

OHRNET

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EDITOR'S NOTE: THIS WEEK BEHAR IS READ IN ISRAEL AND EMOR IS READ OUTSIDE OF ISRAEL

PARSHA INSIGHTS

OF FAITH AND TRUST

"But the seventh year shall be a complete rest for the Land. A Sabbath for G-d." (25:4)

Sometimes trusting G-d isn't so easy. In this week's Torah portion the Jewish People are told to put down tools once every six years and stop working the fields for a year. G-d tells them to trust that He will provide for them. In the sixth year, He promises that miraculously there will be a bumper crop. This will keep them going for that year, and the next year and the eighth year. Because, of course, seeing as nothing will be planted in the seventh year, there will be nothing to harvest in the eighth. In other words, one year's crop becomes three. G-d says this is going to happen with clockwork regularity every seven years.

Sometimes, however, when it comes to our own lives it's not so easy.

That's the difference between *emunah* (faith) and *bitachon* (trust). We can believe that there is a G-d who created everything in existence, who continues to sustain reality from one second to the next, a G-d who rules over everything, everywhere, everyone, every second. But, when it comes to our own lives, we can still fall short in trusting Him when the going gets tough.

I'm often asked how Torah institutions, which receive lit-

tle if any government assistance, manage to stay afloat financially. And we even are witness to a tremendous growth of the number and size of Torah educational schools worldwide, in addition to a growing number of families that are dedicated to Torah studies despite the high cost-of-living and no "natural" source of income to support a life of Torah.

How do all these institutions and families manage?

Well, let me tell you how one Rosh Yeshiva looks at it. This is a man who has on his shoulders the burden of supporting an institution whose yearly running costs are in six figures. On his last trip to America, he told his donors to prepare "tanks" to receive the outpouring of wealth that G-d is going to bestow on *them*.

Supporting Torah is a privilege, not a budgetary burden. In the desert, the Holy Ark needed no wagon to carry it from one encampment to the next because "to the sons of Kehat he (Moshe) did not give (wagons); since the sacred service was upon them, they carried on the shoulder." (Shmot 6:9) In fact, no one carried the Aron. The Aron carried itself, and also those who "carried" it. The Aron carries its carriers. The Torah supports its supporters, not the other way round.

PLEASE JOIN US...

...in saying Tehillim/Psalms and a special prayer to G-d for the safety and security of all of Klal Yisrael in these times of conflict and conclude with the following special prayer:

"Our brothers, the entire family of Israel, who are delivered into distress and captivity, whether they are on sea or dry land – may G-d have mercy on them and remove them from stress to relief, from darkness to light, from subjugation to redemption now, speedily and soon."

KIDDUSHIN 72 - 77

“A tzaddik (righteous person) does not depart this world until another tzaddik like him is created (i.e., is born into this world).”

This teaching in a beraita on our daf follows a statement made by Rebbi as he lay on his deathbed (he was given a prophecy to tell — Rashi). Rebbi, who was in the Land of Israel, told of a number of terrible events that were occurring on that day in various cities throughout Bavel, concluding with the passing of Rav Ada bar Ahava on that day (according to one of two explanations cited by Rashi and Tosefot) in a city called Akra Diagma in Bavel. However, Rebbi “ended on a good note” and concluded with a statement of consolation that on that same day the Sage Rav Yehuda was born in Bavel.

The gemara follows up on this statement of Rebbi with a beraita that expresses a final message from Rebbi, which states that a tzaddik does not depart this world until another tzaddik who is like him comes into it. (According to the other explanation in Rashi and in Tosefot, Rav Ada bar Ahava was circumcised on that day, and did not die — “he was dwelling in the lap of our Patriach Avraham” — and it was Rebbi who died on that very day when Rav Yehuda was born.)

The idea being conveyed in this beraita is that God ensures that there is a “conservation of tzaddikim” in the world, in order that the righteousness, Torah study and the ethical Monotheism of Judaism should continue to exist in the world — for the sake of the continued existence of the world.

