

“One who serves from love, immerses in Torah and mitzvahs and travels the paths of wisdom not for any other consideration in the world, and not based on fear of evil, and not to inherit the good. Rather, he performs the truth, because it is true. And ultimately, the good will come because of it.”

Maimonides' Laws of Repentance 10:2

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Weekly Parsha

Behalotecha

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“Make for yourself two silver trumpets. You should make them of hammered metal. And they will be yours for summoning the assembly and to cause the camps to journey.” (BeMidbar 10:2)

In our pasuk, Hashem commands Moshe to create trumpets. This passage and the following pesukim outline four functions assigned to these trumpets. First, the trumpets would be used to announce that the

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Humility

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Last Shabbos, Laibe Moshe recounted for me his recent conversation with his daughter. He told me how they talked for two hours about “tznius”, humility.

What is humility, or modesty, when applied to dress? Is it simply a manner of dress? Is it something one can perform perfunctorily, or automatically? When and where does it apply?

What is its role in a Torah lifestyle?

We just read the book of Ruth on Shavuot.

We learned how through her modesty,

God selected Ruth to be the ancestor of

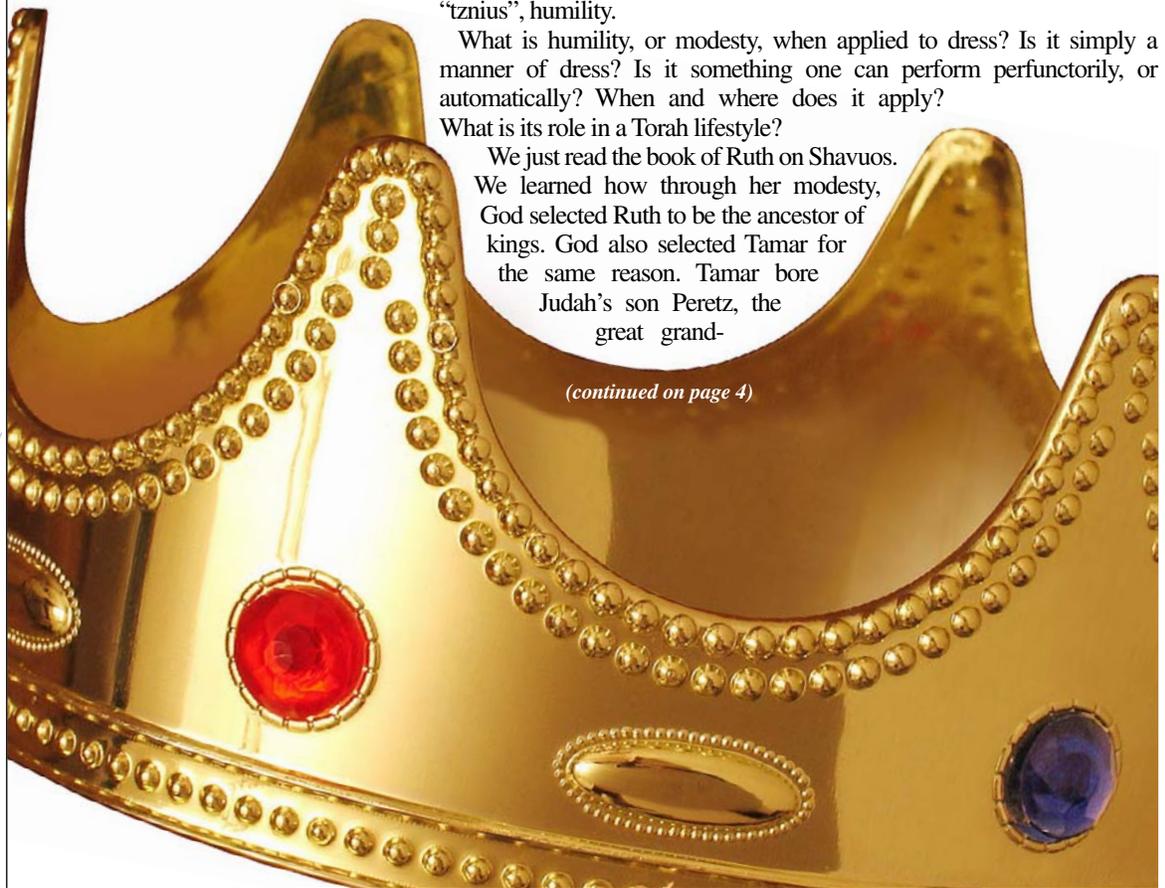
kings. God also selected Tamar for

the same reason. Tamar bore

Judah's son Peretz, the

great grand-

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Weekly Parsha

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camp of Bnai Yisrael must begin a new stage of its journey. Second, the trumpets would be used to assemble the people or the leadership. Third, the trumpets were to be sounded when the Festival sacrifices or the sacrifices for the Rosh Chodesh – the new month – would be offered in the Mishcan. Fourth, the trumpets were to be sounded at a time of affliction.

