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EAT, DRINK, AND TOMORROW YOU DIE?

by Rabbi Yaakov Blau

The last Perek of Parashat Mishpatim contains a rather cryptic account. In Shemot 24:9, Moshe, Aharon, Nadav, Avihu, and the 70 elders ascend Har Sinai. In the next Pasuk, they "see" Hashem, and the subsequent Pasuk tells us that Hashem does not strike them down, they see Hashem, and then they eat and drink. The Perek then moves on to a conversation between Hashem and Moshe, seemingly unrelated to the previous story. How are we to understand what happened when all those characters "saw" Hashem?

The Meforashim suggest two nearly opposite approaches to this story. Rashi (24:10-11) views their actions as having been negative, explaining that it was improper for them to so blatantly perceive Hashem. Rashi views Pasuk 11, which states that Hashem did not strike them down, as evidence that they in fact deserved to be struck down. Rashi believes that their eating and drinking was symptomatic of their lack of respect for such a sacred moment.

Now, if Rashi is correct that what Moshe, Aharon, Nadav, Avihu, and the elders did was so egregious, it seems odd that there does not appear to be any consequence for their actions mentioned in the Pesukim. Rashi deals with this issue by positing that they, in fact, were deserving of death, but Matan Torah was too joyous an occasion to be marred with so many leaders being killed (24:10 ad loc. VaYir'u Eit Elohei Yisrael). Instead, Hashem "waited" for another opportunity to kill them all – Nadav and Avihu, when they brought the foreign flame in VaYikra 10, and the elders in the story of the Mitonenim in BeMidbar 11:1. Although this solution accounts for the leaders' not being punished, this explanation of their punishment is questionable.

Many other explanations are given as to what Nadav and Avihu did in Sefer VaYikra to deserve death. In terms of the elders, it is not even clear if they were killed in the aforementioned story. Rashi (BeMidbar 11:1 s.v. BiKetzei) Midrashically understands the word "BiKetzei," "the corner," in BeMidbar 11:1, as meaning "BeMukatzin," the leaders. In addition to the fact that this is certainly not the Peshat of the Pasuk, Rashi on that Pasuk suggests

another Midrashic reading, and he also presents the aforementioned approach that he writes in Sefer Shemot.

Other Meforashim view the elders' ascending Har Sinai in a positive light. Targum Onkelos (Shemot 24:11) understands that they did not actually eat and drink but rather felt so much joy for their revelation that it was as if they ate and drank. Ramban (ad loc.) deals with the fact that the Pasuk states that Hashem did not strike them down, which at first glance would seem to be a solid proof for Rashi's negative approach. Ramban harkens back to 19:24, where levels are designated for how far different groups are allowed to ascend Har Sinai. What the Pasuk teaches us, Ramban writes, is that nobody overstepped his boundaries and therefore, Moshe and those accompanying him were not deserving of being stricken down. As to why they ate, Ramban understands that they were eating Korbanot, a quite appropriate reaction to the preceding events. Ibn Ezra (Peirush HaAruch) quotes Rabi Yehudah HaLevi as writing that the Pasuk is informing us that, unlike Moshe, who was able to be sustained for forty days without eating or drinking, the other leaders, despite the awesome Divine revelation, still needed to eat and drink.

Now, the fact that the Meforashim can take such diametrically opposed approaches is, of course, significant from a Parshanut perspective. Methodologically, it is important to note that each approach had to explain how every detail in the Pesukim made sense with his overall understanding. I believe that one can take a lesson that is more personal than the aforementioned analysis. We often make snap judgements of situations and how people act in them. We should be cautious and recall that there are many factors that go into every situation that arises, and it behooves us to reserve judgment until we know all the facts and consider all the factors that may be motivating people to act the way that they are.

IT'S NOT TOO LATE

by Avi Roth ('18)

Shabbat is a very special day of the week. Its uniqueness can be seen through its prayers, as it is the only day of the week during which the Shemoneh Esrei has a different text from the ordinary Shemoneh Esrei for all three main Tefillot – Ma'ariv, Shacharit, and Minchah. Of the three unique Tefillot, Minchah is the most unusual; it begins with the first three standard Berachot, in which we rely on our Zechut Avot and talk about Tachiyat HaMeitim and Hashem's Kedushah. After these first three Berachot, we continue the prayer with the paragraph of Atah Echad, in which we mention our forefathers again. No Shemoneh Esrei throughout the year, even those of the Shalosh Regalim and Yamim Nora'im, discusses

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the Avot after the first three standard Berachot. What special quality of Shabbat Minchah warrants our mentioning of the Avot and our reliance on Zechut Avot?