The beraita quotes a verse in Kohelet (1:5) as the source of this concept that when a tzaddik departs this world another one enters: “The sun rises, and the sun sets...”. The commentaries explain in various ways how our Sages learned from this verse, which seems to be descriptive of natural, daily sunrises and sunsets, the assurance that the passing of one tzaddik will always be accompanied with the birth of a new tzaddik.

One approach is that the order of the sun’s events is reversed in the verse. According to the Torah, in Creation and for most purposes in Jewish law and practice, evening precedes daytime. “And it was evening, and it was morning, day one.” The change of this order in the verse cited by the beraita hints to a completely different aspect of the world: the daylight preceding nightfall refers to the arrival of a new tzaddik in the world before the departure of an already existing one, so that the world should never be lacking “the light of the Torah” that tzaddikim bring with them. (Iyun Yaakov)

Another reason for explaining the verse in this manner is the seemingly redundant mention of the word “sun” a second time. The verse could have said “the sun rises and sets” instead of saying “the sun rises and the sun sets”. By stating the word “sun” a second time in the verse we are taught that this is a reference to a “different sun” — the tzaddik, who illuminates the world with his Torah righteousness and scholarship. Before the “light” of one tzaddik is dimmed when he departs this world, the light of a second tzaddik who has entered the world has been “lit”. (Maharsha)

I once heard from a great rabbi in Jerusalem that the comparison of a tzaddik passing from this world to sunset also teaches another important lesson. Just as the sun after setting is still “there”, and is giving light someplace else in the world even if we don’t see it in a specific place, so too tzaddikim radiate an aura of holiness, purity and Torah in our own existence — even after their passing from this world.

• Kiddushin 72b

*With great sorrow the Ohr Somayach family
shares in mourning the passing of our beloved friend, colleague and teacher*

PAUL (AVRAHAM PESACH) LASTER זצ״ל

May Hashem comfort his family along
with the mourners of Tzion and Yerushalayim.

PARSHA Q&A ?

1. Why does the Torah specify that the laws of shemita were taught on Har Sinai?
2. If one possesses shemita food after it is no longer available in the field, what must he do with it?
3. The Torah commands, "You shall sanctify the fiftieth year." How is this done?
4. Which two "returns" are announced by the shofar during yovel?
5. From where does the yovel year get its name?
6. What prohibitions are derived from the verse "v'lo tonu ish et amito - a person shall not afflict his fellow"?
7. What is the punishment for neglecting the laws of shemita?
8. If shemita is observed properly, how long is the crop of the sixth year guaranteed to last?
9. After selling an ancestral field, when can one redeem it?
10. Under what circumstance may one sell ancestral land?
11. If a home in a walled city is sold, when can it be redeemed?
12. What does the word "days" mean in this week's Parsha?
13. What is considered a walled city?
14. What is the definition of a "ger toshav"?
15. To what is one who leaves Eretz Yisrael compared?
16. Why does Rashi mention the plague of the firstborn in this week's Parsha?
17. List three prohibitions which demonstrate the dignity with which one must treat a Jewish indentured servant.
18. Who supports the family of the Jewish indentured servant during his years of servitude?
19. If a Jew is sold as a servant to a non-Jew, does he go free after six years?
20. Where is it permitted to prostrate oneself on a stone floor?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this week's Questions!