Of course, the first function mentioned in these passages no longer applies. We are not traveling through the wilderness. However, the other three functions continued to apply after the people entered the Land of Israel. Maimonides explains that when Bnai Yisrael is confronted with a threat or affliction, we are required to call out to Hashem and to sound these trumpets.[1] Maimonides tells us the trumpets are to be sounded in the Bait HaMikdash during the offering of the Festival and Rosh Chodesh sacrifices.[2] He also explains that the trumpets are to be sounded to assemble the people to listen to the King read from the Torah on second day of Succot of the year following the Sabbatical Year.[3]

However, there is an interesting problem in Maimonides' treatment of these trumpets. In his Sefer HaMitzvot, Maimonides explains that we are commanded to sound the trumpets when offering the Festival and Rosh Chodesh sacrifices. He adds – seemingly as a postscript – that these trumpets are also sounded when we are confronted with a danger or an affliction.[4] It seems clear from this formulation that not all functions of the trumpets are equally central to the mitzvah. The primary function of the trumpets is to be sounded when offering the Festival and Rosh Chodesh sacrifices. The sounding of the trumpets at a time of affliction is treated as a secondary function. In this description of the mitzvah, Maimonides does not mention the sounding of the trumpets to assemble the people.

In his code of law – the Mishne Torah – Maimonides places the mitzvah of sounding the trumpets in the opening law in the laws of fasts. He explains that it is a positive commandment to cry out to Hashem and to sound the trumpets whenever an affliction confronts the people. In this treatment of the mitzvah Maimonides does not even make mention of the other functions of the trumpets – their sounding when offering the Festival and Rosh Chodesh sacrifices and their sounding to assemble the people.[5] In short, in Sefer HaMitzvot, Maimonides seems to assert that the primary function of the trumpets is the requirement to sound them with the offering of the Festival and Rosh Chodesh sacrifices. But in Mishne Torah, he treats the sounding of the trumpets at a time of affliction as the primary element of the mitzvah.

Actually, this is one of numerous instances in

which Maimonides treatment of mitzvah in Sefer HaMitzvot differs from his treatment of the same mitzvah in his Mishne Torah. In order to understand Maimonides' two different treatments of this mitzvah it is helpful to consider another example of a similar seeming inconsistency. In his Mishne Torah, Maimonides introduces his laws of repentance by explaining that when a person violates a mitzvah one is required to repent and confess the sin. He explains that this confession is a positive commandment.[6] In this characterization of the mitzvah of confession – veyduy – Maimonides describes it as the essence or as an essential component of the process of repentance. In his Sefer HaMitzvot, Maimonides offers a similar definition of the mitzvah of veyduy. However, he includes this mitzvah among the commandments relating to sacrifices.[7] In other words, in his Mishne Torah Maimonides presents the mitzvah of veyduy as the fundamental mitzvah discussed in the laws of repentance. In his Sefer HaMitzvot, he presents it as one of the many mitzvot related to sacrifices.

Maimonides adds an interesting and important comment to his discussion of the mitzvah of veyduy in his Sefer HaMitzvot. He explains that the Torah discusses the mitzvah of veyduy in the context of its treatment of sacrifices. This context might mislead a person to assume that the performance of veyduy is an element within the offering of sacrifices and that without a sacrifice veyduy is not performed. Maimonides explains that this is not the case. The performance of veyduy is required whenever a commandment is violated. Even when a sacrifice is not or cannot be brought the performance of veyduy is required. Therefore, veyduy deserves to be treated as an independent mitzvah and not as a mere element within the process of offering a sacrifice.[8]

Maimonides is clearly defending his treatment of veyduy as an independent mitzvah within the system of Taryag – the 613 mitzvot. He is arguing that veyduy is not an element of the process of offering a sacrifice. But if this is Maimonides position, why does he include this mitzvah among the mitzvot dealing with sacrifices?

In short, there are two problems with Maimonides' treatment of the mitzvah of veyduy. First, in his Mishne Torah he describes it as the mitzvah that is the basis of the laws of repentance. He does not relate it to sacrifices. In his Sefer HaMitzvot, he places it among the mitzvot relating to sacrifices. Second, in his Sefer HaMitzvot, he stresses the veyduy is not merely part of the process of offering a sacrifice. It is an independent mitzvah. Yet, he places the mitzvah among the mitzvot related to sacrifices.

It seems from Maimonides' different treatments of this mitzvah in these two works that Sefer

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(Behalotecha continued from page 2)

Weekly Parsha



HaMitzvot and Mishne Torah have very different organizational schemes. In Sefer HaMitzvot, the commandments are organized and formulated in a manner that reflects their treatment in the Torah. Although veyduy is an independent mitzvah, it is presented in the Torah in conjunction with the Torah's discussion of sacrifices. Sefer HaMitzvot adopts the organizational scheme of the Torah. Therefore, although veyduy is an independent mitzvah, because the Torah presents the mitzvah in relation to sacrifices, Maimonides preserves this presentation in his Sefer HaMitzvot.