We can try to understand the uniqueness of Shabbat Minchah by looking at the day's themes. The first goal of Shabbat is to remember that Hashem created the world¹. The second goal of Shabbat is to remember the Exodus of Egypt². The last, and perhaps most important, goal of Shabbat is to remember our uniqueness as a nation³. Shabbat distinguishes us Jews from the other Umot HaOlam and builds a connection between us and Hashem.

These three themes are expressed in the Shemoneh Esrei of the three main Tefillot of Shabbat. We talk about Hashem's creation of the world during Ma'ariv and recite the Pesukim of VaYechulu to show that Hashem created the world and rested on Shabbat. During Shacharit, we mention the Exodus and Bnei Yisrael's Shabbat in the desert, and we recite the Pesukim of VeShameru to show Bnei Yisrael's dedication to the day. Even after davening Ma'ariv and Shacharit, we still have yet to address the most important aspect of Shabbat, our specialness as a nation and connection to Hashem. Because of our waiting until the last minute, we "pull out the big guns," the Zechut of the Avot, to try to remember the last and most important part of the day. We need the Avot to make up for our procrastination, and then we can proclaim that "Ki Meiltecha Hi Menuchatam, VeAl Menuchatam Yakdishu Et Shemecha," "because from You comes their rest and through their rest they will sanctify Your name." Shabbat is our bridge to Hashem, and our keeping it brings us closer to Hashem. We require the Zechut of the Avot to make this connection, especially at the end of the day.

The theme of trying to make a late connection appears in Parashat Mishpatim. According to Ramban (Shemot 24:1 s.v. VeEl Moshe Amar), the order of events were as follows: first we received the Aseret HaDiberot, then Hashem gave us the laws that appear in Parashat Mishpatim, then Moshe Rabbeinu wrote portions of the Torah and made twelve Mizbachot upon which we offered Korbanot, and then Bnei Yisrael proclaimed "Na'aseh VeNishmah." Why did Bnei Yisrael not say this earlier? Hashem had already given the Decalogue and more commandments by the time Bnei Yisrael said that they accepted them!

One possible answer is that Bnei Yisrael were so caught up in the moment, with all of the miracles and rules given by Hashem, that they forgot to make their part of the connection to Hashem. The situation in Parashat Mishpatim and the case of Tefillot Shabbat are very similar – Hashem gave us both the Ten Commandments and Shabbat, but we

did not accept them right away. We got caught up in the details of the moment so much so that we forgot to remember its primary goal. Therefore, we try to finish off both by saying that we want a connection with Hashem, whether through the day of Shabbat or through observing all of the Mitzvot.

Just as the Avot invested their efforts to create a connection with Hashem, so too must we try our hardest to connect with Hashem. May we all be blessed to remember the big points in life and not get caught up in the details.

THE CASE FOR RESTRICTIONS – PART TWO

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Introduction

In our last issue, we began our discussion of the importance and impact of Hashem's restrictions in our daily lives and presented a poignant anecdote which demonstrated that importance. We will begin our discussion in this issue with a second story which illustrates how Hashem's restrictions are expressions of our being half angel in addition to being half animal.

A Second Story

A rabbi who was raised as a non-observant Jew explained that the following incident convinced him to live a life of Torah observance: He had decided to experiment and experience one Shabbat during his visit to Israel. He stayed at a Ba'al Teshuvah Yeshivah where he very much enjoyed the Friday night Tefillah, Se'udah and discussions. He then proceeded to his room where he was faced with a dilemma: the main light was not turned off before Shabbat.

The young man was unsure as to what to do. On the one hand, he was not observant, so why not turn off the light in order for him to get a proper night's rest? On the other hand, he promised he would give Shabbat a try, and so he decided to refrain from turning the light off.

The next morning he woke up tired from lack of proper sleep but exhilarated over his ability to control himself. Never before had he experienced such a profound sense of satisfaction. The angel side of his personality was finally satisfied. This experience was his prime motivation to become a Torah observant Jew.

This type of exhilaration can be experienced when one refrains from eating that which he should not eat, listening to or speaking Lashon HaRa, or engaging in inappropriate sensuality. Elation emerges from the empowerment of being able to master one's physical urges. One who observes the Torah experiences the joy of being the one who controls himself and not being enslaved to his passions. Indeed, Chazal teach (Avot 6:2) "Ein Lecha Ben Chorin

¹ As we mention in Kiddush, "Zeicher LItzi'at Mitzrayim."

² As we mention in Kiddush, "Zikaron LeMa'aseih VeReishit."

³ As we mention in Kiddush, "Ki Vanu Bacharta VeOtanu Kiddashta MiKol HaAmim."

Ela Mi SheOseik BeTalmud Torah," the only truly free individual is the one who is immersed in a Torah lifestyle."⁴

Rav Soloveitchik's "Catharsis"

Rav Soloveitchik's dramatic essay entitled "Catharthis" expands upon Chazal's teaching that "The commandments were given to purge mankind" (BeReishit Rabbah 44). The implication of this teaching is that man is born in an unrefined state and requires improvement. The Mitzvot facilitate the indispensable refinement of the human being. Without such refinement, explains Rav Soloveitchik, the individual is unredeemed.

