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Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

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Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Bamidbar / Shavuos



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The Discerning Element Between a Torah Scholar and a Torah Sage

Gemara: Rebbe Akiva had 24,000 students (*talmidim*) who were the *Torah* sages of that generation. During the period between *Pesach* and *Shavuos*, all 24,000 passed away. There is a discussion among the commentators as to when the students began dying and when they stopped. Everyone agrees that they perished over a 33-day period.

Gemara: After they had passed away the world was considered desolate. Other than Rebbe Akiva, there were no more *Torah* sages. The reason all the students of Rebbe Akiva passed away in such a short period was that “They did not conduct themselves with proper respect towards one another.” The students of Rebbe Akiva were the most advanced *Torah* sages of that generation. Thus, it is not possible to even consider that they were disrespectful to one another.

In addition, had Rebbe Akiva noticed any inappropriate behavior among his students he would have rebuked them. Evidently, the failing must have been so subtle that even Rebbe Akiva was not able to detect it. How do we understand the *Gemara*’s statement that the students of Rebbe Akiva passed away because they did not respect one another?

The students of Rebbe Akiva were most certainly respectful to one another. However, there is a subtle aspect to which they were not sensitive. All of the students had a special dimension of *Torah* scholarship; however, there were slight shades of differences between each of them.

When one accords respect to a *Torah* sage it must be appropriate to the individual’s level of *Torah*. The *Torah* Sages neither addressed or acknowledged the subtle differences of greatness between them, and thus ignored these distinctions. They treated each other with the same level of respect, which was not

sufficient. They should have accorded one another the appropriate level of respect commensurate with each individual's greatness. Why were the students of *Rebbe Akiva* held to such a standard of liability for a seemingly minor infraction?

Reb Aaron Kotler z"tl: The students of *Rebbe Akiva* were the sages who were responsible for the transmission of *Torah* to the future generations. They had the responsibility of communicating to the Jewish people what *Torah* is and is not. However, if they did not have the sensitivity to evaluate the nuances between their different levels of *Torah* and act accordingly, then they were not qualified for this awesome task.

Since the students of *Rebbe Akiva* did not recognize the subtleties between themselves, it was an indication that they did not have the necessary level of discernment to transmit *Torah* with the accuracy that was necessary. Their passing had nothing to do with their level of *Torah* knowledge, rather it was because they did not qualify to be the transmitters of *Torah*. Had they not passed away, the *Torah* that they would have communicated would have been deficient.

One can be a *Torah* scholar and possess an enormous amount of knowledge, but he may not necessarily qualify as a *Gadol b'Torah* (*Torah Sage*). A *Torah sage* is another dimension of person. He has the sensitivity and ability to weigh and evaluate all situations and see the far-reaching consequences that will evolve into the future. He can perceive with clarity how his decisions will impact on the Jewish people. This is the difference between a *Torah* scholar and a *Torah Sage*.

Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam – the Redeemers of Israel

Zecharya: "I will remove the three shepherds in one month..." The verse is informing us that *Moshe*, *Aaron*, and *Miriam* would pass away in the same month.

Gemara in Tractate *Taanis*: "How do we reconcile this with the fact that *Moshe*, *Aaron*, and *Miriam* did not all pass away during the same month? *Miriam* passed away in the month of Nissan. *Aaron* passed away in the month of Av. *Moshe* passed away in the month of Adar."

Gemara: The verse is informing us that when each of them passed away the gifts that came through them

no longer continued. In the merit of *Moshe* the Jewish people were given the gift of the Manna, which sustained them in the desert. In the merit of *Aaron*, they were given the gift of the Clouds of Glory, which protected them. In the merit of *Miriam*, they were given the living wellspring, which provided them with water. Each of these gifts ceased when each of them passed away.

