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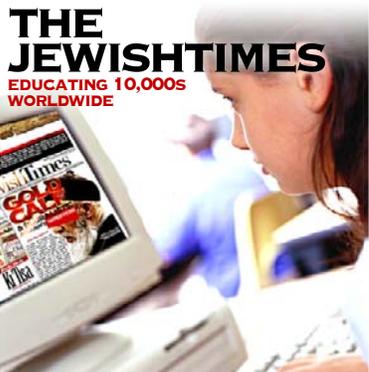
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Weekly Parsha

Kedoshim

RABBI BERNIE FOX

Honor for and Awe of Our Parents

Every person should fear his
mother and father and keep my
Shabbat. I am Hashem your G-d.
(Va Yikra 19:3)

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Fundamentals

Method in Study:

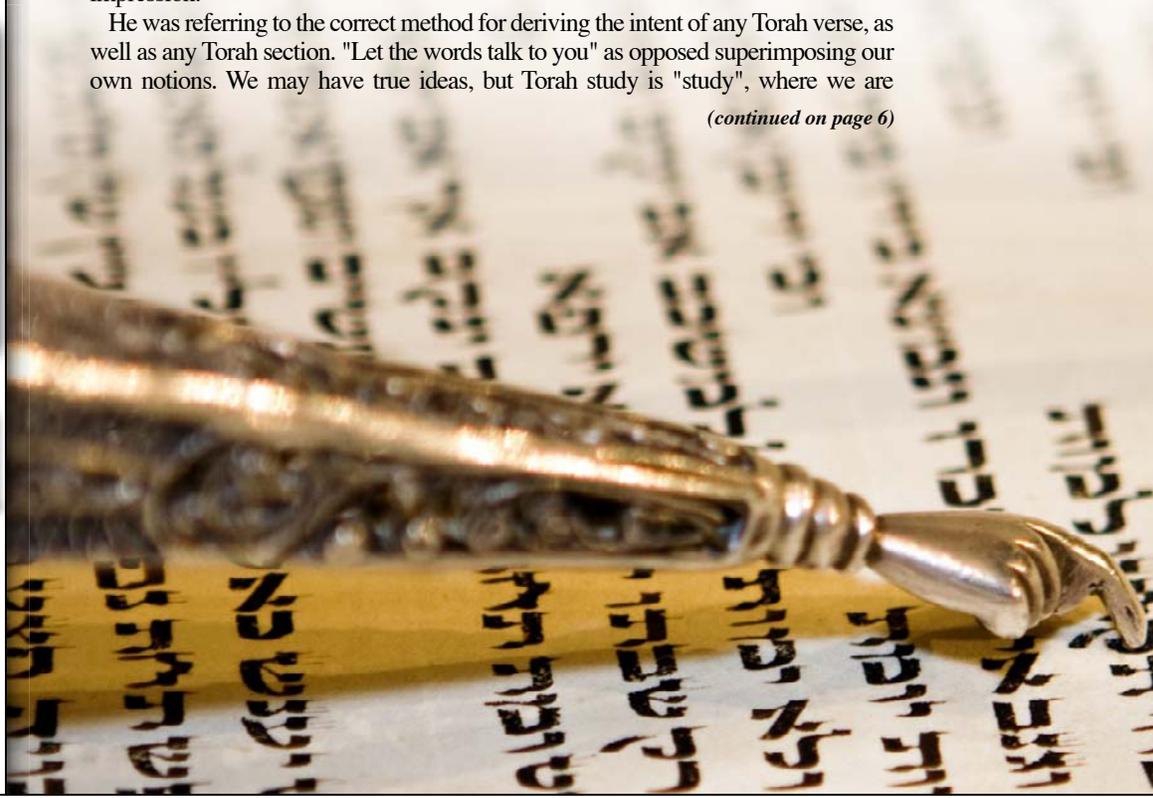
“Let the words talk to you.”

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Maybe I heard that stated only once, but that's all I needed. It was decades ago when a wise Rabbi said this during one of his thousands of lectures. His words left a lasting impression.

