

JewishTimes

THE JOURNAL ON TORAH THOUGHT

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THOUGHTS

Tzedaka's Perfection

HOWIE: Malachi 3:10 says, "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, and let there be food in My House, and in this put Me to the test said God of Hosts. I will surely open heaven's storehouses for you and pour down blessings on you more than sufficient." Here, God guarantees that one who gives tzedaka, can test God to see that he will receive back great wealth. What is the reason you can test God by Tzedaka and nowhere else?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The most difficult thing for man is to forfeit his financial security: "Man gets excited regarding his money" (Sabbath 117, 120). Tzedaka asks man to operate against nature and his view of reality. Giving money decreases one's resources, placing man at risk. But God teaches that there is another reality, a greater reality than what one sees. Typically, 100-50=50. So man requires God's guarantee of supernatural providence which offers man security, thereby allowing us to give and feel confident God will return it. If God did not make this guarantee, man rightly fears parting with his much needed resources. But God's guarantee assures man that God will override nature. It is the mark of perfection when one acts with greater conviction in God's words, over his conviction in natural law. Perfected man realizes that God created nature, and therefore God can alter nature when man follows God's Torah. Perfected man is more convinced in God's words than in nature. ■

The Concluding Prayer

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Rabbi Israel Chait on the end prayer of Shmoneh essay:

"To those who curse me, let my soul remain silent"

This means that if an entire society curses you, you should be quiet. This is the proper level. One should be unconcerned with what society says. A perfected person needs only to walk in the proper path and that is sufficient for him. He needs nothing more [he does not need society].

"And my soul be like dust to all"

This is an unbelievable prayer. This means that a person should want one thing: to be alone in the world of reality and not care about anyone. Others should not affect a person whatsoever. Chazal say that King David was persecuted not only by evil people, but even by Torah giants of his generation, but he did not care. This prayer shows the ultimate level of the person living in the world of reality and not society.

"And my soul be like dust to all"

If a person truly desires this, that it does not disturb him [that society thinks nothing of him, for he thinks nothing of society] and he does not care about what people say about him, [this discard for society's approval is a prerequisite for greater attachment to Torah, as the next statement says]:

"Open my heart to Your Torah, then I will pursue Your commandments"

To feel as dust is the basis [for greater attachment to Torah]. That desire to be satisfied and happy, even though others view him as dust, will drive him more towards living a Torah life, learning for learning sake alone. And the Torah says so: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk modestly with your God" (Micah 6:8). ■

Torah is Pleasant

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

It's interesting that every part of the Yom Kippur service except for pushing the scapegoat off the cliff is included in the Written Torah. Also interesting is that when Noah sent out the raven it does not give a reason, but it says when he sent out the dove it was to see if the land had dried. The raven is a flesh eating bird and it would appear Noah was concerned if he had to confront the corpses of the annihilated society. If the raven did not return he would know there were bodies everywhere. That is also why he made a window which was not commanded by God. God said make a "tzohar," but Noah also made a "chalon" from which he sent out the raven. Torah, following a peaceful path (Prov. 3:17), avoids gruesome or disturbing subjects like the purpose of the raven, which was to find out if there were dead bodies everywhere, and the purpose of the scapegoat which was to be dismembered on the rocky cliff. ■

Happiness

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

You can tell how happy a person is by how much he lives in the present and how much he lives in the future. And in so far as he lives in the future, we say he's unhappy. In so far as he lives in the present he is happy, for a very simple reason. By living in the present he utilizes all his energy. So there's no energy left [satisfaction of all one's energies is the definition of happiness]. But when a person starts living in the future, it comes from unhappiness in the present. Today he's making \$100,000. He's unhappy. So what happens? He has to think, "Next year I'll make \$200,000. Year after that I'm going to make \$300,000." It shows the projection, the world of fantasy. The world of unreality is caused by the fact that in his present reality, there is no satisfaction. Therefore, the happiest man is the man that doesn't think about the future, but about the present; he's

completely involved in the present. But the one who has plans and all kinds of things [future imaginations, fantasies], on the contrary, he's in a state of frustration. Therefore, his gratification must be of an imaginary nature: he's daydreaming. What does daydreaming mean? It means that he's frustrated now, he imagines situations, and he derives an imaginary gratification [of his future]. It's not as good as real gratification, but he has no choice at that time, that's what he needs.