When *Miriam* passed away, the wellspring ceased and was reinstated in the merit of *Moshe*. When *Aaron* passed away, the Clouds of Glory ceased and were reinstated in the merit of *Moshe*. Consequently, when *Moshe* passed away, all three of the gifts ceased. Only then did the Jewish people sense the loss of all the "three shepherds" – *Moshe*, *Aaron*, and *Miriam*. Thus, it was the equivalent of all of the "shepherds" passing away during the same month.

It is interesting to note that the verse refers to *Moshe*, *Aaron*, and *Miriam* as "shepherds (*ro'im*)."

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Taanis* refers to them as "communal leaders (*parnasim*)."

However, the *Midrash Tanchuma* refers to them as, "redeemers (*goalim*)."

There is no question that *Moshe* was the Redeemer who took the Jewish people out of Egypt. However, why does the *Midrash* classify *Aaron* and *Miriam* also as "redeemers?" In what capacity did they function so as to be valued as "redeemers?"

Evidently, we see from the *Midrash's* classification of *Aaron* and *Miriam* that being a "redeemer" goes beyond taking the Jewish people out of Egypt. Had it not been for the Clouds of Glory to protect them and the wellspring, which miraculously provided them with water for forty years, they would not have been able to survive the trek in the desert. Without these miracles, leaving Egypt would have had no value.

Therefore, it is true that *Moshe* is identified as "the Redeemer" because he was the one who had taken the Jewish people out of Egypt. However to bring about the ultimate value of redemption, *Moshe*, *Aaron*, and *Miriam* were all necessary to bring the process to completion. Because of their integral role vis-à-vis the survival of the Jewish people, *Aaron* and *Miriam* were more than "shepherds" or "communal leaders." They assumed the value of "redeemers" and thus each was a different dimension of person.

When the *Midrash* says that it was in the merit of *Miriam* that the Jewish people had the wellspring, it

identifies her as “the one who led the women in song (after the splitting of the Sea).” Why does the *Midrash* identify *Miriam* in this manner? It would have been enough to say that in the merit of *Miriam*, the Jewish people received the wellspring.

It is interesting to note that the wellspring was only needed after the splitting of the Sea. Seemingly, what the *Midrash* is communicating to us is that the basis for *Miriam*’s merit to bring about the wellspring was that she led the women in song after the splitting of the Sea. Because she led the women in song, she brought them to another level of clarity and appreciation of G-d. In addition, the women’s expression of praise was a public sanctification of G-d (*kiddush Hashem*).

Through *Miriam*’s articulation of what had transpired at the splitting of the Sea, she merited that the wellspring come about through her. Had it not been for this special merit, like the manna, the wellspring would have come about through *Moshe*, *Miriam* is identified as a “redeemer” not only because she provided water for the Jewish people in the desert, but also because of her song at the Sea, through which she provided a new level of appreciation and understanding of G-d.

We see that the greatest level of merit that one could have is to bring others to an understanding and realization of G-d’s Omnipotence. His involvement is in every aspect and nuance of existence. A Jew should surely sing the praises of G-d for everything he has been endowed with and for all that he receives, because it is only because G-d deems it so.

The Basis for the Jews’ Failing in the Desert

Midrash: “G-d said to the Jewish people, you had said to *Moshe*, ‘Why did you take us up out of Egypt?’ Did I (G-d) treat you as if you were in a desert? If a mortal king were to go out into the desert, does he have the tranquility and comfort of his own palace? Does he have the same amount of food and drink available to him? With Clouds of Glory, I took you out of Egypt where you were slaves to Pharaoh. I gave you three redeemers to accommodate your needs. I provided you with the Manna and the wellspring. Yet you complained.”

The generation of the desert had witnessed the ten plagues in Egypt and the splitting of the Sea. The revelation of G-d at the splitting of the Sea was at

such an advanced level that even *Yechezkel* the prophet did not merit seeing what the maidservant had seen. Despite having such a unique level of clarity and experiencing such an advanced level of revelation, the Jewish people complained to *Moshe*, “Why did you take us up out of Egypt?” What was the basis for the Jews to complain, if G-d in fact provided for all of their needs in the desert? Evidently, there was something missing.

