

Good Shabbos and good Chodesh, everyone.

Mishenichnas Adar, marbin besimcha! Purim is coming. We are looking forward to celebrating together, safely! Please stay tuned for information about the schedule and details regarding *Parshas Zachor*, *machatzis hashekel*, *matanos l'evyonim*, and *Megilla*, to guarantee safety during this joyous season.

I want to thank the *drasha* sponsors:

- Mark and Elana Feld, in honor of the *aufruf* of their son, Ami, on his upcoming marriage to Goldie Fuchs from Lawrence, New York. May Ami and Goldie be *zoche* to build a *bayis ne'eman beYisrael!*
- Etta Friedman, Moish Friedman, Kenny & Marla Friedman, and Ira Friedman, to commemorate the first *yahrtzeit* of Mr. Norman Friedman on 1 Adar.
- Murray and Baila Jacobson, in memory of Murray's mother, Rose Jacobson. on 3 Adar.
- Shimon and Hana Millrod, in memory of Shimon's father, Moshe ben Yakov Millrod, whose *yahrtzeit* is on 1 of Adar.
- Simcha and Leah Kossman, in memory of Simcha's father, Lawrence Kossman, whose *yahrtzeit* is on 4 Adar.
- Bennett and Bernice Pleeter, in memory of Bennett's mother, Dora Pleeter, Devorah bas Ben Zion HaLevi, whose *yahrtzeit* is on 29 Shevat.
- Ethan and Cheryl Spiegler, in memory of Ethan's mother, Laura Spiegler, whose *yahrtzeit* is on 2 Adar, and in memory of Ethan's grandmother, Ethel Spiegler, whose *yahrtzeit* is on 3 Adar.

May all the *neshamos* have an *aliyah* and may the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha* and *hatzlacha* and good health!

Speaking of supporting the shul, we will soon be launching an important crowdfunding “matching campaign.” This campaign will be both a celebration of Shomrei and a tribute to the memory of Chavi Klein, a”h, whose family will receive the Keser Shem Tov award, and to honor Ezri and Zahava Klein with the Ahavas Chesed Award. Thank you to those who have already stepped up to be **matchers**. We are still looking for more matchers, and we are looking to ALL our members to become ambassadors for the campaign--to make this a great success! Please do not delay--sign up now. You can also donate now!

This Shabbos is Parshas Shekalim, where we read about the first census, when the Jewish people were counted by their half-shekel donations. **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks** writes an insightful idea regarding counting through *machatzis hashekel*. He writes that a census is taken primarily to determine strength. He says counting through half-shekel donations is the way the Torah teaches that our strength as the Jewish nation **is in our contributions, not our numbers**. We have always been a nation whose contributions have exceeded our size. In that vein, we must all do our part to contribute to the shul to ensure that we stay strong and vibrant!

This past week, the Baltimore community lost a great leader, HaRav Sheftel Neuberger, zt”l, the President of Yeshivas Ner Yisrael. He cared deeply about the success of the Yeshiva, the Baltimore Jewish community, and world Jewry. He was someone who looked for opportunities to do chessed—always offering to help everyone he could, in any way he could. On a personal level, he knew I enjoyed *dikduk*, and whenever I saw him, he shared a *vort* on the *parsha* that was related to Hebrew grammar. יהי זכרו ברוך His memory should be a blessing.

Towards the end of Parshas Mishpatim, the Torah records a reaction of the *zekeinim*, the elders, to the events of Har Sinai. Their reaction is astonishing, almost to the point of being shocking.

שמות פרק כד

(ט) ויעל משה ואהרן נדב ואביהוא ושבעים מזקני ישראל:

(י) ויראו את אלהי ישראל ותחת רגליו כמעשה לבנת הספיר וכעצם השמים לטהר:

(יא) וְאֶל־אֶצְיָלִי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא שָׁלַח יְדוֹ וַיַּחְזוּ אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ: ס

The elders, together with Moshe and Aharon, ascend Har Sinai. At that time, we read, **they saw the glory of God**, and they ate and they drank. The juxtaposition of these two activities is puzzling. How could they eat and drink while experiencing God's presence?