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Elaborating on the above, "Living in the present" refers to a state of mind where one values present activities and engages his energies in them. This refers to his Torah studies, labors, family and pleasures. His energy flows towards all these areas in the present. When one desires present activities and also fulfills his desires, that is happiness. He has performed all that he wants; all his wishes are realized. If however one does not find satisfying activities in the present, as Rabbi Chait said, he will fantasize about future activities, as one intends to avoid pain. But then his energies are not flowing, as the future has not arrived, which is only when he will find release. So his energies are frustrated, which is painful. ■

Proving God Exists

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

We have one life.

If the greatest doctors informed you how you're killing yourself, you would listen. If the greatest minds said you forfeit what's best for your kids, you would listen. Well, the greatest Jewish minds quoting God have already spoken, namely, Moses, King Solomon and Maimonides. You must ensure children receive the best direction.

The Greatest Event

In Torah, 9 times Moses reminded the Jews of the greatest event in all of history. He recalled how our nation of 2 million Jews, enumerated extensively by family names and tribes had eye-witnessed Revelation. They all stood at the foot of Mount Sinai hearing intelligence emanating from the blazing inferno, feeling Earth quake, seeing lightning, hearing thunder and the sound of a shofar

waxing louder and louder (Exod. 19:16-18). The mountain was engulfed in fire, yet intelligent sounds were heard from within the fire. The people trembled. God orchestrated such a miracle to remove all doubt that the source of the Torah being given, was not biological, not earthly. For any biological entity perishes in fire. That's why God used fire in this communication.

Proof of God

Had the nation not witnessed this event, they would reject Moses' repeated reminders that they were there. But they did not reject Moses, in fact, the entire nation transmitted that event to their children, grandchildren until that account reached us today. There is no other Jewish history for that Hebrew date, Shavuot 2448. Had this miracle never happened, we would have in our possession an alternate Jewish history. Had the Jews never been in Egypt and witnessed those 10 plagues and the splitting of the Reed Sea, again we would have an alternate history in our possession today. But the fact is that there's only one singular Jewish history, which is what Torah communicates: we were in Egypt 210 years, we witnessed 10 plagues, the sea splitting and receiving Torah at Mt. Sinai. We ate miraculous manna that appeared on the ground each morning for 40 years in the desert. The miraculous rock provided the entire nation water during those decades.

These histories cannot be false. Had they been, the Jews would not have unanimously transmitted it as their sole history. Similarly, if someone today tried to convince us that this morning we all witnessed a spaceship with aliens, we would not unanimously teach our children such a story.

The proof of Revelation at Sinai is that simple and irrefutable. We possess this historical account because all these miracles transpired literally in front of millions of people. We all witnessed God's communication. No other religion makes such claims of mass witnesses of miracles. In fact, they demand blind faith, precisely because their religions are fabrications.

Caring for our Children

If rabbis, teachers and parents communicated these historical truths to our children, if children learned this clear proof that God gave the Torah to the Jewish nation, this reality would stir our children to wonder what is so important in the Torah. Far fewer children would abandon religious Judaism. When a child's mind sees a proof, it far outweighs the lures and values of our secular societies today led by the intellectually untrained and the morally deficient.

Torah is True & is the Best Life

Revelation at Sinai validated the entire Torah as true, which proves that God created man, the universe and Torah. God created us, so He alone knows what's best for us, and He told us to follow Torah. Torah will yield the greatest life in terms of personal happiness, societal peace, and success as promised by God in the Shema (Deut. 11:13-15). Rejecting a Torah life and all its laws and values means one thinks he knows better than God. Sinning against God will also result in the Torah's harsh curses.

Of course adapting to a Torah life requires change, and your personal comfort in what's familiar and what's routine to you will oppose such change. But those are poor reasons to not follow God. If you follow wisdom, and decide to change and follow Torah, you can do so slowly, guided by this new knowledge that Torah wisdom will improve life in all areas. And your continued Torah study will grant you a higher level of happiness as you will start enjoying Torah's immense brilliance. King Solomon was second in wisdom only to Moses. He taught that nothing man can desire compares to Torah wisdom (Prov. 3:15, 8:11). World leaders were greatly impressed by King Solomon's wisdom. We should not take his advice lightly. Following him, we learn what decisions and values have caused us unhappiness and problems. His keen knowledge of psychology and philosophy will guide us to more rational decisions that avoid most problems. We then start enjoying a more tranquil life, we eliminate animosity, and find more success and an appreciation for God's wisdom. The same God who created the universe, also created Torah. This must imbue us with motivation to study Torah which has great depth and brilliance that provides unparalleled satisfaction.