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

1. 25:1 - To teach us that just as shemita was taught in detail on Har Sinai, so too, all the mitzvot were taught in detail on Har Sinai.
2. 25:7 - Remove it from his property and declare it ownerless.
3. 25:10 - At the beginning of the year the Beit Din declares, "This year is kadosh (sanctified)."
4. 25:10 - The return of the land to its original owner, and the "return" (freedom) of the slave from slavery.
5. 25:10 - From the sounding of the shofar. A ram's horn is called a yovel.
6. 25:17 - One may not intentionally hurt people's feelings, nor give bad advice while secretly intending to reap benefit.
7. 25:18 - Exile.
8. 25:21,22 - From Nissan of the sixth year until Sukkot of the ninth year.
9. 25:24 - After two years following the sale, until yovel. At the beginning of yovel it returns to the family automatically.
10. 25:25 - Only if one becomes impoverished.
11. 25:29 - Only within the first year after the sale. Afterwards, even in yovel, it does not return.
12. 25:29 - The days of an entire year.
13. 25:29 - A city that has been surrounded by a wall since the time of Yehoshua.
14. 25:35 - A non-Jew who lives in Eretz Yisrael and accepts upon himself not to worship idols.
15. 25:38 - To one who worships idols.
16. 25:38 - The prohibition against taking interest is accompanied by the phrase, "I am the L-rd your G-d who took you out of Egypt." Rashi explains that just as G-d discerned in Egypt between those who were firstborn and those who were not, so too will G-d discern and punish those who lend with interest, pretending they are acting on behalf of others.
17. 25:39-43 - 1. Do not make him perform humiliating tasks 2. Do not sell him publicly 3. Do not make him perform unnecessary jobs.
18. 25:41 - His master.
19. 25:54 - No. If he is not redeemed with money, he must wait until the yovel to go free.
20. 26:1 - In the Mikdash.

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Abarbanel

ON THE PARSHA

BY RABBI PINCHAS KASNETT

Behar

A Puzzling Reference to Mount Sinai

This week's Torah portion begins with the words, "And G-d spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai". The narrative then proceeds to a discussion of the requirement to refrain from all agricultural activity in the Land of Israel every seven years. The commentaries are puzzled by the unusual reference to Mount Sinai only in regard to this mitzvah since all of the *mitzvot* were given at Mount Sinai.

Abarbanel explains that even though Moshe received all the commandments at Mount Sinai, he did not teach all of them to the people at the same time. Rather, he was instructed by G-d prophetically when to teach particular commandments.

When Moshe first descended from Mount Sinai he was confronted by the tragedy of the idolatry of the golden calf. In order to rebuild the spiritual level of the nation, the emphasis of the Torah narratives for the rest of the Book of Exodus and the first several *parshiot* of the Book of Leviticus is on the spiritual purification of the nation, focusing on the

construction and services of the Tabernacle, which represents the epitome of the pure spiritual relationship between G-d and the Jewish People, as well as numerous commandments focusing on the spiritual elevation of the people. As a result, G-d speaks to Moshe in the Tent of Meeting in the Tabernacle itself.

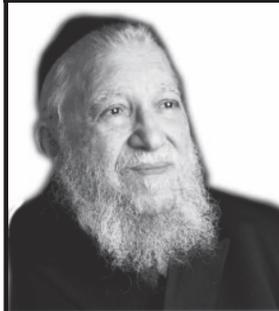
Once the solid foundation of sanctity has been rebuilt from its source in the Tent of Meeting or Tabernacle, the Torah can then again refer to Mount Sinai, the original source of all the commandments. The ultimate relationship between G-d and the Jewish People can only be brought to fruition in the Land of Israel. However, the Torah makes it abundantly clear that only when the nation has been purged of its idolatrous and heretical past through its forty-year experience with the Tabernacle in the desert can it merit the privilege of dwelling in the Land of Israel. It is in the Land of Israel that the Jewish People are given the opportunity to demonstrate to the entire world their faith and trust in G-d as the ultimate source of our material welfare by refraining from agricultural activities every seven years.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

The Torah prohibits normal farming of the Land of Israel every seven years. This "Shabbat" for the Land is called "shemita". After every seventh shemita, the fiftieth year, yovel (jubilee), is announced with the sound of the shofar on Yom Kippur. This was also a year for the Land to lie fallow. G-d promises to provide a bumper crop prior to the shemita and yovel years. During yovel, all land is returned to its original division from the time of Joshua, and all Jewish indentured servants are freed, even if they have not completed their six years of work. A Jewish indentured servant may not be given any demeaning, unnecessary or excessively difficult work, and may not be sold in the public

market. The price of his labor must be calculated according to the amount of time remaining until he will automatically become free. The price of land is similarly calculated. Should anyone sell his ancestral land, he has the right to redeem it after two years. If a house in a walled city is sold, the right of redemption is limited to the first year after the sale. The Levites' cities belong to them forever. The Jewish People are forbidden to take advantage of one another by lending or borrowing with interest. Family members should redeem any relative who was sold as an indentured servant as a result of impoverishment.