Indeed, **Rashi**, based on a **Medrash Tanchuma**, writes that the Torah is criticizing their actions.

רש"י שמות פרק כד פסוק יא

ויחזו את האלהים - היו מסתכלין בו בלב גס מתוך אכילה ושתייה, כך מדרש תנחומא.

They were **too** comfortable, experiencing it like watching a show...**while** eating and drinking...

But, the **Ibn Ezra** explains very differently. He says they experienced Hashem's presence with reverence and humility, and **then, only after they descended**, they ate and drank.

אבן עזרא שמות (הפירוש הארוך) פרשת משפטים פרק כד פסוק יא

וטעם ויאכלו וישתו שירדו שמחים מההר ויאכלו וישתו שלמים שזבחו נעריהם. וישתו - בשמחה. ור' יהודה הלוי אמר, כי טעם ויאכלו, כי הוצרכו שיאכלו, אעפ"י שנהגו מזיו השכינה. והזכיר זה בעבור משה, שחיה ארבעים יום וארבעים לילה בלא אכילה.

He says this pasuk is not criticizing them. It does not mean they ate while in God's presence. Rather, the Torah is describing the way the elders acted **afterward**. **After** they came down from Har Sinai, — they ate and drank **with simcha**. The Torah is stressing that, even though they had just experienced such a lofty vision, now they returned to reality. But, instead of eating and drinking the way they would have done before that experience, they infused their eating and drinking with the *simcha* and *kedusha* and a new vision and understanding about the meaning of life, that was inspired by their experience at Har Sinai.

As **Rav Hirsch** explains

רש"י הירש שמות פרשת משפטים פרק כד פסוק יא

הם חשו את קירבת ה' בליבם שעה שאכלו מזבח השלמים (פסוק ה). הם התברכו בחדוות קירבת ה' בתוככי החיים הגשמיים, והרי זה ההישג העליון של פריחת חיי ישראל מדי יום ביומו ומטרת שאיפתם לפני ה'.

When they ate the meal of peace offerings, they felt God's closeness. They enjoyed the bliss of feeling God's closeness in the midst of earthly life, which is the highest attainment of a blossoming Jewish life. Attaining such a level day in and day out is Israel's aim and aspiration before God.

They were able to incorporate the inspiration from Har Sinai into their everyday lives.

The **Kotzker Rebbe** writes that--after all Jews received great inspiration at Mattan Torah, and they heard the voice of Hashem, and they experienced the revelation at Har Sinai, and they were inspired to commit to great spiritual heights-- the first thing Hashem tells them is to return home:

דברים פרק ה (כו) לך אמר להם שובו לכם לאהליכם:

Isn't this strange? Why command them to go home?

The **Kotzker** answers that, in effect, Hashem was telling them: Now that you have this inspiration, don't allow it to remain here on Har Sinai, intangible and theoretical. Instead, take this inspiration back to your homes; incorporate it into your daily routines; find a way to internalize that experience and make it part of your lives.

This is a lesson Hashem taught them by teaching *mishpatim*—civil laws-- at Har Sinai.

According to one **Medrash**, cited by the **Ramban**—the *Mishpatim* were given immediately after the *Aseres Hadibros*—because Torah is dependent on *mishpat*. . .

אמרו במדרש (שמות ל טו) כל התורה כלה תלויה במשפט, לכן נתן הקדוש ברוך הוא דינין אחר עשרת הדברות.

Why is the Torah **dependent** on *mishpat*—on civil law? On business dealings, interpersonal relationships, the guidelines for the more mundane aspects of life? These seem like unlikely laws to teach immediately after the inspiring and powerful ten commandments!

The **Ksav Sofer** cites the **Medrash Rabba** teaches that Hashem was, in effect, telling the Jewish people, if you do not accept civil law, I will take back my Torah.