The basis for the sense of inadequacy among the Jewish people, which caused them to complain, was that they were in a situation where they had no choice but to adhere fully to the Word of G-d. Just as G-d had put the mountain over their heads with an ultimatum—that they had no choice but to accept the Divine Will upon themselves, so too they continuously had no choice throughout the forty-year period.

The Jewish people witnessed immediate repercussions whenever they deviated from the Will of G-d. They could not pursue their own interests without the Attribute of Justice intervening. Although they were no longer the slaves of Pharaoh, they were conscripted to be the servants of G-d. In the desert, they had no sense of personal accomplishment because G-d was their full provider. It was this confining relationship with G-d that caused them to rebel.

Pirkei Avos: “There is no free man other than the one who engages in *Torah*.” The only person who is truly free is the one who appreciates and understands that freedom is not only exercising his own will, but also having the clarity and appreciation for truth. This can only come about through serious *Torah* study. It is only if one is totally permeated with spirituality that he understands and appreciates that all of his good fortune is due solely to G-d. It is because the Jewish people were not fully purged from the impurity of Egypt (idolatry) that they could not completely appreciate their predicament.

Egypt was a location of debasement and thus was antithesis of spirituality. The Egyptian experience impaired the ability of the Jewish people to appreciate fully G-d’s unlimited Kindness. They perceived their situation as going from being slaves of Pharaoh to being bound to G-d. They were not able to deviate an iota from G-d’s Will without immediate retribution. Thus the Jews felt that they were not truly free—causing them to speak in a defiant manner.

King David in *Tehillim*: “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of G-d.” Meaning, the prerequisite to wisdom is to fear G-d. The Jewish people were deficient in their fear of G-d on the most minute level. One is only able to maximize his knowledge and process it as “wisdom” when it is predicated on the fear of G-d. One only has true fear when one understands his true insignificance – thus resulting in no interference.

Mishna in *Pirkei Avos*: “If one fully sees (appreciates) three things, he will not come to sin – from where do you come, to where are you going, and before whom will you give a reckoning...” The language employed in the *Mishna* is communicating to us that it is not enough for one simply to be aware of certain realities in order to be impacted.

Rather, one must “visualize” the realities of what he understands conceptually. Only then, will he not come to sin. Fear of heaven in Hebrew is referred to as “*yiras shamayim*.” The word “*yira*” is derived from the word “*roeh*” which means “to see.” When one visualizes heaven and G-d becomes a reality, as one sees something, one understands who he is not - thus causing him to appreciate who G-d is.

The Mitzvah of Spiritual Procreation

Torah: “These are the offspring of Aaron and Moshe... These are the names of the sons of Aaron, the firstborn was Nadav, and Avihu, Elazar, and Ithamar.” Although the verse is addressing the offspring of both Aaron and Moshe, it only mentions the sons of Aaron. Moshe’s children are not mentioned. It seems from the verse that Aaron’s sons are being identified as Moshe’s sons. Why is this so?

Gemara in Tractate *Sanhedrin*: We are able to derive from this verse, “When one teaches *Torah* to his fellow’s child, it is as if he gave birth to him.” Seemingly, *Chazal* should have stated, “When one teaches his fellow’s child *Torah*, it is as if he is his son.” Why does the *Talmud* use the expression “it is as if he sired (fathered) the child?” The appellation of “son” to identify a father’s relationship to his child does not have the same connotation as the expression of “siring” a child.

The connotation of “giving birth to” communicates the father’s involvement from the very beginning of the child’s existence. He is responsible for bringing

his child into existence. Just as a father’s relevance to his own child begins at conception, so too does a teacher who mentors another’s child in *Torah* have a similar relevance to the student. Because Moshe had taught *Torah* to Aaron’s children, it is considered as if Moshe had brought them into being (“gave birth”).

