

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת בשלח

ויקח משה את עצמות יוסף עמו כי השבע השביע את בני ישראל לאמר פקד יפקד אלקים אתכם והעליתם את עצמתי מזה אתכם

“Moshe took the bones of Yosef with him, for he had made the Children of Israel swear, saying: God will surely remember you, and you shall bring my bones up from here with you” (13:19)

"The wise of heart will seize good deeds." (Mishlei 10:8) Chazal (Sotah 13a) tell us that this posuk refers to Moshe Rabbeinu, who occupied himself with the mitzva of finding Yosef's remains at a time when all the other Jews were busy collecting money from the Egyptians. The Kli Yakar explains the expression that Moshe took the remains "with him." This mitzvah was "with him" forever, because when a person leaves this world, he takes only mitzvos with him. Unlike the money that the other Jews took with them, Moshe took something with him that would last forever.

Wisdom usually refers to book knowledge, but here, in the posuk in Mishlei, it seems to mean having a good heart. The truth is that fearing Hashem and using those feelings to make the right decisions, is also called wisdom, an area of study. This is because fear of Hashem is an acquired skill that requires effort to learn. The Mesillas Yesharim, in his introduction, writes that fear of Hashem the only true wisdom. This posuk from Mishlei serves as proof of his statement. When one fears Hashem, his heart, the seat of decision making, will become wise and direct him to do more mitzvos in its wisdom. It is incumbent upon all of us to aspire to this level of having a wise heart. In order to accomplish this, we should try to spend some time learning mussar sefarim to improve our behavior. One sefer suited to this purpose is Chovos Halevovos, by Rabbeinu Bachya, which discusses the duties of the heart.

There is a story told that a man once approached R' Yisrael Salanter, the originator of the mussar movement, to ask for advice. "I only have half an hour a day to study Torah," said the man. "What should I learn?" R' Yisrael Salanter replied, "Study mussar. Then you will find more time to learn Torah."

ה' ילחם לכם ואתם תחרשון

“Hashem will do battle for you, and you shall remain silent” (14:14)

The Mechilta writes that Moshe was telling the people that Hashem would fight on their behalf at this time and also in the future. The Meshech Chochma explains that even though now they might have been able to ascribe Hashem's salvation to the fact that He would not have brought them out of Egypt for naught, Hashem would assist them even when that would not be the case. Even when "you shall remain silent," when there will be no reason for the Bnei Yisrael to deserve Hashem's salvation, Hashem will always be there. This is the meaning of the posuk, "To You, Hashem, is the righteousness, and to us is the shamefacedness" (Daniel 9:7).

Mark Twain wrote an essay about the phenomenon of the continued survival of the Jewish race, entitled "Concerning the Jews." He wrote: "To conclude. - If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one per cent. of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star-dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvellous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and

passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

The answer to Mark Twain's question lies in this Chazal.

(For the full text of "Concerning the Jews," by Mark Twain, go to <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1898twain-jews.html>)

ובני ישראל הלכו ביבשה בתוך הים והמים להם חמה מימינם ומשמאלם

“The Children of Israel went on dry land in the midst of the sea; the water was a wall for them, on their right and on their left” (14:29)

At first, the posuk says that the Jews crossed "in the midst of the sea, on dry land," but then says that they crossed "on dry land in the midst of the sea." What is the reason for the different expressions?

Chazal explain that the first expression refers to Nachshon ben Aminadav, who jumped into the sea and had faith in Hashem. In response to his actions, Hashem turned the sea into dry land. Thus, Nachshon entered the sea, which then turned to dry land. Only afterwards did everyone else cross "on dry land in the midst of the sea."

R' Elimelech of Lizhensk gives a different answer. He says that while people tend to get inspired when they see an open miracle, they fail to realize that nature itself, the way that the world runs every single day, is a miracle in its own right. The world only keeps running smoothly because of Hashem's constant guidance. This is the meaning of the difference in the pesukim. At first, the Bnei Yisrael were astounded by the open miracle. They crossed "through the sea on dry land." Soon after, they realized that this was not the only outward manifestation of Hashem's hand in the world. They saw that nature was also a miracle, no less a miracle than the splitting of the sea. As they crossed, they came to realize that when they "went on dry land," it was just like "in the midst of the sea," no less miraculous. Avraham Avinu also recognized Hashem by looking at nature. Through his analysis, he came to the realization that there was nothing "natural" about nature and that there had to be a higher power directing it all.

עזי וזמרת קה ויהי לי לישועה זה קלי ואנוהו אלקי אבי וארממנהו

“Hashem is my strength and praise, He has been a salvation to me; this is my God and I will beautify Him, the God of my father and I will exalt him” (15:2)

What is the meaning of the word ואנוהו? The Gemara Shabbos 133b cites two explanations. The first opinion relates the word to the root נאה, beauty. It is important to beautify our performance of mitzvos, to make the extra effort to wear nice tzitzis, to acquire a beautiful sukkah, esrog and shofar, to write beautiful Sifrei Torah, and to perform all mitzvos in the most beautiful way possible.

