

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת יתרו

ויהי ממחרת וישב משה לשפט את העם ויעמד העם על משה מן הבקר עד הערב
“It was on the next day that Moshe sat to judge the people, and the people stood by Moshe from the morning until the evening” (18:13)

Moshe would judge the people all day, from the morning through the night. There was once a great Rabbi of Yerushalayim, R' Shmuel Salant, who had visitors streaming through his house all day long to ask him questions and to seek his advice. He was once asked why he did not have a set time to allow people to come and get their questions asked. Would that not have been more convenient for him? He answered that we are commanded to emulate the ways of Hashem. Just as He answers people at all times, whenever Jews turn to Him, we must also be ready to help people whenever they need it. We say in Birchas Hamazon, ומפרנס אותנו תמיד בכל יום ובכל עת ובכל שעה, that Hashem provides for us and answers all of our requests at all hours of the day. In everyday life, there are many times when we are given the opportunity to be of help to others, but we make ourselves unavailable. We try to push it off to another more convenient time when we will not have anything else to do. We must be careful not to act in this manner and to always have time for those in need.

כי יהיה להם דבר בא אלי ושפטתי בין איש ובין רעהו והודעתי את חקי האלקים ואת תורתיו
“When they have a matter, one comes to me, and I judge between a man and his fellow, and I make known the statutes of Hashem and His laws” (18:16)

The posuk writes that when two people had an argument, they would come before Moshe. However, the Torah says בא אלי, "he comes to me," in singular form. If two people would come to Moshe, why is it written in singular form? The Meshech Chochma answers that when two people come for a Din Torah, a trial according to Torah law, the only thing that comes before the judge is the subject matter, not the individual litigants. "It comes to me" refers to the case, the matter came before Moshe. The judge is not to be swayed in his decision by the people involved in the case. The people are to be blocked out of the mind of the judge and all that matters is clarifying the instant case and the relevant Torah laws. The Torah understands the concern that a judge may be partial to people who are rich and famous, people who are poor and helpless, and other people who gain his favor. Therefore, there are many laws regarding how judges must act when they adjudicate a dispute. The Torah stresses that it must be the case that comes before the judge, not the people.

Rabbi Shmuel Spiegel, Rav of Khal Shaarei Shamayim of the Lower East Side, offers a different approach. When there is an argument between two people and they come to be judged, they should come before the judge as one unit. The disagreement should not become personal. Rather, they should come united with the intent to learn what the applicable Torah law is in their case. Their trial should be a quest for the truth, not an attempt to get the better of their opponent. This is true for all disagreements, not just court cases. Any interpersonal disputes that we have should be like that of Hillel and Shamai, whose disagreements were solely for the sake of Heaven, in order to seek the true Torah law. When arguments become personal, the truth is not important anymore. We should never allow our anger to blind us and cause us to lose sight of our true quest for the truth that should be the underlying cause of any disagreement.

ושפטו את העם בכל עת את הדבר הקשה יביאון אל משה וכל הדבר הקטן ישפטוהם
“They would judge the people at all times; the difficult thing they would bring to Moshe and the

minor thing they themselves would judge” (18:26)

Yisro advised that all small cases should be decided by the lower judges and any large matters should be handled by Moshe. Moshe, on the other hand, said that while the lower judges would determine the small cases, he would resolve the difficult ones. What is the reason for this discrepancy? R' Chaim Berlin answers that Yisro thought that Moshe should only be involved the big important cases where large amounts of money were involved. Moshe, however, did not feel that way. He stated that he would take any difficult case, not just the high-profile ones. Whether the case involved millions or mere pennies did not matter to Moshe. No matter how big or small, Moshe felt that every single case was important and, if it proved too difficult for the lower judges to decide, he would settle the case himself.

בחדש השלישי לצאת בני ישראל מארץ מצרים ביום הזה באו מדבר סיני

“In the third month from the Exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt, on this day, they arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai” (19:1)

Why does the Torah say that they came to Har Sinai "on this day" and not "on that day?" Rashi comments that the Torah should always be approached as if it were given today. This idea is also mentioned in Shema, in which we Hashem commands to remember the mitzvos "that I command you today." Every day, we must feel that we have received the Torah anew. We must develop a feeling toward the Torah just like the feeling when using a new item for the first time. The first time we use a new acquisition, it feels special. We should strive to have that feeling when we do mitzvos as well. The fact that this concept recurs many times shows how important it is. It is incumbent upon us to recognize that we must have this attitude toward Torah and mitzvos. We have to actively take steps to preserve a feeling of excitement in our learning and our daily mitzvos. This can be achieved by taking up new subjects of learning, finding new people to learn with, attending new lectures, and in many other ways. It is not sufficient to learn Torah and do mitzvos without feeling. We must create that excitement, that burning enthusiasm within us, that raises our Avodas Hashem to another level.

אתם ראיתם אשר עשיתי למצרים ואשא אתכם על כנפי נשרים ואבא אתכם אלי

“You have seen what I did to Egypt, and that I carried you on the wings of eagles and brought you to Me” (19:4)

Rabbi Levi MiBerdichev points out in his sefer, Kedushas Levi, that the word "neshar," "eagle," originates from the root נשר, "to fall off." This derivation comes from the fact that a bird sheds its feathers every so often and grows new ones. Hashem said that he bore them on the wings of eagles as a hint that the Jewish people also have this ability to rejuvenate. Even if the Jews fall, they always grow back, they return to their original freshness.

