

פ' יתרו תשפ"ג

Based on droshos by Maran HaGaon Rav Moshe Sternbuch shlita, raavad of Yerushalayim. To receive these weekly divrei Torah email benipray@netvision.net.il.

EARTHQUAKES

This week many people were killed in Turkey and Syria from earthquakes. In *Eretz Yisroel* some tremors were felt, but due to great *chasdei Hashem* there were no injuries, and no damage to property. Many people commented that this is a sign of Hashem's great love for His nation. It is of course true that Hashem loves us more than we can imagine, but that is not the main message that we should take from these events. *Gedolei Yisroel* on such occasions would always take such an event as an indication of Hashem's infinite power, and that He uses earthquakes in order to warn us of divine judgement and the need to repent.

We are in the period of the "birth pangs" of *moshiach* and close to the period of the war of *Gog Umagog*. Many people will be killed, buildings will be destroyed, and half of Yerushalayim will be exiled. No one can be sure which half he will belong to, the one that will be saved, or the one that will be exiled, and we should currently be grabbing as many *mitzvos* as possible, even "light" ones, and especially the *mitzvah* of *talmud Torah*, because each word is a *mitzvah* in its own right.

It is very difficult to merit the future redemption, which is compared to the redemption from Egypt. Just like then, great divine mercy was required to be saved and merit redemption, so too in the final redemption. However, we should take comfort from the fact that although at that time we were steeped in the 49 gates of impurity, Hashem in His great mercy redeemed us, so that we should not become immersed in the 50th gate. We too, although we may be immersed in 49 gates of impurity since we have not become steeped in the 50th gate, Hashem will have mercy on us and redeem us in an everlasting redemption. May this happen speedily.

DAAS TORAH AND AMOLEK

"*Moshe's father-in-law, Yisro, the chieftain of Midian, heard all that Hashem had done for Moshe and for the Jews, His people, that Hashem had taken the Jews out of Egypt*" (18:1)

Rashi cites the *gemoro* that the news that made such an impression on Yisro that he came to join the nation was the splitting of the Red Sea and the war with Amolek. However, the event mentioned in the *possuk* itself is that Hashem took us out of Egypt, which Rashi says was the greatest miracle of them all. Why, then, did Yisro wait until the war with Amolek to join Moshe *Rabbenu* and not come immediately after we left Egypt, or after hearing about the miracles of the *mon* and the pillars of fire and smoke?

When he heard about all the previous miracles, he did not yet think that the time had come to uproot himself and make his way to his son-in-law, but after hearing about how even after the miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea Amolek still remained adamant that everything is happenstance, that the only reality is nature, and that, at best, any unusual event must be attributed to witchcraft, he felt the need to join the holy Moshe *Rabbenu* and remain in his environment in order to boost and maintain his spiritual level. Only by being in the vicinity of *gedolei yisroel*, cleaving to them, and obeying them, is it possible to overcome the pernicious influence of *Amolek*.

During the Holocaust in Rav Moshe Schneider's Yeshiva they said *Ovino Malkein* every day after *Shacharis*. The *oron hakodesh* was opened and each section was recited by the *chazan* and then by the *mispalelim*. Rav Schneider would cry out tearfully, especially when saying "Nullify all evil decrees against us".

After the War, Rav Schneider wanted to continue this practice, arguing that until now the Nazis had sought to annihilate our bodies, but now secular Jewish groups in *Eretz Yisroel* were seeking to annihilate Jewish souls by assimilating them into their "melting pot". These people wanted to strip

fellow-Jews of their faith and indoctrinate them with their Amolek-like heretical philosophies, that the only reality is nature, and so on. This surely called for a continuation of reciting *Ovinu Malkeinu*.

