

On Reading the News

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

The Alter of Kelm had a stone fence put up around the yeshiva building he headed in Kelm. The fence had a gate with a lock and key. The key was hung on a hook on the inside of the fence in a way that it was possible to reach from the outside as well. Everyone who entered and exited was obligated to take the key, unlock the gate, go in or out, and then return the key to its proper place. At the end of the learning day, a certain bochur was tasked with ensuring that the gate was locked and then taking the key with him for the night. In the morning, he would come, reopen the gate, and replace the key.

There were no exceptions. Each morning, everyone had to wait for the person in charge to arrive with the key and open the gate. If people came early and the person in charge of the key had not yet arrived, they would stand there and wait for him. Even the Alter would wait.

One day, the fellow was delayed and a large crowd began to form at the gate, awaiting his arrival. One of the bochurim became agitated and could wait no longer. He shouted that it was "bittul Torah to continue waiting." He jumped over the fence and walked to the bais medrash.

Upon seeing what happened, the Alter fainted. When he was revived, he promptly fainted again. A commotion ensued and the talmidim began asking the Alter what happened that caused him to faint.

He responded, "Did you not see how that fellow jumped over the fence! The same way he breached that fence, it is likely that he breached many others," he said, referring to the various "fences" that Chazal placed around aveiros to prevent people from sinning.

The talmidim wondered what the big deal was. Besides, he seemed like a fine fellow and nobody had previously suspected him of doing anything wrong.

A few days later, something happened and the jumper was exposed as a thoroughly rotten, evil person.

When the scandal broke, talmidim were standing around discussing what happened, declaring that the Alter must have "ruach hakodesh" to be able to discern from a small act that the talmid had fallen under bad influences.

But the Alter would have none of it. He reminded them that everyone was calmly awaiting the arrival of the talmid with the key to unlock the gate. This fellow was the only one who shouted that it was bittul Torah to wait and jumped over the fence.

He observed, "That fellow was not an especially great masmid, so it wasn't his urge to study Torah that prompted him to do what he did. I saw that the fence was not a barrier to him and he coolly jumped over it. Someone who is not held back by a fence and has no problem leaping over it, is a person who is close to sin."

This week, we learn the parsha of Kabbolas HaTorah, when Hashem transmitted the Torah to the Jewish people, giving them their mission in life and their list of obligations and instructions. Prior to the deliverance of the Torah on Har Sinai, Hashem instructed that the mountain be circled by a fence, and that anyone who crosses over it and touches the mountain will be punished by death.

And the question is: Why is the prerequisite to Kabbolas HaTorah encircling the mountain? And why such a severe punishment for someone who feels compelled to get closer to the mountain and contact the holy site?

The answer is that in order to follow the Torah, a person has to be able to observe its halachos and instructions without cutting corners, and without proclaiming that the laws that are meant to prevent a person from approaching sin are not applicable to him. For once you jump the fence and go where you don't belong, you come too close to sin and to transgressing Hashem's commandments.

In order to be a shomer Torah umitzvos, a person must also observe the gedorim – the fences – that are placed around the halachos. It is not sufficient for a person to say that he will keep the major laws but not the minor ones. If someone says that he will keep the mitzvos that are in the Torah but not those that Chazal developed, chances are that he will eventually leave the path of Torah.

If a person says that he keeps kosher, that he would never eat meat in a non-kosher restaurant, because he wouldn't eat meat that wasn't properly shechted and wasn't checked for treifos. But what's the big deal about eating fish there? "Fish doesn't require shechitah," he says, "so I can eat it anywhere." He can't be occupied with the laws of cooking fish in the same oven as treif and using non-kosher utensils to prepare and eat it. Those, to him, are mere trivialities. Such a person will likely end up eating outright treif as well.

It has become accepted to only consume meat that is glatt kosher. A person could say, "Oh, that's only a chumrah. Why bother spending the extra money when non-glatt meat is also theoretically kosher?" Or, if he is traveling and he passes a food store that is open on Shabbos and has a dubious hechsher, he'll buy there anyway. Such a person may end up eating food without a hechsher if it is "kosher style," or looks kosher, or his friend tells him that he thinks it's kosher.

Thus, there was a fence around Har Sinai, signifying that the Torah and its observance are not subject to adjustment by man. Nobody has the ability to minimize the importance of any of the mitzvos or halachos. They are untouchable.

Our conduct in all areas is based upon the Torah. From the Torah we learn how to behave, how to think, and how to live. A person who studies the Torah is refined in all areas, because the Torah does that to a person. Someone who is conceited will not become a talmid chochom, because he won't do what must be done to allow the Torah to train and adapt his being.

The Vilna Gaon writes in Even Sheleimah that there are different types of Jews. As we move further from Matan Torah and the kedusha of the Bais Hamikdash, the group referred to as the "Eirev Rav" increases. In order to curtail their

growth and protect others from joining them, the chachomim of each generation have to enact gezeiros, erecting fences around the mitzvos and halachos and containing the breaches.