He was referring to the correct method for deriving the intent of any Torah verse, as well as any Torah section. "Let the words talk to you" as opposed superimposing our own notions. We may have true ideas, but Torah study is "study", where we are

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(Kedoshim cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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The Torah commands us to treat our parents with respect and awe. Parents especially appreciate these commandments. They create a family structure and foster a social order. Our Sages observed that these mitzvot also promote other less obvious values. One of these values is appreciation of Hashem. We honor and fear our parents because we appreciate the benefits that they bestow upon us. Our very life is made possible through our parents. However, we owe an even greater debt of appreciation to Hashem. Through our behaviors and attitudes towards our parents, we train ourselves to appreciate others and not take their benevolence for granted. Hopefully, this attitude will be applied to our relationship with Hashem.[1]

Gershonides notes another important outcome of these commandments. In order to understand his observation, an introduction is required.

In Perkei Avot, our Sages exhort us to “make” for ourselves a rav or teacher.[2] On the simplest level, the Sages are cautioning the student against attempting to master the Torah without the assistance of a teacher. The teacher provides the student with essential guidance.[3] Why is the teacher’s guidance so important? The answer requires an understanding of the basic nature of Torah scholarship. Our Sages explain that Torah scholarship is not achieved through merely memorizing facts and developing fluency with and mastery of these facts. Instead, the Torah scholar must understand the underlying principles and concepts that are the basis of halachah and the Torah’s outlook.[4] Such an understanding cannot be acquired through reading a list of texts. Even if a person commits the entire Talmud to memory, this person cannot be regarded as a scholar. Torah scholarship requires understanding, synthesis, and insight – not merely memorization.

Understanding is difficult to achieve. It must be developed slowly and sequentially. A student builds new concepts upon prior conclusions. As the student’s understanding develops and expands, additional areas of the Torah become comprehensible. Furthermore, through intense study the student’s mind and modes of thinking expand and are refined. The student slowly develops into a novice scholar. Eventually, the patient novice can achieve erudition. However, this development requires guidance. Without the invaluable

guidance of the teacher, the student does not know where to begin. The student may settle for superficiality. Even worse, the student may delve into issues beyond his grasp. The result is that a faulty foundation is created. Every structure is limited by the strength of its foundation. If the student lacks a sound foundation, all further attempts to understand the Torah will be undermined.

The guidance of the rav allows the student to develop systematically. The teacher understands the Torah. The rav guides the student through a systematic program and progression. The teacher tells the student where to begin one’s studies. The rav evaluates the progress of the student and determines when the student is ready to progress to the next stage. With this guidance, the student can become a true scholar.

However, there is another message in this lesson from Perkei Avot. The commentaries note that the Sages did not say that the student should acquire or secure the assistance of a rav. They said that a person should “make” for oneself a rav. This is an odd expression. What is meant by the phrase “make a rav”?



Maimonides and others comment that the Sages are alluding to an important issue. It is not always possible to find an appropriate rav. The inexperienced student, and even the novice scholar, can expect to find a more advanced scholar to serve as a guide. However, what recourse is available to the more advanced student? This more advanced student may not find a teacher with adequate erudition to provide guidance and direction. What course should this person choose?

Maimonides explains that the phrase “make a rav” refers to this situation. Sometimes a more advanced student may not be able to secure a guide. No available rav is suitable to serve as this student’s mentor. This student must “make a rav”. The rav will not be the ideal guide. Nonetheless, this novice scholar must appoint someone as his rav. Why is this necessary?

Maimonides explains that knowledge and understanding are developed through the exchange of ideas. The student must expose his or her conclusions to critical analysis and review. This free exchange of ideas is crucial to achieving an objective and refined understanding of the Torah.[5]

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Working with a rav – even if he is not ideal – is essential to the student's development. This rav may not be the best guide but he will challenge and stimulate his student.

Gershonides extends the insight of Perkei Avot to the commandments regarding our parents. Gershonides explains that just as the Torah scholar requires a guide, so does the child. Every young person faces innumerable challenges and obstacles in the process of personal development. The parent shields the child from the challenges that are beyond the capacity of the youngster. The parent exposes the child to appropriate challenges and responsibilities. The parent provides guidance and counsel. At the very least, the parent provides an invaluable review of the child's conclusions and decisions. The parent, in the personal development of the child, performs all of the tasks that the rav performs in facilitating the intellectual development of the scholar.