The second opinion states that the word is a compound of אני והוא, I and he. This teaches us that we should try to imitate the characteristics of Hashem. Just as he is merciful, we should have mercy on our fellow human beings. Just as Hashem is kind, we should treat other people kindly.

The Targum Onkelos traces the word to the root נוה, a dwelling place. Thus, the Targum explains it as a vow on the part of the Jewish people to build the Bais HaMikdash, a dwelling place for Hashem.

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch builds on the Targum, but with an added twist. The posuk does not refer to constructing a physical dwelling place for Hashem, but rather to the commitment to create a Mikdash within oneself. The most desirable sanctuary that a person can make is his own person. When Hashem commanded the construction of the Mishkan, He said, "And I will dwell within them" (Shemos 25:8). Ideally, every person is to become a Mikdash to themselves, a receptacle for the Divine Presence. By

following the Torah and mitzvos, by living life as Hashem intended, each individual becomes a manifestation of Hashem's will on earth. This is the ultimate goal in life, to transform oneself and one's home into a miniature sanctuary. Therefore, a person has to constantly reassess himself and see if he is truly making himself into a receptacle for the Divine Presence. Hashem desires to dwell within us, if only we will allow him to enter.

ויאמר אם שמוע תשמע לקול ה' אלקיך והישר בעיניו תעשה והאזנת למצותיו ושמרת כל חקיו כל המחלה אשר שמתי במצרים לא אשים עליך כי אני ה' רפואך

“He said: If you will listen diligently to the voice of Hashem, your God, and you will do what is just in His eyes and you will give ear to his commandments and observe all his statutes, then any of the diseases that I placed upon Egypt, I will not place upon you, for I am Hashem, your Healer” (15:26)

The Malbim comments that Hashem dealt certain punishments to the Egyptians as ends in themselves. The punishments served only as a distribution of justice for their bad behavior. However, when Hashem punishes the Jewish people, it is as a doctor acts toward his patient. The pain is meant to be temporary and lead to eventual healing. The punishment is a means of education toward a goal. This is indeed the great mercy that Hashem has toward the Jewish people. Hashem never punishes us needlessly, only when He uses it to correct something that we are doing wrong. The purpose of suffering is to improve our conduct, not to cause us pain.

Tu B'Shevat

by Michael Gutmann

Tu B'Shevat approaches; soon we will celebrate the birthday of the trees. Try telling this to a random stranger on the street and see what their reaction is. “Are you mad?,” is what you are likely to hear. “It’s freezing out and winter is just getting started! Do you see the trees growing?” Anybody who says this would seem to have a valid point. Why do we celebrate the birthday of the trees at this time of year?

In truth, the essence of Tu B'Shevat is not a celebration of growth but of rebirth. Although there is no visible foliage on the trees now, the inner core of the trees revive on the fifteenth of Shevat and the process of growth begins anew. The sap begins to flow deep within the recesses of the tree and the system which produces the leaves and fruits that we see is restarted. The fact that the inner workings have not been damaged while the exterior of the tree has been reduced to a shadow of its former self in the harsh winter weather is worthy of celebration. That is why we specifically choose this moment to mark the beginning of a new year for the trees.

The random stranger on the street does not appreciate this idea. He most likely believes that whatever cannot be seen is unimportant. He does not even begin to think of what lies beneath the surface. Judaism teaches us a different outlook. What one sees is only half of the picture. It is the inside, the core of the tree, which is the most vital part. We do not celebrate the first leaves but the first inner stirrings of the roots.

“For man is as the tree of the field,” says the Torah (Devarim 20:19). The development of man is similar to the seasonal growth of the trees. A person may go through times where he finds himself slipping away from the ideals and values that are vital to a Jewish way of life. This can easily lead to feelings of guilt, despair and ultimately one gives up on trying. In such a situation, one must remember Tu B'Shevat. Nothing can break a person's inner self. Those feelings of guilt indicate that the person's core has remained untouched despite his outward actions. As long as the interior has weathered the storm, there is always hope for rebirth, for that inner spark to be rekindled and cause the person to regenerate and flourish again. As long as a person's heart remains true, hope is never lost. Remember how the tree looks in winter and how, at that particular moment, we celebrate its rebirth.

Another lesson we can learn from Tu B'Shevat is to maintain our inner purity. Some may deride the pettiness of many of our observances under the assumption that small behaviors are not as important as overarching principles such as belief in God and kindness. The truth is that these "small" behaviors keep our inner core vigorous and help us to maintain our growth on the outside. Simple actions such as refined speech, modest dress, kosher food and others influence our state of mind, preserving our inner purity and maintaining our outward actions. Just as we emphasize the inner workings of the tree rather than its external production, it is the unseen feelings and mindset of a person that matters the most. Our thoughts and feelings, the part of the person seen by God alone, must be constantly refreshed and reinforced so that they can blossom into visible actions and words and a life led in accordance with the ideals of the Torah.

(Based on the Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Volume II, Shevat II, pp. 329-334)

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Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur

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