

That's What We're Here For

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Back at the beginning of the world, when creation was still unsullied by man and his struggles, nothing was guaranteed.

The Gemara in Shabbos (88a) quotes Reish Lakish, who taught that when Hashem finished creating the world, He, so to speak, put everything on hold and conditioned the world's existence. Hashem told His creations that if the Jewish people would accept the Torah when He would present it to them, everything would continue to exist, but if the Jews would have a negative response, the world would be over and everything would revert to nothingness.

The existence of the world depended on what would happen on the sixth day of Sivan. That day, when the Jews stood at Har Sinai in complete achdus, the Medrash states that Hashem said He would take advantage of their unity to deliver the Torah to them.

When Hashem presented His offer, they responded in unison, "Naaseh v'nishma."

The Gemara (ibid.) quotes Rav Sima'i, who taught that when the Jewish people proclaimed naaseh v'nishma, six hundred thousand malochim came to each person and tied two crowns on their heads, one for naaseh and one for nishma.

Rabi Elozor taught (see Shabbos ibid.) that a Heavenly voice rang out and declared, "Who taught this secret of the Divine angels to My children?"

What was so special about naaseh v'nishma that those two words created such a Heavenly response?

Seforim such as those of Rav Chaim Vital and the Maharal teach that Hashem created us comprised of two differing entities, chomer and tzurah. Chomer refers to the physical aspects, and tzurah to the spiritual, the abstract, the goal, the direction to be taken through utilizing the chomer. There is a perpetual struggle between the body and the soul, the guf and the neshomah. All throughout our lives, every day, as we make decisions about how to live, the neshomah and the guf, the yeitzer hara and yeitzer tov, are debating. How we proceed is determined by which side wins.

When the Jews proclaimed naaseh v'nishma, they were saying, in effect, that they recognized this steady battle and were committing themselves to follow the word of Hashem and be people of tzurah, not chomer. They were saying that they would work to subjugate the physical to the spiritual.

When we sing on Shavuos, "Naaseh v'nishma omru k'echod," we are celebrating that promise and renewing the vow.

Naaseh means that we will observe the mitzvos that Hashem will give us, and nishma means that we will study the Torah that teaches us those mitzvos. The greatness of their response was that they weren't only accepting upon themselves to study Torah so that they would be able to properly obey the mitzvos. They were also stating that they would learn Torah with no ulterior motive other than to study Hashem's words. It was this that Rav Yosef was referring to (Pesochim 68b) when he addressed the greatness of the Yom Tov of Shavuos and said, "Ih lav hai yoma kama Yosef ika beshuka." In today's vernacular, he said, "If not for this day, I would be just another Yosef out there in the street."

There are many explanations of what Rav Yosef meant, but Rashi is succinct and clear. He writes that Rav Yosef was saying, "If not for this day upon which we were given the Torah, which I studied and which raised me, I would be just a regular person."

Rav Yosef was referring to Klal Yisroel's statement that they would study Torah lishmah, for its own sake and not for any other reason. Because he studied Torah purely for the sake of studying Torah, he was raised to a higher level.

The same way Torah raised Rav Yosef, it can raise us if we dedicate ourselves to it and follow the words of Chazal at the beginning of Parshas Bechukosai. Hashem says to us, "Im bechukosai teileichu, if you will follow the ways of My commandments, I will bless you."

Rashi, however, based on Chazal, explains the word teileichu to mean that if you would work hard to study the Torah, you will earn Hashem's blessings. Along with those blessings, you will also become a holy person. Torah raises the spiritual levels of those who study it, for when you are learning Torah, you are studying the words of Hashem and connecting to Him.

Chazal teach, "Yisroel v'oraisa v'Kudsha Brich Hu chad hu—Klal Yisroel and Torah and Hashem are one." The more we learn, the higher we rise and the more connected we become to Hashem. We bring additional pleasure to Hashem as we also fulfill the purpose for which He created the world.

This is conditional on us being connected to the rest of Klal Yisroel, as we shall see.

The Shulchan Aruch (428:4) states that we always read Parshas Bamidbar on the Shabbos prior to Shavuos. The commentators explain that this is based on the Gemara in Megillah (32b) that this was instituted by Ezra. [See the Gemara.] Tosefos and the Levush explain that this is done to separate the curses of Parshas Bechukosai from the Yom Tov of Shavuos.

Perhaps we can offer another reason for this practice and say that it is because in Parshas Bamidbar, the Jews were counted. The Torah states that if the Jewish people are counted numerically one by one, they will be punished with a plague.

The Torah prescribes that we are to be counted with the machatzis hashekel coin. Every person who is included in the count contributes a half-shekel coin to the Bais Hamikdosh, and the population number is arrived at by adding up the number of coins.

When the people see that everyone is equal and no single person is worth more than another, and they observe that each one on his own is only a half—they need another person to be considered one and whole—this brings unity, achdus. And when there is achdus amongst Klal Yisroel, the Shechinah can dwell in our midst. Where the Shechinah is, there can be no plague.

Therefore, we learn Parshas Bamidbar prior to Shavuos to remind us to be b'achdus as we approach the Yom Tov of Matan Torah.

Achdus on Shavuos is not only a good idea, but a prerequisite to Kabbolas HaTorah. Each year on the sixth day of Sivan—Shavuos—we receive the Torah anew, just as we did on the sixth day of Sivan when we stood at Har Sinai.