However, the Torah is not just a system of 613 mitzvot. It is also a system of law – of halacha – the guides every aspect of our personal and national lives. Mishne Torah is a code of law. It presents the various laws of the Torah as a systematic and comprehensive legal system. In this context, veyduy and repentance play a fundamental role. Therefore, Maimonides places veyduy in the first book of his Mishne Torah. This placement reflects the fundamental nature of the process of repentance.

A simple analogy will help illustrate the difference between these two organizational schemes. Assume that an author wishes to write a book that graphically describes the human body. The author begins with the toes and describes every body part up to an including the crown of the head. Another author wishes to write a text on anatomy. He begins with a description of the fundamental internal organs. He describes the heart and lungs, the digestive organs. He eventually arrives at the finger and toes. Both authors are

describing the body. Is one organizational scheme more correct than the other? Of course not! Both are correct; the authors have different objectives. The first author wishes to present the body as it appears to the observer. His scheme corresponds with this objective. The second author's objective is to describe the body as a system. He begins with the most fundamental elements of the organic system and then continues on to the other elements. Sefer HaMitzvot organizes the mitzvot as they appear in the Torah. Mishne Torah is more concerned with exploring and presenting the mitzvot as a system of halacha. Therefore, Maimonides departs from the observable organizational scheme and presents the mitzvot in a manner that expresses their interrelationship within the system of halacha.

Let us now return to Maimonides treatment of the mitzvah of sounding the trumpets. Our parasha begins with a discussion of material primarily related to the Mishkan, and sacrifices. In this context, the mitzvah of the trumpets is presented. It follows that in Sefer HaMitzvot Maimonides will present the mitzvah in this context. Therefore, he characterizes the mitzvah as primarily commanding us to sound the trumpets when offering the Festival and Rosh Chodesh sacrifices. This description is true to the presentation in the Torah.

However, according to Maimonides, this mitzvah is also the fundamental commandment upon which the laws of fasting are constructed. Mishne Torah is designed to present the system of halacha. The laws of fasts are fundamental

component of this system. They are certainly not merely a postscript to the obligation to sound the trumpets when offering Festival and Rosh Chodesh sacrifices. Therefore, Maimonides places the mitzvah of sounding the trumpets at a time of affliction at the opening of the section of the laws dealing with fasts and emphasizes the role of the mitzvah as the foundation of this section. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Ta'aniyot 1:1.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Kelai Maikdash 3:5.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Chagigah 3:4.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 59.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Ta'aniyot 1:1.

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 1:1.

[7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 73.

[8] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 73.



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(Humility continued from page 1)

Perfection

father of Boaz, who married Ruth. Both Ruth and Tamar's descendants wed, and gave life to King David and his son King Solomon. We clearly learn God's unbiased view of mankind: no one is more favored simply due to a bloodline. Although both gentiles, Ruth and Tamar embodied God's values. A gentile is no less capable of perfection than a Jew. The fact is Adam and Eve were as gentile as Ruth and Tamar, so all people – Jews included – share the exact, same human design. Today's Jews seeking "yichuss" – lineage – are wise to learn a lesson from those whom God's selected as leaders. Messiah as well descends from Ruth and Tamar. Abraham was of an idolatrous family, serving idols himself. Nonetheless, as he developed and embodied the life of reason, he uncovered what is true: only One Cause exists for all we see. I believe it is due to Abraham's ability to transition from idolater to monotheist that God selected him as a prime example of how capable is the human mind to discover truth, and cleave to one's mind and its convictions. God orchestrated it that the Jewish nation descend from Abraham, in order that we all take a lesson from Abraham, our founding father, just as God wishes kings to take lessons from Ruth and Tamar, their ancestors. Regardless of idolatrous origins and lack of any teacher, Abraham used his reasoning powers alone, arriving at such profound truths, that God eventually spoke to him, and favored him. How perfected must he have been, and all on his own. What a shining example of God's human design. Like Abraham, we are all independently equipped with reasoning, so as to arrive at what is true. Understanding reality that God exists, that He is the sole Creator, and that He relates to man so man may inherit the eternal good, is our objective, and where we will find the greatest fulfillment.

Our leaders – favored by God – embodied correct values and ideas, displayed in Ruth, Tamar, and Abraham. But these two qualities are not unrelated. One can only become wise, if he is truly humble, "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God..." (Psalms; 111:10) This means that man cannot learn if he does not recognize what immense knowledge exists: he knows not what to look for, so he does not desire it, or seek it out. But a man or woman who recognizes God's reality, who is awed by the universe, and has tasted the Torah's sweet waters, is excited at the prospect of unveiling another thought of our Sages. He will certainly remain without rest, until he penetrates the Talmud's words, uncovering another enlightening idea.

Humility, then, is a prerequisite for Torah and scientific knowledge. And with humility, one fears God, and obeys His commandments, primarily because they are truth, but at times too, out of fear of punishment. Ultimately, the best life is lived not out of fear, but from a drive to know more. That is

called "Love of God", when we are drawn to the Source of all knowledge and reality.

