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613: New, or an Addendum?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Doug: During a session today of my class on Fundamentals of Torah for Non-Jews, one of the participants asked about the verse in Genesis to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, etc. This person wondered about that as a commandment.

My understanding from Rabbi Chait is that the commandment to be fruitful and multiply does not devolve upon the Noahides, although it does devolve upon the Jews. Thus, we have no requirement to have children. It's also my understanding that the entire Jewish Torah law was given - and the seven laws were re-given - at Sinai, and that Sinai is the definitive source now, for everything. This participant wanted to know why those original commandments would not still hold, since they were given by Hashem before the Jewish people ever came into existence.

Rashi on Genesis 9:7 comments that the "be fruitful and multiply" statement in 9:1 is a blessing; while in 9:7 it is a commandment. The question about this commandment is discussed in Sanhedrin 59b, but the arguments appear somewhat complex, especially to try to explain in a basics class. I know of no source that argues that the command to be fruitful and multiply devolves on the Noahides, but I'm at a loss to explain to this participant why that's the case.

By the way, even if we just say that everything was re-stated at Sinai and that the command no longer devolves on Noahides, I expect this participant will ask, "Why is that so, if it was originally given to Noahides in Genesis?"

Do you have any thoughts or suggestions?

Thanks, Doug

Rabbi: Yes, as Rabbi Chait said, the Talmud you cited states that Noahides have no commandment to procreate. Yet, your student's question must be answered: "Why did Noahides originally possess that command, and why was it later removed?"

As you state, Sinai became the new starting point; now redefining Noahide law, and it was also the origin of Judaism. The 7 Noahide laws were then reiterated for both Jew and Noahide, and 603 new laws were given to the Jews alone. (But that's only 610! 613 are arrived at by 3 other laws not reiterated as commands: circumcision, procreation and Gid Hanasheh. Read on...)

Talmud Sanhedrin 59a cites the rule through which we learn which original

Noahide laws remained, and which were usurped: "All that God (at Sinai) repeats of the Noahide laws apply to both Noahide and Jew. All that is not repeated applies only to Jew, and is removed from Noahide law." Of the original Noahide laws, there are 3 laws that were never repeated: the prohibition of eating the Gid Hanasheh, derived from the story of Jacob's wrestling with the "man", procreation, and circumcision. As these were not repeated after their original command to Noahides, these prohibitions no longer apply to Noahide, from Sinai and onwards. They apply only to the Jew. Although details of procreation and circumcision are found after Sinai, the actual "command" was never repeated. Therefore, procreation, Gid Hanasheh and circumcision are no longer applicable to Noahide, and now apply to Jew alone.

Can we arrive at an explanation of this phenomenon, of laws once applicable, but then subsequently removed? And can we explain this very rule, that repetition of a Noahide laws causes it to remain for Noahide, but absence of that repetition at Sinai causes it to be removed?

New, or an Addendum?

Perhaps the answer lies in whether we view the Torah given at Sinai as an entirely "new" system for those former Noahides (Jacob's descendants) or as an "addendum".

If Torah is a new system, then it makes sense to reiterate even those former Noahide laws. A "new" system means by definition, a "replacement". If so, then we must be told what is included in the replacement. Therefore, the former Noahide laws require reiteration. But if we view the Torah at Sinai as an addendum, as I will demonstrate is the case, the question arises: "Why reiterate those 7 laws already in existence?" An addendum does not intend on addressing that former code, to which it is attached. It is to add to it. Therefore, no repetition is necessary! Why then are they repeated? We can now answer your student's question...

Sinai's repetition of the 7 Noahide laws is not to teach their continued observance for the Israelites. For the Torah is merely an addendum. Thus, it is not to replace former laws, but to add on to them. Why then does the Torah in fact repeat the 7 laws, if they are unaffected by the addendum of 603 'new' laws? The Talmud says this is to teach a different lesson: those who are not Israelites must still continue in the former Noahide laws. However, procreation, Gid Hanasheh and circumcision were not repeated. Therefore, they no longer devolve upon Noahides. To be clear, the repetition of the 7 laws is not to teach the Jew anything new. Therefore, repetition exists for another reason. And that reason is to reaffirm that Noahides must continue in their observance, despite the giving of an addendum to the Jew.