The human being is a composite of spiritual and physical. One’s spirituality can only be developed through a mechanism known as *Torah* and *mitzvos*. All existence was created for the sole purpose of providing the setting for the fulfillment of the *Torah*. The responsibility was given to the Jewish people. The one who transmits the *Torah* to his student (*melamed*) is the one who is responsible for the development of that aspect/spirituality of his student.

Without the mentoring of the teacher (*melamed*) through the transmission of *Torah*, one’s spirituality remains unaffected and thus his soul remains dormant. In this context, the soul’s only value/function is to maintain life within the physical. This is the reason the *Talmud* states, “The evil person (*rasha*), in his living state, is considered dead.” His soul has no effective value because the evil person is involved in physical pursuits. The soul only has meaning and value if its needs are addressed, which can only be facilitated through the study of *Torah* and performance of *mitzvos*. Thus, whoever mentors/teaches his fellow’s child in *Torah*, giving life and meaning (soul) to his spirituality, it is as if he had given birth to him.

Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos* citing *Psalms*: “The dead are no longer able to praise G-d.” The *Gemara* tells us that one should engage in *Torah* study and *mitzvos* before passing away because death will cause him to become detached from *Torah* and *mitzvos* – and G-d will no longer have praise from him. The *Gemara* is telling us that a Jew brings “praise” to G-d only through his study of *Torah* and performance of *mitzvos*.

When the Jew engages properly in *Torah* and *mitzvos*, he is fulfilling the words of the Prophet who states in the name of G-d, “for My Glory I have created it (the world).” The purpose of existence is only to give glory to G-d. If the Jew does not engage in *Torah* study and *mitzvos*, the objective and purpose of existence is not being addressed. Consequently, G-d’s relevance to the world is limited just as the soul has limited affect on the body without *Torah* and *mitzvos*.

Gemara in Tractate *Berachos*: There is a commonality between G-d's relationship to the world and the soul's relationship to the body. Since the soul only assumes its potential through the *melamed* (*Torah* mentor), it is as though the mentor gave birth to his student.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin *z'tl*, main disciple of the *Vilna Gaon z'tl* and founder of the world-renowned *Yeshivah* of Volozhin, was once in a community away from his city. He was approached by an individual who asked, "What is your vocation?" *Reb Chaim* humbly responded, "I am a *melamed*." During that period of Jewish history, the term "*melamed* (teacher)" had a pejorative connotation, which meant that a person had limited capabilities and was only qualified to teach young children.

Later, this individual discovered that he had spoken to *Reb Chaim* of Volozhin the world-renowned *Torah* sage. This individual again approached *Reb Chaim* and said, "When I had asked you about your occupation, you responded that you were a simple *melamed*. Why did you not divulge your true dimension of person—that you were the *rosh Yeshivah* of Volozhin?" *Reb*

Chaim of Volozhin responded, "We conclude the first blessing which we recite before the study of *Torah* – Blessed are You, Hashem, Who teaches (*hamelamed*) *Torah* to His people Israel. If G-d identifies Himself as a "*melamed*" – should I not consider it the greatest honor to be identified as such?"

G-d is identified as the "*melamed*." Thus if one teaches his fellow G-d's *Torah* with the emphasis on advancing the individual's spirituality and fulfilling the purpose of creation, then he too is a "*melamed*."

However, if one were to teach the *Torah* for the sake of transmitting Jewish intellectualism, he is not considered the one who brought that student into existence because it will not develop the spirituality of that individual. It is only if the *Torah* is communicated as the Word of G-d that it functions as the mechanism that perfects the recipient's soul. This is the reason the *Gemara* specifically uses the term – "one who is a *melamed* of *Torah* to the child of his fellow, it is as if he had given birth to him." It is only in this context that he is identified as fathering that child.



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