Who are the Eirev Rav of which he writes who breach the walls of the Torah? The Gaon lists them. There are five types, he says: the people who cause and carry out machlokes among our people; those who speak lashon hora; the baalei taavah who lust and crave all types of physical pleasure and enjoyment; hypocrites; and people who have an insatiable drive for honor and wealth. He adds that these people are also called Amaleikim, and Moshiach will not arrive until the world is rid of them.

Such people are consumed with themselves, their desires, their needs and their wants. They don't include Hashem in the equation when considering what they are doing or how they are acting.

Amaleik behaved that way. Even following the great wonders that Hashem performed for Klal Yisroel in Mitzrayim and when leaving their servitude there, Amaleik focused on themselves and their own arrogant desire for power and glory.

As Yidden, we are obligated to set aside our own selfish wants and wishes and do what Hashem asks of us.

Prior to Kabbolas HaTorah, the Torah tells us the story of Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe Rabbeinu, who left behind his hometown, relatives, friends and business associates, and went to join the Jewish people in the desert. The posuk tells us that he came because he heard about everything that Hashem had done for Moshe and the Bnei Yisroel.

Figuratively, he read the paper and heard the news and chatter about the Jews leaving Mitzrayim. He read in the newspaper that this was the first time in the history of Mitzrayim that a slave picked up and left the country. He read for months about the various plagues that were taking place in that country. He read the investigative stories about the wealth of the newly freed slaves and where it came from. He read how their dough turned to matzah. He read everything. Every day, on the major news and talk shows, there were updates on the slaves and their newfound freedom.

While the newscasters reported the stories as they do all stories, Yisro knew that there was more to them. The vast majority of the world didn't give it much thought.

People today read of the wars and turn the page and read the next item. They read about a disastrous earthquake in Turkey and Syria; about a flood in Australia, then turn the page and read of shootings in Chicago. On the next page, they read about something silly the president said. They don't stop for a moment to give it any thought. There's a world, and stuff happens in it, and you read about it and move on.

But Yisro wasn't just anyone. He was a man seeking meaning in life. He sought out every avodah zora and gave it a chance. He knew that there was more to life than superficiality. He knew that things don't just happen because someone woke up in a bad mood one day. He knew that countries don't go to war because a tyrant wanted to teach a weaker neighbor a lesson.

Yisro knew that there is a G-d who created the world and that He runs it and causes things to happen. He knew that what the world calls nature is anything but. He knew that everything happens for a reason. When he read about the plagues, he didn't accept the reasoning that they were caused by global warming or global freezing. He knew that the sea didn't turn to blood because of climate change or some other natural reason. He knew that the firstborn of Egypt didn't die of some previously unheard of mysterious disease. He knew that there was a reason.

When the Bnei Yisroel went out of Mitzrayim, Yisro put it all together and realized that everything was engineered and performed by Hashem to redeem His people and to enact punishment upon the nation that enslaved and abused them. Because he was a fine person who sought self-improvement and betterment, he left everything behind and traveled to join the fledgling group in their desert camp. He wanted to understand what transpired.

Moshe Rabbeinu told him everything that happened, all the travails and all the triumphs. Yisro was overcome and proclaimed, "Boruch Hashem, who saved you from Mitzrayim and from Paroh. Now I know that Hashem is the greatest." With that realization, Yisro converted and accepted Hashem as his G-d, returning home to convert his family.

Yisro showed us how to look at the world and how to conduct ourselves. He was the opposite of the Eirev Rav, who prevent the ultimate geulah from happening. Instead of being consumed with himself and pursuing desires of fame and wealth, he forsook everything for the truth. He gave it all up to live the life Hashem prescribes in the Torah.

We are living in tumultuous times. Every day brings news of another flood, another fight, another battle. Every day we hear of fresh tragedies, of deaths and illnesses. We read of terrorist shootings in Eretz Yisroel, and politicians calling for the death of the prime minister and the squashing of the frum community. The media is engaged in a battle to defame us.

There are two ways we can look at everything. We can look at it all through the eyes of nature or we can look at everything through the eyes of a Torah Yid and recognize that Hashem has done it all. Everything that happens is because Hashem controlled it and willed it so for a reason we don't yet understand. Nothing happens by itself, and nature is but a manifestation of the Yad Hashem.

We can see what is happening and say that Hashem is preparing the world for something big and Moshiach is in the air, or we can read the news and shrug our shoulders like the Amaleikim and the agnostics of the world who seek only selfish pleasure.

We need to learn from Yisro, the Gaon, and all the ehrliche, gutteh Yidden throughout the centuries, who in good times and in times that were not so good viewed everything through the eyes of the Torah, always seeking improvement, deriving mussar from everything that happened to them as well as from the daily news.

May we merit to live lives of introspection and holiness, helping to bring Moshiach speedily in our day.