However, some people objected that continuing this practice for an indefinite period would be tantamount to making a permanent change to the fixed prayers, which is forbidden. Rav Schneider therefore consulted with the Chazon Ish and the Brisker Rov, and both replied that he should indeed not continue with this practice, but should rather recite chapters from *Tehilim* after *davening*. Upon receiving this response, Rav Schneider said that he would immediately stop this practice in deference to the *gedolim*. He added that even though he himself was convinced that those *Ovinu Malkeinu* prayers were capable of achieving salvation and weakening the power of the *tumah* of Amolek, and maybe Holocaust survivors had been saved in the merit of those prayers, even so, when fighting battles against heretics, we must remain subject to *daas Torah*, and we cannot pray in a manner that breaches *halocho*. With Divine assistance, he said, the recital of *Tehilim* will have the same effect as the recital of *Ovinu Malkeinu*.

In other words, we cannot fight the *tumah* of Amolek by ourselves, without the involvement and support of the *gedolim*.

NEVER TOO LOW

Yisro, the chieftain of Midian, heard all that Hashem had done for Moshe and Yisroel, His people that Hashem had taken the Jews out of Egypt” (18:1)

The *gemoro* says (*Zevachim* 116a) that according to the other view he heard about *matan Torah*. What was it about *matan Torah* that impressed Yisro more than other miracles, such as *kerias yam suf*?

Rav Moshe Herzfeld, a student of the Chasam Sofer, suggests (in his *sefer Toras Moshe – Mogen Ovos*) that what impressed him about *matan Torah* was how a whole nation which had been immersed in the 49 gates of *tumah* in Egypt had managed to go from one extreme to the other, by accepting the yoke of Torah. He reasoned that if this was possible, he too, who had been a priest of idol worship, and was familiar with the forms of idol worship in the entire world, could also accept upon himself the yoke of Torah.

This teaches us a fundamental principle in *avodas Hashem*. If a person has stumbled in serious sins, he should not become dejected about being so far removed from Hashem that he can no longer draw close to Him. If he accepts upon himself from now onwards to serve Hashem, Hashem will immediately receive him, just like Hashem drew the Jews close to Him after leaving Egypt and being immersed in the 49 levels of *tumah* there, because they were due to receive the Torah.

SPIRITUAL SALVATION

“Her two sons, one of whom was named Gershom, because he said, “I was a stranger in a foreign land, and one who was named Eliezer, because [Moshe said,] “The G-d of my father came to my aid and rescued me from Paroh’s sword” (18:3-4)

Moshe’s rescue from Paroh’s sword took place before he became a stranger in Midian, so why was the latter commemorated first when Moshe’s first son was born?

Gershom’s name symbolized Moshe’s elation at the fact that he had managed to remain a stranger spiritually speaking in the country, which had welcomed him when he fled from Paroh. The main danger facing the Jewish nation is not the threat of physical destruction, but when we imagine ourselves to be an integral part of our host nation, or wish to adopt their mores, because this eventually triggers a process of spiritual assimilation, and our ruin in this world and the next.

Erosions of spiritual levels are often imperceptible in the initial stages, and therefore require greater *siyata dishmaya* to be overcome. That is why Moshe Rabbenu wished to first celebrate his

spiritual victory with his firstborn, and only subsequently to commemorate his physical rescue from Paroh's wrath, which he considered to be of secondary importance.

A survivor of the camps once told Rav Sternbuch about the many miracles he had experienced during the Second World War, which enabled him to survive, but Rav Sternbuch responded that his main praise to Hashem should be reserved for his spiritual salvation, the fact his faith had remained intact, when many others had abandoned it. This salvation had eternal ramifications, and was therefore much more important than being saved from physical death in this temporal world.

NEVER TOO HOLY TO FORGET OUR FELLOW JEWS

"And he said to Moshe, "I, Yisro, your father-in-law, am coming to you, and your wife and her two sons with her" (18:6). Rashi: If you will not come out for my sake, come out for your wife's sake, and if you will not come out for your wife's sake, come out for the sake of her two sons

Why was Yisro so keen for Moshe to come and meet him? It was surely not for the sake of his own honor.