These commandments are designed to foster and encourage this mentor relationship. A child who respects his or her parents and holds them in awe is more likely to accept these parents as guides.

Some children will challenge Gershonides' analysis. Children sometimes question the qualifications of their parents to provide guidance. After all, the student chooses a mentor based on the teacher's qualifications. We do not choose our parents. It is easy to become a parent; it is far more difficult to provide effective guidance.

Gershonides acknowledges this issue. However, he points out that parents generally have a unique and important qualification to serve as mentors for their children. Parents are instinctively bound to their children. They feel a selfless love for their offspring. A parent will often even place the welfare of the child before his or her own interests. The child cannot find any other mentor who has as deep a commitment to the child's welfare. So, although parents – like everyone – make mistakes, they tend to be very dedicated and selfless guides. This is a qualification that certainly recommends the parent for the position of mentor.

It should also be noted that there is a benefit in "making a teacher" even if the teacher is not the ideal mentor. The same principle applies to one's parents. Every person gains from exposing conclusions and perceptions to a second opinion. This is true even when it is one's equal who provides the second opinion. Some children

surpass the accomplishments of their parents. They achieve greater wealth and success. They are more educated than their parents and may even be worldlier. However, their parents remain an invaluable asset. They can provide honest feedback and review.[6]

Superstition Leads to Idolatry

You must not eat on blood. You must not act on the basis of omens. And you must not act on the basis of auspicious times. (VaYikra 19:26)

Parshat Kedoshim includes many prohibitions regarding occult practices and superstitions. We are not permitted to base decisions upon omens or adopt behaviors associated with the occult. Maimonides includes all of these prohibitions in the section of his code devoted to idolatry. He explains that superstitions and occult practices were used by the idolaters to deceive their followers. He further explains that it is incorrect to maintain that there is any value or wisdom to these practices. Superstition and occult ritual are foolish and of no benefit.[7]

It is readily understandable that belief in the occult is associated with idolatry. However, we need to understand the relationship between superstition and idolatry.

Superstition is based upon human imagination and fantasy. It attempts to create order and security in an ever-changing world. For example, journalists have noted that many professional athletes develop involved rituals or adopt specific practices which they believe will bring them good fortune. In general, all omens and superstitions are designed to provide either insight into the future or protection from mishap. In short, superstition involves a flight from reality. Truth is too harsh. The fantasy of superstition provides solace.

The Torah requires that we approach life and the universe intelligently. The Torah implores us to understand reality and find truth. This search, honestly conducted, inevitably results in an appreciation of the Creator and His Torah. The perspective and attitude underlying superstition is antithetical to the Torah perspective. Escape from reality results in an outlook that has no basis in truth. A superstitious perspective can only produce a fanciful and implausible theology. This theology is a projection of the individual's imagination upon reality.

Idolatry and superstition have identical roots. The idolater does not base religious beliefs upon wisdom and truth. Inspection and investigation

are replaced by projection. The theology of the idolater is an expression of the imagination not tempered by serious thought. The connection is now clear. A person guided by superstition has succumbed to the very attitude that underlies idolatry.

Respect for the Wise and for One's Teacher

Before the elderly you should rise. And you should give respect to the wise. And you shall fear your G-d. I am Hashem. (VaYikra 19:32)

We are required to respect the wise. This requirement dictates that we stand in the presence of a scholar. This law applies even to a scholar that is not one's teacher. Maimonides explains in his Mishne Torah that this obligation is derived from the above passage.[8]

There is an additional obligation that applies to one's teacher or rav. Maimonides also discusses this requirement in his Mishne Torah. He explains that one is obligated to respect and fear one's parents. Similarly, one is required to fear and honor one's teacher.[9]

These are two obligations – to respect scholars and one's rav – are separate requirements. The obligation to respect scholars differs from the obligation to respect and fear one's teacher. For example, we only rise for a wise person or scholar when this individual enters into our immediate vicinity. Once the scholar passes beyond our four cubits (1 cubit is approximately 18 inches) we may sit.[10] This is not the case when dealing with one's teacher. We must rise as soon as the teacher enters into our vision. We remain standing until the rav passes out of our field of vision. [11] In addition, there are various other expressions of respect required in dealing with one's teacher. We are not required to express these forms of respect towards other scholars.