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Rav Bulman ^{zt"l}
on the
Torah Portion of the Week

DEPARTURE DECORUM

From: Ted

*Dear Rabbi,
I have seen over and over in many shuls that toward the end of davening people tend to wrap up their prayer early and gather toward the exit door in anticipation of making a quick exit at the end of the service. It seems to me that this can't be right. Would you please illuminate this matter for me?*

Dear Ted,

If this is the custom, it seems we should welcome a departure from it.

The Talmud (Berachot 6b) forbids rushing or hurrying out of shul because doing so looks like one finds davening to be a burden such that he's anxious to run away from it, G-d forbid.

This would apply to anything that a person does which would appear to others like he can't wait to get out of there, including wrapping up before the davening is over and gathering by the exit door in anticipation of leaving.

Conversely, not only is it forbidden to rush out of shul, it is actually a mitzvah to run toward the shul, as is the case when performing any other mitzvah as well. Doing so demonstrates one's enthusiasm to fulfill G-d's commandments.

Arguably, since the reason for this is to demonstrate to others the alacrity one should have for the *mitzvot*, it applies primarily when one nears the shul and it is thereby apparent to others that he's rushing specifically to the shul in honor of prayers. But if, based on the context, it's clear to others that he's on the way to shul, he should show his eagerness to get there even at a distance. One example of this would be if

he's visibly carrying *tefillin* on his way to the shul for morning prayers.

The importance of demonstrating eagerness to perform a mitzvah is so great that we are encouraged to "run" to shul even on Shabbat, despite its being otherwise forbidden to run on the Sabbath. In fact, one of the Talmudic Sages relates that he initially ridiculed rabbis who would run to Torah lectures on Shabbat, until he heard the teaching of a great Sage who declared that it's a mitzvah to run for a mitzvah – even on Shabbat.

This teaching offers an important qualification to your question. Namely, just as the prohibition of rushing on Shabbat is suspended for the purpose of a mitzvah, so too the prohibition of running out of shul does not apply to one who is rushing to perform a mitzvah.

Accordingly, one who is going to learn Torah after the prayers may "run" out of shul since he's rushing not because he's anxious to leave shul but rather because he's enthusiastic to fulfill the mitzvah of learning Torah. Similarly, even if he has to leave the shul for some mundane reason, but it's his intention to come back to the shul, he may leave quickly in order to hasten his return.

Since earning a livelihood, with the proper intentions, may be considered a mitzvah and, for that matter, since nearly anything with the right intentions may be elevated to a mitzvah, perhaps those people you see preparing for, and making, a quick exit from shul are actually doing so, at least indirectly, for the purpose of a mitzvah...

Sources:

- Talmud Berachot 6b
- Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 60:12 and Mishneh Berurah

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THE SPOKEN WORD OF PRAYER

Infused with one's very breath of life is an expression of the heart and soul within. Channeled through the twenty-two letters of the *aleph-beit*, the words of prayer ascend on high, connecting us — mind, body, and soul — to the Infinite One.

“When praying, one should have in mind the meaning of the words that he is saying. He should also think as if the Divine presence is facing him. One should remove all disturbing and distracting thoughts from one's mind in order that all thoughts will be focused in the prayers.

“If one were to speak before a mortal king one would be careful to organize every word, making sure not to make a mistake. How much more so should one do the same when speaking to the King of kings, the blessed Holy One, Who knows every thought of the person! The pious and dutiful people would seclude themselves before prayer, meditating on their prayers until they reached a transcendental level beyond the physical realm — close to the level of prophesy. One should concentrate on things that humble the spirit, thereby directing him to his Father in Heaven. One should not think of things which might lead to lightheartedness.” (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 98:1*)

The Eliya Rabbah in the name of the Kitzur Shelah suggests a method for removing distracting thoughts from one's mind before praying. One should pass his right hand three times over his forehead while reciting the verse “Create a pure heart for me, O G-d, and a steadfast spirit renew within me” (*Tehillim 51:12*) each time. Also, if a distracting thought comes during prayer, one should pause for a moment and use this method, but think the words of the verse rather than say them aloud. (*Mishneh Berurah*)

