

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE SHMITA AND MOUNT SINAI

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

Concerning the verse, “Hashem spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai, saying...” (Vayikra 25:1), Rashi asks: “What does the subject of the Shmita have to do with Mount Sinai? Were not all the mitzvot stated from Sinai? However just as with the Shmita, its general principles and finer details being all stated from Sinai, likewise all of them were stated – their general principles and their finer details – from Sinai.”

This does not seem to answer his question. Why does the Torah say this here, precisely in the passage dealing with the Shmita, rather than in some other passage, from where we could have also learned that the details of the mitzvot were given from Sinai?

I would like to explain this by first citing the Midrash: “Tabor and Carmel, which came from the ends of the world, boastfully proclaimed: ‘We are high and the Holy One, blessed be He, will give the Torah on us’” (Bamidbar Rabba 13:3). However He gave the Torah on Mount Sinai, for it humbled itself by saying: “I am low.” When the Children of Israel saw that the Holy One, blessed be He, did not give the Torah upon the mountains which had boasted, they made the following inference: If a mountain, which is nothing but a collection of earth, humbled itself before the Holy One, blessed be He, then how much more should we, who have received the order to be humble, conduct ourselves with humility! They immediately humbled themselves before G-d, as it is written: “They stood at the bottom of the mountain” (Shemot 19:17). In other words, they acted with even more humility than the mountain.

Because they acted in this way, they became worthy of receiving the Torah, for words of Torah only endure with one who is humble (Taanith 7a). Since they acted with humility, they became deeply united to one another, as it is written: “Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (Shemot 19:2), from which our Sages derive that they were like a single person with a single heart (Mechilta). There was a lack of unity prior to Sinai, but when they arrived at Sinai they learned humility and unity from the mountain. Since the underlying reason for division among the Children of Israel was the pride which they felt in regards to one another, when they found themselves all equal, they were again united.

We also find the subject of unity in the passage on the Shmita. There we read, “For six years you may sow your field...but the seventh year shall be a complete rest for the land” (Vayikra 25:3-4). The Torah obligates anyone who owns a field to leave it open to everyone during the seventh year. From here, the Torah teaches us humility and baseless love, for during the seventh year whoever owns a field opens

it to every Jew, whether he loves him or not, and everyone has the right to do whatever he wants with it, and nobody can prevent him. Hence it is regarding this mitzvah that the Torah tells us that all the details of any mitzvah were given from Sinai. Since we learn something that concerns the entire Torah from this passage – namely that the details of every mitzvah were given from Sinai – it follows that the entire Torah depends on this passage in all its fundamental principles. Not only that, but the entire Torah rests upon the principle of unity and mutual love. This is what Hillel told a non-Jew who wanted to convert, a man who asked Hillel to teach him the entire Torah while he stood upon one foot. Hillel converted him and said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and learn it” (Shabbat 31a).

Twelve Thousand Pairs

Who is greater for us than Rabbi Akiva, who taught: “You shall love your fellow as yourself [Vayikra 19:18] is a great principle of the Torah” (Torat Kohanim, Kedoshim 4:12)? It is said that Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of disciples, and they all died around the same time because they failed to show respect for one another (Yebamot 62b). This seems difficult to understand, for if they failed to show respect for one another, how could they be called Rabbi Akiva’s disciples? After all, they failed to listen to the teaching of the teacher, namely that “you shall love your fellow as yourself” is a great principle of the Torah. We also need to understand why it is said that he had 12,000 pairs of disciples, rather than 24,000 disciples! It seems that the disciples of Rabbi Akiva did not properly interpret his teaching, for they thought that when the Torah said, “You shall love your fellow as yourself,” it was referring to a single individual, not to “all your fellows” in the plural. Hence they each showed respect to only one other disciple, not to all the rest, such that the Sages designated them as “12,000 pairs of disciples.” Each of them became friends with only one other disciple, showing respect to him alone. Thus two disciples formed a pair, and because there was a lack of unity among them all, they suffered a grave punishment and all died in a short period of time between Pesach and Shavuot. This is because when unity is lacking, every misfortune can occur.

Let us think about the greatness of unity. The Mishnah in Bikkurim describes the ceremony surrounding the bringing of bikkurim [firstfruit] to the Temple as follows: “All the cities that constituted the ma’amad [representatives] gathered in the city of the ma’amad, and they spent the night in its open place without entering any of the houses.... The flute was played before them until they reached the Temple mount.... The rich brought their bikkurim in baskets



Publication of
HEVRAT PINTO

Under the Direction of
**Rabbi David Hanania
Pinto Shlita**

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overlaid with silver or gold, while the poor used wicker baskets of peeled willow-branches” (Bikkurim 3:2-8).

