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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Digital Torah (ver. 1.0)

“I am Hashem, your G-d...” (20:1)

Unlike many other religions, Judaism is not a cult of personality. True, Judaism has its Patriarchs and its prophets, but no one figure emerges as the pinnacle, the focus of all belief. The focus of Jewish belief is a book.

That book is called the Torah.

But to call the Torah a book could be misleading. What exists in this world as a scroll of parchment is an embodiment of a holiness that emanates from the highest possible reaches of creation.

Judaism understands that this world is but the lowest of a myriad of worlds, each chaining down from Hashem Himself. These spiritual worlds are of unimaginable holiness, but as they cascade and descend downwards, the light of each world becomes filtered and diminished. Even though each lower world contains the blueprint within it of the entire connected sequence of the higher worlds above it, and absolutely replicates their image and form, nevertheless, the level of holiness and light in any particular world cannot be compared in any way to that of the world above it.

However, where the Holy Torah is concerned – even though it also cascades down through infinite levels from its high holy source and from world to world and from level to level – nevertheless, its original holiness is preserved intact. Meaning, just as it is in its source, so too it is in this world, and thus it is forbidden to treat it in any mundane way or even to think words of Torah in unclean places like a bathroom.

A person who transgresses this prohibition risks being cut off from Hashem, not just in this world but the world to come as well. Our Sages tell us that whoever holds a Sefer Torah

with his bare hands - is buried 'without that Mitzvah.' In general, they also forbade for a Sefer Torah to be transferred from place to place, and even from one house of prayer to another. In fact, a makeshift minyan or even a permanent congregation, regardless of its size, is required to travel to where there is a Torah available, rather than to have a Torah brought to them. It is considered disrespectful to take a Torah to those who need it - rather, those who need it should come to the Torah.

There is nothing holier in this physical world than a Sefer Torah, because the Torah always has its original level of holiness.

Let's understand this by way of an analogy:

We are living at the beginning of the Age of Artificial Intelligence. At the heart of AI is digital technology, and at the heart of digital technology is something called the binary code. All digital media are based on this simplest code that can be: the presence or the absence of an electric pulse, the turning on or off of a microscopic switch. Every digital device, be it a computer or a fridge, or a frighteningly life-like humanoid, uses this same fundamental code: "0" - no current, or "1" - current.

The strength of digital technology is precisely because it is a code. Provided that the original code can still be made out, the message can be regenerated *exactly* as it was originally, whether that message is a picture or a sound.

Let's take the example of Morse code. Morse code was a system of communication widely used before radio was sophisticated enough to permit voice transmission. It consists of long and short sound pulses, which represent letters. For example, "SOS" in Morse code is "...---..." - where the dots are short pulses and the dashes are long ones.

The beauty of this, and any code for that matter, is that the entire meaning of the message can be reconstructed, provided that the original code is intact. It doesn't matter how much static or noise or other kind of interference surrounds the signal - provided that you can tell a dot from a dash, the original signal can be reconstructed exactly.

This is not the case in an analog system. In an analog system, the medium becomes part of the message. If the medium decays, so does the message. I remember, as a young boy in England, listening to the inevitable surface noise of my HMV gramophone, waiting for the opening bars of the music as the record spun at the dizzying velocity of 78 rpm. 45's, 33's and cassettes weren't that much better. (Remember 8-track cartridges?) All those systems shared the same drawback: the medium was part of the message. The pops and scratches of needle meeting plastic, or, in the case of a cassette, of magnetic tape being dragged across a magnet, was part and parcel of the sound of music.

The Torah is a 'digital communication.' It never loses its original pristine holiness, however much it is surrounded by the background noise and static of this physical world.

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Sanhedrin 72-78

A Home of Peace

The Rabbis taught: “Concerning one who loves his wife like himself and honors her even more than himself, raises his children properly and marries them off at an early age, it is written: ‘You will know that there is peace in your home.’” (Iyov 5:24)

▪ **Sanhedrin 76b**

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COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

KRIAT SHEMA AL HAMITAH (PART 5)

“The amount of sleep required by the average person is five minutes more.”
Wilson Mizener – American Playwright

Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad

Hear O Israel, Hashem is our God, Hashem is One (cont.)