Your kids have one life.

If the greatest doctors informed you how you're killing yourself, you would listen. If the greatest minds said you forfeit what's best for your kids, you would listen. If God tells you what the best life is, follow Him. He knows best.

Not following Torah is self-destructive.

Not teaching your children is worse. ■

BaMidbar and the Ultimate Redemption

RABBI REUVEN MANN

The Sefer (book) of BaMidbar begins at a propitious moment in Jewish history, the second year after the redemption from Egypt. Much had transpired during that time: the nation had experienced a “rendezvous” with Hashem on Mount Sinai and received His Torah. The Israelites remained encamped around the mountain for a year, studying the Torah, performing the Mitzvot (commandments), and building the Mishkan (tabernacle).

Thus, the fourth Book of the Torah begins on a certain high note. One can sense Moshe’s enthusiasm as he entreats his father-in-law, Yitro, to join the people in settling Israel so he can partake of all the blessings that Hashem has in store for Bnei Yisrael (Children of Israel). However, Moshe’s initial excitement did not endure. This Sefer, which was supposed to be filled with glory and accomplishment, turned out to be the saddest and most disappointing in the entire Torah.

It did not take long for a spirit of rebelliousness to break out. We read about the revolt over the manna, which brought forth a severe punishment from G-d. Why, at this point, did the people complain about their food? Did they, perhaps, suffer underlying anxiety about the imminent invasion of Canaan?

One might think so, because the Book of BaMidbar is dominated by the tragic incident of the Spies. In response to Moshe’s pronouncement to “go up and conquer” (Deuteronomy 1:21), the people asked to send men on a mission to scout out the land. This turned out to be disastrous. The Spies infected the nation with extreme panic about the land’s inhabitants. Hashem then decreed that the conquest of the land would be postponed for 40 years, until the entire generation of adults who had left Egypt had perished. This development converted BaMidbar into a Book of sadness and failure. The terrible decree further impacted the people, in that it generated a series of rebellions. Most outrageous was that of Korach and his “congregation,” who openly plotted to derail Moshe’s religious authority. In addition, BaMidbar contains many other sad stories, such as the encounter with the wicked Balaam. While Hashem did thwart his

desire to utter “curses” against the Jewish People, Balaam advised the women of Moab to seduce the men of Israel into worshipping the idol Peor, leading to a plague that killed 24,000 people.

And yet, while there is much that is tragic in this Book, that is not its total story. Alongside the failures we have recounted, there are episodes of spiritual grandeur.

The Path to Redemption Through Mitzvot

Prior to the first anniversary of the Exodus, Moshe commanded the nation to bring the Passover sacrifice on the 14th of Nissan in accordance with “all its Statutes and all its Judgements” (Numbers 9:3). A group of “impure” people, who were proscribed from bringing it, implored that they be given another opportunity to participate in this great Mitzvah. Moshe inquired of G-d, who responded by establishing the Law of the “Second Passover,” which commands all who were unable (or unwilling) to offer the Passover on its initial date to do so at an alternative time (the 14th of the Hebrew month of Iyar).

Let us recognize the nobility of spirit which motivated these “impure” people to issue their request. They would have suffered no legal consequences for failure to perform the ritual. Apparently, these people recognized and appreciated the spiritual benefits afforded by fulfillment of the commandments, especially the Passover sacrifice. They understood that this particular Mitzvah is fundamental to the Jewish People as a commemoration of the Exodus, a renunciation of idolatry, and a testimony to the existence of G-d and the miracles He performed for His People. They did not want to be prevented from bonding with their brothers and sisters in this unifying spiritual experience. This expression of commitment to Torah and Am Yisrael (the nation of Israel) represents a high point in the history of the Jews.

Unity and Commitment in Crisis

Greatness of spirit can also be seen in the interaction between Moshe and the representatives of the tribes of Reuben and Gad. After Moshe became angry with them for petitioning to take their inheritance on the western side of the Jordan, lest they induce national panic like the Spies did, they offered to be in the vanguard of the invading forces and lead the battle for the Promised Land. The two tribes eventually fulfilled all their guarantees. They fought at the head of their

brothers for 14 years until the conquest and settlement were complete.

The ability of the people to rise above partisan interests and forge viable compromises that retained national unity reflects a high level of idealism and commitment which should motivate and inspire us today. Especially in these trying times for Israel when internal discord counts among our greatest problems.