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In fact, this addendum idea makes perfect sense. For if Torah was really a “new” system, and only given to the children of Jacob, then all other Noahides would be justified in abandoning their 7 laws. For they can say, “God gave a new law to mankind, and only to the Jews. We are then free from the old system of 7.” But if we say that the Torah’s new laws are an addendum to a select Noahide group, the sons of Jacob, then the other Noahides have no argument for abandonment. God simply modified the Noahide laws for the sons of Jacob. But all other Noahides remain as they were prior to Sinai, observing the original 7 Noahide laws.

Proof that Torah is an addendum, and not a replacement, may be learned from Maimonides’ discussion concerning the ‘progressive’ nature of the laws through time: Adam received 6 commands, Noah received 1 more (not including procreation), God commanded Abraham in circumcision and Jacob in Gid Hanasheh. Finally, God “completed” the law through Moses. (Laws of Kings; 9:1) You must note: Maimonides used the term “completed”. This indicates that those laws given to Moses at Sinai were an “addendum” to the previous laws. They “completed” those laws.

What more can be derived from this understanding that Torah was an addendum?

God’s Preference

I often wondered why Adam was not a recipient of the 613 commands. The Talmud discusses a few views; one is that Adam received only one command: to accept God as Creator – the prohibition against idolatry. (Sanhedrin, 56b) The Talmud goes on to teach that through this single command, Adam was to use his mind to derive 2 other commands: he should not curse God and he should set up courts. (ibid, Rashi) This is quite interesting.

The primary lesson here is that God intended man to use his mind. Living by imposed commands was not the preferred method of human life. God gave mankind alone a mind. This is all he truly needs to serve God, as we see from Abraham. For with no teacher, Abraham arrived at such a high level of knowledge of God, that God spoke to him, and ultimately created a nation from him. For God desired Abraham’s example: he was to be a beacon for all mankind. This first argument defending the idea that Torah is an addendum is an argument of “God’s preference”. The necessity for at least one command against idolatry is to teach man his role as “servant”, and God’s role as “Authority”. Without any command, man would not know this. Once man knows this, he is now capable of deriving all else.

Another interesting feature of Adam’s requirement to derive those laws, are their respective categories. We said, Adam was to use his mind to derive 2 other commands besides idolatry: he should not curse God and he should set up courts. These three laws actually form the three categories of all human action: thought (idolatry), speech (cursing) and action (courts). Man cannot do anything else. Saadia Gaon teaches that the Ten Commandments also follow these categories. And with a brilliant order as well.

The first five are:	The second five are:
I. Accepting God	VI. Murder
II. Idolatry	VII. Adultery
III. Using God’s Name in Vain	VIII. Kidnapping
IV. Sabbath	IX. False Testimony
V. Honoring Parents	X. Prohibited Desire

Saadia Gaon teaches that the first five address man’s laws between him and God; the second five are between man and man. Both sets follow an order of “most important, to the least”. Between man and God, what are most primary are our thoughts (accepting God and not accepting others). The next is speech (Cursing God) and the last two are actions (Sabbath and Honoring Parents). Our relationship to God is primarily based on our intelligent opinions of what He is, not so much our speech or actions, which are mere expressions. But

between man and man, most primary are our actions, then speech, then our thoughts. For society crumbles more due to actions, than speech or thoughts. Through the beauty in the design of the Ten Commandments we see a brilliant corroboration for the three categories Adam was to derive and observe. The idea is this: even from the very beginning, God’s intent was that man always subject all his actions – thought, speech and activity – to God. This never changed, even with the giving of the Ten Commandments. We thereby learn that God’s intent for man is perfect, and therefore it is constant.

