

A Taste of Text: Source based learning for Shabbat

This weekly sheet is brought to you by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman of Northwood United Synagogue in conjunction with Shapell's/Darché Noam

PARSHAT VAYIKRA

DVAR TORAH: THE CHOOSING PEOPLE

Parshat Hachodesh begins (Shemot 12:2) with Hashem's [seemingly repetitive] declaration to Moshe:
"הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רִאשׁוֹן הַחֹדָשִׁים רִאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה"

"This month is for you the first of the months; it is the first for you of the months of the year."

The second half of the verse seems to repeat the first. Isn't saying that Nisan ("this month") is the head of the months identical with saying it is the first of the months of the year?

The Sforno explains: Only the second half of the verse teaches us that Nisan is the first month of the year. In the first half of this verse God makes a much bolder statement: This is the first month that can be called "yours" – **לכם** – because up until now you've been slaves, whose choices are dictated by others. Nisan is the first of the months – **כי בו התחיל מציאותכם הבהירי** – because it celebrates the beginning of your existence as beings who exercise their free choice.

Only that which we choose, not dictated by outside forces, can be called our own. Yetziat Mitzrayim, the Exodus from Egypt, is the beginning of Jewish national existence – not only because we became politically or socially independent, but because we began life as a choosing people. Only at the end of the Egyptian exile, when we began to exercise our free will, did our national clock start ticking.

Not only is our national identity tied up with our free choice, according to the Sforno, but so is our humanity. Man was created **בצלם אלקים**, in the image of God. Man's **צלם אלקים** is defined by the Sforno (in the end of his comments on Bereishit 1:26) as free choice: "Man is somewhat similar to God in that he can choose his actions; but whereas God only chooses the good, that is not the case for man." The Meshech Chochmah (Bereishit 1:26) explains being in the image of God the same way: Just as God independently chooses His actions so He gave man the ability to choose his own actions.

Free will is not only essential to our identity, but it is also our mandate. God commands us to exercise our free will when He says **ובחרת בחיים**, "You should choose life" (Devarim 30:19), says Rabbeinu Yonah (Shaarei Teshuvah 3:17). And this is not only one of many commandments, but also the purpose of man's creation. Man was created to exercise his free will.

These comments by the Sforno, Meshech Chochmah, and Shaarei Teshuvah teach that bechirah chofshit, free choice should become part of our constant consciousness. Truly living means emulating God as much as possible by choosing to do good. Our Divine image makes us free-willing people and the Exodus marked our beginning as a free-willing nation. Life as a free Jew means not just letting our actions be dictated by outside forces bumping us from one thing to another. It means fulfilling the Divine command "Choose life."

SOURCE GUIDE: FORCE HIM TO DO WHAT HE WANTS TO DO

One of the verses in our parshah is the source of a drashah brought in the Gemara, which is, in turn, the source of an often quoted comment by the Rambam. This week's source guide presents them, along with illuminating comments by the Malbim, Meshech Chochmah, and Rav Soloveitchik, ztl.

Difficult Verse

One of the verses near the beginning of the parshah seems repetitive:

1. Vayikra 1:3 If his sacrifice is a burnt offering of cattle, he should offer (literally, bring close) a blemish-free male to the opening of the Tent of Meeting; he should bring it willfully before God.	ויקרא א:ג: אם עלה קרבנו מן הבקר זכר תמים יקריבנו אל פתח אהל מועד יקריב אתו לרצונו לפני ה'.
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

The last five words of the verse seem to repeat the previous five words, just telling us, with a slightly different formulation, to offer the olah, the totally burnt sacrifice, before God.

