

Parshas Yisro

Issue 2 vol 5

February 5-6, 2021

Shvat 23-24 5781

The power from below

There are those who criticize the Torah, and Jews along with it, for their ever ability to paskin and “manipulate” halacha to find a loophole or uphold a Halacha. We say in the part of davening “Ein Kelokeinu” a passage from Niddah 73a

תנא דבי אליהו כל השונה הלכות בכל יום מובטח לו
שהוא בן העולם הבא שנאמר (חבקוק ג.ו) הליכות עולם
לו אל תקרי הליכות אלא הלכות

The Gemara concludes the tractate with a general statement with regard to Torah study. **The school of Elijah taught: Anyone who studies *halakhot* every day is guaranteed that he is destined for the World-to-Come, as it is stated: “His ways [*halikhot*] are eternal” (Habakkuk 3:6). Do not read the verse as *halikhot*; rather, read it as *halakhot*.** The verse indicates that the study of *halakhot* brings one to eternal life in the future world.

The Torah and the laws within in, and the verses contained in all the books are the source for how this world was/is created and is the source material for all the methods of how to conduct ourselves. The Torah is “lo bashomayim hi”, it is not meant for the heavens (as we see in Berachos 87-89 where the Gemara describes revelation at Mt. Sinai, and the argument between Moshe and the angels about the giving of the Torah.) Hashem, with the words chosen for the 10 commandments, concretized the entire

purpose of creation, by giving us the instruction manual for how to “make a dwelling place for Him in this abode.” The Alter Rebbe in a mamer on Yisro in Torah Or highlights this point, that the commandment of keeping Shabbos “La’asos es HaShabbos” that specifically through the actions of the Jews can we make Shabbos. That specifically through our actions of the 6 days of the week, do we arrive at Shabbos, that through the 6 days of mundane work, that includes holy work of doing mitzvos, which is the power to resist and to convert (Iskafia and Hishapcha), which is the power of Teshuva, can we arrive at Shabbos. The point therefore is to highlight that like what the academy of Eliyahu taught from the pasuk in Chabakkuk, that “ways” aren’t just ‘actions’ of goodness, they are specifically the actions taught to us in Halacha.

Halacha is the power vested in humans (as mentioned with Hachodesh Hazei Lochem—that Hashem gave us the power over our calendar) to devise the methods by which we interpret and interpolate the words from the Torah not only on the surface level, but on a deeper derivative level. Therefore, going back to the opening statement, what would seem like a criticism of Rabbinic authority, is actually a power vested in us. The key though is to ensure we follow the straightened arrow, and we don’t subject ourselves to external forces, and cave to untruths, rather to devise methods by which we can draw Hashem’s light down more and more¹.

In practical Halacha, the Rabbis (such as in Hilchos Basar B’chalav) will sometimes conclude that in the case of Hefsed Meruba (great monetary loss) one can be Meikel (lenient), yet the baseline halacha would seem stricter. I heard from Rabbi Braun of the Crown Heights Beis Din that in fact the

¹ In practical Halacha, the Taz in Shulchan Aruch siman 92 Seif Zayin note 22 states that Rabbinic Authorities must explain a Kula they issued so that

someone else won’t mistakenly apply the Kula to themselves, furthermore so that the rabbinic authority doesn’t look wishy washy on their rulings.

Meikel position (i.e. hefsed meruba²) is the primary halacha, but in the event one can be stricter they ought to. The importance of this point is that we are fallible characters, and we will find excuses so as not to do the best that we can, which is part of the human condition of any task and effort. To be challenged and grow as much as we can in our day to day lives which ought to give us meaning and purposefulness. Perhaps the Rabbonon knew this, and empowered us with the ability to find our way, and it is up to us, in our own way to stay on the ‘correct’ path, again a power of teshuva vested in us by Hashem, as Torah is “lo bashomayim hi” (not for the heavens), where one can argue that everything is as it is meant to be, whereas down here in the physical realms, as Moshe argued to the angels, there are activities of commerce, and interpersonal actions (such as respecting your parents etc.) that angels don’t have challenges with. They (angels) are created with a singular purpose and don’t deviate from that, whereas humans are comprised of personalities, and physical manifestations of experiences which hinders, or develops the ability to serve Hashem, that responsibility is of a physical person, down here on this earth.