Human and Historical Development

Another proof that Torah is an addendum is argued from the standpoint of “human and historical development”. In truth, many commands could not possibly be given to Adam, since they only came to address subsequent events. These include prohibitions of copying the Canaanites, the Egyptians, witchcraft, many idolatrous rites, and all of our holidays. For a holiday cannot act as a remembrance, if the event to be remembered had not yet transpired! Thus, all men from Adam through Joseph could not be commanded in Passover. (Rashi says Abraham made the three angels matzah since “it was Passover”. This is a metaphor.) And copying heathen and idolatrous peoples and rites cannot be prohibited before those people existed. As human corruption increased, so did God’s Torah grow until He gave it at the perfect moment. Of course we know the statement, “God pondered the Torah and created the world”. This implies that Torah already existed at Creation! Well, it did, as God knew all mankind’s flaws from the outset. But I speak in terms of man’s perspective. However, this statement means that God created the world based on the perfections ultimately to be given through Torah. The Earth was created as a compliment to Torah. Creation is subordinate to Torah. This is how to understand this statement.

But this argument from the “human and historical development” is second in priority to the first argument; that God desired man to use his mind. Again, God’s preference was that man derives true ideals using his mind alone. Thus, Adam was not given a Torah. Adam possessed all he required to live perfectly. But mankind erred throughout time. Torah became necessary. In fact, the first argument explains the second argument: due to man’s lack of intelligence in not following “God’s preference”, he erred, and Torah became necessary to address mankind’s corrupt “development”.

Procreation, circumcision and Gid Hanasheh, originally Noahide laws, were transferred to the Jew because Jewish law now replaced Noahide law as the “optimum system”. An optimum system cannot be bereft of laws, which Noahide law might contain. (San. 59a) That would indicate Noahide law perfects man where Torah falls short. (The female captive and stealing less than a prutah coin are prohibited for Noahides and not Jews for separate reasons. ibid)

But why these three? Procreation, circumcision and Gid Hanasheh address three essential components of perfection.. Circumcision minimizes sexual gratification of both men and women. (Maimonides; The “Guide”, Book III, chap. xlix). Gid Hanasheh expresses man’s internal perfection of his ideals. And procreation continues these people who are perfected in the physical (circumcision) and the spiritual (Gid Hanasheh).

The first state of man could have led him to perfection. But it didn’t. This latter, Torah law modifies man’s original obligations, now leading him towards perfection. The former Noahide law still exists, but no longer as a means for current-day man to perfect him. Noahide law is a limited system that guarantees its followers continued life. However, any infraction in Noahide law is punished with death. Although a Jew who steals is not killed, a Noahide is killed for the identical act. This is not due to an unfair God, but due to the nature of each system. Noahide law guarantees life, as it is the minimal system any human must follow. It sets the threshold of God’s tolerance for any human being to live. But Torah law is a “perfecting” system. Therefore, Jews are not killed for stealing, as the complete Torah system offers any follower a path of correction and perfection. ■

VaYerah

Rabbi Bernie Fox

The Court Must Be Situated at the Gate of the City

"And the two messengers came to Sedom in the evening. And Lote sat at the gate of Sedom. And Lote saw and he arose to greet them. And he bowed his face to the ground." (Beresheit 19:1)

Hashem sends two messengers to Sedom. One is charged with the duty of destroying the city. The second will save Lote – Avraham's nephew – and his family. The pasuk comments that Lote was sitting at the gate of the city.

Rashi explains that the people of Sedom had appointed Lote to be their judge.[1] Siftai Chachamim further explains that the wording of the pasuk substantiates Rashi's comment. The Chumash describes Lote's location as "the gate of Sedom." The gate of the city is often identified in TNaCh with the court.[2]

The identification of the court with the gate of the city is not merely a result of idiomatic usage. This relationship is expressed in halacha. Maimonides explains that the court is physically located at the gate of the city.[3]

Why is it proper to place the court at the gate? The answer to this question involves two issues. First, we must consider the role of the courts. Maimonides explains that the obligation to establish courts is one of the seven laws commanded to all descendants of Noach. These courts must be established in every political or governmental jurisdiction.[4] In other words, a court must be established in every place in which people live as a society. Therefore, cities require courts. A community is required to govern itself with justice. The court must be part of the fabric of the society.

Second, the location of the court demonstrates this integral relationship to the community. The significance of placement at the gate can be appreciated through consideration of another mitzvah. We are obligated to place a mezuzah upon the doorpost of our house. Through placement of the mezuzah upon the doorpost, the entire house is transformed. The mezuzah can be compared to a badge. A police officer pins a badge upon his or her shirt. But it is the officer who is wearing the badge, not the shirt. The officer wears the badge through pinning it on his shirt. In a similar manner, the mezuzah does not transform the doorpost. It transforms the entire room or house through placement upon the doorpost of the residence or room.