It is clear that the level of respect and awe a person is required to show towards one's rav is greater than the respect due a scholar. This is reasonable. One has personally benefited from the knowledge of one's teacher. It is appropriate that a higher form of respect is required.

Maimonides makes an astonishing statement that seems to contradict this reasoning. He explains that the teacher can excuse the student from the obligations of respect and awe. Nonetheless, the student remains obligated in the forms of respect due to his rav as a scholar.[12] Under no circumstances can the honor due a scholar be

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(Kedoshim cont. from previous page)

Weekly Parsha

dismissed. It is odd that the more elaborate obligation due one's teacher can be ignored. But the lesser forms of respect due a scholar can never be dismissed!

Maimonides provides an important insight into his reasoning. In beginning his discussion of the obligation to fear and respect one's teacher, Maimonides explains the reason for this requirement. He explains that the obligation to honor and fear one's teacher surpasses the requirement to respect and fear one's parents. Parents bring us into this world. However, the teacher provides us with the opportunity to achieve everlasting life in Olam HaBah – the afterlife.

These comments suggest a basic difference between the obligation to honor the scholar and the requirement towards one's teacher. The obligation to honor the scholar is an expression of our appreciation of wisdom. Because we value wisdom and thought, we honor those who possess these invaluable assets. It follows that these individuals cannot forgo this honor. We are not honoring the scholar as an individual; we are showing our respect for the wisdom represented by the scholar.

In contrast, Maimonides compares our obligation to our rav with the requirement to respect and fear our parents. This obligation is an expression of appreciation to the individual for the gift we have received; we are required to show a deep and pronounced appreciation. This consideration dictates the respect and awe due our teacher be emphatically expressed in many forms. However, the obligation is fundamentally an obligation towards the individual who has provided us with wisdom. This means the rav can forgo this honor.[13]

Loving Our Neighbors

You shall not take revenge and not bear a grudge against the members of your people; you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am Hashem. (VaYikra 19:18)

These passages instruct us that we may not take revenge or bear a grudge against another and that we are required to love one another. The pasuk delineates two prohibited forms of behavior: taking revenge and bearing a grudge. What is the difference between these two forms of behavior? Our Sages explain that taking revenge is more direct. It involves acting towards a person in the same hurtful manner that one has been treated by this person. For example: I ask to borrow from a friend his pen and he refuses. The next day this friend needs to borrow a pen from me. I remind

the friend of his response to my request the previous day and refuse the pen. This is taking revenge. Bearing a grudge is more passive. In the above example, if I lend the pen but point out to the friend that I am not behaving as he behaved to me, this is bearing a grudge.[14] Bearing a grudge is prohibited because it too is a form of hatred. As the second portion of the passage teaches, we are to love one another.

The pasuk's directive to love one another is remarkable in two respects. First, the passage instructs us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. This is wonderful goal. However, our Sages noted that it does not seem to be a very realistic objective. Certainly, we should try to overcome the pettiness and self-centeredness that often interfere with our empathy, compassion, and love for others. But a directive to love another person to the degree one loves oneself seems to require the impossible.

Second, our Sages did not regard this directive as a mere ethical exhortation – an appeal to act with love towards others. The Sages regarded this directive as an absolute commandment. It is included in the Torah's 613 mitzvot. This compounds the first difficulty. Torah is not only establishing an impossible standard of behavior, it is commanding us to achieve the impossible!

Various commentaries suggest different answers to these problems. Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra explains that the meaning of the instruction is that we should love those things that benefit our friends as we love those things that benefit ourselves. In other words, the Torah is not suggesting that we actually feel for our friends the same love we feel for ourselves. This would not be realistic. The Torah is establishing a standard of behavior. We must be as scrupulous in caring for the needs of our neighbor as we are in caring for our own needs.[15] This remains a high standard, but it does not contradict human nature.

