M A I N T A I N I N G   P E R S P E C T I V E

1  The Shabbat Shu"r - R. Miller

"If you walk in my statutes. In connection with this the verse states, I considered the ways in which I would go, but my feet carried me to Your statutes." King David stated, "Every day I decided to go to a specific place, to one person’s home and another person’s house. However, my feet brought me to Your synagogues and study halls." This is why it says, "My feet carried me to Your statutes."

2  She'orei Chanukah - R. Haveron

P arshas Bechukosai begins with a list of many blessings that we will benefit from if we keep the Torah. The Torah says, “I am Hashem, your G-d, who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of being their slaves; לא נתניכם את ענף מצרים, I broke the pegs of your yoke” (Vayikra 22:13). Why is the “breaking of the yoke” mentioned only now in a reference to the going out from Egypt and not in the main section in Shemos that speaks of our leaving Egypt? Chazal say that this word תבוסה, as well as referring to the past, also refers to the future times of Moshiach and the Beis Hamikdosh. If this parshah is about the future, then why do we need the stage of ובס ידוע? Wasn’t that done on Vizroel’s going out of Egypt?

3  The Chasam Sofer cites the Gemora (Nedarim 8b) where Reish Lakish says that there is no Gehinnom in the World to Come. Instead, Hashem will take the sun from its cover, and tzaddikim will be healed by it, and the wicked will be burnt by it. What is the meaning of the sun’s burning? The Ein Yaakov cites Chiddushei Hagaonim, which says that the sun symbolizes the light of the Shechinah. This spiritual light will be abundant, and tzaddikim will benefit from it. For people who tried to toil in Torah and mitzvos, perhaps it was hard for them but they made an effort. With this spiritual light, these things will become easier. Tzaddikim will be able to tolerate this light, because they were already attuned to it. But the wicked will simply melt away, because it will be too much for them.

4  The Ponevetzer Rav once related that when he built Ponevetz Yeshiva, he employed a group of Russian workers. They had been yeshiva bochurim in Russia and were now working. One day the bricks didn’t arrive, so there was nothing for them to do. One of the workers told the Rav, “We remember from our learning that if you have hired workers and there is no work for them, you still have to pay them.” He replied, “Whilst this is true, I would like you to do another form of work. I want you to come into the yeshiva and learn, and I’ll pay you for that instead.” They agreed and paired up into chaourusas. After 10 minutes some got up and went for a coffee. Half an hour later a few more joined them. After an hour the others got fed up. They said to the Rav, “We can’t do it; it’s too boring. You can keep the money.” The Ponevetzer Rav explained the story by citing the words of the Rambam that when Moshiach comes, the only pleasure will be to benefit from the Shechinah, a spiritual pleasure. Someone who enjoys learning Torah and doing mitzvos will benefit from this, as he had a connection to this pleasure beforehand, so he will thrive on it now. To someone for whom it’s all boring – he davenens because he has to; he doesn’t enjoy the shirah and each mitzvah is just a burden – he will be like those workers.

5  Similarly, Chazal say that when Sanchev came to conquer Eretz Yisroel it was Seder night. The malochim in heaven started singing shirah. This singing was made audible to his army, and on hearing it his soldiers all died. So too in the future, if one can’t handle spirituality, then one won’t be able to tolerate it. We have to prepare ourselves for the light of the Shechinah of the future.

6  The Mesillas Yesharim says that a person is created only to benefit from the light of the Shechinah and that this is true joy and the greatest pleasure that can be found.

7  Returning to the Chasam Sofer, we are now able to answer our two questions. We see that there are in fact two breakings of the yoke. When the Jews left Egypt, they had a great desire to receive the Torah. The Sefer Hachinuch says that the mitzvah of counting the Omer is to show our great desire for the day we receive the Torah. One may have thought that, having left Egypt, they would have expected that being subservient to the Torah would be a terrible burden. The answer is that Hashem broke this “yoke” from their necks and, with that, the feeling that being a Jew would just hold them back. The Chasam Sofer then says that so too in the future, the Beis Hamikdosh will be rebuilt, and there will be a similar “breaking of the yoke.” A person will only enjoy Torah and mitzvos, and he will benefit from the divine light of the Shechinah. On the other hand, a rasha cannot enjoy these pleasures; he won’t be able to handle them.
How does one attune himself to reaching this level of not finding Torah and mitzvos a burden? The Maharal (Nestes HaTorah 4) explains that people are born with a unique makeup. Man is half animal but half spiritual. Therefore there is a continuous struggle between the body, which wants to follow the physical, and the soul, which wants to follow the spiritual. How does one make one's spiritual side stronger than the physical? The answer is through learning Torah. When a person learns, it has the koach to clean out his nefesh. The Gemora relates that Hashem says, "I created the yetzer hora; I created Torah as its cure."

