



PARSHAS BEHAR- BECHUKOSAI 5777

The most important parsha that Chazal viewed to be read as preparation for Kabbolas HaTorah is Parshas Bechukosai. Parshas Behar is generally combined with Bechukosai. It contains a number of themes which complement and lead up to Bechukosai. The idea of Shmittah and Yovel is a simple one. “Ki Li Kol Ho’oretz” the whole world is Mine. We human beings who live here are merely guests who inhabit Hashem’s world. We are geirim and toshavim. We don’t own this world. We are granted permission to use it only in accordance with the rules Hashem laid down for us.

Yovel was a double nisayon. If Shmittah is the 49th year and Yovel is the 50th year, it means there are two consecutive years where there is no planting and agricultural activity. So Hashem promises He will provide extra food in years prior in order to sustain us through these years of inactivity.

A person could say to himself that he’ll give Hashem 7 years out of 49, but the remaining 42 are his to do as he pleases. The Torah says no. At the end of 50 years, all the lands get reset to their original ancestral owners. No-one can claim he is in full control. We own nothing in this world. We are geirim—temporarily in this world for one purpose—to develop the pure neshomo that was given to us according to the rules He has given us.

In this week’s parsha we read that Jewish slaves must be released by Yovel. Why? Because all Jews are Hashem’s slaves. Hashem chose Klal Yisroel as His special nation. This is a tremendous honor and privilege for every Jew. We are His Am Seguloh. But it comes at a price. Hashem first put us in Egypt and kept us there as slaves to learn what slavery means. Then He took us out of Egypt and switched our servitude to Pharaoh to servitude to Hashem. This was the prerequisite process for Kabbolas HaTorah.

It is a concept that goes back to the bris Hashem made with Avrohom Ovinu. Hashem told Avrohom in advance that his offspring will be strangers and foreigners and then enslaved and persecuted by another nation. Part of the very foundation of Klal Yisroel required the experience of slavery which would then be substituted by servitude to Hashem. This was the plan from the very beginning.

The world doesn’t belong to anyone. We are here as visitors. If we listen to Hashem’s rules, He will take care of us and treat us very well. But it is His world and we are not masters of our own possessions or anything we have. This is why a Jew makes so many brochos—a different one for everything he enjoys. We have to strike a balance between two facts. Hashem owns the world, and He gave this world to people to populate and develop and enjoy. We first need to recognize that Hashem owns everything and nothing is mine. We make a brocho. Then I get permission to use it for the purposes that He created it for.

In exchange for being Hashem’s special Am Seguloh, the price is that we must be His servants in return. What does that entail?

Rashi quotes Chazal that if we want all the brochos Hashem is promising to Klal Yisroel in Bechukosai, there is one condition: ameilus baTorah. It can’t be just an intellectual exercise. It has

to be learning on condition that this is a way of confronting Hashem’s will and integrating Hashem’s instructions for living into our daily consciousness.

Learning Torah is not always a very popular activity. There are many people who are resentful when they see people doing nothing but sitting and learning. There is an interesting posuk in the beginning of the tochocho which acknowledges this phenomenon. If you find My chukim repulsive and My Mishpotim detestable... Rashi explains that once you abandon limud HaTorah for yourself, you start to naturally despise those who are ameilim baTorah and you will find Hashem’s mitzvos revolting. It starts with a sinoh for limud HaTorah.

If you want to experience all the brochos, the key to it all is limud haTorah. And if you reject this key, you will end up in a place where all the mitzvos of the Torah will end up as a burden.

Many years ago, shortly after my book on Jewish Women and Jewish Law came out, I was speaking at a certain shul in the United States. After my speech a woman in the audience raised her hand. She admitted that everything I said made perfect sense. But it can only be compelling for someone like you who is committed to the Torah. You have to understand that for myself and everyone else in this room, we are simply resigned to keeping the Torah. This was a very honest statement. There is a very big difference between being committed to the Torah and being resigned to the Torah. What makes one person committed and another person resigned? Rashi says: ameilus baTorah.

A person can only connect deeply to Torah and mitzvos through limud haTorah. A person who refuses to look at limud haTorah as the highest form of activity a human being can engage in, he will start to resent the Torah and ultimately reject the Torah. He will be stuck in his observance like an obstacle course. A person committed through limud haTorah transforms his experience of Torah and mitzvos to an entirely higher level of inspiration.