Although Ibn Ezra's interpretation of the passage is somewhat helpful, it is also somewhat vague. What exactly does the passage require? Does it mean that if I need a new home for myself, I must also provide housing for all homeless individuals?

There is a well-known teaching of Hillel that may explain Ibn Ezra's position. Hillel explained that a person should not do to another person that which he would not want done to himself. Hillel went on to explain that the remainder of the Torah is merely an elaboration of this principle.[16]

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Hillel's lesson is empirically compelling. Many of society's problems could be solved if this principle were universally adopted. But Hillel's contention that this is the essence of the Torah and the rest is merely an elaboration seems to be an overstatement. Perhaps Hillel did not intend for this last part of his teaching to be taken literally; he was not suggesting that it is okay to deny Hashem's existence as long as you are nice to people. But if Hillel did not intend for his statement to be understood literally, what was the message he was attempting to communicate?

Sefer HaChinuch suggests that Hillel noted that so many of the mitzvot of the Torah are designed to regulate relations among people. We are not permitted to steal. We cannot overcharge. We are prohibited from engaging in various deceptive business practices. We must return lost objects. All of the commandments are designed to foster and encourage harmony among the individual members of society. Hillel recognized that all of these laws are amplifications of a single theme. They attempt to create a society in which all members have equal rights to fair and compassionate treatment by one another. All of these laws are designed to prevent one member of the group from taking advantage of another. Hillel explained that were we each to treat our friends as we wish to be treated, all of these laws would be superfluous.[17]

Sefer HaChinuch's comments provide an explanation of Ibn Ezra's position. We are not expected to be as solicitous of the needs of others as we are of our own needs. However, we are expected to regard his needs as being as serious and real as our own. Therefore, we need not provide shelter for the homeless before building a home for ourselves. We have every right to care for our own needs first. But we cannot dismiss other's needs as insignificant. When the poor require our assistance, we cannot be dismissive. Certainly, I cannot place my rights before those of another person. I must respect those rights as I would expect my own to be respected.

We can only recognize the full implication of this commandment if we acknowledge that this is not our usual attitude. If we are honest, we will admit that although we do not dismiss our friend's needs, we tend to see them as somewhat less compelling than our own. If we honestly review our interactions with others, we will be able to identify behaviors

that place our needs above others. The Torah is commanding us to identify these behaviors and correct them.

In short, according to Sefer HaChinuch, we are required to respect other's rights and needs as we do our own. This attitude fosters harmony within a group or society. In a society in which the attitude is not present, there will be friction and discord.

Rav Naftali Tzvi Berlin Zt"l – Netziv – offers an alternative understanding of the objective of this commandment. He begins by quoting a teaching from the Jerusalem Talmud. The Talmud observes that we are forbidden from taking vengeance. The Talmud explains that vengeance is absurd. This is illustrated with an analogy. A person is cutting meat; his hand holding the knife slips and he cuts his other hand. Would the person then take punish the hand that slipped by cutting it as well? The Talmud concludes by explaining that this is the message of our passage. We may not take vengeance because we must love one another. We are all similar to the fingers of a single hand, or limbs of a single body. If we take vengeance upon another person – even to redress a wrong – we are cutting one of our own limbs. [18], [19]

It seems that Netziv is explaining that the mitzvah to love one another is not merely designed to serve a practical purpose. It is not designed to assure order and harmony in society. It has a higher purpose. It is designed to reorient our perspective upon ourselves. We are commanded to refrain from vengeance and to love one another in order to foster within ourselves a healthy and truthful perspective. We must recognize that we are members of a group and nation. This does not mean the individual is not important, or that a person's sense of individual significance is improper. But our sense of our own individual importance cannot overwhelm our realization and acknowledgement that we are also part of Bnai Yisrael.

In summary: According to Sefer HaChinuch, the mitzvah to love one another is essentially a social contract. It is designed to foster harmony. According to Netziv, the commandment is designed to nurture within each person a healthy and truthful perspective on himself. Each of us must be able to see ourselves as a member of a group and nation. ■

Footnotes:

[1] Rav Ahron HaLeyve, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 33.

[2] Mesechet Avot 1:6.

