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**WEEKLY PARSHA
ARCHIVE Q&A**

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BAMIDBAR

SANCTITY OF THE FIRSTBORN AND SANCTITY OF THE LEVITES

In *Parshas Bamidbar*, Moshe Rabbeinu is commanded by Hashem to sanctify the firstborns, as well as the Levites of the Jewish people: “Behold, I have taken the Levites from the among the children of Yisrael, in place of every firstborn, the first issue of every womb among the children of Yisrael, and the Levites shall be Mine. For every firstborn is mine....”¹

The sanctity of the firstborns of the Jewish people began with the night of Pesach, when Hashem killed all the firstborns of Egypt. Ever since the exodus from Egypt, the firstborns received a sanctified status, and when they stood at Har Sinai, they were destined to do the *avodah* (the service in the *Beis HaMikdash*²).

Rashi states that after the sin with the golden calf, the firstborns were punished for taking part in the sin, and were no longer allowed to do the *avodah*. In their place, the Levites received the rights to do the *avodah* of the firstborns, in the merit of refusing to take part in the sin. This conferred a status of sanctity upon the Levites.

However, it is clear that the sanctity of the firstborn and the sanctity of the Levites were not the same exact kind of sanctity. It was not simply a transferal of the sanctity of the firstborns upon the Levites. Rather, when the firstborns lost their sanctity and the Levites became sanctified instead of them, there was a change in the concept of this sanctity. At first it was a sanctity of the firstborns, and later it was a sanctity of the Levites – two different and distinct kinds of sanctity.

THE SANCTITY OF FIRSTBORN\BEGINNING AND LEVITES\CONNECTION

What, indeed, was the difference between the sanctity of the firstborn and the sanctity of the Levites?

The Torah says that a firstborn is sanctified because he is *peter rechem*, “first to exit the womb”. Thus, a firstborn represents a root, a beginning - a *raishis* (first). In contrast, the Levites did not receive any sanctity in the sense of being the first. Although there is a commandment of “And you shall sanctify them”³, to give certain honors and preferences to a Kohen and Levi, the sanctity of the Levites is not because they have any “first” status, but for a different reason.

When Levi [ancestor of all Levites] was born, Leah said, “*This time my husband shall*

1 *Bamidbar* 3: 12-13

2 *The Holy Temple*

3 *Vayikra* 21:8

*become attached to me, for I have born him three sons*⁴ – and the depth of this is that the word “*Levi*” is from the word “*levayah*”, escort, which connotes an attachment\connection between two things, the escort and that which is being escorted. The sanctity of the Levite is therefore defined as a connecting point between two previously separated points.

Thus, the sanctity of the firstborn was because they had a status of being the “first”, whereas the sanctity of the Levites is because they are a connecting point which enables holiness.

THREE-FOLD CONNECTION WITH HASHEM

There is also a more fundamental understanding of the difference between the sanctity of the firstborns with the status of the Levites - and which also can help us prepare to receive the Torah.

The sanctity of the Levites represents connection of two sides. Chazal state, “Three ties are bound to each other – *Yisrael* (the Jewish people), the Torah, and *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* (G-d)”⁵. There is Hashem, the Jewish people, and the Torah. The Torah is called *bris* (pact), for a *bris* connotes a bond and connection, and so is the Torah the “connecting point” between Hashem and Yisrael. This is like the sanctity of the Levites, which connects together two sides.

This is the depth behind the sanctity of the Levites – it is the three-fold connection of Hashem, Yisrael, and the Torah, with the Torah being the middle, connecting point between Hashem and Yisrael.

The sanctity of the firstborn, however, represents the level at the giving of the Torah, when the firstborns still had their sanctified status to do the *avodah*, which was taken away from them only after the sin with the Golden Calf. The sanctity of the firstborn is not about a connection to something after it now exists - rather, [it is more inherent], it is a connection [to the very essence of something, for it is a connection to beginning point of something.

In clearer terms, the sanctity of the firstborn, which is a sanctity of the being the first, is represented by the concept that Hashem is called “First”, for it is written, “*Ani Rishon*” (“I am the First”)⁶. The Torah is also called “*raishis*\first”, as *Rashi* in

4 *Beraishis* 29:34

5 *Zohar parshas Re'eh* 73a

6 *Yeshayahu* 44:10

the beginning of *Parshas Beraishis* cites from *Midrash Rabbah*, that “The world was created for the Torah which is called *raishis*\first.”⁷ *Rashi* there also cites Chazal who state that “The world was created for the sake of Yisrael, who are called *raishis*”.