Yisro knew that Moshe had become a man of G-d, and therefore sent a message to him that even though he had become so close to Hashem and removed from worldly pleasures and interests, he still needed to be concerned for the welfare of his family. Even if he saw no need to engage in worldly matters for himself, he should still come out to meet them for the sake of his wife and sons, because even the most holy people who cleave to Hashem constantly cannot breach their interpersonal obligations.

FICTITIOUS CONVERTS

And Moshe told his father-in-law everything that Hashem had done to Paroh and to the Egyptians on account of the Jews, all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and that Hashem had saved them (18:8)

We can understand why Moshe told his father-in-law about the miracles that had taken place, since it is a mitzvah to publicize them, but why did he tell him about the hardships (*keriyas yam suf* and Amolek – Rashi) which they had endured?

The *Maor Voshemesh* explains that Moshe was worried that Yisro wanted to convert because he was interested in the benefits the Jews had obtained, namely the miracles which they had witnessed and their salvation from the Egyptians, and if that was his motivation, it would be preferable for him not to convert at all, since Chazal say that converts who convert for such motives are more difficult than *sapachat* (*Yevomos* 47b) (literally "a sore on the skin", but here: an external, subsidiary group: see Maharal *ibid*), because they do not accept upon themselves the yoke of heaven, and afterwards, if they endure difficulties, are likely to rebel. Therefore, Moshe wanted to inform Yisro that it is not all plain sailing for the Jews in this world, and they have to endure difficult periods because of the nations of the world. (Similarly, a prospective convert is told about stringencies and punishments in order to dissuade him and to determine if he is sincere and acting for the sake of Heaven).

Yisro nevertheless responded, "Blessed is Hashem etc.", thereby emphasizing that he intended to convert for the sake of Heaven, having enquired after every form of idol worship in the world and finding them all futile, he wanted to nestle under the wings of the Shechina and accept the yoke of Torah and *mitzvos* for Hashem's sake.

The *Maor Voshemesh* adds that just like there are two types of converts, those who seek to avoid physical trials and enjoy the benefits the Jews enjoy, on the one hand, and those who seek to join the Jewish nation due to their love of Hashem and their desire to attain spiritual benefits, on the other hand,

so too are these aspects reflected in two types of Jews. One type serves Hashem primarily in times of trouble when they turn to Him for assistance. Although the *avoda* of such Jews is very important in the eyes of Hashem, since it is dependent on the motive of obtaining a physical benefit, it is potentially fickle, and once they have obtained it, they are likely to revert to their previous ways. By contrast, the *avoda* of righteous Jews who serve Hashem due to their love of Him is consistent, genuine and enduring, since it is not dependent on ephemeral causes.

DOWNFALL OF THE WICKED

“Yisro was happy” (18:9). Rashi: *His flesh became prickly because he was upset about the destruction of the Egyptians*

Even though Yisro believed in Hashem, and was happy that He had saved the Jews, he was still not able to hear about the misfortune that befell the Egyptians without his flesh becoming prickly from distress about their destruction.

Yisro was still at this level at the beginning of his path, but we have to know that just as we are happy at the salvation of the Jews, we also rejoice at the destruction of the wicked, as it says (*Mishlei* 11, 1): “When the wicked are destroyed, there is joy”. This is not only because we have been saved from them, but also because of the sanctification of the divine name upon their downfall.

The Rambam (*Ovel* 1:10) rules that upon the death of an *apikores* or anyone for whom his relatives do not mourn, his relatives wear white, eat, drink, and rejoice at the demise of Hashem’s enemies. Rav Sternbuch recalls that when Rav Moshe Schneider heard about the death of Stephen Wise, an anti-religious Zionist Reform leader in America, he donned Shabbos clothes and broke into a spontaneous dance after *Maariv*. This man had thwarted efforts to save European Jews in World War II and had supported anti-religious coercive activities against religious Jewish children in *Eretz Yisroel*. Therefore, his death was a reason to rejoice.

