

Parshat Shavuot 5778

Birkas HaTorah

Throughout our tefillos on Shavuot we refer to the Yom Tov as “Zman Matan Toraseinu – The time of the giving of the Torah”. However, we also refer to the events of Matan Torah as ‘Kabolat HaTorah – the receiving of the Torah’. Why do we specifically refer to the aspect of the giving of the Torah when surely the more crucial aspect is that we received the Torah, that we now have the Torah?

There are many explanations for the dynamic between Kabolat Hatorah and Matan Torah, but I would like to share and explore an idea of the Maharal in the introduction to his work Tiferes Yisrael and relate it back to this dynamic.

The Gemara in Nedarim brings a perplexing analysis of the reason for the destruction of the first Beis Hamikdash. It quotes a dialogue from Yirmiyahu, where he asks - "על מה - על אבדה הארץ – for what reason was the land destroyed?" Hashem responds "על עזובם את תורתי – for they have forsaken My Torah". Rav, in the Gemara, famously explains that ‘forsaking of the Torah’ means that they did not make Birchas HaTorah before they learned the Torah.

Q. How could it be that the destruction of the first Beis Hamikdash can be attributed to the fact that they didn’t make Birkas HaTorah? Surely this is only a minor infringement? Furthermore, it implies that they actually did learn Torah, just since they didn’t make the brocha beforehand; it was as if they had forsaken the Torah – why should this be so?

A. The Maharal explains that when a sculptor designs a sculpture, he is not the intrinsic reason that the sculpture exists, but rather he can be attributed to have given form or shape to the pre-existing material. Likewise, the builder of a house is not the source of the house’s existence; he was not the ultimate source of the bricks, he merely assembled the bricks in a house formation. Therefore, if the builder or sculptor were to die, the house would continue standing and the statue would continue to exist. The house exists independently of the builder. However, if it were so that the ultimate source of the bricks or sculpting material would cease to exist, so too, the house or sculpture would disappear.

In this vein, the Gemara writes that when Titus destroyed the Beis Hamikdash, Hashem declared – "קמה טחון טחנת בית שרוף שרפת – You ground ready-ground flour, you burned a burnt house." The Beis Hamikdash requires Hashem’s presence to rest within it to function as the Beis Hamikdash, the House of Hashem. Without the presence of

Hashem, the building is just an empty pile of stones. Thus, when the Jewish people neglected Hashem as the resident of the Beis Hamikdash; despite it physically standing and being in operation, it was already empty of its significance, it was already a burnt building. Hashem’s presence, its true source, was no longer there.

So too, this principle is applied when we learn Torah. Hashem has appointed us to be the ambassadors of His Torah in the world; by learning and practicing His Torah, we allow it to be manifest in the world. When we are cognisant that it is Hashem who gives us the Torah and the ability to understand His Torah, we have plugged the Torah into its source. The Torah and our people can flourish. However, if we are not cognisant of the source of the Torah, we disconnect the Torah from its source, reduce it and empty it of its significance. It becomes like a brick whose true source of existence has left it.

Every brocha that we make assists us in understanding Hashem as the creator and source of the item in front of us. For example, when we grasp an apple in our hand and make a brocha, we say that Hashem, our G-d, the King of the Universe is the בורא פרי העץ - the creator of the fruit of the tree. Likewise, with mitzvos, we make a brocha announcing that Hashem, the King of the Universe has sanctified us through the mitzvos and commanded us to do action x. We bind the source of the action into the action that we are about to perform.

When we say Birchas HaTorah we sign off with the accolades that Hashem is "המלמד – נותן התורה – He who teaches the Torah to His people, Yisrael" and the "נותן התורה – the giver of the Torah". The whole essence of the brocha is to enter ourselves into a mindset of recognition that Hashem is the source of the Torah and without Him giving it to us, the Torah, and all the religious life that it encompasses, would be empty.

This explains Rav’s statement that the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, the Land and the ensuing exile, were due to not making Birchas HaTorah. The brocha on the Torah is the key to bringing Hashem, the source of the Torah, and thus the entire framework of our Judaism, into the forefront of our minds. With its absence and neglect, we empty our entire Jewish practice of its significance.

Shavuot is the Yom Tov of opportunity to rectify this problem. We focus on ‘Matan Torah – the giving of the Torah’, rather than the ‘receiving of the Torah’, because it is the Giver of the Torah that is important, and without acknowledging His presence within it, there is no receiving of the Torah.

May we all use this opportunity to strengthen the way we make Birchas HaTorah every morning and that through these brochos, may be zoche, to fully engage with and receive the Torah.