But why does God desire kings to emanate from modest individuals? Was this a reward for Tamar and Ruth's modesty? What type of reward can exist for someone long after they die?

We learn that a king must not increase horses, wives, silver or gold. A king must take a Torah wherever he travels, reading it daily. (Deut. 17:16-19) What do all these laws point to? They point to the next verse, "Lest his heart grow haughty over his brothers, and lest he turn from the commands..." (ibid 17:20)

The one danger kings face is allowing their positions to justify arrogance. What combats this emotion? Modesty. Therefore, God planned our kings to descend from those who embodied modesty. In this fashion, a king will be modest...but not through genetics.

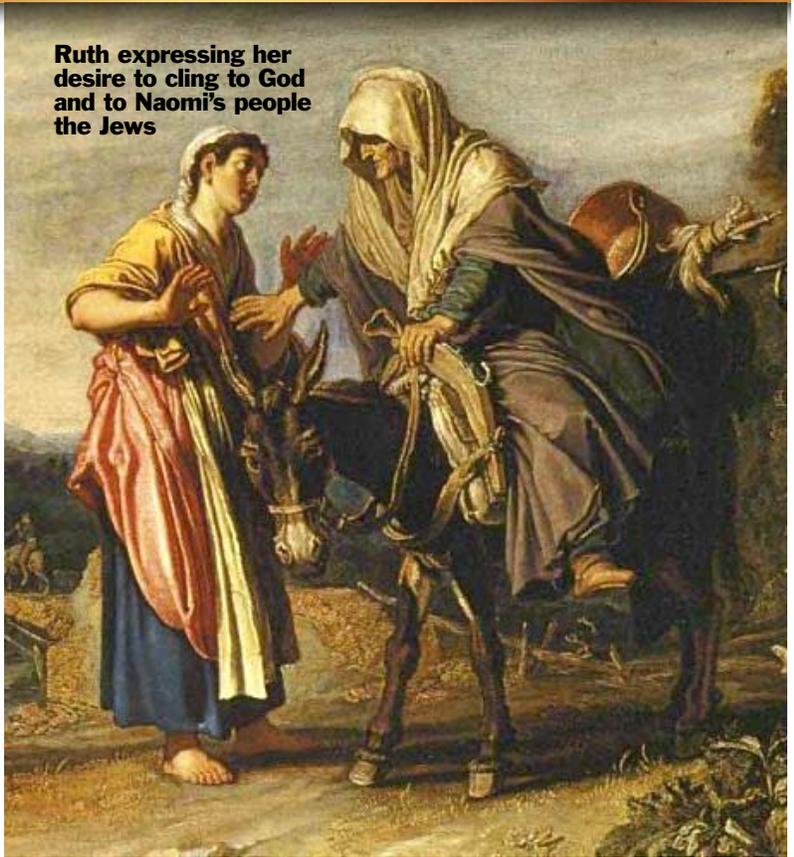
By definition, man identifies with relatives more than with strangers. To insure a king will not become full of himself, God planned our kings to descend from those with whom they will naturally identify, and look to for instruction. Their identification with Ruth and Tamar will humble them. They will, in turn, rule the people not from arrogance, but from a genuine identification with others, only secured by a fostered humility. Such a king will be most effective in his role to lead the people towards God. A king must never lose sight of Israel's objective: love of God. His compassion for others expressed via his just rule of the nation will lead the people towards Torah and love of God.

Becoming Modest

But let's backtrack...how does one become modest? Is modesty a direct result of a discreet action, like being charitable: can one also simply "be" modest?

We learn in this week's Parsha that "The man Moses was exceedingly more humble than any man on the face of the Earth." (Num. 12:3) This

Ruth expressing her desire to cling to God and to Naomi's people the Jews



was due to his great knowledge. Knowing more about God and reality than any other human, Moses understood the disparity between man and God better than any other person. For this reason, Moses was more humble. He knew his low position in the universe. This does not mean he was depressed, but that he understood man's place, his place, he embraced it, and acted accordingly.

Furthermore, why should one be egotistical, or immodest? Did a person create himself, and cause his features and accomplishments alone, that he should take full credit through his arrogance? Reality teaches a person that something other than himself created him. As Pirkei Avos states (3:1), "know from where you came: a putrid drop [of semen]". This helps one refrain from sin, since sin requires a person's convictions in his own desires...his ego. But reflecting on his origins as a putrid drop, one should be humbled, and not sin.

True humility is only achieved over time, provided, one continues to study this world, and Torah. Only then will one understand how insignificant we are. And with this recognition of our true place, we concern ourselves less with strides towards fame, and attention from others. We will eventually dress differently, as a display of our convictions, for man tends to express what he feels. But a change of dress, although proper due to Halacha, must ultimately be the expression of one's values. And values must be learned, considered, and then inculcated into personal

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(Humility continued from page 4)

conviction. All mitzvahs should be performed based on our conviction that they are true. A very modestly dressed individual who always speaks Lashon Hara has severely missed the point. Conversely, one who is just commencing the path towards modest dress, and possesses a “golden heart” - never speaking Lashon Hara, will eventually express her inner values in her outward dress. This latter person is certainly closer to the truth and far more perfected: a keener sensitivity advances nobler attitudes.