Rav Soloveitchik identifies four areas of human life that are in need of redemption: carnal drives, emotional life, intellectual life, and religious life. Essential to redemption, argues Rav Soloveitchik, is the ability to retreat and withdraw from situations. For example, a hungry individual who resists eating delectable food due to Kashrut regulations or refrains from a business dealing due to its incompatibility with Torah laws and values has redeemed an aspect of his personality. Rav Soloveitchik also explains that Halachah challenges us to engage or be prepared to engage in such redemptive and heroic actions on a regular basis⁵.

Without such withdrawal, one remains an incomplete and unredeemed individual. Thus, the wealthy businessman who could not control his urge to eat in the story we presented in our previous issue is living a pitiful and unredeemed life⁶. The profound sense of satisfaction experienced by the young man who refrained from extinguishing the light in his room on Shabbat emerged from the sense of sorely needed redemption of the human personality.

Rav Soloveitchik's observations do not merely highlight the deficiencies of living a life absent of Torah observance. They also constitute a challenge to Torah observant Jews as to whether their Mitzvah observance truly redeems and uplifts their personalities. Chazal's teaching that the Torah was given only to refine our character is a sobering reminder of the important goal of Torah observance. Every Jew must engage in serious introspection and determine if he is successfully meeting this goal⁷.

Argument #3 – God's Restrictions Are in Our Best Interest

Sefer Devarim, the compilation of Moshe Rabbeinu's farewell speeches to Am Yisrael, stresses that observance of the Torah is "Lema'an Yitav Lach," for our benefit (Devarim 4:40, 5:15, 6:18 and 6:24 are examples). A classic illustration of this principle is articulated by Rabi Meir (Niddah 31b), who explains that the Torah restricts marital relations during the time a wife is a Niddah "because if the husband would become accustomed to his wife, he would loathe her; therefore, the Torah made her impure for a certain amount of time so that she would be as beloved to her husband as at the moment she entered the Chuppah."

Moreover, the time spent abstaining from their physical relationship allows a couple to develop their personal relationship as they did during their courtship. Refraining from physical relations before marriage allows the personal relationship to grow and be nurtured before the physical relationship begins. The dramatically lower incidence of divorce among fully committed Jews constitutes dramatic evidence of the efficacy of the Torah's laws regarding male-female relationships. Couples who observe Niddah laws are eager to be intimate during permitted times since they know that their opportunity is limited. This explains reports from therapists with whom I have consulted that in the long term, observant couples engage in marital relations more often (which, in turn, strengthens and reinforces the marital bond) than non-observant couples.

I read of a non-observant Jew who related that he began engaging in intimate relations with his future wife on their second date and did not observe Hilchot Niddah during the marriage. He observed that he and his wife began to develop a personal relationship only when working together to raise their children after their divorce. Only after their divorce did this couple refrain from intimacy and develop a personal relationship. What a profound tragedy! When one conducts his or her life in



⁴ The ideas presented in the following section are presented most elegantly, eloquently and profoundly by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik in his seminal article entitled "Catharsis," published in Tradition Spring 1978. This brief essay is one of Rav Soloveitchik's most important essays and is an essential read for every thinking Jew. An excellent and extensive analysis is presented by Rav Ronnie Ziegler in essays archived on the website of Yeshivat Har Etzion, <http://etzion.org.il/en/topics/thought-rav-soloveitchik>.

⁵ Rav Yehuda Amital (in an informal talk with overseas students at Yeshivat Har Etzion in 1982) explained the difference in Mitzvah requirements between men and women by telling of an interaction he had with his granddaughter who asked why she does not wear a Kippah and Tzitzit: He asked her, "Are girls as wild as boys?" The granddaughter responded "no." Rav Amital told her that boys are wilder and need to wear a Kippah and Tzitzit to remind them to control their behavior. We can express this idea in Rav Soloveitchik's terms. Hashem bestows a more refined character upon women than he does upon men, and thus women require fewer Mitzvot to refine their personalities.

⁶ The businessman's behavior, which was related in our last issue, is reminiscent of Eisav's selling his birthright for lentil soup. Regrettably, Western society has become a culture of Eisav, glorifying immediate gratification. In the words of Rav Efram Goldberg, "In the area of the battle between the animal and the Godly soul, the temptations of the physical world versus the quest for spirituality, we not only have not progressed, but a survey of advertisements, websites, themes of movies and TV, and behavior of politicians and celebrities shows that we have regressed. The world of marketing seeks to exploit the animal impulse inside us all with messages like 'Obey your thirst' and 'Just do it.' Look at the infidelity rates and the obesity statistics and you cannot help but conclude that for many modern people, the animal instinct is defeating the Godly, disciplined soul."