[3] Rabbaynu Menachem Me'eri, Bait HaBechirah, Mesechet Avot 1:6.

[4] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 21:1.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Commentary on the Mishne, Mesechet Avot 1:6.

[6] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1997) p. 292.

[7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 11:16.

[8] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah 6:1.

[9] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah 5:1.

[10] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah 6:1.

[11] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah 5:7.

[12] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah 5:11.

[13] See Rav Yizchak Zev Soloveitchik, Chiddushim on Mishne Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah.

[14] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra 19:18.

[15] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer VaYikra 19:18.

[16] Mesechet Shabbat 31a.

[17] Rav Aharon HaLeyve, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 243.

[18] Talmud Yerushalmi, Mesechet Nedarim 9:4.

[19] Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv), Commentary Hamek Davar on Sefer VaYikra 19:18.

(Words cont. from page 1)

Fundamentals

receivers: we seek to unveil the underlying meaning and not suggest anything unwarranted. We must learn to become highly sensitized to the deliberate nuances of a verse and the unique design of each of the Torah's clues. God had Moses write each verse in such a way that if we are properly trained, we will notice astonishing questions that lead to their very answers.

"What must you say?" was another bit of this Rabbi's invaluable advice. With these words, the Rabbi's intent was to make us aware that one could possibly attribute many meanings to a verse. But that doesn't mean our interpretation is the true intent. By ensuring we do not say anything else than what is absolutely warranted by the written words and phrases, we remain true to God's message, and do not convolute it with our projections unintended by the verses.

The Rabbi desired to uncover God's intended truths. He understood that God encoded the Torah with a method of study, and that method is the only key to unlocking the purposefully obscured and profound ideas. Better than any other teacher, he understood how to bring a Torah section to life with remarkable insights that floored you...and fit the words perfectly. It was that amazement at how he taught that caused myself and hundreds of others to stand in awe of the Creator and His remarkable Torah.

Applying his lessons, I took up the area of leprosy and Lashon Hara with a friend, since we read that last week. In his Mishneh Torah (Laws of Tumah and Tzaraas 16:10) Maimonides refers to two Torah sections. Deuteronomy 24:8,9 reads as follows:

"Be on guard regarding the affliction of leprosy to be exceedingly careful to do as all the Levite priests teach you as I have commanded; you shall guard to do. Remember that which God did to Miriam on the way when you left Egypt".

We must review that earlier account of Miriam's affliction of leprosy. But we must be clear: Maimonides openly states that Miriam did not speak Lashon Hara about Moses, as he classifies only 'derogatory' speech as Lashon Hara (Dayos 7:3).

Maimonides says the following in Tumah and Tzaraas 16:10 :

"Ponder well what happened to Miriam who spoke about her brother [Moses]; and she was older than him, and she raised him on her lap, and she risked her life to save him from the sea, and she did not speak of him derogatorily. Rather, her error was that she

equated him [Moses] to all other prophets, and he was not particular on all these matters as it says "And the man Moses was exceedingly more humble than any man on the face of the Earth". And even so, Miriam was afflicted immediately with leprosy. Certainly, regarding foolish wicked people who continually speak great, wondrous things."

Maimonides teaches that Miriam did not speak Lashon Hara, although she erred and received leprosy. He informs us that from Miriam one may derive an a fortiori argument (from the lesser to the stronger) i.e., one will certainly receive leprosy if one does in fact intend to degrade another person with speech. We thereby learn that leprosy is not only given for Lashon Hara, but for other forms of mistakes made with speech, as is the case regarding Miriam. Let us now study that sin of Miriam.

Numbers 12:1-10:

"And Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses regarding the matter of the black woman that he married; for he married a black woman. And they said, "Is it only with Moses that God speaks, does God not also speak with us?" and God heard. And the man Moses was exceedingly more humble than any man on the face of the Earth. And God said suddenly to Moses and to Aaron and to Miriam: "The three of you come out to the tent of Meeting", and the three of them came out. And God was revealed in a pillar of cloud and it stood [at] the opening of the tent and He called Aaron and Miriam and the two of them came out. And He said, "Listen please to My words: if there will be prophets of God: in a vision to him I will make Myself known; in a dream I will speak to him. Not so is it with My servant Moses; in all My house he is trusted. Face to face I speak with him and in vision and not with riddles; and the form of God he beholds...and why were you not fearful to speak against My servant, against Moses?" And their burned God's anger with them and He left. And the cloud removed from upon the tent and behold Miriam was leprous like snow, and Aaron turned to Miriam and she was leprous."