Modesty – tznius – is an outgrowth of our increased knowledge of God and Torah, and is truly an expression of our humbled natures. Of course we must adhere to Halacha (Jewish law) and obey laws of dress. But as Rashi says, if one performs a law while ignorant of its ideas and perfections, it is useless. Therefore, we are not exempt from the law, but we also must strive to understand why we are commanded in this law, and ultimately accept our insignificance, due to God’s greatness.

Micha and Tznius

The Torah expresses a blatant demand for humility: “It has been told to you man, what is good, and what does God require of you: only that you perform justice and loving kindness, and humbly walk before God.” (Micha, 6:8)

Radak explains: 1) “performing justice” as referring to mitzvahs; 2) “loving kindness” is explained as doing more than what is commanded; and 3) “walking humbly” Radak quotes the Talmud’s elaboration (Succah 49b) that one must attend funerals and weddings humbly. Why these three? I believe it to mean that when performing God’s will, we must do so for the correct reason, and not for the fanfare. Thus, there are two areas of God’s will: 1) mitzvahs, and 2) doing even what is not commanded, like Abraham who possessed no Torah. And when performing these two, we must 3) do so for the right reasons: not for applause, but humbly.

However, how do we derive from Micha’s words “walking humbly” that man must attend funerals and weddings? That seems arbitrary. Rashi explains. He says that our verse in Micha uses the word “lechess” (to go). “Lechess” reappears in Ecclesiastes, “Better to go (lechess) to a house of mourning, than to go (lechess) to a celebration”. (Eccl. 7:2) The Rabbis thereby derive the following lesson from the repeated instance of “lechess” in Micha and Ecclesiastes: the humility in Micha is to be expressed in Ecclesiastes’ destinations of houses of mourning, and weddings. Thus, one must be humble when performing these two mitzvahs of burial and weddings.

That is understandable. One should be modest,

and not arrogantly cut bar lines or push people at a wedding smorgasbord. One should also not boast if he pays for a burial of a poor man, or a poor bride’s wedding. Boasting violates modesty and humility. But it still seems strange that the command in Micha refers to performing mitzvahs. I mean, aren’t there other areas in which we should be even more modest? The Talmud states that one should relieve himself at night, as he does during the day. Relieving one’s self has nothing to do with mitzvah, and makes more sense to be connected with modesty than mitzvah. For one exposes himself to relieve himself, so modesty naturally applies. And with the cover of nightfall, human emotion tends to be more expressive and deviant. So why couldn’t Micha simply mean, “be modest even when you need to expose yourself” or something similar? This is one problem with Micha.

Another problem is the Talmud’s conclusion. The Talmud poses this a fortiori argument: “If one is commanded to be humble in mitzvahs performed publicly like weddings, he is certainly bound to be modest in private mitzvahs” like giving charity to the poor arriving at your door - a private venue. Now, I would agree with a person who said, “If I can lift 5 pounds, I certainly can lift 1 pound.” That reasoning of certainty is perfect. So is this: “If I like a little chocolate, I will like a lot”. In both cases, the first premise assures the second premise as a certain truth: a 1 lb. weight offers greater “ease” of lift than 5, and regarding desirous tastes, a greater “enjoyment” exists with greater quantity of chocolate. But the Talmud’s reasoning regarding humility doesn’t appear to follow. How does it follow, that if I must be modest in public mitzvahs, then, I must certainly be modest in private mitzvahs? What is the category in private mitzvahs that is “greater”?

Let’s rephrase this question: what is in greater need when one is alone? The answer is “attention”, for the ego is always seeking satisfaction. Now, how does this express itself in connection with mitzvahs?

Performing a mitzvah publicly, man feels self-righteous, and his ego is content. There is nothing to seek. He is therefore commanded to perform the mitzvah humbly, and not seek any ulterior motive, as that danger exists in publicly performed mitzvahs. One can daven at a wedding in public very calmly, answering the blessings quietly. Or, he can shout above everyone else, gaining attention for his “righteous” devotion. Therefore, we are commanded by Micha to perform mitzvos humbly, not seeking ego satisfaction. But when one is alone, man’s ego is unsatisfied, “No one saw me do this mitzvah” and he wishes an audience.

We can now understand the argument of certainty: if in public mitzvahs when our egos are

content that others see us so righteous we are commanded to be humble, then certainly when the need for ego is greater in private mitzvahs, we should not seek to boast of our “righteousness” after the fact.

This explanation answers our previous question, why Micha teaches that man must express humility in the realm of mitzvahs, as opposed to mundane matters. It is because in mitzvah, man’s ego finds a guilt-free expression, rationalized that when performing God’s will he can seek glory for it. Man thinks, “If the Torah says I must do mitzvahs, I am justified in flaunting my righteousness”. This sentiment is to be avoided.