Similar to the mezuzah, the court transforms the city. Just as the mezuzah is integrated into the home through placement upon the doorpost, so too, the city is transformed by placing the court at its gate.

Lote Offers His Daughters to the Mob

"Please, I have here two daughters who are virgins. I will bring them out to you, and you can do with them as you please. But to these men do nothing, as they have come under the shade of my roof." (Beresheit 19:8)

The messengers of Hashem come to Lote in Sodom. Their mission is to rescue him and his family from the destruction of his city. Lote invites the messengers to share the hospitality of his home. The residents of Sodom soon surround Lote's home. These residents wish to abuse Lot's guests. Lote offers to exchange his daughters for the safety of his visitors.

Nachmanides observes that Lote's behavior demonstrates an improper understanding of the obligation of hachnasat orchim — extending hospitality to guests. Our responsibility to display hospitality does not supersede our duties to our own families. Lote, however, in his fervor to fulfill his obligation of hachnasat orchim, was willing to sacrifice his own daughters.[5]

This is an illustration of one of the basic principles of Torah life. In order to

fulfill our obligation to Hashem, fervor alone is unacceptable. In Lote's case, extreme fervor led him dangerously close to violating his duty to his own family. Overzealousness can lead to a superficial interpretation of our obligations. Even when accompanied by good intentions, such behavior is inadequate. Instead, we are expected to guide all of our actions with wisdom and understanding.

Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno proposes an entirely different approach to understanding Lote's offer. He suggests that Lote did not actually intend to sacrifice his daughters. He explains that Lote was attempting to create confusion and dissension within the mob. His daughters were already engaged. Lote expected that his offer would be accepted. This would alarm his future sons-in-law. They would turn against the mob. They would probably attract sympathetic supporters among the people. The mob would be split and turned against itself.[6]

The Greatness of Yishmael

"And also the son of the maidservant I will make into a nation for he is your descendant." (Beresheit 21:13)

Yitzchak is born and begins to mature. Yishmael – the son of Avraham and Hagar – is also a member of the household. Sarah urges Avraham to send away Yishmael but Avraham resists. Hashem tells Avraham that he should follow Sarah's advice and send Yishmael away. Hashem assures Avraham that Yishmael too will develop into a great nation.

What was the intent of this assurance? Surely, Hashem was not merely telling Avraham that Yishmael would be the progenitor of a nation with a large population! Avraham was not concerned with the number of descendants Yishmael produced. Hashem must have been alluding to some meaningful accomplishment to be attributed to Yishmael's descendants.

Rabbaynu Avraham ben HaRambam offers a fascinating interpretation of Hashem's assurance. Before Avraham, the concept of a single indivisible Creator had been all but forgotten. Avraham was devoted to re-introducing Hashem to humanity. This mission would be continued through the Jewish nation. However, another religion would emerge and teach the concept of uncompromised monotheism. This would be Islam. This religion would develop and be promulgated through Yishmael's descendants. In some of the Jewish nation's lowest periods, Islam supplanted Judaism as the world's dominant religion. As a result, when the influence of Judaism was minimal, Islam preached the monotheistic concept of G-d. This was the blessing that Hashem placed upon Yishmael.[7]

The Test of the Akeydah

"And He said: Take now your son, your only child, whom you love, Yitzchak, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him up there as a sacrifice on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." (Beresheit 22:2)

Parshat VaYerah relates the incident of the Akeydah – the binding of Yitzchak in order to be offered as a sacrifice. In this passage, Hashem commands Avraham to sacrifice his beloved son Yitzchak. The commentators regard this as the most difficult of the tests that Hashem required of Avraham. Avraham's willingness to subjugate even his love for his son to the service of Hashem was the ultimate testament of his devotion.

Beis Halevi is troubled by this characterization of the event as a test for Avraham. He points out that an even greater sacrifice was required of Yitzchak. Yitzchak, after all, was thirty-nine years old at this time, and willingly submitted himself to be sacrificed. Therefore, was not Yitzchak's demonstration of devotion even more outstanding than his father's?