There are two very important aspects to the phrase “Na’aseh Ve’Nishma” which Klal Yisroel uttered at Har Sinai.

First is the midrash contrasting the way all the other nations rejected the Torah after first hearing what it demands, with how Klal Yisroel accepted the Torah without any preconditions—not even knowing what it says in advance. There are two approaches to the Torah. One starts with the given that I have my worldview and my values, and I need to get the Torah to fit into what I am already committed to. I’ll push it this way and adjust it that way to accommodate my needs. But the Torah is absolute—it isn’t very adjustable.

Klal Yisroel at Har Sinai had the opposite approach. If you understand that the Torah is being given by Hashem Himself as His wisdom and His plan for creation, then our job is to adjust our lives to the Torah. We use the Torah to form our attitudes and our outlook on the world. A lot of people, especially intellectuals, have constructed their own intellectual universe of how things ought to be. And then they try to fit the Torah into that intellectual

universe and it never fits. The Torah is autonomous. It has its own intellectual constructs and its own value system that we bow our heads to. That is one part of “Na’aseh Ve’nishma”.

The other part of Na’aseh Ve’nishma” is, as the Beis Halevy points out, an extra dimension of learning Torah beyond all the vast amounts of Torah knowledge necessary to simply perform all the mitzvos. That Torah knowledge is already included in “Na’aseh” We will perform. This includes all the knowledge of halacha necessary to perform all the mitzvos correctly. So Nishma must involve something else entirely. It is learning for its own sake.

When you understand that we connect to Hashem and uplift our lives by connecting our minds to the thought process of the Torah, it is a whole new way of looking at the world and of approaching mitzvos. When I bend my mind to understand how Hashem wants the world to run in the ideal way, then you look at Torah very differently.

It isn’t easy to adjust one’s self to the Torah instead of the other way around.

The braisoh at the end of Ovos lavishes many praises on those who learn Torah Lishmoh. At the end of this long list, it concludes with the fact that Torah Lishma lifts one up to live on an elevated plane of existence. Connecting one’s self to Hashem through limud haTorah has many effects on a person and it ultimately transforms him.

We are in the time of sefiroh where the talmidim of Rabbi Akivah were punished for not respecting one another to the proper degree. One of the effects of limud HaTorah Lishmoh should be that it makes one a true friend who gets along with people and refines one’s middos. Somehow, the Torah learned by these talmidim didn’t impact them in the way that it should. Learning Torah should make one sensitive to the great kedusho and potential of the neshomo within each and every Jew which demands respect.

The Megaleh Amukos writes that the 24,000 talmidim of Rabbi Akivah who died during sefiroh correspond to the 24,000 people who were killed for worshipping Ba’al Pe’or and lived with the women of Moav in Arvos Moav. What is the connection? And what message is Hashem sending us by killing these talmidim specifically during the period of Sefiras Ha’omer when we prepare ourselves for kabbolas haTorah?

Sefiroh is a very special time. It is a time to remember how Hashem built up Klal Yisroel step-by-step from level to level until they reached the level that they were able to accept the Torah. Somehow, something went wrong at the time when we are supposed to introspect and think about how I am preparing to be mekabel the Torah. 24,000 talmidim’s preparation was so deficient that Hashem said there will be no kabbolas HaTorah for these people. Why? They didn’t give each other enough respect.

What does that have to do with Ba’al Pe’or?

Chazal describe the typical slave in ancient times as one who is preoccupied with immorality. Why is he prone to this behavior? A slave loses any self of self. The only thing he knows is that he obeys his master’s commands. He controls his mind and controls every aspect of his existence. He lives to serve his master.

When Pharaoh protested to Moshe that he is distracting the Jews from their work, he was complaining about the fact that Klal Yisroel had one day a week where they were able to reconnect to the Ovos and their lofty heritage. They had an independent identity outside of slavery. Pharaoh realized that he wasn’t controlling their minds to turn them into mindless working animals because of Shabbos, so he started to make them work on Shabbos. Don’t give them time to be involved in other activities to re-enforce their independent identity.