SHE’OSO LI KOL ZORKI IN THE CAMPS

“Now I know that Hashem is greater than all the deities, for with the thing that they plotted, [He came] upon them” (18:11)

We are blessed with a special ability to praise Hashem in all situations. When Rav Sternbuch was in Europe after World War II he met a *yid* who told him that he had been in a concentration camp where his wife and children had all being gassed, and he had to work hard all day and pretend to look strong to avoid the Nazis noticing any weakness and sending him to the gas chambers after being beaten mercilessly.

That *yid* told Rav Sternbuch that despite all the torture he had to endure he was particular to put on *tefilin* every day when no one was looking, and he prayed all the *tefilos* to Hashem at every possible opportunity, although he would leave out the blessing *she’oso li kol zorki*, because since he was suffering so terribly from morning to evening, had lost his wife and children, and was in constant danger of being sent to the gas chambers himself, he felt it would be a total lie to tell Hashem that He had provided him with his every want. However, he had a friend in a similar situation to his who told him: “We believe that Hashem is just, and all His ways are surely for the good, even though we don’t always perceive this clearly with our minds, there must be a very great reward awaiting us which we cannot even imagine, and we must accept the heavenly decree for the good and for the bad”. When the *yid* heard this he shouted out the *brocho she’oso li kol zorki*, and everyone present answered *omen*.

APPOINTING DAYONIM

“You will surely wear yourself out both you and these people who are with you for the matter is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. I will advise you, and may Hashem be with you” (18:18-19)

The main prerequisite for a successful *dayan* is not for him to be a big *rov* and *lamdan*, but rather that he should enjoy *siyata dishmaya*. Yisro was telling Moshe: "let me advise you what you should do so that Hashem may be with you, that you may enjoy *siyata dishmaya*. If you will relieve yourself of some of the burdens of public service, you will be in a better position to concentrate on coming closer to Hashem and serving Him, and then He will become closer to you".

Nowadays, the prevalent custom is to appoint *dayonim* on the basis of examination results. Anyone who achieves good marks immediately becomes a candidate for *dayonus*. In reality, *dayonim* should be appointed by *gedolei yisroel* who should ascertain whether candidates are also G-d-fearing, in which case Hashem will be with them, and such *dayonim* will have the merit of issuing proper judgments.

JEWISH LEADERS

“You shall choose... men... who hate monetary gain [sonay beza]” (18:21)

Rav Zelig Reuven Bengis once told Rav Sternbuch that although he knew Jews who do not run after money, he had yet to meet one who hated it. How, then, could Moshe have looked for a person who does not exist?

Rav Sternbuch answered that Rashi (as interpreted by the Ramban) already explains that *sonay beza* does not refer to people who hate money, but rather to those who hate holding onto money which others can claim from them in a *Beis Din*, and they part with that money before a *Beis Din* forces them to do so.

Rav Bengis himself suggested that *sonay beza* refers to *dayonim* who cannot tolerate leaders who sell themselves for money. Such people do not hate money itself, but rather hate the money which plays a part in the considerations of leaders that cause them to make corrupt judgements.

Alternatively, *sonay beza* does not refer to people who hate money, but rather to those who hate people who run after money, because if someone does not feel a revulsion for such people, that is a sign that he himself is still somewhat attached to money, and cannot serve as a *dayan*, because it will be easy to change his opinion by giving him bribes or favors.

RAV STERNBUCH PLACATES THE VICAR

“So shall you say to the house of Yaakov and tell the sons of Yisroel” (19:3)

Rashi cites the Chazal that the house of Yaakov refers to the women. Those who are ignorant of the Torah reproach us with discriminating against women and denying them equality. Chazal tell us that the women were commanded first here, because they are the ones who perform the commandments with greater alacrity, or, others say, because they take their children to learn Torah. In general, women are responsible for maintaining the sanctity of the Jewish home and guarding it against harmful influences from the outside. The fact that they are exempt from certain *mitzvos* does not mean that their merits are less than those of men, or that they are less important in the eyes of Hashem.