במדרש...אמר להם משה, הקב"ה נתן לכם את תורתו, אם אין אתם משמרים הדינים נוטל מכם את תורתו, שלא נתן לכם התורה אלא על מנת שתקיימו הדינים...ונ"ל ע"פ מה שאמרתי במק"א תחלת דינו של אדם נשאת ונתת באמונה, ע"פ שארז"ל (סוכה ל.) דכתיב שונא גוזל בעולה, מי שגוזל בהמה והקריבה שנוא לפני ה' ואין מקובל, וכן כתיב בוצע בירך ניאץ ד'...וכן כל מצוה שאדם עושה כגון לוקח לולב שופר ציצית ממעות גזל שנוא לפני ד' ואין המצוה מקובלת לפניו ית"ש. ולכן שואלים אותו תחלת נשאת באמונה, דאל"כ רוב המצות שעשה אינם נחשבים בעיני ה'. ולפ"ז המצות תלוים בדינים כי מי שאינו משמר הדינים משפטי צדק כל המצות **שעושה לאין נחשבו...**

He explains that adherence to *mishpatim* shows the character of the person. That is why the first question a person will be asked after he dies is about his honesty in business. If a person has poor character, Hashem despises his *mitzvos*. If a person is not a *mentsch*, then his spirituality is worthless. The way a person acts in his everyday life reveals whether his *mitzvos* are genuine and had a transformative effect on him.

What demonstrates our character? What shows that mitzvos are changing us? It is the way we act in everyday life. We spend most of our lives **out** of the shul, **outside** the holy places set aside for religious activities and rituals. And most of the week is not Shabbos; most of the year is not *chagim*.

By putting *mishpatim* immediately after the Sinai experience, Hashem was telling us that for religion to be vibrant and transformative-- to change our character--it must be relevant at all moments of life. It cannot be present only in the rarer, if more intense, moments of ritual practice. And it cannot be present only in holy places like at Har Sinai or in *batei knessios* and *batei medrash*.

People may think that spirituality is reserved for specific moments of overwhelming emotion or to times spent in exotic locations. Many perceive spirituality as limited to jolting transformative experiences--- moments when there is an overwhelming sense of God's presence. Such moments certainly are important in Yiddishkeit—as we place a great deal of importance on certain times of the year like Elul and the *yamim tovim*, and of course, Shabbos. We place a great deal of importance on Holy places like Yerushalayim, and *batei knessios* and *batei midrash*. We place a great deal of emphasis on davening and learning. They help us restore a sense of purpose and recharge our spiritual batteries and establish a more guided direction for our lives.

But **after the inspiring moment passes, after the high is over, then real life resumes.** And that is where Yiddishkeit must dwell. Parshas Mishpatim is precisely that kind of spirituality, teaching us to look for God, not with closed eyes, but through our involvement in the world around us.

God teaches us that, if we follow the guidelines of *mishpatim*--honest labor, compassion and justice--we can find Him in our world every day. **Mishpatim is the confirmation that Torah belongs in all locations and in all circumstances.** The Sinai experience must not be relegated to the rare “holy” or ritualistic experiences. It must be present in all we do; in eating and drinking, no less than in davening and learning.

רב קוק (עין אי"ה)

יסוד עבודת ה' ע"פ התורה, הוא להשריש שכל דרכי החיים צריכים להיות הולכים ע"פ רצונו ית'. ומי שחושב שעבודת ה' נשלמת בפעולות פרטיות, ומקצה להן מעותותיו ושוב אין ה' בלבבו, הוא הורס כל בניני התורה. . . כי יסוד העבודה לה' יתברך הוא שיהיו דרכי החיים הולכים ע"פ תכלית רצונו, שהוא לשמו הגדול יתברך."

Rav Kook in his sefer *Ein Ay"va* writes:

The foundation of avodas Hashem based on the Torah guidelines is to implant within us the idea that the entirety of our lives must be according to the will of G-d. One who thinks that one can discharge his obligations with specific actions, and ignore G-d in the rest of his life misunderstands the foundation of Torah...The foundation of Judaism is the ability to give tangible presence to the theoretical inspiration; in a way that reminds us that God is concerned with every aspect of our lives.