Beyond its stories, BaMidbar also contains a number of new commandments. In addition to the Second Passover, the commandments include Sotah (woman who strayed), Nazir (nazirite), Tzitzit (fringes on garments), Red Heifer, Purging of Utensils, and more. One may rightfully ask, is there a connection between the Mitzvot detailed here and the narratives communicated in BaMidbar? In my opinion, many of the commandments in BaMidbar are based on the idea of correcting defects and repairing sin. They presuppose that a person is prone to failure but can overcome it. The Torah prescribes corrective measures to transform weaknesses into strengths and flaws into capabilities. Setbacks can become catalysts for growth and progress.

For example, the institution of Nazir, which is completely voluntary, consists of a vow to abstain from wine, avoid cutting one’s hair, and avoid contact with a corpse (except for a Meit Mitzvah, i.e., a deceased person with no one to tend to their burial). This suppression of the bodily pleasure of enjoying wine seems at odds with the general Jewish approach to living a disciplined, balanced life and controlling the gratification of one’s desires.

However, sometimes a person goes to extremes in indulgence and needs to be weaned of excess. A limited vow of abstinence might be just what he needs to regain his moral equilibrium. The Mitzvah of Nazirut offers a person who strayed into a hedonistic lifestyle a pathway back to the intelligent and moderate lifestyle of Torah.

It is not by accident that the commandments of the Red Heifer and Purging of Utensils appear in BaMidbar. These Mitzvot express the theme of purification from sin and rebirth of the personality. The Red Heifer commandment addresses man’s purification from the Tumah (spiritual impurity) acquired through contact with a dead body. The Purging of Utensils teaches that a vessel, ritually tainted by absorbing non-kosher substances, can be cleansed and restored to functionality according to Halacha (Jewish law). Judaism asserts that man is a sinner by nature—although it vehemently rejects the notion that he is evil by nature. Due to human nature, the road to perfection includes foolish

and irrational setbacks. However, the Creator also implanted in man the ability to recognize his failures and overcome them. Just as with the Red Heifer and the Purging of Utensils, the human personality can expunge the negative attitudes and dispositions it has internalized to become a new and better person.

However, we must never become complacent. G-d will not miraculously transform us into righteous people. Neither will we be magically “saved.” He has implanted within us a divine soul that gives us the ability to choose. And He demands that we use that capacity to choose the good. BaMidbar is a Book that gives us hope, but does not relieve us of responsibility.

Hope Amidst Failure: BaMidbar’s Enduring Message

We should remember that in spite of the many tragedies recounted in BaMidbar, Bnei Yisrael did enter the Promised Land and established a society which rose to great heights. Both Temples were destroyed and a long and bitter Exile ensued. And yet, our generation has been granted the privilege to witness and participate in the fulfillment of the biblical prophecy of the return and regeneration of Jewish national existence. This historical odyssey has been a long and difficult one, but BaMidbar inspires us to believe that the prophetic vision of the Jewish People restored to their destiny as a “Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation” (Shemot 19:6) and of mankind redeemed through their recognition of the eternal truth of Hashem’s Torah and of a world at peace and harmony will be achieved. May it happen speedily and in our time.

Shabbat Shalom. ■

Destruction

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM
HOWARD SALAMON
DANI ROTH

“When you besiege a city warring on it a long time to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the axe against them. For from them you may eat, but you must not cut them down. For are trees of the field a man, that come before you in a siege? Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siege-works against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced.” (Deut. 20:19,20)

The meaning is simply not to waste needlessly: fruit trees can provide abundant produce over their lives. Not so non-fruit bearing trees. But why would man destroy fruit trees when in battle? Ramban explains that one must trust that God will grant victory over our enemies. Therefore you should not destroy trees you will need for food once inhabiting their cities. Sforno says “Destruction must not be wanton; it is justified only if it serves to harm the enemy residing within the city.”

The phrase “Are trees of the field a man that come before you in a siege?” suggests a few ideas:

- 1) trees are immovable field items; their location—“the field”—is fixed. Therefore...
- 2) “they can’t come before you in a siege” like a man can.

Thus, trees “of the field” intentionally warns man against his inclination towards indiscriminate destruction of stationary trees posing no threat as “they can’t come before you in a siege.” This verse beautifully highlights 2 lessons.