Beis Halevi explains that indeed it was Avraham who faced the greater

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challenge. Giving up one's own life is certainly an act of awesome devotion. However, with death the ordeal ends – there is no looking back, no haunting regrets. In contrast, Avraham was faced with the challenge of taking his son's life and then living with that decision. Avraham knew his ordeal would not end with the death of Yitzchak – the trauma of the event would remain with him for the rest of his life. Nonetheless, without hesitancy, Avraham demonstrated his willingness to fulfill Hashem's commandment.[8]

Hashem Descends to Judge the People of Sedom

"I will descend now and see. If they have done as the cries that have come to Me, I will destroy them. And if not, I will know." (Beresheit 18:21)

Our parasha discusses the destruction of Sedom. This pasuk introduces the narrative. Hashem tells Avraham that the cries of the people of Sedom have risen before Him. He will descend in order to judge the wickedness of the people. If these cries truly and accurately reflect the evil of the people, then He will destroy the city and the surrounding communities.

There are a number of problems presented by this pasuk. We will consider three of these difficulties. First, the pasuk describes Hashem as "descending." Hashem is not a material being. We cannot ascribe descending or ascending to Him. It is clear that this term is used by the Torah as a metaphor. But, what does the metaphor represent? Second, the pasuk implies that Hashem conducted some sort of analysis of Sedom. There was some issue that Hashem investigated before he decided whether He would destroy the city. But, Hashem is omniscient. What further information can He have required that added to His knowledge? Finally, the pasuk seems to imply that Hashem conducted some sort of analysis in order to secure this new information. Can we identify the nature of this process of analysis? In other words, can we determine the means by which Hashem secured the additional information that was essential to His decision?

Let us begin with the first two issues. The pasuk refers to Hashem as "descending." The same phrase is used earlier in the Chumash. The Torah describes Hashem as "descending" in order to investigate the activities of the Dor Haflagah – the generation of the Dispersion.[9] This post-Deluge generation joined together with the goal of unifying all of humanity. They wished to build a single civilization that would encompass all humankind. Hashem "descended" to judge this generation. Based on this judgment, He intervened in their plans by bringing about the Dispersion.

Rashi explains that in both instances – in our parasha and in the narrative regarding the Dor Haflagah – the Torah's description of Hashem "descending" is intended to communicate that He conducted an investigation. However, Rashi points out that this message cannot be understood in a literal sense. Hashem is omniscient and does not need to conduct an investigation in order to secure additional information. Instead, these references are to be understood homiletically. In both instances, the Torah is telling us that a judge should only render a decision after thoroughly investigating the particulars of the case. The Torah ascribes a process of investigation to Hashem in order to establish a standard of conduct for mortal judges. The Torah is telling us that just as Hashem only rendered a judgment based upon a full consideration of all of the elements of the case. So too are we only to pass judgment after conducting a thorough investigation.[10]

Rashi's interpretation is unusual. He accepts that, in general, when the Torah ascribes a material activity to Hashem, it is in a metaphor intended to describe His behavior. However, in this instance, Rashi asserts that the metaphor is not intended to describe Hashem's behavior. Instead, the metaphor is employed in order to teach a lesson regarding our own conduct. In other words, although the Torah often uses material expressions in describing Hashem and His activities, these terms are metaphors that communicate information regarding Hashem. Here, Rashi asserts that the metaphor is not

referring to an action of Hashem. In fact, the phrase is not related to Hashem in any sense. Instead, the metaphor is designed to teach us a homiletic lesson regarding the manner in which we – specifically judges – should conduct ourselves.

Why does the Torah specifically employ the metaphor of "descending?" Rashi discusses this issue. He explains that the term "descent" has a precise meaning. It refers to making a judgment based upon the ultimate outcome of a pattern of behavior. The people of Sedom were not judged solely on the basis of their behavior at the moment. They were judged based upon the ultimate outcome of these behaviors. Hashem considered the direction in which the people were progressing. He punished them because they were progressing towards absolute evil. However, Rashi does not identify the specific outcome towards which the people were progressing.