Thus, the nation of Yisrael shares a bond with Hashem [and His Torah] on two levels – a bond through the power of “connection”, as symbolized through the sanctity of the Levites, and a [deeper] bond, through being connected with “*raishis*\first”, as symbolized by the sanctity of the firstborn.

THE TORAH – OUR CONNECTION OF “RAISHIS” WITH HASHEM

Through the Torah, which is called the *raishis* (beginning, or first), there is a bond of the nation of Yisrael with Hashem, for at the giving of the Torah, there was the revelation of Hashem and His Torah, to the nation of Yisrael.

On Pesach, Hashem revealed His presence and also the firstborn status of the Jewish people, and especially the firstborns of the Jewish people; 50 days later, on Shavuos, there was also this revelation of Hashem, when “Hashem opened all the heavens and showed them *Ain Od Milvado*,” that there is nothing else besides Him.⁸ At the giving of the Torah, the Creator, Who is the ultimate *Raishis* (First, or Beginning) was revealed. The Torah, which is also called the *raishis*, was revealed. The nation of Yisrael is inherently connected to the *raishis* – to the Torah, and to the ultimate *Raishis*, Hashem.

This was the kind of *d'veykus* (connection) that the nation of Yisrael had to Hashem when they stood at Har Sinai.

A DEEPER LEVEL OF BONDING WITH HASHEM: FINDING OUR BEGINNING POINT

This matter will now be explained further.

In This World, in whatever a person is involved with, there are two ways of how he may relate to it and connect to it. He may either have a love towards it, or he relates to it with awe. In the spiritual realm, there are also these two ways of connecting. There is both a love and awe towards the Creator, and there is also love and awe towards the Torah. From a superficial standpoint, the nation of Yisrael is outside of Hashem and His Torah, and they [we] have a task to connect to that reality.

That, however, is but an external, superficial level of bonding with Hashem and the

⁷ *Beraishis Rabbah 1:1, cited in Rashi Beraishis 1:1*

⁸ *Rashi to Shemos 15:35*

Torah – and, if only people could merit even this level. According to this understanding, there is Hashem, there is Torah, there is the nation of Yisrael whom I am a part of, and my task is to connect myself to that reality.

But there is a deeper view. In whatever we are involved with, we can really find its root, or its *raishis* (beginning point). We can look into what came before it, and then we are led to its source.

EXAMPLE: PARENTS

Here is an example of this concept. What is the depth behind the *mitzvah* of honoring parents? It is so that we should realize that our beginning did not begin with us, but with something that came before us.

The *avodah* of a person is to build his soul, in order to become an *adam hashelaim* (perfected individual) as the *Mesillas Yesharim* states. At first one must know his outer “garments”, and then his more inner “garments”, and then he can get deeper into his soul.

First, [he should get used to this idea of “garments” by] he should see his physical clothing. Then he should realize that his body and its forces are also “garments” atop his soul, and he should recognize the bodily forces. Getting further in, he needs to recognize the aspects of a more inner garment, his *nefesh habehaimis* (the “animal soul”, or the base, undeveloped emotions of the human soul). From there, he can slowly get further into his soul.

One should then contemplate and recognize that his parents are a *levush* (garment) to his *neshamah* (Divine soul). In order for one to get to his actual essence, he needs to get to his own beginning point. His physical beginning began with his parents. That is the depth of honoring parents – to get to the beginning of something.

When one views Creation, if he looks superficially, he just sees a world in front of him. But if he looks deeper into Creation, he will see the source of everything. “Hashem looked [saw] into the Torah and created the world” – and so, too, does man have the *avodah* to “look and see” that there is a Creator of the world; and from this contemplation, he can be led to the root of creation, which is the Torah.

This is a deep way to prepare to receive the Torah. “Hashem looked into the Torah to create the world”, and our *avodah*, from our human perspective, is to get to “see”

the Torah from this world. How do we get to the Torah from seeing the world? If we just look at the world and see *niflaos haborei* (wonders of the Creator), that is wonderful, and we will receive much wisdom. and it is all true. But there is a deeper part to life: One can try to discover the source of each thing he comes across.