When Rav Sternbuch and his late brother were stationed in the English countryside at the beginning of World War II they were hosted by someone who turned out to be an English vicar. Their host came across a translation of the *siddur* known as the Singer's Prayer Book, and noticed the blessing "who has not made me a heathen". He became infuriated. "Is this how the Jews repay us for all the rights they enjoy in join this country", he ranted. "Look how they make fun of us and degrade us in their prayers!" He threatened to make a big fuss if the Jews would not delete this blessing from their prayer book.

Rav Sternbuch (who was about 14 at the time) pointed out to the vicar that in the next but one blessing in the prayer book every Jewish male thanks Hashem that “He has not made me a woman”. Do you think, he said, that we despise all our women? Of course we don't! We honor and respect them, but they have a different function in life. Similarly, Jews have a different task than Gentiles do. Would you like to stop eating pork or give up on a whole list of things you would not do without? You wouldn't, but we're happy to do so. Gentiles too have a holy task to fulfill in this life by recognizing the Creator, but we observe a myriad of commandments and thank G-d every day for this privilege and the closeness to Him that they create”. This argument placated the vicar.

HOW TO REPENT

“And Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Go to the people and prepare them today and tomorrow’ (19:10)

Those wishing to repent their sins should not make drastic decisions, because often, after a short while, the initial feeling of awakening wanes, or they are not successful in practice in fighting their desires, so that they give up, and return completely to their evil ways. Therefore, they should rather adopt resolutions for one or two days at a time, and then, if they are successful, they can gradually make more progress, and eventually become complete *ba'alei teshuva*.

Accordingly, this *possuk* says, “Prepare them for today and tomorrow”, because before *matan Torah* when the nation was about to accept the yoke of Torah, Moshe guided them by telling them that they should not assume that they could change completely in one go, because such an attitude was dangerous, but they should rather make decisions to change only for “today and tomorrow”, and then make more progress slowly but surely.

However, the evil inclination endeavors to convince a potential *baal teshuva* that if he does not undertake a complete change in his life, he would have achieved nothing. In truth, we have no idea of the enormous value of *teshuva* even for one day. If one receives a great reward even for a thought of *teshuva*, how much more so for *teshuva* in deeds for one complete day.

MURDERING TIME

You shall not murder. (20:13)

Why does it not say “you shall not shed blood”? Someone who touches a *goses* (a dying person) is considered a murderer. Even though the *goses* will die shortly anyway, by hastening his death by even a moment the person is considered to have shed his blood. The *Derech Pikudecha* (written by the author of *Bnei Yissochor*) says in the name of Rav Menachem Mendel of Riminov that someone who wastes his friend's time — or even his own time — thereby preventing the friend or himself from learning Torah during that time, is considered to have shed blood, because the main purpose of our existence in this world is to delve into Torah, so that stealing someone's time and depriving him of a life of Torah is deemed a kind of temporary murder for the duration of the deprivation.

In a similar vein, the Chofetz Chaim would say, “People say that time is money, but I say time is a chunk of life.”

Based on this, we may suggest that the Torah specifically prohibits murder instead of shedding blood in order to include all kinds of murder, such as depriving a person of his life force by wasting his time, even without actually shedding his blood.

Rav Moshe Schneider would explain the *gemoro* (*Avodo Zoro* 10b) that “Rebbi cried and said, ‘There are those who acquire their World (to Come) in an hour’, that he was crying about the severity of wasting even a minute. If one hour is so important that you can acquire eternal afterlife through it, then someone who wastes even a minute, how much more so many hours, is likely to be severely punished for it.