Tannaitic Solution

The Gemara quotes a baraita that solves this difficulty, building on two seemingly contradictory words: יקריב (in the causative הפעיל form indicating that we force him to offer the sacrifice) and לרצונו (indicating that the sacrifice must be willful):

2. Rosh Hashanah 6a Baraita: "He is caused to offer": This teaches us that we coerce him. Perhaps [his sacrifice is acceptable even] against his will? The Torah teaches us that this is not so by saying "willfully." How is this possible? We force him until he says "I want."	ראש השנה ו. תניא "יקריב אותו": מלמד שכופין אותו. יכול בעל כרחו? תלמוד לומר "לרצונו": הא כיצד? כופין אותו עד שיאמר "רוצה אני."
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Rambam's Explanation

This solution has a built in difficulty. Does someone who is forced to say the words "I want to do this mitzvah" really want to offer this sacrifice? Shouldn't this sacrifice be categorized as באונס – given under duress – and not ברצון – willfully? The Rambam explains:

3. Rambam Mishneh Torah, Laws of Divorce 2:20 We only refer to someone as "coerced" if he is pressured into doing something he is not obligated to do by the Torah – for instance, someone who is beaten until he sells or gives away property. But someone whose evil inclination overpowered him to not do a mitzvah or to do a sin, and he is then hit until he does that which the Torah obligates him to do or distances himself from something prohibited – is not considered "coerced" from it. Rather, he has [artificially] forced himself, through his evil mindset, [to not fulfill the Torah's command]. Therefore, this man who doesn't want to divorce [a woman the halachah commands him to grant a divorce to] – since he wants to do all the mitzvot and distance himself from sins but was just overpowered by his evil inclination – who was then hit until his evil inclination was weakened and said "I want to" actually divorced willfully.	רמב"ם משנה תורה - הלכות גירושין ב:כ שאינן אומרינן אנוס אלא למי שנלחץ ונרחק לעשות דבר שאינו מחוייב מן התורה לעשותו כגון מי שהוכה עד שמכר או נתן אבל מי שתקפו יצרו הרע לבטל מצוה או לעשות עבירה והוכה עד שעשה דבר שחייב לעשותו או עד שנתרחק מדבר שאסור לעשותו אין זה אנוס ממנו אלא הוא אנוס עצמו בדעתו הרעה לפיכך זה שאינו רוצה לגרש מאחר שהוא רוצה להיות מישראל רוצה הוא לעשות כל המצוות ולהתרחק מן העבירות ויצרו הוא שתקפו וכיון שהוכה עד שתשש יצרו ואמר רוצה אני כבר גרש לרצונו.
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Three Comments that Illuminate this Rambam

1. **The Malbim** (Vayikra 1, note 26) contrasts two Hebrew verbs – רצון refers to decisions we make in our mind, whereas חפץ refers to desires and lust (see, for instance, Bereishit 34:19). The Torah requires רצון for certain mitzvot – like offering a burnt offering or granting a divorce. But, says the Malbim, you will not find the word חפץ used in conjunction with mitzvot. He **wills** to do the mitzvah but **desires** not to.

2. **The Meshech Chochmah** says (in his comments on Shemot 3:19) that the Jewish nefesh, inner being, wants true perfection. Coercion, as explained by the Rambam, removes the [superficial] lust for physicality, allowing his nefesh to express its true will.

3. **Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik**, ztl, sees this Rambam as based on the Jew's inner love for God. The Talmud tells us (Niddah 30b) how the angel teaches the fetus the entire Torah while in the womb. This pre-birth internalization of God's Torah is the source of our inner love for God (beautifully described by the Alter Rebbe in Chapter 15 of Sefer Hatanya). This creates a predisposition to Torah. The Jew's true "I" wants to fulfill God's Will (see Nefesh Harav by Harav Hershel Schachter pp. 72-75).

EDUCATING THE WICKED SON BY RABBI SHAYA KARLINSKY

Responding to the questions of the Four Sons at the Pesach Seder serves as a paradigm for educating our children – and ourselves. Knowing how to give appropriate answers to the relevant questions of the wise son, the mocking questions of the wicked son, the most basic questions of the simple son, and the ignorance of the son who doesn't even know how to ask – this is the challenge of every Jewish parent. And these four sons represent more than four different children. Within each Jew resides a quality of each of these sons and their questions, and we are being taught the requisite responses. The response to the wicked son raises a number of problems. I will suggest an interpretation that can have an important impact on our approach to Jewish education and to outreach.

"What is this service to you?" asks the wicked son. "What are these statutes and dictates that G-d has commanded you?" asks the wise son. The wicked son gets his teeth blunted, being told that he wouldn't have been redeemed from the exile, simply because of the "to you". Meanwhile, the wise son, who used the same "to you," gets a detailed and respectful answer. I am sure the wicked son didn't know what hit him. What was wrong with his question?