In the bikras haTorah, we first make the brochah of rabim rotem and then say ani lechvod. This shows that first we have to make the effort, to delve into the Torah's words, and then we will feel the sweetness. There is a concept called being dibury. The simple meaning is to toil in Torah. Then there is another meaning. Sometimes it is difficult to go to a shiur, but one overcomes the difficulty and makes the effort to go. Then Torah will be a "remedy," and in the future there will be a "breaking of the yoke," such that when the light of the Shechinah is revealed, he will feel close to Hashem, because in essence he thirsts for spirituality. Despite the fact that it's hard, one has to make the effort and know what his priorities are.

Chazal say that one's Torah has to be fixed and his work should be temporary. This means that his Torah should be the main part of his day. Even when a person is working, if he is constantly thinking and looking forward to the shiur, or he is constantly on the lookout for the laws of ribis and gezeilah, then he gets reward for making his work temporary, and his Torah is permanent. This is so long as his Torah is with a fixed commitment, meaning that he doesn't miss his fixed times for Torah for any reason.
לא ניתןていきます. כמו שציינו לפני כן, כדי לשים קץ

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The days between Pesach and Shavuoth are punctuated not only by our counting the days that lead up to our receiving of the Torah, but also by a communal semi-mourning. It was in this time of year that a great tragedy befell the Jewish People: twenty-four thousand of Rabbi Akiva’s students were struck down by a terrible plague. Our Sages reveal to us the reason for this tragedy: when Mashiach comes, they did not accord sufficient honour and respect to each other. It seems there was an impediment in this area, which made attribution of honour a difficult goal to achieve. What lies at the root of this difficulty? To understand this topic, let us consider the following. Every single person is unique and special, differing from every other person alike: “Just as everyone has a different disposition, so everyone’s temperament and character differs.” Every individual has a combination of qualities which cannot be found in any other person alike. Each person shines in a different area, achieving excellence in a field exclusive to him. This character development, however, contains a potential pitfall: One who has developed a trait to a high degree is extremely sensitive in this area, and will be unable to tolerate presence of the opposite trait in one’s fellow. A person who excels in his generosity will become vexed when witnessing another person’s misersliness. It is incompatible with the fabric of his being he has worked so hard to weave. This dissonance precludes a relationship of mutual respect and honour. One who is very particular to tell the absolute truth is unable to countenance those who are prone to exaggeration and hyperbole. Respect, in such instances, is hard to acc. Such is the case with any quality in which one specializes; one is sensitized to those who lack the trait, and particularly to those of the opposite temperament. All of humankind being different, and each individual having a forte in a different area, we are left in a quandary. How can one give one’s fellow the honour due to him? How can we rectify the area in which the students of Rabbi Akiva stumbled? Our question is fortified when we consider Rabbi Yonah’s recommendation in his commentary on Pirkei Avot. He enjoins every Jew to excel in one trait, lating this achievement as greater than the attainment of mediocrity in all areas. But considering what happens when a person views another who fails where he excels, this would appear to be a recipe for schism and contention. How can the negative feelings which such achievement engenders be neutralized? The period of Sefirat HaOmer is one of intense spiritual labour. During this time, each individual asserts himself, concentrating on self-perfection in preparation for Shavuoth, the day the Torah was bestowed upon mankind. The very word שופא contains the word שופא, a thing of purity. When we left Egypt, we were on the fortieth level of impurity. The next forty-nine days were for each individual to expiate corruption and perversion from his heart, and attain a sublime level of purity and wholesomeness. This cathartic process is to be undergone by every individual in this period of the year, as we ready ourselves for the day of revelation. Every day counted should mark the achievement of further purity, a higher level in one’s field of excellence. Each person develops his personality, and this further accentuates his own individuality.
predicted is that in one’s own field breeds intolerance of others who are not working in harmony with oneself, and who are not attaining the same sensitivities as oneself. It is thus that during the days of Sefer HaOmer, the period marked by intense character building, there is a tendency to deny others the honour and respect which one would ordinarily accord.