“One should not pray in a place or at a time (like when angry or traveling — *Mishneh Berurah*) that will disturb his concentration during prayer (Tur in the name of Rabbi Meir of Rotenberg). Today we are not so careful with the above since we are no longer able to pray with so much concentration.” (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 98:2*)

The Pri Megadim writes in the name of the Levush that even though we are no longer able to pray with “proper concentration” as in earlier days, we must still do what we can to ensure that we pray our best. We therefore should not deliberately pray in a place that will disturb us, such as in a place with a bad smell. (*Mishneh Berurah*)

LOVE OF THE LAND

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

CHEFTZIBAH — HOME OF THE MAGNIFICENT MOSAIC

One of the most interesting relics of ancient times can be found in Kibbutz Cheftzibah at the foot of Mount Gilboa. It is the magnificent mosaic that decorated the floor of a synagogue built some 1400 years ago on the site where nearby Kibbutz Beit Alpha is located.

It was back in 1928 that the discovery of this mosaic came about while a tractor was digging in the fields of Beit



Alpha. Archaeologists who rushed to the scene uncovered the floor of the ancient synagogue with a mosaic showing the sun encircled by the twelve signs of the zodiac (the *mazalot* in Hebrew).

The Israeli government has erected a building over the mosaic to protect it at the kibbutz to which it was moved and it is now a popular tourist attraction.

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BY JONATHAN ROSENBLUM

A TRUE EDUCATIONAL OFFICER PAUL LASTER, *zt”l*

When I first arrived at Ohr Somayach in the summer of 1979, groups of Israeli army officers were a regular fixture in the *beis medrash* during the afternoon break. Ohr Somayach was ideally suited for meetings between Israeli yeshiva students and the IDF officers by virtue of its large Israeli program and a distinguished staff, which included Rabbi Avraham Ravitz, *zt”l*, Rabbi Moshe Frank and two famous *ba’alei teshuva*, the artist Ika Yisraeli, *zt”l* and the comedic actor Mordechai Arnon.

All the *ba’alei teshuva* learning in the Israeli branch had served in the IDF, including a number who had been high-ranking officers. So the army issue was off the table. The IDF eventually terminated the visits, however, when three pilots and some other officers became religious.

The moving force behind the IDF program was Paul (Avraham Pesach) Laster, a courtly Southerner from a socially prominent Richmond, Virginia family. Paul’s father was the first Jewish judge in Virginia. Unlike most of the other established Richmond Jewish families, however, the Lasters had not yet succumbed to assimilation.

In 1967, Paul had just completed his legal studies at the University of Virginia, and decided to spend a year in Israel before taking up the practice of law. He arrived in the midst of the euphoria surrounding Israel’s victory in the Six Day War, and soon decided to stay. He began to think a great deal about his own personal relationship to the Jewish people and its history.

Eventually he went to work for the Jewish Agency preparing emissaries to English-speaking countries. He returned to the United States to earn a master’s degree in Contemporary Judaism at Brandeis University. But after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, he knew it was time to return to Israel. Even then, he found frustrating the apathy of American Jewish university students, as Israel’s fate hung in the balance.

The widespread national depression following the successful Arab surprise attack at the start of the Yom Kippur

War caused the army to worry about a severe problem of morale in the ranks. Emigration jumped sharply.

Paul came to the attention of the IDF as a result of his earlier lecturing on Jewish identity. Typically, he would begin his lectures by telling his Israeli audience that he was returning home to America. “You are Israelis and I’m an American Jew,” he would say as a means of riling up his listeners, “What does Israel have to do with me?” The message that he wanted to drive home was that being Jewish must mean

something more than just living in Israel, especially if Israel sought to maintain claims on the loyalty of Jews around the world.

Paul was invited to become an educational officer with the rank of captain. The IDF then had a three-week final course for new officers. The last week of the course included discussions of a variety of issues – e.g., the Ashkenazi-Sephardi divide, economics, Israel as a Jewish and democratic society, the Cold War and its implications for Israel, etc.