The Gemara in Megilla 25b

אמר רבי חנינא הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים
שנאמר (דברים י, יב) ועתה ישראל מה ה' אליך שואל
מעמך כי אם ליראה

Tangentially, the Gemara cites an additional statement by Rabbi Hanina, concerning principles of faith. **Rabbi Haninasaid: Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven.** Man has free will to serve God or not, **as it is stated: “And**

now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you other than to fear the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 10:12). The fact that God asks man to fear Him indicates that it is in man’s ability to do so.

This Rabbinic adage imbues us with responsibility to be where we are. We, individually, are responsible for our outcomes, even if it seems like there is an ‘outside’ not divine force that is pushing us to places we ‘find’ ourselves. The Rebbe told this to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the first time R’Jonathan visited the Rebbe.

...“He had not prepared for this. He had come to interview the Rebbe – and to his surprise, the Rebbe turned the tables on him. So Sacks tried to defend himself, saying, “In the situation in which I currently find myself. ...” The Rebbe cut him off mid-sentence with a statement that changed his life: “No one finds himself in a specific situation. You got yourself into a certain situation and you can put yourself into another situation.”³

The point therefore is that Hashem vested power in us, and we take that power and responsibility and draw down the G-dliness, through the Torah and its Mitzvos.

The Parsha opens up with

וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ כֹהֵן מִדְיָן חתן מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה
אֱלֹהִים לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ כִּי-הוֹצִיא יְהוָה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל
מִמִּצְרָיִם:

Jethro priest of Midian, Moses’ father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moses and for

² That is in the case of a great loss one may not follow the “chumra position”, which would seem antithetical, what is the right way, especially since hefsed meruba, that is, what one would consider a loss is subjective, and therefore can be a stumbling block for people to misinterpret or incorrectly follow the law.

³ https://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/opinion/oped/the-day-rabbi-sacks-met-the-rebbe/article_3607fc9a-2375-11eb-ae3c-df097d16d215.html

Israel His people, how the LORD had brought Israel out from Egypt.

Rashi explains that what Yisro heard was the splitting of the sea, and the conquering of Amalek (that is the Vayishma), and the Elokim (level of Teva) whereas when describing the miracle of the exodus, the name of Havayah is used. The Zohar explains that the Jews could not have received the Torah until Yisro proclaimed Hashem as the true ruler of the heavens and the earth. Given that Yisro was the premier pagan priest, and with all the knowledge he had of the various (and possibly attractive) other deities, he concluded that Hashem is the one true ruler. His power to come to Hashem is similar to Avraham Avinu, who from the house of Terach an idol dealer/worshipper came to realize monotheism, and the power of Hashem. Avraham was younger, and perhaps more impressionable, whereas Yisro it's perhaps a different leap of faith for having crystalized his own life (given that he was a priest- he had a career in other deities), he was still able to change his ways.

This lesson is one to apply to our own actions. The power of teshuva (and not that we are all bad and require rectifying our ways, teshuva in chassidus is also simply the day-to-day activity of being in the mundane physical world and resisting and converting the mundane into spirituality -Iskafia and Hishapcha). As the Alter Rebbe states, that 6 days a week we serve Hashem, "La'asos es haShabbos".