Rabbaynu David Kimchi – Radak – offers a different explanation of the metaphor of "descending." He explains that when Hashem involves Himself in the affairs of human beings, He is descending from His exalted honor. Hashem is the Creator. He is exalted over all of His creations. When Hashem interferes with the natural universe that He created in order to save humanity or punish humankind, He is descending from His glory and majesty.[11][1] Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin – Netziv – expands on this explanation. He explains that Hashem created a universe governed by a natural order. It is His will that this natural order be preserved. However, He interferes with the natural order in two situations. First, He exercises His providence and interferes with this order to help the righteous. Second, He interrupts the natural order in order to punish the wicked. When we act in a manner that demands providential punishment, we are – metaphorically – requiring Hashem to "descend" from His throne of majesty to correct our behavior.[12][2]

Both of these explanations present some difficulties. Rashi does answer our first two questions. He explains that Hashem's "descent" is a metaphor. Rashi also explains the specific meaning of the metaphor. "Descent" means making a judgment on a person or group based on the ultimate outcome of a pattern of behavior, and not focusing solely upon the person or group's current behaviors. According to Rashi, our third question regarding the specific issues that Hashem investigated and considered is not relevant. Hashem did not conduct an actual analysis. The phraseology employed by the Torah is not intended to be applied to Hashem. However, Rashi's explanation is somewhat radical. As we have noted, it is unusual for the Torah to ascribe a material behavior to Hashem that does not have a metaphorical message regarding Hashem's behavior. In addition, Rashi asserts that Sedom was not punished for its present behavior. Instead, the people were destroyed because they were destined to perform some great evil. Yet, Rashi does not indicate the specific nature of this evil.

Radak's and Netziv's explanation also answers our first two questions. Yet, they seem to leave our third question unanswered. What was the nature of the investigation performed by Hashem?

Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno offers a comprehensive explanation of the events in our parasha that resolves all three of our difficulties. He begins by adopting an element of Rashi's explanation. Like Rashi, he asserts that the term "descending" must be understood idiomatically. When the Torah describes Hashem as descending, it is identifying a particular type of judgment. Hashem is making a judgment based upon the ultimate outcome of a pattern of behavior. But, at this juncture, Sforno extends his explanation beyond this initial observation. In each instance in which the figure of "descending" is employed, Sforno identifies the outcome that demanded Hashem's interference. Let us focus on our parasha. What outcome demanded the destruction of the people of Sedom?

A corrupt society can reverse itself. Sforno asserts that as long as the potential for repentance exists, the society can be spared. However, there is a point

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at which the society can no longer reverse its direction. At some point, repentance is no longer possible. This occurs when no dissent is tolerated – when no one remains who can provide the society with a new direction. When all members of the society have accepted and champion the corrupt values of the civilization, there is not opportunity for reevaluation and repentance. If this point is reached, the society can only continue in its deterioration into absolute evil.[13]

Hashem “descended” in order to test Sedom. He designed a test to determine whether Sedom had reached the point at which there was no longer an opportunity to repent. What was this test?

“And the two angels came to Sedom in the evening and Lote was sitting at the gate.” (Beresheit 19:1)

The Torah tells us that three angels came to visit Avraham. They foretold the birth of Yitzchak. After taking leave from Avraham, two of these angels proceeded to Sedom. The angels told Lote that Sedom would be destroyed. They urged him to gather his family and flee the city. Lote left with his wife and two daughters. Lote’s wife died during their flight. But, Lote and his daughters escaped the destruction of Sedom. It is clear from the Torah that these angels had two missions. They were charged with the mission of destroying Sedom, and they were sent to save Lote and his family. However, the Torah describes in detail the activities of these angels in Sedom and their interaction with the people of the city. Why is this information included in the account?

“They had not yet lied down and the people of the city, the people of Sedom, surrounded the house – from the young to the old, all of the people, from every quarter.” (Beresheit 19:4)

The angels came to Lote and agreed to spend the night in his home. The people of Sedom did not extend hospitality to strangers and were not willing to tolerate Lote’s offer of lodging to these visitors. They surrounded Lote’s home and demanded that he deliver his guests to them. The Torah explains that all of the people of Sedom were involved in this protest – the young and old, all of the people, from every quarter. Why does the Torah provide such a detailed description of the mob that surrounded Lote’s home?