Paul took one look at the curriculum and told his bosses that it was overloaded, and would not address the morale problem in the IDF. To do that it would be necessary to focus on Jewish identity. He prepared a program around the questions: Who am I as a Jew? What is my relationship to the Jewish people, particularly to Jews in the Diaspora? What is my relationship to Jewish culture? To Jewish religion?

To measure the effectiveness of the course, Paul had the participants fill in questionnaires about whether they would choose to be born again as a Jew and also on their basic Jewish knowledge. Around a third, responded that they would not choose to be born as Jews. The respondents were also shaken by their lack of knowledge of the basic tenets and practices of Judaism. Yet at the end of the course, 90% of the participants expressed an interest in participating in a course on Judaism even if it meant giving up IDF vacation days.

In time, Paul realized that yeshivahs would be a logical place to look for information on the essence of Jewish iden-



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tity. He began bringing groups to Rabbi Baruch Horowitz's Dvar Yerushalayim yeshiva and later to Ohr Somayach. After the first visit to Dvar Yerushalayim, he once told a reporter for *Jewish Life* magazine, "I couldn't tear them away. They were singing and dancing wildly." That experience was an eye-opener for Paul.

Yet during the years he ran the program, he remained resolutely non-observant, even refusing to wear a yarmulke in the *beis medrash*. The program, however, was a reflection of his own wrestling with the meaning of being Jewish. In the end, the only person he could say with confidence had become observant through the program was him. But, then again, he once explained to Rabbi Nota Schiller, the Rosh Yeshiva of Ohr Somayach, "They only heard the material once, I heard it 78 times."

In 1978, the IDF began to develop cold-feet about Paul's program, and he retired from the IDF. In reality, he just switched hats and became Ohr Somayach's liaison to the IDF. In that capacity, he continued to bring groups of soldiers into Ohr Somayach, sometimes hundreds in a week, for all-day sessions. Rabbi Ron Rinat, a former naval commander, then learning in Ohr Somayach's Israeli division, remembers that Paul had an unbelievable power to show the participants that they had not begun to think about the most fundamental issues of life in any serious fashion.

He would push them hard, until they did not know which way to turn. But his Southern charm and ready smile, allowed him to get away with it, no matter how confrontational he was. "Israelis," Paul once told his *chavrusah* of 25 years, Rabbi Chaim Chait, "can take a punch." They haven't heard yet of micro-aggressions and safe spaces.

The myriad Shabbos guests that Rabbi Meir Schuster used to bring from the Kosel to the Lasters' home found themselves similarly challenged as they never had been. But they never felt it was personal or that Paul was trying to prove he was smarter than them. Many came back Shabbos after Shabbos drawn by warmth of Paul and his wife Sharon's welcome as soon as they entered the door, Paul's unsurpassed raconteurial abilities, enhanced the mellifluous Southern drawl he never shed, and the singing of Paul and his sons. They returned repeatedly even knowing that their defenses would be put to the test by Paul's bull's-eye, prodding cross-examinations. Sharon was Paul's perfect match in clarity of vision, genuine warmth and capacity for active listening.

In 1985, Paul decided it was time to focus on his own Gemara learning. He took a seat in the *beis medrash* of Chofetz Chaim yeshiva and did not move from it for the next 31 years. He had first fallen in love with the yeshiva when he brought a group of soldiers there in the year (1979-80) that

Rabbi Henschel Leibowitz brought the entire yeshiva from Forest Hills to Jerusalem's Sanhedria Murchevet neighborhood.

He started in the lowest shiur learning with young men less than half his age. But it was not a problem, recalls his first rebbi, Rabbi Yossi Granovsky, because he did not let it be. He was not embarrassed to ask questions.

Few of the *bochurim* would have guessed that he was twenty years their senior. For decades, he led *bein hazemanim* hikes in the Golan on which the *bochurim* could not keep up with him. And he organized weekly basketball games.

His greatest impact on the *beis medrash* was his example, according to Rabbi Dovid Chait, the current rosh yeshiva. Eighteen-year-olds came to Israel to learn Torah, but also dreaming of living the good life on their return to America. It did not occur to them that the fleshpots of America might be incompatible with growth in Torah.