He can start with himself, and see that his beginning started with his parents, through the *mitzvah* of honoring parents. When he views the world in such a way, he can get to the Torah. And when one takes a look into himself - his soul - he can get to the beginning of his soul, his *nefesh chayah* (living soul) which is called the “breath of Hashem”, of which the Sages state, “The One Who blew, from His own did He breathe it”¹⁰, so to speak. In this way, man can get to Hashem, from himself.¹¹

OUR TRUE BEGINNING - THE GIVING OF THE TORAH

That is the depth of the giving of the Torah.

The world was created for the sake of the Torah and for the sake of Yisrael, which are both called *raishis* \beginning. Before the giving of the Torah, there was just a world. After the Torah was given, there was now a revelation that the beginning of the world was not only for the sake of Torah and for the sake of Yisrael, but that Torah and Yisrael are the *shvil*, the path, by which all Heavenly sustenance comes to the world (as the *Nefesh HaChaim* explains). At the giving of the Torah, the true *raishis* was revealed – not the simple beginning of Creation which took place on the first day of Creation, but the true [inner] beginning of Creation - which was the Torah that Hashem looked into to create the world.

DRAWING CLOSER TO THE DEEPER LEVEL OF CLOSENESS

If we understand this matter deeply, we see that there are two deep perspectives towards life.

The perspective which people are more familiar with is reminiscent of the concept of the “sanctity of the Levites”. We are currently not found on the level we were at by the giving of the Torah, for ever since the *Luchos* were broken, we fell from that exalted level, and, correspondingly, we fell from the perspective of “sanctity of the firstborn” to the perspective of “sanctity of the Levites”. Our usual perspective

¹⁰ *Ramban Beraishis 2:3*

¹¹ *Editor's Note: The concept of knowing the Creator through knowing one's own soul is depicted in the verse in Iyov (19:26), “From my flesh, I see G-d.”*

reflects **the sanctity of the Levites, which represents the level of closeness with Hashem in the sense that there is Hashem, Torah, and Yisrael, and that we need to connect with Him and His Torah [as if this reality exists “outside” of us].** It is the understanding that *now* that there is a Creator, Torah, and Yisrael, we recognize that bond and we seek a bond with Hashem and His Torah.

But there is a more inner perspective towards life, which corresponds to “sanctity of the firstborn”, which is a deeper level of closeness with Hashem than “sanctity of the Levites”.

The giving of the Torah changed all of life and all of man. It revealed the power that one can find the source of each thing he comes across. In each thing you encounter, you can think of what came before it.

When we live in this world, we tend to think that it is we who do everything. We certainly have *emunah* that Hashem does everything, but while we are actually going about our daily living, we usually think that we are doing it all. But if we want to draw closer to the level of standing at Har Sinai, we should think *about what is actually empowering us* to act, as we move and perform throughout the day.

For example, when you see a fruit, you can wonder where it came from. It came from some man who planted it, who descends all the way back to Adam HaRishon, and Adam was created by Hashem. Every time you see a fruit, you can try thinking of the first fruit, which Hashem made through His word, by looking into the Torah to create the world. When you make the blessing of *Borei Pri Ha'Eitz* on the fruit, remember that the *Borei* is the Source of this fruit, just as the first fruit was created by His own word.

There are many more examples as well, of this concept. When it comes Yom Tov, we have a *mitzvah* of *simchas Yom Tov*, to eat meat. As you are eating meat on Yom Tov, you can also think of the first animal which all meat came from, which was created by Hashem on the fifth day. This kind of thinking connects you all the time with the Creator, all the way back to the six days of creation. Living in this way is an overhaul. It connects a person to the Torah on a deeper level, in which one is always connected with his beginning point.

In the three days preceding Shavuos, there is preparation for the Torah. The three days of preparation symbolize the three-fold connection between Hashem, Torah and Yisrael, corresponding to the sanctity of the Levites. At the day of the giving of

the Torah itself, though, there is a deeper level of closeness. It is no longer a three-fold connection, but a level of Torah *which is the Creator's revelation to us*, where we are “one” with the Creator - as the Sages state, “Hashem, Torah, and Yisrael are one”¹²) – a connection with Hashem through recognizing the *raishis*, the “beginning point”, of each thing. How can reach such a level of connection to the Torah, especially since the Torah preceded man? As explained, it is when we are looking for the root (or beginning) of each thing.

This perspective connects us to a bond with the Torah on the level of *raishis*, beginning. It is not simply a connection to the Torah “now” that it is here. Rather, it is a connection to our inherent bond with the Torah, for both Yisrael and the Torah are called the *raishis* beginning. From there we can reach the Creator.

