

OHRNET

SHABBAT PARSHAT EMOR · 15 IYAR 5766 · MAY 13, 2006 · VOL. 13 NO. 29

PARSHA INSIGHTS

IN GEE-DASH-DEE, WE TRUST

“You shall convoke on this very day (the festival of Shavuot)... When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not remove completely the corners of your field...for the poor and the convert shall you leave them; I am Hashem your G-d.” (23:21-22)

The strength of the United States is based on the dollar – not on the dollar’s value, but what’s written on each and every dollar: “In G-d we trust.”

The history of the world echoes with inhuman acts perpetrated by governments to maintain their vise grip on power. The more repressive the regime, the more it espouses the ‘good of the people’ to justify its cruelty; in the name of freedom, of supporting the poor, of the equality of labor, etc., the most egregious crimes are carried out.

Bitter experience shows that a government that has no belief in a Divine Power will see itself as *The* divine power; that its own continuing hegemony is the *raison d’etre* of the world itself.

The enormous success of the United States, on the other hand, is not because of the mighty dollar, but because it acknowledges the Might that is written on the dollar. “In G-d we trust.”

As we approach the celebration of receiving the Torah at Shavuot, we might ponder what we are celebrating. Obviously, part of our celebration is that G-d revealed to us some of the mysteries of the universe. For example, without the Torah, we would never have known that

strapping a black leather boxes to our forearm and our head brings an influx of spirituality to our bodies. Had the Torah not warned us that eating meat cooked with milk or cheese creates a mystical barrier that makes it very difficult to sense G-d’s presence in the world, we would have cheerfully lined up to buy Big Macs.

However, at Shavuot we are also celebrating that G-d commanded us to fulfill “logical” *mitzvot* as well, such as giving charity to the poor and having pity for the down-trodden. These are actions that all right thinking individuals espouse.

You shall convoke on this very day (the festival of Shavuot)...When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not remove completely the corners of your field...for the poor and the convert shall you leave them; I am Hashem your G-d.”

In this week’s portion, the Torah juxtaposes the *mitzvah* to observe the festival of Shavuot with that of obligatory gifts to the poor. Ostensibly, the two have little in common. However, the Torah is teaching us that for the “logical” *mitzvot* as well we should have tremendous thanks to G-d. Despite these commandments being self-evident, without a belief in a Divine Commander who legislates even the logical, man can easily descend to the level of an animal.

Very few things stand in the way of bald-faced ego and the lust for power. The most powerful of society’s checks and balances is the belief that all our actions are scrutinized and accountable. And the accountant is a Divine One.

OHRNET magazine is published by OHR SOMAYACH Tanenbaum College

POB 18103, Jerusalem 91180, Israel • Tel: +972-2-581-0315 • Email: info@ohr.edu • www.ohr.edu

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PARSHA OVERVIEW

The *kohanim* are commanded to avoid contact with corpses in order to maintain a high standard of ritual purity. They may attend the funeral of only their seven closest relatives: father, mother, wife, son, daughter, brother, and unmarried sister. The *kohen gadol* (High Priest) may not attend the funeral of even his closest relatives. Certain marital restrictions are placed on the *kohanim*. The nation is required to honor the *kohanim*. The physical irregularities that invalidate a *kohen* from serving in the Temple are listed. *Terumah*, a produce tithe given to the *kohanim*, may be eaten only by *kohanim* and their household. An animal may be sacrificed in the Temple after it is eight

days old and is free from any physical defects. The nation is commanded to sanctify the Name of G-d by insuring that their behavior is always exemplary, and by being prepared to surrender their lives rather than murder, engage in licentious relations or worship idols. The special characteristics of the holidays are described, and the nation is reminded not to do certain types of creative work during these holidays. New grain may not be eaten until the *omer* of barley is offered in the Temple. The Parsha explains the laws of preparing the oil for the menorah and baking the *lechem hapanim* in the Temple. A man blasphemes G-d and is executed as prescribed in the Torah.

ISRAEL Forever

A SECOND CHANCE

“Give me a second chance!” How often have we said or heard this desperate appeal for an opportunity to make amends for something that went wrong?