This is Micha’s lesson: not simply to be a modest person, but deeper, and stated openly in Pirkei Avos: “Do not make the Torah a spade with which to dig”. (Avos, 4:5) We are instructed to perform mitzvahs for our perfection, not for our glory.

Summary

We learn of a “command”: to be humble in our mitzvah performances, and when going over and above what is commanded, just as we are required to be Kadosh, sanctified. This is expressed in distancing ourselves from that which is even permitted: we should not be gluttonous, or indulging in sexual activity.

We also learn from Moses that humility is proportionate to our knowledge, so a false humility is certainly a reality, from which we should refrain, as it is a lie.

Maimonides teaches that in all emotional spectrums, man should live in-between the two extremes: not frivolous with money, and not miserly. Man should not be morbid, nor a jester. A Rabbi once explained this is a correct prescription, as the middle ground keeps one equidistant from close proximity to an extreme where the emotional pull is strongest. Remaining furthest from the pull of the two poles in any emotional spectrum –equidistant from both – we enable our intellect to remain more involved in wisdom, what will truly afford us the greatest life, as God wishes for us all. However, Maimonides taught that there are two emotions that we must go to the opposite extreme so as to avoid: never become angry, and never satisfy arrogance. We learn not to seek ego satisfaction with publicly flaunting our Torah adherence.

Humility, then, originates from greater wisdom, and should naturally be expressed in our appearance, which plays a major role in our egos. Ultimately, humility prepares us for a life of wisdom as we reduce our infantile focus on the self, engaging more time in study, and a real preoccupation with and awe for the Creator. ■

the
Dangers
 of
 Understanding
 Midrashim
Literally

*An Open Dialogue
 with the
 Jewish Community*

PART II

RABBI PINCHAS ROSENTHAL

Dean,
 Torah Academy
 of Long Island



Rabbi Pinchas Rosenthal, dean of Torah Academy of Long Island, has recently addressed many of Jewish education's flaws; one of which is the blind acceptance of Midrashim as historic truths, and not the metaphoric instruction intended by our Rabbis as stated by Abraham ben Maimonides, Ramchal, and of course, King Solomon. (Proverbs, 1:6) Rabbi Rosenthal expounded upon the famous Midrash of Pharaoh's daughter Batya "extending" her arm to retrieve Moses from the Nile. Rabbi Rosenthal offered an enlightening insight, removing the need to understand Batya as literally and unnaturally "extending" her arm.

Following, we record the Rabbi's original article, some responses, and finally the Rabbi's response.

*"And the daughter of Paroh's
 arm stretched out
 many cubits"*

As part of the interview into high school, I often challenge incoming students with questions that contrast the P'shat of a Chumash story with its Midrashic counterpart. The reaction is always the same- the student looks at me like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck. The other day, the student was an eager young lady named Leah. I asked her the following question: If you were able to go back in time to the moment when Paroh's daughter saw baby Moshe in his basket, what would you see? Would you see Paroh's daughter requesting her maidservant to fetch the basket as the posuk tells us or would you see her arm grow 25 feet long like Mister Fantastic and rope in the basket as the Midrash says?

I felt at that moment as if I had asked Leah to choose between her two parents at a divorce proceeding. She knew that the Torah was an authority and correct and the Midrash was an authority and correct. Her mind was telling her both versions could not be simultaneously true! Therefore, she was frozen and unable to respond.

Leah was educated in a yeshiva day school. The vast majority of children from the current Yeshiva system believe all Midrashim are part of the literal account of the events that occurred in the Tanach.

Let me fast forward to an Anthropology Class at Queens College. The professor is discussing ancient Egypt. He mentions there is a legend among the Jews about the daughter of Pharaoh

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Education

concerning her arm stretching out to retrieve baby Moses. Leah raises her hand. She says that it was a miracle and the daughter of Paroh had her arm stretched out to save Moshe. Suddenly, all 53 members of her class turn to her and stare. Her face turns crimson. The Professor asks her, "Do you believe that actually happened?" Leah feels the temperature rising. She knows that her beliefs are under attack, and that she has been publicly put on the spot. She desperately wants to explain the Torah position in a cogent way and yet she finds that despite 15 years of Yeshiva education, she is unable to do so.

What is the Torah position on Midrashim?

The great philosopher, the Rambam, in his commentary to Perek Chelek (10th Ch. of Sanhedrin) states unequivocally that Midrashim are not to be taken literally, but are a source of deep wisdom. The great Mikubal, the Ramchal, in his Introduction to Aggadah (found in most editions of the Ein Yaakov) states the Midrashim are a source of deep and abstract ideas and not to be taken literally. The Ra'avad on his commentary on the Mishne Torah (Hil. Teshuva ch. 3) states that taking the Midrashim literally "Mishabshos es ha'deos" distorts ones principles of belief. Sadly, this is case with our children. They have been taught midrashim as fairy tales. The effects are disastrous.