That is what the *pasuk* is stressing—that the elders were able to infuse that inspiration of Sinai into their mundane activities. And even more, as the **Noam Elimelech** says...the Jewish people reached a level at that moment that spirituality permeated even the mundane aspects of their existence.

נועם אלימלך הוספות ליקוטי שושנה

רק שהן עצמם היו יכולין לעשות כל זה בלי סעד ותומך* ויאכלו וישתו ויהזו אלקים, היינו שאפילו אכילתן ושתינתן היו מביאין אל הקדוש

He inverts the words of the *pasuk* and explains "they ate and drank, and saw Hashem..."

This is the lofty level described by the **Mesilas Yesharim** in Chapter 26, as the level of *kedusha*.

הנה האיש המתקדש בקדושת בוראו אפילו מעשיו הגשמיים חוזרים להיות ענייני קדושה ממש, וסימניך אכילת קדשים שהיא עצמה מצות עשה, ואמרו ז"ל (פסחים נט ב): כהנים אוכלים ובעלים מתכפרים .. וכמאמרם ז"ל במדרש כן המאכל והמשתה שהאיש הקדוש אוכל, עילוי הוא למאכל ההוא ולמשתה ההוא, וכאילו נקרב על גבי המזבח ממש..

Behold, for the man sanctified with the holiness of his Creator, even his physical deeds become actual matters of holiness. A sign of this is in "the eating of temple offerings", which our sages of blessed memory said: "the priests eat and the owners obtain atonement" (Pesachim 59b). ... So too, the food and drink which the holy man eats elevates that food or drink as if it had actually been offered on the altar.

כללו של דבר ענין הקדושה הוא שיהיה האדם דבק כל כך באלהיו, עד שבשום מעשה אשר יעשה לא יפרד ולא יזוז ממנו יתברך, עד שיותר יתעלו הדברים הגשמיים אשר ישמשו לאחד מתשמישיו במה שהוא משתמש בהם, ממה שיורד הוא מדביקותו ומעלתו בהשתמשו מדברים גשמיים .

The general principle of the matter: Holiness consists of one's clinging so much to his G-d that for any action he does, he will not separate nor budge from G-d, blessed be He, so that the physical things he uses will attain greater elevation than that which he diminishes in his clinging and level due to his using physical things.

By eating and drinking to celebrate the Sinai experience, the elders were modeling this important lesson as well. Our obligation to elevate the world in which we live, by living life with *kedusha*.

As **Rav Hirsch** writes on the prohibition to make engraved images of Hashem...

רש"ר הירש שמות פרשת יתרו פרק כ פסוק כא

(כא) לא תעצב אתה מה שיש אתי, אלא מצווה אני עליך לעצב מה שיש אתך; לא עליך להוריד אליך את אשר בשמים, אלא להעלות ולרומם כל אשר בארץ - אלי

Your task is not to bring what is in heaven down to you on earth, but to elevate everything on earth to Me

Our job is to take the Torah, its teaching and inspiration, and infuse every aspect of our lives with that perspective and those lessons. May we learn from these great elders to fully incorporate spirituality into all aspects of our lives.

During this pandemic, we have had the opportunity to take principles that have been largely theoretical, like **חיי בהם**—the primary value the Torah places on preserving life--and incorporate them into our daily lives and routines. Regardless of the sacrifice, we have been committed to protecting life. We have also been called upon to do real *chessed*, to help people who are isolated and in genuine need of our care. And, we have seen how, when Torah is part of life, where Torah principles applied properly, it preserves life and dignity. It becomes a true *Toras Chaim*—a living Torah.

May we appreciate and enjoy the lofty and meaningful moments of life and never avert our gaze from the *chessed* Hashem bestows upon us. May we get to the level that we live with a true level of *simcha*, knowing that we are always in the presence of Hashem. May we be *zoche* soon to see an end to this horrific pandemic and the rebuilding of the *Beis Hamikdash* and appreciate it when it happens, *bimhera viyamenu*, amen.