This Friday, the 14th of the Hebrew month of Iyar (May 12), is the day 3317 years ago when some Jews did indeed get a second chance.

When our ancestors offered the first Korban Pesach after leaving Egypt, these Jews were ineligible for participating in this sacrificial service because of their ritual impurity resulting from their contact with the dead. “Why should we be

left out?” they complained to their leader Moshe. He, in turn, relayed their impassioned plea to G-d, Who responded that those Jews, like all others in future generations who miss out on the first time, would have a second chance a month later.

This “second chance” which we recall on the “*Pesach Sheini*” date this week should serve as a reminder to every Jew everywhere, and in every situation, that he is also given a “second chance” to fulfill his potential as a Jew in every sense. We might sum this up by urging every Jew to “never say never” and preserve Israel forever.

LOVE OF THE LAND - THE SAGES

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

“AND EVERYTHING IS ACCORDING TO THE MULTITUDE OF THE DEED” (AVOT 3:15)

Lofty levels of development are not reached through the great size of a deed but rather through the great number of deeds. Repeated performance of good deeds gives one a strong hold on the level he aspires to, something that a single major performance alone cannot provide. The classic example is one who gives a thousand gold coins to one person in need but nothing to another. He will not develop the characteristic of generosity as well as one who gives one coin a thousand times. The latter’s repeated acts



of generosity gave him a strong hold on this trait, while the former experienced a great single inspiration, which not reinforced and therefore evaporated.

The same is true in regard to the Torah’s reward for good deeds. The reward of one who ransomed one captive with a hundred coins or gave a poor man a hundred coins is not as great as that of one who ransomed ten captives or gave ten poor people ten coins each.

• Rambam

PARSHA Q&A ?

1. Which male descendants of Aharon are exempt from the prohibition against contacting a dead body?
2. Does a *kohen* have an option regarding becoming ritually defiled when his unmarried sister passes away?
3. How does one honor a *kohen*?
4. How does the Torah restrict the *kohen gadol* with regard to mourning?
5. The Torah states in verse 22:3 that one who “approaches holy objects” while in a state of *tumah* (impurity) is penalized with excision. What does the Torah mean by “approaches”?
6. What is the smallest piece of a corpse that is able to transmit *tumah*?
7. Who in the household of a *kohen* may eat *terumah*?
8. If the daughter of a *kohen* marries a “zar” she may no longer eat *terumah*. What is a *zar*?
9. What is the difference between a *neder* and a *nedavah*?
10. May a person slaughter an animal and its father on the same day?
11. How does the Torah define “profaning” the Name of G-d?
12. Apart from Shabbat, how many days are there during the year about which the Torah says that work is forbidden?
13. How big is an *omer*?
14. On what day do we begin to “count the *omer*”?
15. Why do we begin counting the *omer* at night?
16. How does the *omer* differ from other *minchah* offerings?
17. The blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is called a “*zichron teruah*” (sound of remembrance). For what is it a reminder?
18. What is unusual about the wood of the *etrog* tree?
19. Who was the father of the blasphemer?
20. What is the penalty for intentionally wounding one’s parent?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week’s Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi’s commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 21:1 - *Challalim* — those disqualified from the priesthood because they are descended from a relationship forbidden to a *kohen*.
2. 21:3 - No, he is required to do so.
3. 21:8 - He is first in all matters of holiness. For example, a *kohen* reads from the Torah first, and is usually the one to lead the blessings before and after meals.
4. 21:10-12 - He may not allow his hair to grow long, nor attend to his close relatives if they die, nor accompany a funeral procession.
5. 22:3 - Eats.
6. 22:5 - A piece the size of an olive.
7. 22:11 - He, his wife, his sons, his unmarried daughters and his non-Jewish slaves.
8. 22:12 - A non-*kohen*.
9. 22:18 - A *neder* is an obligation upon a person; a *nedavah* is an obligation placed upon an object.
10. 22:28 - Yes. The Torah only prohibits slaughtering an animal and its mother on the same day.
11. 22:32 - Willfully transgressing the commandments.
12. 23:7-36 - Seven.
13. 23:10 - One tenth of an *eipha*.
14. 23:15 - On the 16th of Nissan.
15. 23:15 - The Torah requires counting seven complete weeks. If we begin counting in the daytime, the seven weeks would not be complete, because according to the Torah a day starts at nightfall.
16. 23:16 - It was made from barley.
17. 23:24 - The *akeidat* (binding of) Yitzchak.
18. 23:40 - It has the same taste as the fruit.
19. 24:10 - The Egyptian killed by Moshe (*Shemot* 2:12).
20. 24:21 - Death.