A change of perspective is the cure for the potential malady. If one excels in a specific area, it must be that one’s fellow excels in a different field. One must simply look for the other’s area of greatness and focus upon the outstanding quality which one personally does not possess. One transfers one’s concentration from viewing other people in light of one’s own character traits to a perspective in which one sees other people in the context of their own expertise. One can then honour one’s fellow for the perfection he has achieved.
How did the voice emanate from Mount Sinai when the Torah was given? Everyone experienced it according to his capacity. The elders heard according to what they could hear, the young people heard according to what they could hear, children and babies heard according to their ability, women according to their ability, and even Moshe himself according to his ability. Everyone heard a voice which he could hear. Each individual discerned what he was able to discern and absorb in this revelation.

Further:

R. Yochanan said that the voice was in fact one voice, however it was split into seven voices which then became seventy languages.

Seven is the largest prime number under ten, the largest number which still manifests as an entity in its own right. That is, seven is the biggest number without factors; it cannot be formed by multiplying two other numbers. Seven, therefore, indicates individuality, that which is not grouped together. The voice was split into seventy parts, seven multiplied by ten. Seven, the number of individuality, was multiplied by ten, the number of collectivity. The number ten indicates the affiliation of individuals to form a single entity. The whole has a value many times greater than the sum of its parts. Ten people form a minyan for prayer, with a potency disproportionate to ten individuals standing separately in prayer. A transformation of existence has occurred, not merely an assembly of disconnected beings.

Our character development must follow the pathway of seventy.

The seven must fuse with the ten. Not only must we exert ourselves in the development of our own person, we must recognize the qualities of others. Relating to the traits of other people connects us with the community as a whole. It is insufficient to focus exclusively on our own improvement. We must seek out, and pay homage to, the traits of our fellow. It is thus that we build a community of solidarity and brotherhood consisting of many people who have developed their individuality to an intense degree. Seven combines with ten to produce seventy.

At Mount Sinai, seventy voices were heard. Every voice was different, yet they are classed as one group. Perfection of one's own individuality is achieved only when one seeks the perfection of others.

It is a feature of our emotional makeup that we respond both to the experience of being unique and single, and also to the experience of blending into a team or crew. Actually, these responses are antithetical: if it is natural to thrill to the experience of being a single, all-important individual, there should be a negative response to losing one's identity in a group; yet we find, paradoxically, that both are thrilling.

We respond in these two seemingly opposite ways because that is exactly the nature and purpose of the human experience: each of us is unique, cosmically important; yet we achieve our uniqueness precisely when we fit into a larger order perfectly. Remarkably, it is exactly when we blend into the Universal picture exactly as we should in terms of our private, unique qualities and abilities that we thrill to the realization that no-one else could fulfill this particular function, no-one else could stand exactly here and do what must be done here. I fit in perfectly so that I become indistinguishable as an individual, and yet in so doing my individuality swells to the proportions of the Universe. I am nothing, and yet I am everything. Each person reflects the uniqueness of the image of the Creator; the totality of the Universe reflects the Oneness of the Creator; and in depth, the two are not in contradiction.

The Chiddushei HaRim explains that, paradoxically, perfection on an individual level alone contains an inherent deficiency. As our Sages continue their maxim, "If I am only for myself, what is my worth?" Although one's individual toil is a necessary stage, which is fulfilled by the individual counting of Sefiraith HaMen, the process leading to completion requires each person to conquer an additional field. Each individual must align himself with the community, recognizing the qualities of other people and using his own gifts.

King David sought initially to actualize his own individual potential. He attempted to go to the limits in all directions, specific and individual places. King David desired to attain ever greater heights in his own Divine service and personal spirituality. But the time came when he was directed to the places where the community gathers. His feet led him to the synagogue, the place where people gather together and seek direction in their capacity as a community. King David was duty-bound to guide the assembly of people, in place of his yearning to continue in his quest for personal perfection. He was bound to merge the seven with the ten, thus producing seventy, a level of perfection that would otherwise not be achieved.

Although each person is required to actively participate in and align himself with the community, the degree of prior self-development required can vary. A prime example in recent times is that of the Chazon Ish, a towering Torah personality revered around the world. His name is synonymous with intense, unrelenting labour in Torah study, and he was looked upon as the father of yeshivah in the modern era. Yet, the Chazon Ish spent the first fifty years of his life secluded from the public eye, ensconced in his own world of scholarship. When the time came for him to be revealed to the world, the Chazon Ish became intimately involved in all the affairs of the community, and devoted himself to all that was required of him by the Jewish nation.

The pathway begins as a personal one. Each individual perfects his avenue of Divine service. Initially, it is incumbent upon every single person to perform the mitzvah of Sefiraith HaMen, using each single day to develop his singularity. Each element and detail is thus attended to, culminating in the perfection of every part of the whole. The obligation now shifts to the whole itself.