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Parshat Vaetchanan-Nachamu - 5781

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Over the last two weeks humanity has commenced the next great phase of space exploration, witnessing the daring and audacious flights of Richard Branson and Jeff Bezos. These two men are the first to provide opportunities for commercial flights to space for private citizens—and it seems people are interested. At a cost of a modest \$250K each, 600 tickets have already been sold! Of course, seeing earth from space must be magnificent, and to experience weightlessness is surely a draw to the adventure seekers out there. When I first read about this, I was quite enthused, but then I realized that unfortunately both of these men would be returning to earth after the short flight and not remaining in space... One of the major criticisms levied against them is that the untold fortunes they spent on this obsession could have bettered society in many productive and profound ways. Yet the pull of being the first civilian to fly to space is strong; indeed, the pull of being the first at *anything* is strong. The Guinness Book of World Records is filled with meaningless statistics of people who achieved unremarkable firsts. I recall as a child that one day, the good citizens of Rochester attempted to set the Guinness World Record for The Most People Doing The Hokey Pokey. For a day, that *was* what it was all about! Or consider Fin Keheler, age 11, of Sandy, Utah, who set a world record when he covered his face with 43 live snails. Apparently, this broke a previous record. Can you imagine the feelings of the *shmendrik* whose record was broken!?

¹ In partnership with Rabbi Shaanan Gelman

Being original is not necessarily synonymous with virtue, in fact our parsha seems to shun originality and those who seek to create new ideas, laws and rituals:

We are informed that one may not subtract or add onto the Torah or mitzvot.

דברים פרק ד

(ב) לֹא תִסְפוּ עַל־הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם וְלֹא תִגְרְעוּ מִמֶּנּוּ לְשֹׁמֵר אֶת־מִצְוֹת יְקֹנֵן אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם:

The Rambam explains that this prohibition applies to adding an extra verse onto the Birkas haKohanim:

רמב"ם הלכות תפילה ונשיאת כפים פרק יד הלכה יב

אין הכהנים רשאים בכל מקום להוסיף ברכה על שלשת הפסוקים כגון יי' אלהי אבותיכם יוסף עליכם ככם אלף פעמים וכיוצא בה לא בקול רם ולא בלחש שנאמר לא תוסיפו על הדבר

Similarly, it is prohibited to add or delete from the requisite *parshiot* in one's tefillin, or to add a fifth species onto the מינים - say you choose to bundle together hadasim, aravos, a lulav and one beautiful red long-stemmed rose.

I can readily appreciate the prohibition of *Bal Tigra*, of deleting a mitzvah from the Torah. After all, God gave us 613 commandments. Who am I to suggest which ones are unimportant or irrelevant? But adding on to a mitzvah is an expression of our devotion and commitment. Why should it be prohibited to take on additional mitzvot, or add from our own passion and creativity to them??

Rav Shimon Sofer zt"l, HY"D, the grandson of the Chatam Sofer and son of the Ktav Sofer, served as the Rav of Eger (Erloi) Hungary for 64 years, before being transported to Auschwitz at the age of 95, where he was murdered along with his entire community. I want to share a remarkable insight that appears in his Torah commentary entitled שיר מעון. Rav Sofer explains that the prohibition of Bal Tosif isn't merely forbidding us from adding new *mitzvot* or new components of existent mitzvot, but it is also forbidden to place greater emphasis and level of severity upon a mitzvah than it already demands. To elaborate upon this claim, he argues that if there was a light custom, which usually is treated with great importance but in a time of need, an עת צורך, there is certainly room for leniency - for example - one who is careful to fast on the minor fast days, as Jewish law requires, but if someone were to be severely dehydrated or have a host of other medical issues that would cause their doctor to recommend against fasting, they should not be looking for a *chumra* - to do so may feel like a genuine expression of *frumkeit* but would be foolhardy and a violation of *bal tosif* - an over accentuation of one mitzvah:

שיר מעון דברים פרק ד פסוק ב

(ב) לא תוסיפו על הדבר אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם. יש לפרש ג"כ שלא תוסיף להגדיל ולרומם ולומר על דבר שאינו חמור כל כך שהוא חמור יותר, אלא כל אחד כמו שצוה הקדוש ברוך הוא, לא תעשה, ועשה, דרבנן, מנהגים, הגם שכל דבר אפילו מנהג קל חמור הוא ועונשו גדול ורב, מ"מ יש חילוק רב ביניהם להקל לעת הצורך, כגון במקום חולי והכרח ומקום מצוה.

What emerges from this is a new understanding of bal tosif - is that it refers not only to someone who creates a new mitzvah or adds onto an existing one, but that it refers to someone who places an undue amount of emphasis upon one particular law in the Torah.

And this is not just true when it comes to the mitzvot in the Torah; it is true when it comes to many facets of Jewish life, and life in general. For many, the issue they fixate upon changes from time to time, but the pattern remains the same, acting as if the agenda of the moment is the most important thing, disproportionate to what it actually is. People who do this seize upon one issue, and it dictates who they associate with, who they vote for, how they parent, where their charitable dollars go and what they feel the primary agenda should be for their community. We've all seen or heard people like this; they proclaim "the shidduch crisis is the most pressing concern of our time" or that "yeshiva tuition is the single most significant problem threatening our future" or that we cannot ignore the threat of a Nuclear Iran, or off-the-derech teens, or our community's perceived failure to be invested in any of a host of social causes or political issues. All of these are important and have a place and time, but when you adopt one item as your pet project then you run the risk of ignoring all others. The Torah is broader and farther reaching than one headline and one moment's stirring of the heart and believe it or not, it's even bigger than ice cream.

It is ironic, that the message of בל תוסיף a commandment whose simple premise prohibits us from altering the Torah - is, at the same time, encouraging us to not become fixated and stagnant.

This novel understanding of Bal Tosif is informative when it comes to our approach to *ben adam le'chaveiro*, interpersonal relationships. If we assign greater weight to one moment in a friendship, then most of our relationships are likely doomed, since you can never look past a harsh word, a slight, a sin of commission or a sin of omission. And as we approach the

holiday of Tu B'Av, a time in which the Jewish world focuses on matchmaking and improving marriages, perhaps in the spirit of bal tosif, we ought to recall that the key to any of our relationships is not to harp on any one detail. We ought to fight the urge to artificially inflate the significance of one bad moment, an unfortunate argument, above all else in the relationship's history. Likewise, on a really great day, never assume that this relationship has reached its apex and that things can never get better. What an encouraging thought this is to ponder, as we get up from the floor on Tisha B'av and anticipate the period of Rosh Hashanah in the coming weeks...what happened was but a moment, yet circumstances can and will get better...לא תוסיפו על הדבר, do not obsess over, be dismayed or make too much out of things in our past.

As our haftarah assures us - even the topography of the earth will not remain fixed:

כָּל-גֵּיאַ יִנָּשָׂא וְכָל-הַר וְגִבְעָה יִשְׁפָּלוּ ...

Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain humbled

וְנִגְלָה כְבוֹד ה' וְרָאוּ כָל-בָּשָׂר יַחְדָּו כִּי פִי ה' דִּבֶּר:

And the glory of God will be revealed, as all of humanity together recognizes that God has spoken