Now let's apply the Rabbi's methodology. I won't get into the exact issue about Moses marrying the "black" woman; whether that is literal or not. I will focus on Maimonides' words that Miriam erred by equating Moses to all other prophets as quoted above. Meaning, we will follow the commentary that says Moses separated from his wife as God commanded after Revelation at Sinai. For through Sinai, Moses rose to a higher level and marriage was no longer befitting this level.

"Is it only with Moses that God speaks, does God not also speak with us? and God heard"

Miriam responds that she and Aaron did not separate from their spouses as did Moses, although they too received God's prophecies. She equated herself and Aaron to Moses, an error that Maimonides says is the core issue. But we must ask why Miriam had to "discuss" her opinion. What forces one – with any opinion – to advance the "thought" to a "discussion"? The only change is that a discussion includes another person. Perhaps here, Miriam was too much preoccupied with "social" framework: meaning, she assessed her relationship with Moses. But man should be focused on his or her relationship to God, not to other people.

"and God heard"

Of course God heard...God hears everything. We must question the necessity to mention this here, and not in other cases where people sinned through speech.

One answer: Miriam was not engaged in relating to God when she discussed Moses with Aaron. Therefore, God wrote in His Torah that He did in fact hear, indicating that this is where she should have been focused. Had Miriam acted properly, she would not have concerned herself with her status relative to Moses. She would not be "comparing". By teaching us the He did hear, we learn that Miriam was talking in a manner 'not in pursuit of God'. God is subtly teaching us that Miriam's sin was in the directing of her attention more towards man, than towards God. By contrast, "and God heard" highlights her focus on man.

"And the man Moses was exceedingly more humble than any man on the face of the Earth"

Since Moses was so humble, he would not take such discussions to heart and concern himself with the relative statuses of people. It means nothing to the perfected man whether he "measures up" to others. He is not a competitor and his values have nothing to do with social acceptance or status. Rather, the perfected man is a philosopher, so only truths and God's approval concern him. This verse explains at least two things: 1) why Moses didn't respond, and 2) it contrasts Moses' perfection to Miriam's imperfection, making Miriam's error more acutely identifiable.

"And God said suddenly to Moses and to Aaron and to Miriam: "The three of you come out to the tent of Meeting", and the three of them came out. And God was revealed in a pillar of cloud and it stood [at] the opening of the tent and He called Aaron and Miriam and the two of them came out."

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(Words cont. from page 6)

Fundamentals



Moses reached the "zenith of the human species" as the Rabbis state. This being so, Miriam and Aaron must have had a false idea concerning human existence. This was their crime. Instead of appreciating the true role of man, which would be expressed as learning from Moses, they missed this point momentarily and discussed their relative, prophetic statuses as compared to Moses. Such a discussion completely misses the mark.

Again we read of an unusual case: God said "suddenly". Why was a 'sudden' prophecy essential? The Rabbis explain that unlike Moses, other prophets required preparation so as to receive prophecy. But in this one exception, God allowed Miriam and Aaron to receive a prophecy without preparation, "suddenly". Miriam equated her prophetic level to that of Moses. It was therefore necessary that she experience another type of prophecy; one in which she understands that she erred in grouping all prophets under one type.

To support this point, I would ask why God does not address them after all three came out. Why does He again call only Miriam and Aaron, and only then He addresses them after that second calling?

This is to teach that the first calling (of all three) was not for the 'content' of the prophecy, for nothing was spoken. Rather, the absence of any message during the first calling taught Miriam and Aaron that the prophecy was meant to allow them to experience a prophetic 'style' different than what they knew...a "sudden" prophecy. Thus, nothing was communicated during that first calling. For it was not intended for any communication, but rather an experience. Experiencing a different level of prophecy, Miriam and Aaron could now grasp they were wrong...they were now open to what comes next: God's rebuke.