⁷ Interestingly, before Rachel married Rabi Akiva, she realized his great potential to develop into a great Torah scholar from the fact that he had refined character traits (Ketubot 62b).

accordance with the rules set down by our Creator for our benefit, he or she is poised to succeed. Failure to adhere to the divine guidance leads to disaster, as set forth by Hoshei'a: "Shuvah Yisrael Ad Hashem Elokecha Ki Chashalta BaAvonecha," "Return Yisrael to Hashem your God since you have failed in your sins"⁸ (14:2).

The benefit of observing Torah law is apparent not only regarding Hilchot Niddah. Shabbat observance brings the priceless treasure of a forced vacation and a day to unplug from electronics. Kashrut, in addition to Shabbat, helps Jews build and create cohesive communities. The Halachic prohibition to drive a vehicle on Shabbat and Yom Tov compels us to reside within walking distance of a synagogue, which leads to the creation of clusters of observant Jews living within a concentrated area. Kashrut requires us to live in an area where kosher food is readily available. When traveling, Kashrut and Shabbat regulations motivate us to meet the local observant Jews for lodging and dining.

There are Conservative rabbis (as recounted by Rav Shmuel Goldin) who bemoan their leadership's decision in 1950 to permit driving an automobile to Shabbat prayers. They note that this decision irreparably disrupted the creation of Conservative Jewish communities, since it led to the destruction of its members' requirement to live within walking distance of their synagogues⁹. This, tragically, proves correct Moshe Rabbeinu's warning "Why are you violating God's command? It will not succeed" (BeMidbar 14:41).

A root of all sin is one's thinking that he will benefit from the sin, as did Chavah when she partook in the forbidden fruit of the Eitz HaDa'at (Tree of Knowledge). Chavah thought that by eating from the Eitz HaDa'at, she would become as great as Hashem (BeReishit 3:5). She regarded the forbidden fruit as "Good for eating, pleasing to the eye and desirable as a means to wisdom" (BeReishit 3:6), when in reality, it lead only to exile and death.

It is tempting for one to erroneously believe that "It is my life and I will do what I want." However, Moshe Rabbeinu cautions us against these attitudes by telling us, "You should know in your heart that just as a father will discipline his child so too Hashem discipline us" (Devarim 8:5). How sad it was for my wife and I to hear an elderly relative articulate his regretting that he objected to his wife's pleas to give their children a Jewish day school education. He admitted that the reason he had no Jewish

grandchildren was his stubborn insistence on his children attending public school, against the advice of his rabbi and his wife. Failure to abide by the Torah way leads only to disaster, as repeatedly taught in Tanach¹⁰.

From an early age, we must realize that all which Hashem has commanded us to do is in our best interest, and compliance to those commandments gives us long-term pleasure. Hashem (BeReishit 12:1) instructs Avraham Avinu, "Lech Lecha," "move for you" to the Land of Kena'an. Rashi (ad loc.) explains that the seemingly unnecessary word "Lecha" conveys that the journey was intended for Avraham's benefit and pleasure. Indeed, all of Hashem's commandments are for our benefit and pleasure¹¹.

Conclusion

As we have demonstrated, Hashem's commandments and prohibitions are aimed to make our lives more meaningful and enriched. In our next issue, we will, God willing, continue our attempt to reveal the benefits of Hashem's restrictions.

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⁸ I read an apt comparison of Hilchot Niddah to parents who restrict the amount of cake and candy their children eat. Parents are not trying to reduce the children's pleasure but rather instruct the children to limit their intake in order that they enjoy the cake while not becoming sick.

⁹ I have heard non-Jewish clergy praise the beauty of Jewish families walking back and forth from synagogue on the Jewish Sabbath. A Catholic priest commented half-jokingly that he should raise with his colleagues the idea to prohibit driving to their houses of worship on Sunday to induce families to walk together to worship.

¹⁰ In the Viduy (confessional), we state that "Sarnu MiMitzvotcha UMiMitzvotcha HaTovim VeLo Shavah Lanu," "We have turned away from your wonderful Mitzvot and it has not been worthwhile."

¹¹ For an explanation of the Torah's ban on homosexual behavior, see an enlightening and courageous essay authored by psychiatrist Dr. Nathaniel S. Lehrman entitled "Homosexuality: A Political Mask for Promiscuity: A Psychiatrist Reviews the Data," published in Tradition, vol. 34, no. 1 (2000) pp. 44-62. Dr. Lehrman demonstrates at length that homosexual behavior runs contrary to the best interests of those who choose to engage in such activity. He also bemoans much of Western society's myopic approach to homosexuality which has halted any significant research in helping those who wish to eliminate homosexual attraction.