The example of someone raised in a well-to-do home, with a promising legal career in front of him, who had traded it all for the simplest possible stone hut, helped them realize that growth in Torah only comes with sacrifices. At the same time, the joy on Paul's face after ever *mussar shmues* from Rabbi Moshe Chait, the excitement every time he cracked a Gemara from which he refused to budge until he was sure he fully understood it, made it clear that the sacrifices for a life a Torah were well worth it.

He and Sharon kept in contact with many *bochurim* he had influenced in the Chofetz Chaim and those in Ohr Somayach whom he tutored one-on-one (the only way he could relate – on a personal level) over his last fifteen years. Two of those from Chofetz Chaim flew from America to visit him in his last week.

His passing on Thursday before Pesach was exactly as he would have chosen – with the shortest possible *shivah* and no *hespedim*. His ego had long ago been cleansed by his love of Hashem. Though he could talk about his journey to help others on the path, to hear himself praised would have pained him. Few even knew of his illness until he could no longer come to the *beis medrash*, and almost none that he had been battling the dread disease for years.

That singular lack of ego, his disarming simplicity and directness, is what made it possible for him to challenge others to examine their most fundamental assumptions while still building a close personal relationship with them.

The above article originally appeared in Mishpacha Magazine, May 6, 2016, and is reprinted with permission.

UNITY, RESPECT AND THE STUDENTS OF RABBI AKIVA

During *sefirat ha'omer*, twenty-four thousand of Rabbi Akiva's *talmidim* passed away. Therefore, there is a custom to observe certain laws of mourning, like refraining from getting married and from cutting one's hair (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 493:1). The *Gemara* explains that these students passed away because they did not give proper *kavod*, honor, to each other (Yevamot 62b). This idea, however, is hard to understand. How could such incredible people and "*gedolei Yisrael*" falter on such a fundamental concept? In addition, why was it specifically during the time between Pesach and Shavuot that this decree was passed on them? Finally, what practical lesson is there for us to learn from this tragic incident?

The Shem M'Shmuel explains that a person comes to respect another because he sees in him a certain strength that he himself lacks. Since the other is superior to him in at least one aspect, he comes to respect him. This world is composed of many different facets, so it should not be difficult for one to respect his friends, as there is at least one feature in which another is greater than him. However, this only holds true as long as each person is seen as an individual. If there is a feeling of unity to such an extent that people fail to view one another as individuals, then the ability to respect the other also diminishes. In such a situation, it is no longer relevant to respect another for something for which he is superior, since, as a unit, everyone has a share in everyone's unique abilities. Just as the human body functions as one cohesive unit and the left hand does not "praise" the right hand for the right hand's strengths, so too, when there is such an intense feeling of *achdut*, unity, it may also be the cause for a weakening ability to give another the proper *kavod*.

Unity and the Receiving of the Torah

Describing the Jewish People's arrival at Har Sinai to receive the Torah the verse says: *And they traveled from Refidim and they came to the desert of Sinai and encamped in the desert; and Israel encamped there opposite the mountain* (Shemot 19:2). The Kli Yakar points out that the word *Refidim* has the same letters as the Hebrew word for divisiveness (*hafradah*). Based on this we can read the above verse as "they left their divisiveness and came to the Sinai Desert". Meaning, it was only when they left their divisiveness that they were able to go to Sinai to receive the Torah. This idea is also indicated by the fact that the Torah uses the word "*vayichan*" when describing how the Jewish People camped by Har Sinai before they received the Torah. Rashi explains that the Torah uses the singular form of the verb, "*vayichan*", he camped,