But man might act wantonly, as Sforno says, treating the enemy’s trees on par with the enemy. The attacking Jewish army is advised to control its aggression and wage war wisely. This law teaches that man possesses the ability to unleash indiscriminate hostility. This is dangerous, even towards trees. Why? For unguided hostility can then be expressed elsewhere—towards man—without just cause. Satisfying an emotion in one area causes all emotions to sense a release and seek satisfaction. Rabbi Israel Chait explained that once the Jews sinned with the Gold Calf, their sexual drives became unleashed and they committed illicit sexual acts, “They arose to rejoice” (Exod. 32:6) refers to illicit sexuality (Rashi; Ibid.). Thus, control of our aggres-

sion—even towards lifeless trees—has far-reaching benefits, as it trains us in restraining our instincts in all areas.

When you besiege a city it a long time to war on it, to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the axe against them.

Dani Roth asked, “Wielding the axe against them” is not needed, for with what else will you cut down trees? Dani explained this phrase intends to depict the graphic act of hostility, thereby emphasizing the wrong, excessive emotional expression of hostility.

This prohibition [of destruction] does not apply to trees alone. Rather, anyone who breaks utensils, tears garments, destroys buildings, stops up a spring, or ruins food with a destructive intent transgresses the command “Do not destroy.” (Maimonides Laws of Kings and Wars 6:10; Sefer Hachinuch 529).

This teaches that human destructiveness is broad with many potential expressions. It’s not limited to wartime. Human destructiveness crouches at the doorstep and we must remain on guard.

Sefer Hachinuch says that the pious men took great measures to shield against any destruction, even the loss of a mustard seed, and they would use all their power to spare any loss. This seems extreme, unless you understand that “They rejoiced in man’s good and drawing man close to Torah” (Sefer Hachinuch 529). Meaning, these pious men properly viewed all creation as God’s blessings to provide man with all his needs...to follow Torah. It’s a great sensitivity when a pious man will save even a mustard seed, as to him, even this is an expression of appreciating all God’s creations in the capacity of helping man follow Torah. No minuscule loss is tolerable.

Sefer Hachinuch goes on to describe the wicked as “friends of destructive people.” He refers to King Solomon:

One who mocks the poor [the dead] disgraces his Creator, and one who is glad at his friend’s downfall [destruction] will not be held innocent (Proverbs 17:5).

The latter part of this verse condemns destruction. But what do the two parts of this verse have to do with each other, meaning mocking the dead versus enjoying somebody else’s tragedy?

This person fears death so he must deny it. He breaks his identification with the dead person by mocking him, thereby distancing

himself from the reality of his own ultimate death. But how is he disgracing his Creator? He does so by denying that he is created: laughing at the dead denies death and ipso facto denies that God created him as a being who will die. Denying deaths demands denying everything leading to death, including birth, i.e., his God-given temporary existence. He thereby denies God's design of birth and death. He denies God.

Laughing at another person's downfall is a similar matter: although the person is not dead, he has suffered. When you're glad about your friend's tragedy, again it's because you don't identify that this is something you too are subject to.

Why are the wicked happy when others—or the world—are destroyed? This reminds us of the event that came before King Solomon (Kings I, chap. 3). Two women slept at night with their infants in their bosoms, and one suffocated her child. While the other woman was sleep, that first careless woman swapped the infants. Their case came before King Solomon. Hearing both women claim that the live infant was theirs, he commanded, "Cut the live child in two, and give half to one and half to the other." This evoked the true mother's response, "Don't kill the baby, give it to the other woman," and the callous response from the first woman, "It shall be neither yours nor mine; cut it in two!" Their responses clarified who was the true mother, but it also shows us the level of destruction a person is capable of. The desire for destruction or desiring that others die, is generated from a self-centered focus where one cannot tolerate somebody else enjoying a better fortune than oneself. Rashi teaches that Noah's son Cham castrated Noah when he was drunk in order that Noah should not have more children and cause Cham to have a smaller inheritance. Both, the callous woman and Cham—2 destructive personalities—preferred a person's death or harm, as it suited their selfish agendas. Their jealousy sought the destruction of others, as the jealous feelings ignite their animosities and seek complete destruction. It's not destruction per se that is evil, but destruction with the intent to harm another through that destruction. That's why the verse the Chinuch uses refers to enjoying another's tragedy.

Destructiveness has many far-reaching effects. It's not just about sparing fruit trees, but saving anything from destruction expresses the lofty respect of God's will to salvage all man needs to provide for his Torah study. And this grand gift of Torah drives the pious go to extremes in sparing any minute destruction. Equally vital, refraining from destructiveness also trains us in restraining hostility which can flow over to other more severe expressions. ■