The Chasam Sofer writes that many times the Jews are compared to a dove, but here, at the giving of the Torah, they are mentioned in connection with an eagle. An eagle is a bird that is not kosher because it bears all four signs of a non-kosher bird. The Torah teaches us that even when the Jewish people are as impure as the eagle, Hashem still brings them close to Him and uplifts them.

יום השביעי שבת לה' אלקיך לא תעשה כל מלאכה אתה ובנך ובתך עבדך ואמתך ובהמתך וגרך אשר בשעריך

“But the seventh day is Shabbos to Hashem, your God; you shall not do any work - you and your son and your daughter, your slave and your maidservant and your animal, and your convert within your gates” (20:10)

The posuk says that the seventh day is Shabbos "for Hashem," that is to be dedicated to spiritual

pursuits. However, we know that the posuk in Yeshaya (58:13) instructs us to "call the Shabbos an enjoyment," that is to enjoy Shabbos with special food and drink. What is the purpose of Shabbos? Is it for physical or spiritual pleasure? In truth, Shabbos is meant for a mix of both. The Talmud Yerushalmi says that on Shabbos one should enjoy himself with food, drink or sleep, but spend the rest of the day involved in learning Torah. However, the Rema in Orach Chayim 290:2 cites a Bais Yosef (Orach Chayim 288) who quotes a Talmud Yerushalmi that resolves the disagreement between the two pesukim. The posuk that says Shabbos is for Hashem refers to people who work during the week and have limited time for learning Torah. These people should take advantage of the free time that Shabbos provides and dedicate more time to studying Torah. The posuk that says Shabbos is an enjoyment refers to those who spend the work week learning Torah all day and do not concentrate on anything else. They should take the spare time that Shabbos provides and spend some time eating and drinking. In this way, Shabbos is a day of enjoyment for each person in his own way. However, the Mishna Berura (290:3) makes sure to point out that this does not give one who learns all week license to waste the day away eating and sleeping. He also should be sure to spend time learning Torah as well. Even those who work all week are entitled to sleep on Shabbos as long as it does not interfere with Torah study.

The Mishna Berura continues and quotes the Zohar that it is a mitzva to come up with new ideas in Torah on Shabbos. One who cannot do so should at least learn new material on Shabbos. The Meiam Loez writes that this is so because every Shabbos we are given a special added soul, which returns back to Hashem after Shabbos is over. Upon its return, Hashem asks the soul what new Torah thoughts it has learned during its time in the world. If the soul has indeed learned something new on Shabbos, Hashem gathers all the heavenly hosts and says, "Come hear what Torah this soul has learned this Shabbos." The Torah that one learns on Shabbos has a tremendous potential.

**כבד את אביך ואת אמך למען יארכון ימיך על האדמה אשר ה' אלקיך נתן לך
"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days will be lengthened upon the land that Hashem, your God, gives you" (20:12)**

R' Dovid Feinstein asks: Why does the Torah promise a reward of long life specifically for the mitzvah of honoring one's parents? He answers that this reward is commensurate to the mitzvah that the person does. The Gemara in Kiddushin tells us that the mitzvah of honoring parents entails giving them food and drink, dressing them, and escorting them. These are things that are usually done in a parent's old age. Thus, by honoring one's parents in this manner, one shows that he respects his elders and honors them. Hashem will reward the person by allowing him to achieve the status of an elder himself.

Rabbi Friedman suggests that the reward of long life is given as a repayment of the time that a person spent honoring his parents. Honoring parents is different from many other mitzvos in that it can be very time-consuming, as opposed to many other mitzvos that can be completed very quickly. The appropriate reward is to give the person back the time that was spent taking care of his parents.

We see this concept of Hashem repaying time spent in His service elsewhere. The Gemara in Berachos says that the pious people used to spend one hour before praying preparing themselves, one hour praying, and one hour afterwards devoted to Hashem. They did so for all three prayers each day. The Gemara asks: If they spent nine hours each day in prayer, how were they able to have a livelihood and support themselves? The answer is that because they devoted a large amount of time to Hashem, Hashem repaid them by safeguarding the Torah that they learned in their memories and by giving a blessing to the small amount of time that they devoted to their sustenance.

לא תחמד בית רעך לא תחמד אשת רעך ועבדו ואמתו ושורו וחמרו וכל אשר לרעך

“You shall not covet your fellow's house. You shall not covet your fellow's wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, nor anything that belongs to your fellow” (20:14)

The Ibn Ezra asks: How is it possible for a person not to desire something belonging to someone else that he likes? How can one control his feelings? He answers that just as a commoner does not desire to marry a princess because he knows that she is beyond his reach, a person should have the same feelings regarding something that belongs to someone else. One must know, understand and actually feel that he will get everything that Hashem decides that he deserves and that if he is supposed to have something, he will get it. When one realizes that he is not meant to have whatever belongs to someone else, no matter how much he desires it, he will be happy with his portion in life and will trust in Hashem to provide for him and give him what is good for him. Therefore, this prohibition also includes pressuring someone to sell something that he does not want to sell. Even though it is a legal transaction, since the person did not want to sell it, one has violated the prohibition against desiring the property of others.

Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur
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