One of the most striking elements of Kriat Shema is that we cover our eyes when we accept upon ourselves “*Ohl Malchut Shamayim* – the Heavenly Yoke.” The simple explanation for this custom is that Kriat Shema cannot be fulfilled simply by reading the words. Rather, the words must be said with intent and concentration. If so, covering our eyes helps us to block out the physical distractions around us so that we can focus on what we are saying (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 61:5).

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch points out that the last letter of the word “echad” – ‘dalet’ – is written in the Sefer Torah larger than the other letters. It is enlarged so that a person shouldn’t inadvertently change the ‘dalet’ into a ‘reish,’ which is a very similar shape. To change the ‘dalet’ for a ‘reish’ would change the word “echad – one” to “acher – another” - which would be a terrible mistake! It would change the sentence to read, “Hear O Israel, Hashem is our God, Hashem is another”! The letter ‘dalet’ is sharp and angular whereas the

letter ‘reish’ is soft and round. According to Rabbi Hirsch, the sharpness and the angularity of the letter ‘dalet’ leaves no room for mistake. Because truth is something that must be unequivocally defined. The “Oneness” of Hashem is absolute, and even if a person “only” rounds the truth a tiny bit, it becomes “acher” – something else altogether.

Rabbi Hirsch explains that this is a reason why we cover our eyes. There are so many reasons and arguments for not keeping Hashem’s mitzvot. For not accepting upon ourselves the *Ohl Malchut Shamayim*. Instead, we cover our eyes and block out the enticements of the physical world. We concentrate on only one detail – that Hashem is One and His Name is One – to the exclusion of all else.

Rabbi Moshe Sherer (1921-1998) was the legendary head of Agudath Israel of America. Selflessness and unwavering concern and love for Jews worldwide were his hallmark. Rabbi Sherer would ask why we cover our eyes when we recite Kriat Shema. He answered, “When our eyes are open, we can see only what is in front of us. But when we close our eyes, we can imagine a much larger canvas. One that encompasses the entirety of the Jewish People. We cover our eyes with our hand because our hands are the tools that take abstract thoughts and turn them into concrete action.”

It is fascinating to note that our Sages use a “yoke” to depict our relationship with Hashem. In addition, they also refer to the mitzvot as a yoke – “*Ohl Mitzvot*.” Instead of a yoke, one might expect them to use much more appealing and positive descriptions of the Kingdom of our Father in Heaven and the mitzvot.

A yoke is a heavy piece of wood that is molded to fit an ox’s neck so that it can work in the fields. It ploughs, sows and harvests through the medium of the yoke. But it is uncomfortable and it is not something that, given the choice, an ox would choose to wear. And, yet, our Sages introduce us to the twin concepts of the “Heavenly Yoke” and the “Yoke of the Mitzvot.” What are they teaching us?

While it is true that an ox would never voluntarily want to wear a yoke, it is equally true that an ox cannot be productive without a yoke. The only way that an ox can utilize its enormous strength is by having the yoke channel its power into preparing the field, or by harvesting the field. It is the yoke that gives the ox purpose and turns the ox into a valuable tool for the farmer’s use.

So, too, we are productive only when we do His Will. Our task in this world is to reveal more and more layers of Hashem’s Majesty. But to do so, we must live how the Torah commands us to live. It is only with the mitzvot that we are able to produce and to be productive. It is only with the mitzvot that we can “plough,” “sow” and “harvest” in this world. It is the yoke of the mitzvot that gives our lives purpose and meaning. It is an unfortunate reality that those who do not understand the significance of Hashem’s yoke may

spend their whole lives trying to throw it off instead of embracing it. Because they do not grasp that without accepting the Heavenly Yoke and the Yoke of the Mitzvot, it is not possible for a person to reach what they were placed in this world to achieve.

To be continued...

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Hearing of the miracles that Hashem performed for *Bnei Yisrael*, Moshe's father-in-law Yitro arrives with Moshe's wife and sons, reuniting the family in the wilderness. Yitro is so impressed by Moshe's detailing of the Exodus from Egypt that he converts to Judaism. Seeing that the only judicial authority for the entire Jewish nation is Moshe Rabbeinu, Yitro suggests that subsidiary judges be appointed to adjudicate smaller matters, leaving Moshe free to attend to larger issues. Moshe accepts his advice.