Principally, the era from Bereishis until the giving of the Torah was foundation period for the Jews to ultimately receive the Torah on Mt. Sinai. When Hashem created the world, it was imbued with natural order (b'shaim Elokim) and the epoch was all to prepare us for the wedding of Hashem and the Jews at Mt. Sinai (Rashi on "Likras Hoelokim" Shemos 19:17). Connecting to the first Rashi

in Bereishis, that on another level, the Torah couldn't begin with Hachodesh Hazeh Lochem i.e., the concretization of the Jews as a nation, rather it had to begin with the creation et al. for reasons I've explained in the past in order to bring us to the point where we can understand the level of bitul (as a slave is bitul to its owner) and Hashem can vest the power of Havayah in everything we do. This relates to Halacha as well, in Hilchos Basar Bichalav, there is a concept of "Ta'taah Govar" that a food item on the 'bottom' rules how heat and flavour are transferred to other food items. Without going into all the details here, the 'stick in the mud rule' is that bottom items have more power than things that arise from the top (with some exceptions), the purpose is that the drive for the dissipation of heat, comes from below. This concept is a rule, meaning, whenever a case arises to understand the premise of the outcome of the halacha, the various rabbinic authorities will ask, and relate as to whether the case is derived from "Ta'taah Govar". This concept though is also a metaphor for the power of the Jews in the "Ta'taah" in the world down here, and we have the power to influence the above. Even if there is a "kli rishon pour from above" ta'taah govar will still apply. Even if there is an Asrusa D'leilah, an arousal from above, it is manifest on our world with an Asrusa D'Itatoh, an arousal from below- again relating to what the Alter Rebbe said, that for 6 days we work and on the 7th day we rest- l'asos- action.

Hashem gave us the rules- we follow it and draw down the light- "L'asos lo dira b'tachtonim".

Yisro's mesiras nefesh gave the world (i.e., the Jews) the power receive the Torah (as the Zohar explain-his proclaiming Hashem as one was the contingency for receiving the Torah), because he changed his ways, (Iskafia to

Hishapcha) even late in life⁴ on a level of Mesiras Nefesh of Avraham Avinu. Yisro's proclamation of Hashem's trueness is also a counteraction to evils of Pharoh, (who claimed himself as a god), which is why Tzfadeiah (frogs) was one of the plagues. As the Rebbe explains in a Sichra that each of the plagues had a purpose to show Hashem's trueness, that even an atheist, or agnostic could return to Hashem. Whereas Pharoh, was on a whole other level of difficulty, in that he made himself as a god. Yisro, as a priest of midian could have done this, yet, he had the humility and power of change to proclaim Hashem as the one true G-d, even the priest had the power to change.

The power of the below is even brought out from the posuk Shemos 19:4

אַתֶּם רֹאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרָיִם וְאַשָּׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל-
כַּנְּפֵי נְשָׁרִים וְאַבֵּא אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי:

‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me.’

Rashi explains that of all the birds to choose, and eagle which carries its babies on its back, whereas other birds carry their young in their talons because they are afraid of other birds that will fly on top of them, but the eagle is only afraid of man, lest he shoot an arrow into him, because no bird flies above him (the eagle), as well it is better that I get the arrow than my child much like Hashem protected the Jews from arrows with the cloud of glory. On a simple level this a beautiful metaphor, and the metaphor for the future that Hashem

will redeem the Jews from the current exile on the back of the eagle. But there is a deeper explanation perhaps. This is the fact that the Eagle is Hashem in this case, and the one connection the eagle has is from below (whether by arrow or not, by the power of man...), Hashem first saved us with this metaphorical eagle, to tell us that the influence over the spiritual is from below, He (Hashem) protected us from the arrows, by putting His young on his back, as an eagle does, but provided us with the shield from the metaphorical arrows of this Earth.

The Rebbe tells us this in his famous sicha that explains the Jews going to sleep before Matan Torah (from pesukim in Shir Hashirim). The simple question is that if you are going to get the biggest gift of your life, it is antithetical to go to sleep the night before, so much so that Hashem had to arouse them, that even a mosquito didn't wake them. In the Gemara we know that 1/60th of the Neshama recharges with Hashem while we sleep, which is the basis for our ability to not feel pain, or be conscious while we sleep, and the reason to be asleep during a surgery for example. The Jews had attained the highest levels of spiritual growth after leaving Egypt, at the 50th level they asserted that the best way to receive the Torah would be on a spiritual plane, that is when there neshamos are above near to Hashem. But this intention was good, but the method was incorrect, in that the “Torah Lo Bashomayim Hi”. The Torah has to be received, and enacted by Neshamos b'guf gashmi and on this earth⁵ - as Moshe said to the angels, do you have parents to