Without this perspective, a person does not reach his own beginning point, so he will not either reach the beginning of the Torah, and he will not completely reach the Creator. Of the Creator it said, “*He was, is, and will always be*” – the Creator always existed before Creation, so to speak. One who recognizes the Creator on the level of the “sanctity of the Levites” is only connecting to the Creator “after” Creation. In contrast, when one connects to the Creator through the perspective explained here, he touches upon the beginning of his soul as it in his body, as well as the beginning of his soul root above, and the beginning of the Torah.

Hashem says, “*I am First and Last, and besides for Me there is none other*”.¹³ The ability to connect to Hashem is uniquely the Jewish people's, and it cannot be reached by any other nation. Only of the Jewish people it is said, “*Yisrael*, since the time they stood at Sinai, their impurity left them.”¹⁴ This was said about the nation of *Yisrael*, not of the gentiles. By the giving of the Torah, Hashem opened the heavens and revealed “*Ain Od Milvado*”, that there is nothing else besides Him, and this meant that the bond between Yisrael and Hashem was not simply “now” that there was Creation, but a bond that existed even before Creation.

SHAVUOS – THE RETURN TO THE INHERENT BOND WITH THE CREATOR

These words, understandably, are describing a lofty spiritual concept. But we have

¹² Zohar parshas Achrei Mos 73a

¹³ Yeshayahu 44:10

¹⁴ Shabbos 145b

no loftier day of the year than the day of the giving of the Torah. All other days of the year, with almost no exceptions, are on a level of after the sin of Adam. The giving of the Torah was a level reminiscent of before the sin of Adam. (To some degree, *Rosh HaShanah* is also on a level of before the sin of Adam, from the perspective of time.) We have one day of the year, the day when the Torah was given to Yisrael, where we were free from the Angel of Death, and when the spirit of impurity left us entirely.

Each year, the spiritual light of this day returns. Although it is not completely revealed, due to the presence of sin today, it is still allowed to shine, and it exists in a concealed dimension.

The power of Yisrael to bond with Hashem from the depths of their *neshamos* – that spiritual light is allowed to shine during this time of the year. It is the power of each individual Jew to reach the *raishis* beginning of his soul. From there a person can connect to the Torah which is called *raishis* – and, as explained, this is not the level of Torah of “after” Creation, but the level of Torah as it was before Creation, at its very beginning.

At that level, the Jewish people enjoy a bond with the Torah as if they are “twins” with the Torah, who have been born together, [and who are seen as ‘always being together’] – and even more so, they have this relationship of “twins” towards Hashem, as it were.¹⁵

IN CONCLUSION

May we merit together, as well as the entire Creation, to once again receive the light of the giving of the Torah. It should be revealed completely, the revelation of Hashem on His world, through the revelation of His Torah, and through the nation of Yisrael, [which is] the extension of this spiritual light - and from there, may it spread to the rest of the Creation.

שיחת השבוע 027 במדבר ראשית תשע"ז

¹⁵ Editor's Note: Refer to the derashas of *Mazal of Rosh Chodesh 05 /Twins* & *Mazal of Rosh Chodesh 06 Closer Than Twins*

SHAVUOS – AVODAH ON NIGHT OF SHAVUOS

The Rav has said that our avodah on the night of Shavuos is to connect, as much as we can, to the “50th Gate of Holiness”, to the level of Torah that was before the sin, to Torah learning amidst mesirus nefesh (self-sacrifice). How can I do this, practically speaking? We know that in Torah learning, a person needs to be intellectually focused, and that a person shouldn’t involve the heart or emotions in it. Therefore, how can I connect to the “50th Gate of Holiness” on the night of Shavuos, which is a “heart” matter? It would make sense if I was learning agadta, which is more of a “heart” kind of study, but what if I’m learning regular Gemara, which requires a focused intellect? How can I stay focused on my learning on Shavuos night while also trying to reach the “50th Gate” in my Torah learning on the night of Shavuos? (Obviously this question will only bother a person who is interested in avodas Hashem, as opposed to those who only learn Torah for purely academic and intellectual purposes).

ANSWER

Before beginning to learn, concentrate with your heart, from the depths of your heart and from thoughts of repentance (as stated in sefer Nefesh HaChaim, shaar IV). Your heart should mainly be used before beginning to learn, as a preparation for learning. After you have made this “heart” preparation well, attach your thoughts, calmly, and with precise focus, as you calmly concentrate with your mind, in a deep and penetrating way [to the Torah discussions you are learning] until you have exhausted your thoughts, amidst inner silence, calmness, and pleasantness.