The Jewish People arrive at Mount Sinai, where Hashem offers them the Torah. Once they accept, Hashem charges Moshe to instruct the people not to approach the mountain, and to prepare for three days. On the third day, amidst thunder and lightning, Hashem's voice emanates from the smoke-enshrouded mountain, and He speaks to the Jewish People, giving them the Ten Commandments:

1. Believe in Hashem.
2. Do not worship other "gods".
3. Do not use Hashem's name in vain.
4. Observe Shabbat.
5. Honor your parents.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not kidnap.
9. Do not testify falsely.
10. Do not covet.

After receiving the first two commandments, the Jewish People, overwhelmed by this experience of the Divine, request that Moshe relay Hashem's word to them. Hashem instructs Moshe to caution the Jewish People not to draw close to the mountain or touch any part of it.

Q & A

Questions

1. Yitro had 7 names. Why was one of his names Yeter?
2. News of which two events motivated Yitro to come join the Jewish People?
3. What name of Yitro indicates his love for Torah?
4. Why was Tzipora with her father, Yitro, and not with Moshe when Bnei Yisrael left Egypt?
5. Why does verse 18:5 say that Yitro came to the desert — don't we already know that the Bnei Yisrael were in the desert?
6. Why did Moshe tell Yitro all that G-d had done for the Jewish People?
7. According to the Midrash quoted by Rashi, how did Yitro respond when he was told about the destruction of Egypt?
8. Who is considered as if he enjoys the splendor of the Shechina ?
9. On what day did Moshe sit to judge the Jewish People?
10. Who is considered a co-partner in Creation?
11. "Moshe sat to judge the people, and the people stood before Moshe...." What bothered Yitro about this arrangement?
12. Why did Yitro return to his own land?
13. How did the encampment at Sinai differ from the other encampments?
14. To whom does the Torah refer when it uses the term "Beit Yaakov" ?
15. How is G-d's protection of the Jewish People similar to an eagle's protection of its young?
16. What was G-d's original plan for Matan Torah ? What was the response of the Jewish People?
17. How many times greater is the "measure of reward" than the "measure of punishment"?
18. How is it derived that "Don't steal" refers to kidnapping?
19. In response to hearing the Torah given at Sinai, how far backwards did the Jewish people retreat in fear?
20. Why does the use of iron tools profane the altar?

Answers

1. 18:1 - Because he caused a parsha to be added to the Torah. Yeter means addition.
2. 18:1 - The splitting of the sea and the war against Amalek.
3. 18:1 - Chovav.

4. 18:3 - When Aharon met Moshe with his family on their way down to Egypt, Aharon said to Moshe: "We're pained over the Jews already in Egypt, and you're bringing more Jews to Egypt?!" Moshe, hearing this, sent his wife and children back to Midian.
5. 18:5 - To show Yitro's greatness. He was living in a luxurious place; yet he went to the desert in order to study the Torah.
6. 18:8 - To draw Yitro closer to the Torah way of life.
7. 18:9 - He grieved.
8. 18:12 - One who dines with Torah scholars.
9. 18:13 - The day after Yom Kippur.
- 10.18:13 - A judge who renders a correct decision.

- 11.18:14 - Yitro felt that the people weren't being treated with the proper respect.
- 12.18:27 - To convert the members of his family to Judaism.
- 13.19:2 - The Jewish People were united.
- 14.19:3 - The Jewish women.
- 15.19:4 - An eagle carries its young on top of its wings to protect them from human arrows. So too, G-d's cloud of glory separated between the Egyptians and the Jewish camp in order to absorb Egyptian missiles and arrows fired at the Jewish People.
- 16.19:9 - G-d offered to appear to Moshe and to give the Torah through him. The Jewish People responded that they wished to hear the Torah directly from G-d.
- 17.20:6 - 500 times.
- 18.20:13 - Since it is written immediately after "Don't murder" and "Don't commit adultery," it is derived that "Don't steal" refers to a crime carrying the same penalty as the first two, namely, the death penalty.
- 19.20:15 - They backed away from the mountain twelve mil (one mil is 2000 cubits).
- 20.20:22 - The altar was created to extend life; iron is sometimes used to make weapons which shorten life.