⁴ Interestingly someone in a shiur I gave added a wonderful point that the testament of a B'al Teshuva or convert is tangible, in that they knew what was “out in the world” and yet they turned themselves back to Hashem and proclaim Him as true. One would presumably believe the testament of someone's experience over their own inexperience, and if it wasn't enough for them to realize Hashem on their own-

believe the person who saw the ‘other side’ and still saw Hashem as true.

⁵ My father often brought up the importance of challenge as part of the service of Hashem. That is the angels service to Hashem is without challenge, as stated in the Gemara in Shabbos, whereas the service of Hashem by Jews is about the challenge to work through the service required of us on a day-to-day basis.

respect, or interpersonal issues, dealing with business that the Torah applies to you?

Finally, even Hashem told us that the Torah is for down here, as the first word “Anochi” is an Egyptian word, which begs the question, if the Jews never changed their language in Egypt, why would Hashem state the first word in a foreign language. The mepharshim explain that it was for the Eirev Rav, (lit. mixed multitude i.e., non-Jews who joined from Egypt) to understand the Torah. Which even connects to the fact that V’yishma Yisro as the parsha opens up, Yisro heard, which means he understood as well, even though monotheism and our G-d was foreign to him. As Hashem spoke (Shemos 20:1) וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאַמֵּר: G-d spoke all these words, saying: Dibbur, spoke, means that the party who is listening presumably understands. Whereas through Anochi, and Vayishma, everyone no matter what level they were on heard and understood. Furthermore, the mepharshim explain that the Kolos, and noises were not only heard they were seen, and felt.

As well, dibbur is the second level in manifesting the middos. The levushim of Machshava Dibbur and Maisch are the trajectory for manifesting activity, especially with mitzvos. Machshava, the highest most esoteric level exists in our minds, the thought is synthesized into speech, which is a communicable level, and the grounds for synthesizing what cannot be understood when an idea just exists in someone’s mind. Finally, after speech, comes action, seemingly the lowest level, but the level of execution. The Torah in heaven exists on the level of

Machshava, Hashem spoke it to us, synthesized the words through dibbur, (b’lashon Vayidaber above), and we, the Jews are the Maisch. We act and manifest and execute. Which is why, Torah on its own in the level is Chochma where through learning it, we achieve extremely high levels, but the Mitzvos which are Tainug (pleasure) of Hashem, which is beyond reason, and therefore on a higher level in the seder Hishtalshelus (something that cannot be explain isn’t lesser, rather rooted higher), therefore by acting out the mitzvos, we give Hashem the ultimate pleasure, and we draw down His light, “L’asos Lo Dira Bitachtonim” (to make an abode for Him here)⁶.

Further references to the “down here” is also hinted to in the pesukim, as the Jews were “B’tachtis Hahar” (Shemos 19:17), which is also a wedding canopy, which we are ‘under’.

In summary, Hashem vested the power to change, and the power to serve him, through the Torah and by performing His Mitzvos, in order to draw down Hashem’s light, “La’asos Lo Dira Bitachtonim”.

Good Shabbos

⁶Further references to the “down here” is also hinted to in the pesukim, as the Jews were “B’tachtis Hahar” (Shemos 19:17) as I’ve explained elsewhere that the mountain being held over our heads, under the mountain, which was manifest fully by purim the z’mam of V’nahphoch hu, flipping the order of things. That in the time of Moshiach, where would have achieved making a dira b’tachtonim, would mean that

the physical world we live would be in a level of revealed spirituality that we cannot comprehend. We can only reference it based on the Torah. But the fact that Purim will remain a holiday post Moshiach arrival is understood, as it is the holiday of opposites, which at the time of Moshiach will be revealed.