Sforno explains that the Torah’s intent is clear. The message is that the entire population of Sedom – without exception – joined into this mob that congregated against Lote. There was no dissent. Not one opposed the mob. No one even held back from joining the mob. The opposition to Lote was unanimous and complete.

Sforno explains that this was the test. Hashem provided the people of Sedom with an opportunity to demonstrate either that they deserved to be spared, or to be destroyed. The test was simple. Would anyone rebuke this mob? Would anyone refuse to join in the attack on Lote’s home? The people of Sedom failed the test. There was no opposition to the evil designs of the people. Every person joined the mob. The people of Sedom failed the test. They lost their last opportunity to be spared. No one in Sedom was willing to oppose the evil of the citizens. No one resisted the urge to join the mob. Repentance was no longer possible. This test established that the people of Sedom were beyond repentance.[14] ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 19:1.

[2] Siftai Chacahmim Sefer Beresheit 19:1.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Sanhedrin 1:3.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Melachim 9:14.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 19:8.

[6] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 19:8

[7] Rabbaynu Avraham ben HaRambam, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 21:13.

[8] RavYosef Dov Soloveitchik, Bais HaLeyve – Commentary on the Torah, Parshat VaYerah.

[9] Sefer Bereshiet 11:5

[10] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 11:5, 18:21.

[11][1] Rabbaynu David Kimchi (Radak), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 11:5.

[12][2] Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv), Commentary Hamek Davar on Sefer Beresheit 11:5.

[13] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 18:21.

[14] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 18:21.

Tehillim as a Cure?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Last week, an interesting debate over Tehillim surfaced on the Internet. One side of this debate claimed Tehillim should be used as a means to restore health to those who are sick. They felt that Tehillim is a true cure. I submitted the following arguments against that position...

It’s vital that this conversation doesn’t lose sight of the Torah fundamentals, which must guide all our opinions. I refer to “Reward & Punishment”. Let’s apply this to our context:

One becomes physically sick or harmed through either 1 of 2 means:

1) “The SELF”: as in harmful substances - that one ingests or contacts. This includes rotten foods, sharp objects, dangerous persons, dangerous chemicals, overeating, disease, viruses, etc.

2) “God”: as in His deliverance of sickness as a punishment.

If the former #1, medical treatments and distance from further contact is the only cure. If the latter #2, repentance for the sin is essential. In neither case will words address the cause. It is therefore foolish to value “A” (words) for something “B” (viruses or sin) caused.

Reciting words cannot remove existing harm. But as the Rabbis teach, if we are yet healthy, we can study Torah or perform mitzvos and seek God’s assurances that we are kept from harm’s way. Torah words are inanimate, and therefore have no affect on physical issues. But God’s providence to keep us in His shelter can be sought by aligning ourselves with His system.

The following I addressed to the group the next day, as more support was posted in favor of Tehillim recital as a cure:

(continued on next page)

Question for all: Does anyone have proof that reciting anything - Torah or otherwise - can re-grow a severed limb? If not - which is the case - then reciting anything at all cannot do the opposite...for no relationship exists between 'words' and 'health'. I am certain no person or Rabbi in their right mind would recite Tehillim if in a car accident, and they were bleeding profusely. And the author of Tehillim did not recite Tehillim when faced with his approaching enemies. He used steel swords. And when his first child from Batsheva was dying, he prayed to God.

Again, no Tehillim.

If Tehillim's author - King David - did not endorse this foolish belief, and if God's Torah teaches Reward and Punishment, where man must repent to remove his ailments...Tehillim recitation is clearly unveiled as ineffective, not the Torah way, and a practice that is akin to incantations.

In general, people are very insecure, and seek amulets and quick fixes for their woes. The Talmud and the Prophets state that we are to reflect and repent in order to remove our problems. Or, we must cease from self-destructive behavior.

I fail to see why people do not follow reason in "this" area, while in all other areas, people use reason. They work to pay bills, look before crossing the street, and analyze stocks before purchasing them. Either use Tehillim for protection in all areas, or live in reality in all areas, and address physical symptoms as successful doctors prescribe. I will quote a Torah source in support.