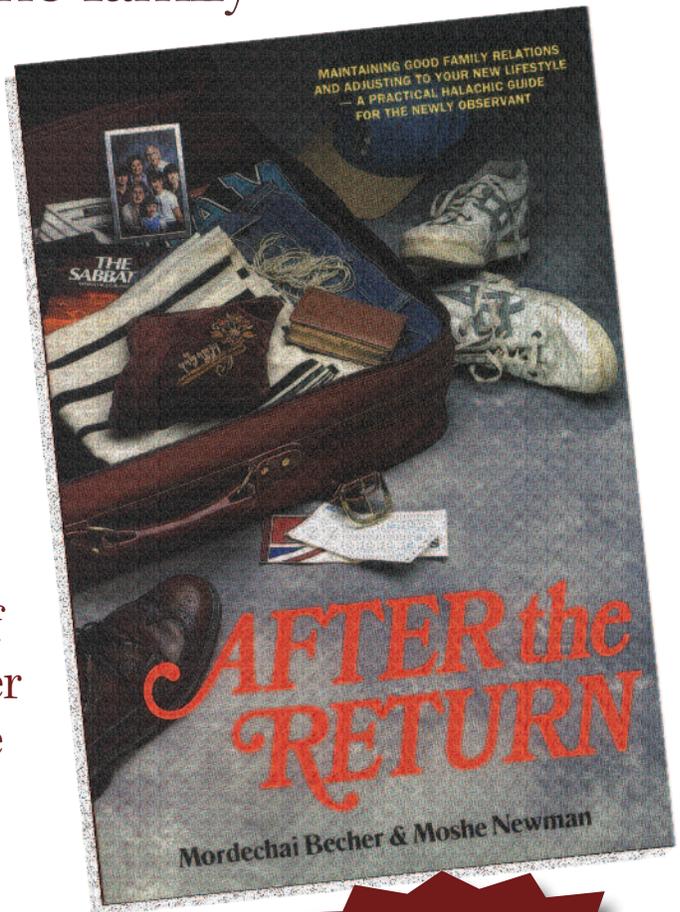
instead of "*vayachanu*", they camped, to show the incredible feeling of unity they felt at the time. Echoing these ideas, the *midrash* says, "When they came to Har Sinai they became a unified group. At that time, G-d said that the time has come to give My children the Torah" (Eichah Rabbah, Pesicha 20). It follows from the above that unity is a major prerequisite for the receiving of the Torah.

Shavuot is the holiday in which we accepted the Torah. The time between Pesach and Shavuot is therefore meant to be used as a personal preparation period for the receiving of the Torah. Therefore, during this time Rabbi Akiva's *talmidim* were most certainly working on themselves to become proper receptacles for G-d's Torah. Since unity is such a fundamental principle for receiving the Torah, Rabbi Akiva's students placed an extra-special emphasis on specifically building on their ability to express this feeling of unity. However, as a result of the intense focus on unity they began to lose sight of relating to each of their colleagues as individuals — and thus, their respect for each individual began to lessen. They saw just the greater whole, and stopped fully appreciating the unique individual contribution of every single person. Due to the lofty spiritual levels of these *talmidim*, this ever-so-slight expression of a lack of proper *kavod* for one's friend was enough for G-d to exact judgment from them (based on Shem M'Shmuel, Emor 5672).

The commentaries explain that one reason for observing these laws of mourning during this time is to inspire us to work on our interactions with those around us (see Kaf Hachaim 493:5). This is the time to learn and study the laws that pertain to the interactions between friends, and prepare for "*matan Torah*". As Chazal tell us, "*Derech erez kadmah la'Torah*", proper behavior precedes the giving of the Torah (Vayikra Rabbah 9:3). While obviously a big component of this preparation is *achdut* and unity, one has to be careful not to allow this to be the cause for taking any individual's unique contributions for granted. As the *midrash* says: Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said, "If Yisrael was lacking even one person, the Divine Presence would not have appeared to them" (Devarim Rabbah 7:8). This is especially true of giving proper *kavod* to those whom we are especially close with, such as one's wife, parents, family members, close friends, *chavruta*, etc. We can not let the *achdut* we feel compromise the *kavod* that should be given as a result of appreciating their unique strengths. This is one practical lesson we can learn from the tragic loss of Rabbi Akiva's students.

An old friend's wedding, an uncle's funeral, Passover at the family homestead — these are but a few of the challenging real-life events that are fraught with conflict and anxiety for the newly observant.

After returning to the faith of their ancestors, many re-enter the secular world without the tools to respond to the inevitable challenges to their newly adopted set of beliefs.



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