- The advantage of living economically
- Order of the blessings in the Pesach *kiddush*
- The vegetable dipped at the beginning of the Seder
- Eating of the *matzah* and *maror* (bitter herbs) in the time of the *Beit Hamikdash* and today
- Why we dip the *maror* into *charoset* and why we wash twice
- The four questions and who asks them
- The basic outline of the Haggadah
- Can the blind say the Haggadah for others
- Analysis of “*Halleluya*” and the authorship of the *Hallel*
- Getting into the right mood for prophecy, learning Torah and a good dream
- How much of Hallel is said before the meal
- Texts of *kiddush* and prayers on Shabbat and holidays
- The third cup, *birkat hamazon* and *birkat shir*
- Some reflections on food – the Heavenly benevolence, the difficulty of earning a livelihood and the cause
- *Hallel Hagadol* and the *Hallel* we say – the differences and the choice
- Two miraculous rescues of righteous from fiery furnaces
- “Fish food” and praises from our enemies in the past; praises and gifts in the future
- Odyssey of treasure from Egypt to Rome, to Korach and to the righteous
- Anatomy of *Hallel* and its blessings
- *Matzah*, *Maror* and *Afkomen*
- Deadline on eating sacrifice and falling asleep in the process
- Blessing before eating sacrifices and on redemption of first-born

THE BOOMERANG OF ENVIRONMENT

The social nature of man makes him very vulnerable to the influences of his environment, for good and otherwise. While the usual impact of the environment is conformity with the standards, there is sometimes the

boomerang effect of a person’s surroundings turning him in an opposite direction.

This will help us understand more profoundly why our *Mishna* instructs us to begin the recitation of the Haggadah by mentioning our unsavory past before speaking of our present glory. The Sage Rav explains that we fulfill this by our recalling that “at first our forefathers were idolaters... Terach, the father of Avraham and of Nachor, and they worshiped other gods.”

Why is it necessary to trace our lineage back to Avraham’s idol-worshipping father?

In his classical ethical work “*Michtav Mai’Eliyahu*”, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler suggests that we thus wish to point out that the development of the Patriarch Avraham as a giant of faith in monotheism was greatly influenced by his immunity to idolatry resulting from his exposure to the corruption of his environment.

The same approach applies to what the Sage Shmuel suggests as a reference to our humble beginnings: “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.” In preparing His chosen people for the sanctified role of receiving His Torah, G-d did not take them to the holiest of places, but rather to the land that was the quintessence of spiritual corruption. It was there that the environment had a boomerang effect of injecting them with an immunity to a lifestyle opposed to the values which G-d expected of man.

Only after we thus reflect on our beginnings as a people are we able to appreciate what developed from them. From ancestors who worshiped idols we became the nation “whom the Omnipresent has brought to His service”, and from being slaves in corrupt Egypt “G-d took us out of there with a strong hand and outstretched arm.”

Beginning with an inglorious past may provide this important lesson in the boomerang effect of environment but its main purpose is to teach us how much we are indebted to G-d for the happy ending of being free men who received His Torah.

• *Pesachim 116a*

WHAT THE SAGES SAY

When we say in *Hallel* “Let all the nations praise G-d, for His lovingkindness to us is so great” (*Tehillim* 117:1-2), we call attention to the fact that the nations who tried to harm us recognize what He has done to them for our sake and are compelled to praise Him – how much more are we obligated to sing His praises.