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WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Write It Down

The Hebrew language is blessed with many different words to refer to the act of “writing.” The most common verb that denotes that act is *ketivah*, inflections of which appear about 260 times in the Bible. For example, the Bible refers to the Ten Commandments being “written” on the stone tablets with forms of the word *ketivah* (Ex. 31:18, 32:16, 34:28, Deut. 9:10, 10:4). But there are other words used in the Bible to denote the Decalogue being “written” on the tablets, such as *charut* (Ex. 32:16) and *pasal* (Ex. 34:1, 34:4, Deut. 10:1, 10:3). If we look beyond Biblical usage, we encounter another term used to describe the words “written” on the tablets: *chakuk*. That word is used by Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi in his poem *Yom Shabbaton* when describing the fact that the commandment of Shabbat was inscribed on the twin tablets that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. In this essay we explore the various synonyms used in Hebrew for the act of “writing,” tracing their respective etymologies and cognates to hone in on what exactly each words means and if/how it differs from the rest.

Rabbi Samshon Raphael Hirsch (to Ex. 34:27) connects the root KAF-TAV-BET with other phonetically-similar roots, including KAF-TAV-PEH (“shoulder”), KUF-TET-PEH (“plucking/detaching”), and KUF-TET-BET (“killing”). These connections are made by invoking the interchangeability of PEH and BET, of KAF and KUF, and of TET and TAV. The way Rabbi Hirsch explains the connection, something “written” is a worthy bearer of ideas, but is still nonetheless a dangerous medium because it jeopardizes the existence of that which remains unwritten. Meaning, if something is written down, then one only has exactly what was written and is in danger of losing the idea as a whole that might include elements that are not written. This can metaphorically be represented as somebody “detaching” part of an idea from the entire edifice, which could even lead to “killing” the whole idea. It also relates to the “shoulder,” which is just a corner of the body, but is not the entire body itself. As Rabbi Hirsch stresses, it is because of this danger that Hashem presented the Jews not only with the Written Torah (as it is written), but with the Oral Torah which encompasses so much more beyond that which is written. Only the Written Torah and Oral Torah in tandem lead one to the complete, accurate picture of Hashem's will.

As mentioned above, the Ten Commandments are described in the Bible as having been *charut* (“written”) on the tablets (Ex. 32:16). According to the classical lexicographers like Ibn Saruk, Ibn Janach, and Radak, the word *charut* derives from the trilateral root CHET-REISH-TAV, which only occurs in this one instance in the entire Bible. That makes this word a hapax legomenon. The use of this unique word *charut* in the context of the tablets is likely what led the rabbis (*Shabbat* 54a, *Shemot Rabbah* §32:1, *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* §8:3,

and in more places) to connect that word with cheirut (“freedom”) and offer various explanations as to how the Torah’s strictures actually reflect freedom rather than servitude.

Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim explains the word charut as related to the word chor (“hole”), which derives from the biliteral root CHET-REISH. The way he explains it, charut denotes a mode of writing which engraves an open hole in the material being written. This term thus alludes to the notion that the writing on the tablets penetrated the stone through and through, and could miraculously have been seen/readable from both sides of the tablet (see Rashi to Ex. 32:15 and Shabbat 104a). A similar point about charut referring to a through-and-through hole is also made by Rabbi Shmshon Raphael Hirsch (to Ex. 32:2, 32:15).

Other commentators, including Rashi and Rashbam (to Ex. 32:16), explain the root CHET-REISH-TAV as related to the root CHET-REISH-TET. While the former root only appears once in the entire Bible (as mentioned above), the latter root appears at least twice: once in Ex. 32:4 when saying that the Golden Calf was fashion by a cheret (“stylus/engraver”) and once in Isa. 32:4 when Hashem told Isaiah to write down a certain prophecy "in cheret enosh" (Isa. 8:1), which seems to be a form of inscription (that some scholars identify as cuneiformic). The connection between charut and cheret is of course justified on the basis of the interchangeability of the letters TAV and TET.

