



Parshas Va-eschanan

A LEGENDARY RELATIONSHIP

Midrashim are cryptic, and often misunderstood. They are metaphors, literary devices that encode how Chazal understood stories in the Torah.

There is a Midrash that teaches that before Creation, God went to all the nations that would one day be and offered them the Torah. Each time the offer was made, all the nations inquired what they would be bound to do. All the nations, except the Jews, who accepted without knowing what it entailed.

What is this Midrash about?

The Midrash does not say the Jews would not care what was in it. If they had been asked, perhaps the response would have been about gossip, and the Torah would be declined! The Midrash does not mean that the Jews do not care about the pitfalls. R' Chaim Brown explains that the Midrash is about something else entirely – relationship. R' Binyamin Finkel gives a simple analogy.

If a broker you do not know calls, and gives a half hour window to make a large investment that he assures you would give large returns, there would be a lot of questions to ask. It is perfectly reasonable to want to know what you're getting yourself into – the Midrash is not speaking of a deficiency in the nations for their questions. The questions are fair. "What would this agreement require from me?"

Instead, consider that your parents, or in-laws, were the ones on the phone, offering a half hour window in which to join a venture of theirs. Undoubtedly there are risks, but with the love and trust of the relationship, there needn't be any questions.

This is what the Midrash is about. Whatever duties the Torah requires are worth taking on, because it is our Father offering the package.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

One of the traits heralded by the Gemara as particularly Jewish is humility. Moshe emphasised that the people's lack of stature was a good thing:

כי עם קדוש אתה, לה אלהיך: בך בחר ה' אלהיך, להיות לו לעם סגולה, מפל העמים, אשר על-פני האדמה. לא מרבכם מפל העמים, כי עם קדוש אתה, לה אלהיך: בך בחר ה' אלהיך, להיות לו לעם סגולה, מפל העמים, מפל העמים. כי מאהבת ה' אתכם בחר ה' אתכם, כי מאהבת ה' אתכם בחר ה' אתכם, כי מאהבת ה' אתכם בחר ה' אתכם. You are a holy people to God. It is you He has selected, to be His chosen people, from all other nations on the face of the earth. You have not been chosen because you are mighty; in fact, you're small. Purely because He loves you so... (7: 6-8)

The Midrash says that this is a reference to humility – we are beloved because we make ourselves “small”.

The Sfas Emes says that the מעט / רבכם dynamic, of majority versus minority, frequently recurs. Jews have always been a minority; there are fewer Jews alive today than the margin of statistical error in the Chinese census! But in content, Jews contribute a disproportionate amount of knowledge and achievements to the world. This is our heritage from our ancestor, Yakov.

Yakov was so called because his name derives from being marginalised and disadvantaged, against all odds – or, מעט. He was Yakov because he was born clutching the heel – עקב – of the mighty Esav. He had to run away as Yakov. It requires shrewdness to overcome the challenges faced – shrewdness also being a derivative of the word עקב.

But after surmounting everything in his way, he is no longer the disadvantaged, shrewd Yakov. He is given a new name, Yisrael, a derivative of שר א-ל – a minister of God. The name שר indicates his mastery over all the obstacles he has overcome, to face the world and lead – or, רבכם.

The names linger on in our identity. But not everyone is equally gifted or talented; some people are predisposed to greatness with all the tools at their disposal. So is it not a level playing field?

The Sfas Emes explains that the מעט aspect of Yakov in everyone is the same. Everyone can do with reducing the mundane aspects of their lives. Everyone can display a little more gratitude and humility. Everyone would do well to not take their things or relationships for granted.

It is the מעט aspect that makes the difference, because that is what really makes the רבכם aspect. Yakov could only become Yisrael after dealing with the challenges that every ordinary Yakov has.

Not everyone can save the world, because not everyone is blessed with such ability. But everyone can certainly contribute that little more, to make the world that little bit better.

EMOTIONAL INVESTMENT

One of the mitzvos recited daily is the duty to love God:

ואהבת ה' אלהיך, בכל-לבבך ובכל-נפשך, ובכל-מאדך – Love Hashem your God, with all your heart, soul, and things... (6: 5)

The question commonly asked is how exactly can emotion be commanded? Emotions are responses; they are there or they aren't. How is the feeling of love demanded of us?

The Sfas Emes explains that the existence of the instruction can only mean that the emotion is not borne in a vacuum. The ability to love God is imbued in everyone, and is only dormant. The instruction is to find it.

The same is true of most (all..?) things. The Gemara says to believe someone who claims to discover something after hard work. Curiously, it says “discovers”, not “earns”. The word “discover” means dis-cover, or uncover. Electricity was discovered, not invented.

It is said that an angel teaches a child the entire spectrum of knowledge to a baby in the womb, but at birth, it is tapped on the face and forgets it all. This serves to illustrate that knowledge alone is not the goal. The curse of Adam is to toil and work hard. The Vilna Gaon points out that the knowledge is always there, but birth and life are a gift to enable the ability to earn it. Perhaps the curse of Adam isn't really a curse at all then. The achievement has accrued value due to the effort put into its acquisition.

Perhaps then, the initial question is fundamentally flawed. Something has slipped under the radar. One of the Ten Commandments is לא תחמוד – Do not covet. Jealousy is an emotion too, yet there are no questions about commanding emotion.

The Ibn Ezra explains that emotions can actually be worked on – that is the subtext of the mitzva. The way to not be jealous of someone's property is to view it as out of your league. Most normal people aren't jealous that a billionaire owns a fleet of yachts or a private island in the Caribbean. The way to not be jealous is to understand that some people have yachts and islands, your friends have a house or car, and you have what you have. Jealousy is completely suppressed in this way – mitzva accomplished.

Working on this is deeply significant beyond the applications of jealousy. Simply put, is jealousy really one of the top ten laws of Judaism this top ten in Judaism? Consider then, that it appears in the Ten Commandments.

Perhaps the instruction is that emotional development is required of us. It starts with not being jealous, and can develop into אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים, אֵת הָאֱלֹהִים.

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