• *Rabbi Yishmael quoting his father, Rabbi Yossi - Pesachim 118b*

THE JUST JUDGE

From: Shaul in Jerusalem

Dear Rabbi,

We are supposed to believe that everything that happens to a person in life is from G-d. Whether he is healthy, wealthy or has children and the like are all from G-d who judges justly. If this is so, why should we pray to Him to change the portion He's given us? Why should a person ask G-d for more money, or better health, or more children? Isn't this a chutzpa tantamount to telling G-d He doesn't know what's best?

Dear Shaul,

You are right: Everything that a person has or doesn't have is all from G-d – the Just Judge.

But there's a big difference between what a person should or shouldn't have now, and what he should or shouldn't have a second from now. This constant re-evaluation takes place literally every second.

If a person feels that it is in his best interest to improve his lot in life by being more healthy, more wealthy or having (more) children and the like, he is certainly entitled to make reasonable effort to attain this goal. Whether he succeeds or not is ultimately up to G-d, based on what He thinks is/would be best the person now/later.

A parallel, and even more important, arena of effort

to attain one's desires is on the plane of prayer. The reason for this is because effort in the physical plane addresses only the symptom of the "malady", while penitential prayer pries into its cause. Often the reason we lack a better lot is because we're spiritually out of line. When we turn to G-d asking Him to improve our portion, *teshuvah* (repentance) makes us a different person and prayer directs new blessing to that "new" person.

Therefore we should certainly accept what we have or don't have at any given time as justly determined by the Omniscient. But this doesn't preclude the possibility of improving our lot, through a combination of effort in the physical and spiritual planes to literally make ourselves better in both. In fact, G-d often withholds blessing when we don't deserve it, in order that we do just that – return to Him through prayer.

Accordingly, it would actually be more of a chutzpa to apathetically accept the malady than to endeavor to effect its cure.

That being said, it is sometimes possible that what we think would be best, in fact would not. If after reasonable effort and persistent penitential prayer a particular situation persists, this may be a sign that things are not as they appear, and that G-d knows best. For this reason we don't pray for a specific amount of money or to marry a specific person, but rather generally for a good livelihood or for the proper soul mate etc. What we think would be a blessing might actually be a curse.

Let's try to be our best, pray for the best, and rely on the Best.

WHAT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO?

REAL-LIFE QUESTIONS OF SOCIAL AND BUSINESS ETHICS

GUARDING YOUR EARS

Question: While I am aware that one must not only avoid speaking *lashon hara* (slandorous speech about others) but also hearing it from others, I find it difficult to deal with this on a social level. What is the right thing to do when a friend begins to say uncomplimentary things about someone else?

Answer: The basic prohibition mentioned in halacha is against "accepting" *lashon hara*. That means one is not allowed to believe that what has been said is true. It is dif-

ficult, however, to disbelieve something you hear from a friend. It is therefore advisable to nip the problem in the bud by asking your friend to change the subject the moment he begins to speak about someone else, even if this makes you appear like some *tzaddik*. Should your friend insist on continuing with his slanderous report, it is your duty to inform him that you cannot accept that the object of his *lashon hara* did something improper.

Guarding your tongue is an important responsibility but so too is guarding your ears.

READER OF THE LETTER

“Here she is again!” This was the reaction of a new assistant to the great halachic authority of the last generation, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, to the appearance of a woman in the offices of Yeshiva Tiferet Yerushalayim. She had also visited the Rosh Hayeshiva a short while before and spent a considerable time in his office. This was unusual because if she was consulting him for a halachic ruling, as did countless others every day, Rabbi Feinstein was known to give quick answers to every question.

When he finally got up the nerve to ask the rabbi what

the purpose of the lady’s visit was, this is the explanation he received:

“This woman has no one in the world except some relative in Russia who writes her letters in Yiddish. Since she can’t read Yiddish she comes to me to read the letters for her.”

The Torah giant who was the guiding light for an entire generation, and whose every moment was spent learning, teaching and ruling, made time to bring comfort to a lonely woman.

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