Keep repeating this process, in a cycle, as much as you can on your own level, by using the abilities of your soul. Make sure that you do not exhaust your thoughts too much, to the point that you cannot think properly afterwards, chas v’shalom – for that is an error that many have fallen into. Every so often, you should break up your thinking process by calming your thoughts.

In this way, practically speaking, you can begin your Torah learning sessions with repentance and a clear heart, and then by connecting your mind to the Torah discussions you are learning about, concentrating with all of your focus, but amidst pleasantness, as stated earlier, and then by calming your mind. Keep repeating the cycle. This kind of learning closely resembles the way that the Chazon Ish would learn Torah for all of his life.

SHAVUOS – EXPERIENTIALLY CONNECTING TO SINAI

The Jewish people received the Torah and reached a state where the sin of Adam HaRishon was rectified. If one didn't merit to connect to this level of rectifying the sin of Adam HaRishon, is it possible for him also to connect to the event of standing at Har Sinai, which is the main avodah of this day [Shavuos], to connect to that event of Har Sinai? In our generation, how is it possible to connect to that event, when we are missing the necessary conditions which the Jewish people had at that time?

ANSWER

Through mesirus nefesh [willingness to give up our souls for G-d and for His Torah], we penetrate to the root of the spiritual level of the giving of the Torah. The root of the giving of the Torah was mesirus nefesh, because the souls of the Jewish people left them at every word of Hashem.

SHAVUOS – LEARNING ALONE VS. WITH CHAVRUSA

Regarding Shavuos, if a person finds that his daily learning is disturbed [as a result of staying up at night to learn], is it better for him to learn at night together with everyone else, so that he shouldn't separate himself from the congregation, or does his own personal growth take precedence, and he shouldn't be concerned about separating from the congregation?

ANSWER

If no one will be aware that he is separating himself from everyone else, it is proper for him to learn alone, if this will be of gain to him. If possible, he should also spend a little time learning with the congregation. He should also bind his soul with the root of the souls of the Jewish people, so that he isn't simply learning by himself.

SHAVUOS – THE CUSTOM OF DAIRY

What is the connection between dairy treats and Shavuos, and how can a person make this a more spiritual experience?

ANSWER

Many reasons have already been explained [about why dairy products are eaten on Shavuos]. There is now a sefer which gives 70 reasons of why dairy is eaten on Shavuos. With siyata d'shmaya, here is an additional reason.

An infant's only food is its mother's milk. This is due to the very sensitive and refined

nature of the infant. At the time of the giving of the Torah, when Hashem descended upon Har Sinai, and His Infinite Light was revealed to the people, all creations were on a level of little children, against the backdrop of the endlessness and unlimited light of Hashem which was revealed then. At the time of the giving of the Torah, all of the people reflected the verse, “Like a child on its mother’s lap”, an infant nursing from its mother. It was a state of deep temimus (childlike innocence). On Shavuos, we return to this temimus. From this temimus we become attached with Hashem, as in the verse, “You shall be wholesome with Hashem your G-d”, meaning that when you are a tamim [pure and trusting, like a child], you are then “with” Hashem. This is how we become attached with the Torah, on the level of Toras Hashem Temimah, “the Torah of Hashem is perfect”.

SHAVUOS – WOMEN & GIRLS

How can women and girls relate to Shavuos? How can women and girls have a connection to the event of receiving the Torah, and to relate to this on an emotional level? How can women and girls connect to the concept of this festival, in a way that speaks to their emotions?

ANSWER

- 1) A woman can feel a connection to the event of receiving the Torah since all of the Jewish people stood together at Har Sinai with one heart. So the women, too, were each unified with the whole of Klal Yisrael.
- 2) Women have a connection to a more inner root than the above: they can connect to the “light” of Torah. There is a “light” within the Torah which is at a higher spiritual point than the intellectual aspects of Torah (which include chochmah, binah and daas), and this higher level is called “Toras Hashem Temimah”, the “Torah of Hashem is perfect” [and it is this particular aspect of Torah which women can emotionally connect to].
- 3) Women also have an active connection to the Torah, on the level of “shirah”, “song”, for the Torah is called shirah [Ed. refer to the derashah of “Song of the Jewish Woman”].

SHAVUOS – MIKVEH

Should a person try especially hard to find a mikveh [on Shavuos morning before shacharis]?

Yes.

ANSWER