This is derived from the posuk which states, referring to the Bnei Yisroel at Har Sinai, “Vayichan shom Yisroel neged honor,” using the singular form of the words vayichan and Yisroel to teach us that they stood there as one person with one heart, in complete unity. This harmony was necessary for Hashem to deliver them the Torah. The Medrash states that when Hashem saw that the people were united, He said, “This is the time that I will give the Torah to My children.” Had they not been unified b'achdus, they would not have received the Torah.

The Korban Ha'eidah on the Yerushalmi (Rosh Hashanah 4) states that each year, on Shavuos, it is like the day we stood at Har Sinai to receive the Torah. Since we receive the Torah anew each year on the sixth of Sivan, we have to properly prepare ourselves for the annual Kabbolas HaTorah. One of the ways to do that is to be b'achdus.

The Shelah goes further and cites from the sefer Tolaas Yaakov that Shavuos is a Yom Hadin on what share we will have in the Torah.

Therefore, it stands to reason that just as the Jewish people prepared themselves for the original Kabbolas HaTorah, we have to do the same. Through the days of Sefirah from Pesach until Shavuos, we refrain from frivolity and concentrate on raising ourselves day by day through the 48 levels of proper conduct, purity, and holiness required to accept the Torah. As we mourn the death of the talmidim of Rabi Akiva, we work on improving the way we deal with each other. This includes speech and conduct, perfecting our middos and treating everybody the way we want people to treat us, with decency, respect, and love. In light of what we wrote, to be prepared for the din of Shavuos, we must put an extra emphasis on working towards the goal of achdus, which is necessary for Kabbolas HaTorah.

The Shelah writes that just as on the day Hashem created the world He revisits it and examines people and their actions to determine what the next year will be like, so too, on the day of Matan

Torah, which is “moreh al chiddush ha’olam,” Hashem wants to examine what is happening in the world as He judges it regarding Torah.

I am perplexed by what the Shelah means when he writes that the day of Matan Torah, namely Shavuos, points to creation. Perhaps we can explain that his intention is to say that, in effect, the act of creation was completed on the sixth day of Sivan at Matan Torah, as we saw from Reish Lakish that the totality of the briaah was dependent on whether the Jewish people would accept the Torah.

Thus, the day of Shavuos, when the world began in earnest, is truly a beginning of the world, worthy of a day of judgment, similar to the day of judgment on the first day of Tishrei, the day the world was created, which we refer to as Rosh Hashanah.

We can also say that on the day the Torah was given to the Jewish people, the world entered a new period, for Torah is what gives us life and sustains us. It is the reason Hashem created us and the reason He created the world. Therefore, it is fitting that on this day, He reviews the success of His world and whether it is reaching its purpose. He reviews whether His nation is realizing their purpose in Torah.

Hashem looks down at us and observes us to see if we are toiling in Torah and if we are spending our time immersed in our Torah learning to arrive at its truth, which He meant to be the essence of our life. He looks at our thoughts and actions. He views the way we conduct ourselves and deal with others as He determines what type of Torah year we will have. Will it be a year of serious learning, of understanding what we are learning and remembering it, or will it be a year during which we will have to work extremely hard to understand and retain anything we learn?

Hashem looks to see how we go about our study and observance of Torah. If He sees that we are studying in a lackadaisical and superficial manner, He may not be happy with us and will chas veshalom grant us a year during which it will take superhuman effort to fulfill our purpose in the world.

Additionally, prior to giving the Torah, Hashem told Moshe to tell the Jewish people to make themselves holy and to purify themselves (Shemos 19:10) in order to be able to receive the Torah.

We must do the same. During the period leading up to Shavuos and on Shavuos itself, we must work to sanctify ourselves and our actions and make ourselves holy. We have to raise ourselves from the nonsense we are busy with and rip ourselves away from things that do not lead to holiness or purity. We must examine the things we read and what we speak about, and work to improve ourselves, so that we are not busy with petty things or talking about other people, especially when being judgmental and mocking. We must be uplifted and positive, working to make ourselves and those around us better.

Our society is steeped in too much silliness and shallowness. There are so many causes and so many people suffering. It is so expensive to live these days and we should be trying to find ways to help people and lighten their load. The topic of last week's Yated Chinuch Roundtable was sad and vital. People of goodwill need to sit down and figure out how regular, normal people in our world can make ends meet. It is nearly impossible today to survive on an average salary, and even on two average salaries.

There are so many poor people desperate for help, but no less desperate are families where both parents work. That itself is not optimal, but that's a topic for a different time. There isn't enough money to pay for a mortgage, own a car, have health insurance, and cover tuition. People are crashing and a solution must be found.

We need to work on achdus, which means caring about other people and their situations. It means the little things that we encounter every day. It means that we find a way to get along even with people who are different from us and think differently than we do.

Being a Torah Yid means learning and growing and caring, having high goals and reaching them. It means to be holier and better, nicer and more moral and honest, righteous and spiritual, and committed to excellence. It means to always seek to place tzurah over chomer, to do what the yeitzer tov, not the yeitzer hara, wants. It means saying naaseh v'nishma all day and every day.

We can all do it. That's what we are here for, pre-Shavuos, on Shavuos, post-Shavuos, and all year round.

May we all be zoche to the wonderful blessings reserved for those who study and follow the Torah.

Have a good Yom Tov.