The prohibition against employing charms (Sefer Chinuch, Mitzva 512)

"[That] We were restricted not to make incantations about any matter. In substance, this refers to a man who will say words, then tell people that those words helped or caused harm in any particular matter. About this it is stated, "There shall not be found among you...a charmer (Deuteronomy 18:10-11)." In the language of the Midrash Sifre: It is all the same thing, whether a person casts a charm on a snake or casts a charm on a scorpion — in other words, he says words over them so that they won't bite him, according to his opinion. So too if one says words over a wound in order to be relieved of the pain (i.e. recites a pasuk to cure a wound).

Now perhaps, my son, you might pose a question to me from what we read in the Talmud Shevuos 15b: The Psalm against evil occurrences is with lutes and lyres (Psalms 91), and then he says Psalm 3. In other words, the recital of these Psalms is of use to provide protection from harm. And it says in tractate Brachos 3a: R. Joshua b. Levi would say these verses and go to bed.

However, this matter is not similar (perish the thought) to the business of a charmer that we mentioned. Long ago, the Sages of blessed memory said in this regard (Shevuos 15b): It is forbidden to heal oneself with words of Torah. Yet they mentioned to say these Psalms, since they contain words that inspire the soul that knows them, to shelter in the Eternal Lord, place all his trust in Him, establish a reverent fear of Him firmly in his heart, and rely on His kindness and goodness. As a result of his awareness about this, he will be protected, without any doubt from every harm. This is what was answered in the Talmud in this regard. For it was asked there, but how could R. Joshua do this? Here R. Joshua said it was forbidden to heal oneself with words of Torah! And the reply was given: To secure protection, it is a different matter. In other words, the Torah did not forbid a man to say words of Torah so as to arouse his soul in a good direction, so that this merit should shield him to protect him." ■

Abraham's Character

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

God commanded Abraham to leave Charan. Abraham did so and headed towards Canaan:

"And Avram traversed the land until the place of Shechem; until Alon Moreh; and the Canaanite people were in the land." (Gen. 12:6)

Later we read,

"And also to Lote who traveled with Avram were there sheep and cattle and tents. And the land could not sustain them both for their property was great and they could not dwell together. And there was a dispute between the shepherds of Avram (Abraham) and the shepherds of Lote; and the Canaanite and Prizzite then dwelled in the land. And Avram said to Lote, 'Please let there not be a dispute between myself and you, and between my shepherds and yours, for we are brothers. Is not the entire land before you? Separate before me; if you go left I will go to the right; if you go right I will go to the left.'" (Gen. 13:5-9)

What is significant to mention that these nations were "in the land"? Why mention this obscure detail, and why join this detail with seemingly unrelated information, regarding Avram's travels, and the shepherds' dispute?

Rashi (Gen. 13:7) teaches that Avram's shepherds justly rebuked Lote's shepherds for their grazing in pastures belonging to others. Lote's shepherds' justification was that Avram is to eventually inherit all of Canaan. But Avram's shepherds knew that Avram did not "yet" receive that promise.

We learn Avram's perfection, through this Rashi citing his shepherd's perfection. We are told that Avram initially "traversed the land until the place of Shechem; until Alon Moreh". He traveled "until" this location. "Until" is stated twice in this verse, stressing Avram's respect of others' property. He didn't travel further for the reason that the verse explains, the Canaanite people "were in the land." Similarly, the verse that describes the dispute of the shepherds also ends with "and the Canaanite and Prizzite then dwelled in the land." (ibid 13:7)

The Torah's means of catching our attention is often through repetition. Repeating the idea that the Canaanite were in the land causes us to compare that verse 13:7 with the previous verse 12:6. We then note the context of both verses. The first verse describes how Avram traveled "until" a certain location, due to the presence of the Canaanites. The second verse describes the shepherd's dispute, also related to the Canaanite's presence in the land. Through this repetition, and the seemingly unrelated content of both verses, we learn that Avram did not trespass occupied land, nor did he allow his shepherds to graze there; the cause of the dispute with Lote's shepherds as Rashi teaches. ■

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