I explained to Leah that the Torah's account is what truly occurred in space and time. The Midrash is there to point to the story behind the story. In my opinion, the seemingly miraculous extension of Paroh's daughter's arm is directing us to another idea - the great difficulty that she must have faced saving the life of a Jewish baby. Imagine, if you will, a modern day Paroh - perhaps a Hitler or a Stalin, or even, a Saddam Hussein. How likely would it be for the daughter of such a singularly evil dictator to defy her father's murderous intentions? Her actions required her to go against her upbringing and the dictates of her father. This would of necessity create tremendous conflict for any young woman, but particularly for one in her position of prominence in Egyptian society. The Written Torah's typically spare prose seems to gloss over this conflict. But the Midrash points to it, and if used properly, makes us stop and examine her motivations. The metaphor of her extended arm is an expression of G-d's directing the actions of Paroh's daughter. The rabbis are teaching us that her emotional shift towards feeling protective of this baby is as much of a miracle as if G-d had extended her arm 25 feet.

Leah felt as if a load had been removed from shoulders. At age 14, she was taught for the first time, the relationship between the Torah and the Midrashim. It is my belief that all teachers should only teach a Midrash if they help the students

discover its deeper message.

Rabbi Simcha Feuerman, LCSW and Chaya Feuerman, LCSW in their article "Teaching Midrashim to Children" suggest using the notion of seeking a 'moral of the story' for presenting the idea of a deeper meaning to Midrashim to children. Here is a good example.

"Consider the Midrash which contains a strange twist to the plague of Frogs.

The verse (Shemos 8:2) states: "And the frog went up and covered all of Egypt." The text uses the singular form when referring to the frogs. Of course, the simple explanation (poshut peshat) is that in Hebrew as in many languages, an entire group or species is labeled in the singular form. However, the Midrash derives from this choice of words that actually one frog rose out of the Nile. However, each and every time an Egyptian tried to hit the frog, instead of it being squashed and killed, it split into several new frogs. Thus, as the frogs began to jump all over, and Egyptians encountered and hit them, the plague grew worse and worse. (See Rashi, Op. Cit.)

To our thinking, there is no question that any classroom of children who were encouraged to ponder what they real lesson behind this Midrash is, would draw powerful insights into the nature of problems and how people get further into them. The inescapable lesson of this Midrash is that when you try to stubbornly and pig-headedly fight a problem, as the Egyptians did, instead of thinking about what has gone wrong you will end up panicking and making things far worse. The more the Egyptians fought the frogs, the worse it got. Who among us in life has not panicked and made a situation far worse instead of staying calm and using problem-solving skills?"

As our children enter the 21st century and its scientific mindset it is obligatory for all educators to ensure that our children see the Torah in its most sophisticated light.

What About Miracles?

Re: "Shortchanging Our Children By Teaching Midrashim Literally" by Rabbi Pinchas Rosenthal (op-ed, June 2): I believe this is a question better left to recognized Talmudic scholars and authorities. As for Rabbi Rosenthal's statement that "As our children enter the 21st century and its scientific mindset, it is obligatory for all educators to ensure that our children see the Torah in its most sophisticated light," I wonder whether he'd use such language in referring to the accounts of malachim; miracles such as those that Moshe displayed in Egypt; the splitting of the Red Sea; etc.

-Rabbi Velvel Straub

Watered-Down Torah

Having read Rabbi Pinchas Rosenthal's article, I feel compelled to stand in defense of poor Leah.

Rabbi Rosenthal relates two episodes concerning fourteen-year-old Leah and from there leads us to the premise that the yeshiva system is teaching Midrashim too literally - as "fairy tales" - and that the "effects are disastrous." He then brings three sources that appear to back him up.

In Talmud Bavli (Sotah 12b), there is a disagreement between two tanaaim, Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Nechemia. One (the Talmud is not clear on who says what) holds that Batya sent her maidservant. The other insists Batya sent forth her hand and her arm stretched several cubits.

The Talmud and the later commentaries explain that the disagreement is actually over the translation of the word "amash." One says this means her maidservant, as the word amah in Tanach normally means maidservant. If it had meant her hand, it would have said yadah, the common Hebrew word for hand.

The other tanna holds that the word amah is translated here as both arm and cubit because in Tanach the correct word for maidservant for a person of stature such as Batya is na'arah, not amah, which is used for commoners. In fact, this expression is in the very same verse. Therefore, he translates the word amah as her arm and cubits (which is why it does not say yadah) to teach us that her arm stretched several cubits.

Since neither the Talmud nor the classic commentators decide definitively according to either one (which is probably why Rashi brings both to explain the verse), each account is perfectly legitimate. Therefore, in my view, Leah was perfectly correct in being dumbfounded when pushed to the wall to choose between the two. How could she know for sure? She wasn't there when it happened. In fact how could anyone be one-hundred percent sure?