The point of being a slave is to have no independent identity and live like a beast of burden. It is a very demeaning thing where you lose your tzelem Elokim. The whole idea of the avodo zoro of Pe’or was to expose one’s self and demean one’s self and turn one’s self into an absolute animal.

Zenus has a similar effect. The idea of Jewish intimacy is one tzelem Elokim confronting another tzelem Elokim without anyone dehumanizing themselves or the other one. This is how all interpersonal relationships are looked at in the Torah. Living together in this manner—where you are confronting both the body and soul of another person as a unit - is how to live a family

life of kedushoh. Zenus is an act which takes the name of Hashem out of the relationship and one is left with pure lust of one body for another body. Pe’or and zenus went hand-in-hand—debasement of the human being and erasing his tzelem Elokim.

There is also a way of learning Torah without the consciousness that this is Hashem’s Torah—it’s only a tool to fulfill my ego needs for respect and recognition. But there is Torah Lishma—that it is the ultimate privilege to connect my mind to the mind of Hashem. I confront Hashem in my learning and it humbles me and refines my character.

In interpersonal relationships, the Torah demands that we confront another tzelem Elokim—whether we agree with what he says or don’t agree. Whether we like what he’s doing or we don’t like it—we don’t lose sight of his right to be treated with respect and dignity.

Human beings can live their lives on many different levels. The challenge of Sefiroh and the preparation for kabbolas haTorah is to lift one’s self out of living like an animal and make an upgrade. We can move into our role as a mamleches kohanim ve’goy kodosh. Connect to Hashem through limud haTorah. Moshe Rabbeinu at Moroh said that we can’t survive three days without limud haTorah. That’s what uplifts us and makes us different than animals living on base drives and instincts. We submit our will to the will of Hashem and connect our minds to Hashem’s thoughts expressed in the Torah.

Limud haTorah is preparing for mattan Torah. Learning lishmoh uplifts us and uplifts the entire world with us. The moment you resent learning Torah and you resent other people learning Torah, it means you can’t confront Hashem in your life on a fundamental level.

Unfortunately, this was the failure of some great men in our history. The talmidim of Rabbi Akivah we could imagine must have been great talmidei chachomim. 12,000 chavrusos! But still, they didn’t respect one another. Hashem sent a message: if you would have been learning Torah lishmoh, then you would have been beloved by your fellow man and gotten along with everybody. You would have been living your life on a totally different level. But instead, you are busy stoking your own ego and not thinking about anyone else. You haven’t uplifted yourself from being an animal to being an odom.

The Omer is made out of barley which is typically animal feed, and the Shte HaLechem on Shevuos is made out of wheat which is a staple in the human diet. The process of going from slavery of Egypt to kabbolas haTorah is parallel to the process of moving from an animalistic existence to one of a dignified human being who has a tzelem Elokim. This process parallels the two korbonos—one at the beginning of Sefiroh and one at the end. We go through this process via limud haTorah.

The parallel made by the Megaleh Amukos between the 24,000 who died because of the zenus and the worship of Ba’al Pe’or—which are animalistic acts as we’ve explained—and the 24,000 talmidim of Rabbi Akivah who died during sefiroh when we are supposed to work our way up to kabbolas haTorah, makes this point implicitly.

One can have the greatest rebbe in the world—who’s greater than Rabbi Akivah himself? But one has to know how to take the essential teachings from one’s rebbe and integrate them and make you grow in all dimensions of shleimus through his Torah. These 24,000 didn’t get the idea that you need to be uplifted and transformed by learning Torah. Hashem had to wipe them out and start over with five talmidim down in the Negev. The Torah had to be rebuilt after this desolation which was like another churban.

Preparing for Shevuos takes a lot of introspections. It means understand what learning Torah means, what learning Torah lishma means, how it is supposed to impact your personality and make you a very different individual. We see that it doesn’t always happen that way. One of the ways to test whether a person is letting the Torah uplift him is by seeing how he interacts with other people and how he treats them. If you disrespect other people, then you need to go back and think why you aren’t being changed by the Torah.

Im yirtzah Hashem, we will be mekabel the Torah in the proper way and allow it to uplift us from an animal existence to becoming a true human being created with the tzelem Elokim.