"And He said, "Listen please to My words"

God again uses an unusual introduction. But in fact, in every Torah portion, there is something unusual, or rather, "new". For every portion must teach something we can not know from any other portion. Torah is not redundant. And when we are successful at identifying that unique lesson in each given area, we have sensed the distinction of this area...and we have learned!

Now, why does God open with these introductory words? Consider that Miriam's error was in equating her prophetic level with that of her brother Moses. One error has already been addressed: she has been shown that other levels of prophecy exist, aside from what she had experienced. She learned of a "sudden" prophecy. But prophecy is not only a unique phenomenon and experience with various levels. Prophecy also communicates "content". In this too there are levels. This is the next lesson God offers Miriam and Aaron...

God opens with the request "Listen", which means that without pondering the content – without "listening" – simple audibility is insufficient. God asks Miriam and Aaron to "listen", to contemplate the meaning of His forthcoming words. God intimates to them that here is another area that you differ from Moses. And God elaborates on this...

"if there will be prophets of God: in a vision to him I will make Myself known; in a dream I will speak to him. Not so is it with My servant Moses; in all My house he is trusted. Face to face I speak with him and in vision and not with riddles"

God teaches Miriam and Aaron that Moses need not ponder God's word, for Moses sees the truth openly "face to face". There are no riddles, since Moses is a higher intellect. In contrast, Miriam and Aaron must decipher prophetic content, for they are not on Moses' level. They need to "listen" to God's words. The second lesson is now clear.

"and the form of God he beholds"

God teaches another fundamental. When Moses receives a prophecy, it offers him a new reflection of God's ways. It would appear that with other prophets, such is not the case. Other prophets must first decipher the prophecy, which initially may not offer knowledge regarding God, but abstract illustration...perhaps impressing upon Miriam that Moses perceives matters she has not.

"...and why were you not fearful to speak against My servant, against Moses?"

God just described how Moses was involved in accurately comprehending the most lofty matters. He reached the highest level of perfection and was the "zenith of the human species" as the Rabbis state. This being so, Miriam and Aaron must have had a false idea concerning human existence. This was their crime. Instead of appreciating the true role of man, which would be expressed as learning from Moses, they missed this point momentarily and discussed their relative, prophetic statuses as compared to Moses. Such a discussion completely misses the mark. Similarly, if one takes a perfect pearl and uses it to play marbles, he has wrongly categorized the pearl. Miriam and Aaron should have never viewed Moses in any light other than his true worth: a perfected human – from whom to learn and not judge.

Their error was grave: it was regarding a Torah fundamental. As my friend Howard pointed out, Maimonides 13 Principles includes Moses' unique, prophetic classification as the greatest prophet ever. The primary reason this is a fundamental is that it precludes all others from claiming greater authority than the Torah. For if someone would claim to be greater than Moses, then the Torah – given by Moses – could be overridden. Torah depends on prophecy, another of Maimonides' 13 Principles. For Torah is synonymous with "communication from God".

Moses reached the highest spiritual level any man can ever reach. Having made such an error about man's role, Miriam and Aaron received a punishment equated with death, teaching that such an error removes us from the objective of life.

The many lectures I attended by that wise Rabbi displayed a Torah system that requires patience until one finally "hears the words talk". And when they do, it is amazing. Torah also trains us to say "only what must be said": we learn to be receivers – not projecting anything we feel onto the verses. Torah ultimately excites us with an anticipation for each new area we explore in our pursuit of God's endless wisdom. ■



Maimonides' Warning Against Lashon Hara

(Tumah and Tzaraas 16:10)

“Ponder well what happened to Miriam who spoke about her brother [Moses]; and she was older than him, and she raised him on her lap, and she risked her life to save him from the sea, and she did not speak of him derogatorily. Rather, her error was that she equated him [Moses] to all other prophets, and he was not particular on all these matters as it says “And the man Moses was exceedingly more humble than any man on the face of the Earth”. And even so, Miriam was afflicted immediately with leprosy. Certainly, regarding foolish, wicked people who continually speak great, wondrous things.”