As for her experience in the college classroom, Leah could have explained to the professor and the class that this event is related by one of the greatest sages of Israel who, having lived almost 2,000 years closer than us to the event in question, seemingly would possess a better understanding of the events and times of the Torah.

She could also have pointed out that this sage devoted his entire life to the Torah and is still considered an expert all these centuries later. His words were recorded in the Talmud and have been studied, in the original text, by millions of scholars over the generations. There are also

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Education

many classic commentators on the Talmud and the Chumash, all of them great rabbis in their own right, who quote him and take what he says quite literally.

There are a number of questions Leah could ask Rabbi Rosenthal. Why is it that in a time of miracles – a time when the Nile River turned to blood, locusts covered the land in a moment's notice at the command of Moshe, and every firstborn in the land was struck at midnight (events clearly described in the Torah) – it is not acceptable to believe that a woman's hand could stretch three times its length and then retract?

Surely Rabbi Rosenthal knows that Torah she'bichsav and Torah she'baal peh come from the same source – God Himself. Why, then, would he take one literally and not the other?

How would the rabbi explain the Mishna in Avos (chapter 5, Mishna 5) that there were 10 miracles that happened in the Bais Hamikdash? How about the countless stories basic to our history and faith, such as the one of Avraham being thrown into the fiery furnace without being harmed?

Of course there are Midrashim and aggados that are not to be taken literally. However, they are clearly explained in that way by the classic commentators. If Rabbi Rosenthal would look a little closer at the sources he brought he would see that they are speaking about those specific Midrashim.

From the very fact that the commentators explain those Midrashim as parables or metaphors shows us that they believe that in general the Midrash and Talmud should be understood literally. Why would a Jewish educator willingly take away beautiful and meaningful history from our children and water it down to "fairy tales"?

-Zev Weinstein

A Stretch of Reality

Dear Rabbi Rosenthal,

I read the exchange in this week's Jewish Press between you and those who challenged your comments about studying Midrash. There is an easy and foolproof response that will close the mouths of the braying donkeys (at least for now): imagine that you were Batya swimming in the river, and you saw a basket floating in the distance: would any rational person stretch out her hand for it when it was clearly well out of reach? Of course not. The Midrash CAN'T be taken literally! It wouldn't make any more sense than taking Hashem's "outstretched arm" literally!

-Chananya

The Rabbi Responds

Over the past year I have sought to begin a dialogue on the subject of Jewish education that I believe is vital to the continued health of the Jewish community. I am truly happy to see that so many people are interested enough to take the time not only to read the articles, but to respond to them, since my intention has been to stimulate thought and discussion.

As a Jewish educator, it is my firm conviction that we must always encourage all questions. It is in that spirit that I welcome the responses of both R. Velvel Straub and Zev Weinstein.

The thrust of my concern lies in my observation, as a rebbe and principal for many years, that most current chinuch, rather than inspiring our students with the beauty and wisdom of Torah, too often teaches them that Torah learning requires that they suspend disbelief, setting aside their intellectual faculties rather than further engaging and sharpening them.

As a result, many of our students harbor secret suspicions (which they are too often afraid to voice because their rebbeim will not welcome questions of this type) that Torah cannot stand up to rigorous intellectual scrutiny and/or feel that Torah is completely irrelevant to their lives as 21st century Jews.

It is not responsible to teach our children scientific method and then expect them to be satisfied with a "Be quiet! Smarter people than you have always thought this way" kind of answer. What should they tell their professors who say their religion is nothing more than an empty fraud? What will they think of a chinuch that has no better answers than "You aren't qualified to ask questions"?

For the most part the reaction to my point has been very positive. There is a very large group of people like Leah who wish that their yeshiva education had provided them with the tools to show Judaism to the world as the way of life of an am chacham v'navon – a wise and discerning nation (Devarim 4:6).

Such an education is within our grasp. The

Ramchal, in his introduction to Derech Tevunos (The Ways of Reason, Feldheim) speaks of making a Talmud Torah that is accessible and relevant to every single Jew. The Ramchal's methodology leads the mind unflinchingly in the search for wisdom. He points out exactly what our rabbis of blessed memory meant when they praised King Solomon for making "handles" for the Torah. He was able to accumulate a large measure of wisdom with ease through the application of short concise rules. He further states that these principles are within the understanding of ordinary people.

Such a chinuch must demand absolute precision of terminology. I believe at least some of the rejection of the Rambam's and Ramchal's teaching regarding Midrashim is due to confusion over the difference between pshat and drash. Rashi, as referenced by Mr. Weinstein, clearly identifies the definition of "amasah" as "arm" as a drash. The translation of "maidservant" is presented clearly as the pshat.

This is also the clear basis of distinction between Midrashim and the miracles in the Torah. The miracles of the Torah are written as pshat and must be taken therefore as literal occurrences.

The derech presented by the Ramchal is the better way. We must found our chinuch on a derech tevunos that inspires our children to see the wisdom of the Torah with their own minds. This is the way to be an am chacham v'navon.

-Rabbi Pinchas Rosenthal ■

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