested, and of not affording proper respect to others.

Rashi in Bamidbar points out that Bilaam's donkey died so that he would not be a source of shame to him, because the donkey witnessed what Bilaam did not. If Hashem was careful not to shame Bilaam, who was a murderer and a *rasha*, how much more so should we be careful not to humiliate a fellow Jew. The Alter of Slabodka explains that people cannot live without *kavod*. Suicide is a result of feeling bereft of *chashivut*. Affording someone respect is giving him life. Rav Chaim Volozhner writes in Ruach Chaim that the way to give someone *kavod* is not to denigrate the person or view him

as inferior. Everyone has a *tzelem Elokim* and has the potential to become like Hashem. We were all created by one craftsman. Our work is to identify the artist's signature in each person. This involves looking for the good and not concentrating on the negative character traits of others.

Rav Yisrael Salanter notes that the real test is not respecting someone who is a *gadol* but someone who tries your patience and endurance. Respecting one's family is much harder

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than respecting strangers. He would teach, "Worry about the *gashmiut* of others and your own *ruchniut*." Before his students went to bake *matzot* for Pesach, they asked him what stringencies they should take upon themselves. He answered that they should take care not to raise their voices because the proprietress of the bakery was a widow and it could cause her anguish.

Rav Yisrael Yaakov Lubchansky was the Rav and Mashgiach in Baranovich. During World War II, when the Jews of Baranovich were

confined to a ghetto, he would walk the streets with a smile on his face. When questioned, he answered that he had nothing to give others, not even a piece of bread, at least he could try and give them his smile." Aside from what a moody person does to his surroundings, he makes people think that they are in some way responsible for the person's sadness. When Rav Yisrael Salanter encountered one of his students with a long face before Yom Kippur he admonished him that his face was a *reshut harabbim* and he had no right to make others

feel gloomy.

Many people maintain one *lashon-hara* free hour every day. As we count down the weeks to *Matan Torah*, let us work on our own *tikun hamiddot* by setting aside one hour every day to work on *kavod habriut*. Showing respect to the security guard, the janitor, the parking lot attendant, or the plumber are all little acts of great significance that can have help us reach our goal of perfecting our *middot* as we prepare for *Kabbalat HaTorah*.

Tehillim 89 - Chesed and Emet The Eternal Covenant

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Dr. Esther Shkop

There is a disagreement as to who composed Chapter 89 in Tehilim. Commentators are unsure whether it was composed during the lifetime of David Hamelech or later on when the kingdom was divided between Israel and Judea. Others argue it was written during the Babylonian exile. Whoever wrote it was foretelling our long exile and could envision our situation prophetically.

The chapter begins with Maskil which according to Rav Hirsh is a type of *mizmor*. Others say this is purely a contemplative psalm, not an anthem or a celebratory song. It's meant to arouse some serious thinking. The chapter continues, *Eitan haezrachi*. Some say he was one of the poets or singers in the lifetime of David Hamelech. Not all *Tehilim* was written by David Hamelech. He compiled the great epic poems and the minor ones that had been our legacy and inheri-

tance. Some are attributed all the way to Adam. There's a *Midrash* that says *Eitan haezrachi* means he comes from the east and it refers to *Avraham Avinu*. The common view is that he lived in the days of *David Hamelech* and he is also listed among the wise men who served in the court of Shlomo Hamelech.

"Hashem's kindness I will forever sing for generation to generation. I will inform through my mouth your *emunah*. The couplet of *chesed v'emunah* or *chesed v'emet* will be found constantly woven together throughout the chapter. The Malbim explains that *chesed* which is sometimes defined as charity or mercy is in fact unconditional love. It's the desire of the lover to give to the beloved whatever He can and has nothing to do with whether the beloved deserves it or not. *Eemunah* in common parlance is translated as faith but it really means faithfulness, sticking to

the commitments you made. This refers to Hashem's love and His keeping His promise in choosing *Am Yisrael* as His nation. The Torah doesn't really specify why Avraham was chosen although we know from the *Midrash*. It seems the chosenness was completely arbitrary. But the text later on tells us that only after he was chosen did he undergo the ten tests. Then we find mention of the *brit ben habesarim*, the covenant Hashem makes with Avraham telling him the land of Israel will be your children's forever; but also telling him that they would be slaves in Egypt. It seems now that it's no longer an outpouring of love but a covenant which is conditional, because if one side doesn't keep it it's no longer valid. And it seems Avraham earned it after withstanding the tests. The *mizmor* not only discusses the covenant Hashem made with David, but what he made with the people of Israel and Yerushalayim which can never be breached.