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

“Study improves the quality of the act and completes it, and a mitzvah is more beautiful when it emerges from someone who understands its significance.” (Meiri, Bava Kama 17a)

CUTTING DOWN FRUIT TREES

Mitzvah #529; *Devarim* 20:19-20

On Tu B’Shvat, the Rosh Hashanah of fruit trees, it is customary to enjoy fruits and to praise Hashem for the kindness of their creation. We will explore a Mitzvah relevant to this theme.

In *Parashas Shoftim*, where the Torah sets forth the laws of warfare, we are taught: *When you besiege a city many days to fight it and conquer it, do not destroy its trees by waving an axe against it, for [a tree] you shall eat from and not cut down, for is a tree of the field a man, to come under siege before you?* (*Devarim* 20:19)

This verse prohibits cutting down fruit trees, even for the constructive purpose of building siege towers around an enemy city, when this could be accomplished by cutting down fruitless or dead trees instead. The verse exhorts us to appreciate fruit trees with the words,

“*ki ha'adam hu eitz hasadeh*” (translated above, *for is a tree of the field a man?*), which may also be interpreted to mean, “for man *is* a tree of the field,” that is, man’s life depends on the tree’s fruit. The Sages add that if the Torah instructs us to be considerate of trees that *bear* fruit, then all the more must we be considerate of fruit themselves (see *Sifri* §203). This Torah prohibition is the basis of the Rabbinically-ordained prohibition against wasting in general, known as *bal tashchis* (*do not waste*).

According to *Sefer HaChinuch*, the reason behind this Mitzvah is more than “waste not want not.” He explains that this Mitzvah is designed to educate us to avoid destructiveness, negativity, and evil, and instead to pursue constructiveness, positivity, and good. By simply avoiding wasting, we train ourselves to share the positive outlook of the pious, as a person’s deeds influence his mind. The pious do not waste even a mustard seed, and they find good even in evildoers and seek to draw them near to the Torah. They feel distressed over any destruction they witness and will do their best to spare what they can. In stark contrast, the wicked destroy and rejoice over destruction.

We may suggest further that the Torah instructs us against acting destructively specifically before a battle, even though this Mitzvah applies at all times, because this matter becomes crucial at that time. In the heat of battle, a soldier is liable to become overcome with bloodlust and to act with destructive abandon, even crossing the boundaries of the Torah’s warfare regulations and other Mitzvos. By instructing a soldier not to act destructively when cutting down trees for siege towers, the Torah reminds him that even when he will soon have to cut down human beings, he must do so with the rational, constructive purpose of removing the wicked enemies of the Jewish people (see also *Taanis* 7a).

The verse also contains a deeper layer of meaning, which requires a brief preface. On the third day of Creation, Hashem commanded fruit trees to come into being with their wood sharing the taste of their fruits. Some interpret this as an allusion to the esoteric idea that this world was initially meant to include the goodness of the World to Come (see *Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh, Tu B'Shvat*). The trees disobeyed this instruction and came into being with tasteless trunks. *Panim Yafos* to our verse maintains that this sin of the trees was a consequence of Adam’s subsequent sin, for sins can sometimes affect on the past. It emerges that if not for Adam’s sin, nobody would consider cutting down a fruit tree — which would be entirely edible — for its wood when there are enough fruitless trees available.

Based on *Panim Yafos*’s insight, we may suggest that the words, “*for is a tree of the field adam* (lit., *a man*)?” may be interpreted to mean, “for is a tree of the field Adam?” That is to say, is a fruit tree Adam, that it should deserve to be cut down for its wood on account of his sin? According to this interpretation, this Mitzvah instructs us to be especially careful to avoid acting destructively toward that which is deficient on account of us. We may learn from this to accept and embrace whatever lot Hashem has apportioned us, which is exactly what we deserve, instead of always seeking to replace what we have with something we think may be better. As the *Sefer HaChinuch* has explained, by simply appreciating all the good that Hashem has granted us, we train ourselves to desire good and to follow the ways of the pious, which lead to boundless enjoyment in the World to Come.