Also troubling is the reaction to the wicked son: "blunt his teeth." What's wrong with his teeth? If he spoke in a disrespectful manner, our response should be directed to his mouth or lips. And if his question was heretical, we should be attacking his mind. What do his teeth have to do with it? And why is the remedy to blunt them? Finally, if he is such a wicked son, what is he doing at the seder, eating the Korban Pesach, the matzah and maror, and fulfilling all the mitzvot of the holiday?

I believe one can understand the wicked son as a Jew who is fulfilling all the commandments, with the same level of care as his other brothers. He has no ideological problem with Judaism or the Torah, and certainly not with the Pesach Seder. He actually enjoys it: it is inspirational, it connects him with his roots, it brings the family together. His problem though is with the avodah, the requirement of service represented in those commandments, and which is central to Judaism. He is self-centered, making every decision based on what is good for him. He is constantly in pursuit of his personal gratification, whether it be physical pleasure and comfort, social status, or power.

So the foundation of his question is a challenge to the concept of service. Viewing Judaism through the prism of his own agenda, there to assist him in accomplishing his personal goals, he asks, "What is this service to you?" What is the role of service in mitzvah observance?

What is wrong with his approach to Judaism? Authentic Torah observance is built on good middot, excellence of character and selflessness. The foundation of our relationship to G-d is one of service and responsibility, altruism and giving. When the Gemara (Kiddushin 32b) looks to find a great virtue of G-d that can be emulated by man, it highlights G-d's constant giving of resources to all who need them. Proper human relations and mentschlichkeit is built on the recognition of our role in the world to selflessly serve and give, rather than to selfishly take.

The self-centered son sitting at the seder challenging the need for mitzvot to be performed as service is exposing the true foundation of his observance. The quest for self-gratification may lead to praiseworthy behavior. But the foundation of this behavior is as fragile as it is selfish. What is gratifying today may be frustrating tomorrow. What serves us well today may not be pleasurable or convenient next week. The foundation of our Judaism has to be built on responsibility to our Creator, a giving personality, and a refined character.

“Blunt His Teeth”

What is the proper response to the self-centered person whose behavior is always motivated by self-interest? The Hagada tells us to “blunt his teeth.” The Gemara in Bava Kama teaches us that one of the three categories of damages done by an animal is called “shein” (lit: tooth). This category of damages is identified as being motivated by a desire for enjoyment and pleasure (hana'ah l'hezekah).

If “teeth” represents the desire for pleasure and enjoyment, “blunting the teeth” of the wicked son can be understood as teaching him to control this pursuit of self-indulgence. If his selfishness and desire for self-gratification can be tempered (blunted!), he will be open to the true purpose of the redemption – to enhance our ability to serve G-d. The wicked son, if he is self-centered, can't understand the concept of “service.” So his redemption would not serve its intended purpose.

As we prepare for the annual experience of freedom on Pesach, as we explore ways to better educate our children, as we work to bring estranged Jews closer to Torah, let us remember that the foundation of our Judaism has to be built on a commitment to service. “Blunting our teeth,” redirecting our self-centered aspirations to a life of giving and serving, is an imperative in today's consumer culture.

The study of Pirkei Avot during the weeks leading up to Shavuot teaches us that “Derech erez kadmah l'Torah,” a refined character is a prerequisite to accepting Torah. Generosity, humility and simplicity are the qualities of Avraham Avinu that serve as the foundation of the Jewish people (Chapter. 5, Mishna 19). In our quest for higher standards in our Torah observance and growth, let us ensure that we are always building on healthy foundations.

**This issue is dedicated in memory of
Pinchas ben Naftali ל"י**

*This publication is compiled by the staff and Rabbonim at **Shapells/Yeshivat Darché Noam** for men and **Midreshet Rachel v'Chaya Seminary** for women in Jerusalem. Find out more about the **married couples' programme** and the **Pathways Israel** and **Pathways Plus** programmes offered at www.darchenoam.org +972-2-651-1178, 5 Beit Hakerem Street, Jerusalem.*

To dedicate a Taste of Text, please email Rabbi Freedman at
rabbi.dr.moshefreedman@gmail.com

For back issues and other articles by Rabbi Freedman please see
www.moshefreedman.com