The Torah wanted to put the rich and the poor on an equal footing – the rich who brought their offerings in vessels of gold and silver, and the poor who brought their meager offerings in wicker baskets of peeled willow-branches. Hence everyone slept in the streets of the city without returning home, for when they stood before the King of kings, everyone was equal before Him. Hence it is said that G-d “did not respect princes,

Real Life Stories

It is written, “If your brother becomes destitute and his hand falters near you, you shall support him – proselyte or resident – so that he may live with you. You shall not take from him interest or increase, and you shall fear your G-d and let your brother live with you” (Vayikra 25:35-36).

The Jewish people are holy, and they have always observed the mitzvah of demonstrating generosity, giving even beyond their means. Whoever is moved by a Divine spark makes gold flow from his pockets in order to support anyone he sees in difficulty.

Charity organizations and interest-free loan funds have been established in every Jewish community. With complete integrity, those in charge of tzedakah funds manage large sums of money for lending to anyone in need of cash to support his business and get back on his feet. Indeed, this is the essence of the mitzvah, as Rashi explains in this week’s parsha: “You shall support him. Do not allow him to fall down and collapse altogether, in which case it would be difficult to pick him up again. Rather, ‘support him’ while his hand is still faltering. To what can this be compared? To a load on a donkey. While still on the donkey, one person can grasp it and hold it in place. Once it falls to the ground, however, five people cannot pick it up.”

The gaon Rabbi Shemuel Strashun Zatzal, also known as the Rashash for his famous work Hagahot HaRashash on the Mishnayot and Talmud, was among the Torah luminaries of Vilna over a century ago. In addition to being a genius in every field of Torah, he was also known for his active participation in dealing with every need of the community. Among other things, he had a free-loan fund for the needy that he managed meticulously, lest its capital dwindle over time.

One day a simple Jew borrowed 100 rubles from this fund, on condition that it be repaid four months later. When the due date arrived, the borrower went to see Rabbi Shemuel, but he wasn’t home. He therefore went to the Beit HaMidrash, where Rabbi Shemuel used to learn.

When the man entered the Beit HaMidrash, Rabbi Shemuel was seated and completely immersed in the Gemara, which lay open before him. In fact he noticed nothing going on around him. The borrower approached him and placed a 100-ruble bill on the open Gemara, telling him that it was to repay his debt, which was now due.

Immersed in his learning, Rabbi Shemuel nodded his head, which the man took as a sign that everything was in order. However the truth was that Rabbi Shemuel was completely immersed in the depths of the Halachah, so immersed, in fact, that he didn’t notice the bill or the man! When he finished learning, he closed the Gemara with the bill inside, and then placed the book back on the shelf and returned home.

Rabbi Shemuel normally checked his list of borrowers every day to see if a repayment date had arrived. That is precisely what he did upon

and a prince was not recognized before a poor man, for they are all the work of His hands” (Job 34:19).

The flute was played before them, and the word chalil (“flute”) evokes the word chalal (“hollow”). Whoever came to Jerusalem to bring bikkurim had to feel like the most empty of all, and that no one was greater than the other. Everyone was equal, and the offering of each person was a pleasing odor to G-d because they brought it out of love for Him. As the Mishnah says, “It is the same whether a man offers much or little, so long as he directs his heart to Heaven” (Menachot 110a).

returning home, which is when he realized that a loan of 100 rubles had not been repaid. He waited an additional few weeks, at which point he sent someone to the borrower to request repayment.

The borrower did not delay in presenting himself to Rabbi Shemuel, saying that he had already repaid the loan when the Rav was in the Beit HaMidrash. Rabbi Shemuel, who hadn’t the faintest recollection of being repaid, thought that he was dealing with a liar. Thus fearing a theft of public money, he summoned the man to a Din Torah.

A rumor instantly spread in the city that someone had refused to repay a loan, and everyone asked how it was possible for this Jew not to be ashamed of lying. Not only that, but he was repaying good with evil. The more that word of this spread among the city’s residents, the greater the anxiety and shame felt by this man and his family. It reached such a point that the man’s son, who was ashamed of what his father had done, was forced to leave Vilna, lest his father’s “crime” reflect badly on him.

One fine day, Rabbi Shemuel had to consult the Gemara that he had been studying on the day when the man repaid him. Upon opening it, he suddenly discovered the 100-ruble bill that the man had left there.

Rabbi Shemuel was gripped by a terrible feeling of guilt, for he had caused tremendous shame to this man. He immediately sent someone to get him, and upon his arrival Rabbi Shemuel said to him: “Tell me how I can repay the wrong that I did to you on account of my suspicions! Would it be enough if I ask you for forgiveness in public, so that everyone discovers the truth?”

The man replied, “How would it help if you ask me for forgiveness? People won’t believe you! They’ll think that it’s all been staged to spare me further shame. Since that’s what they’ll think, I’ll remain a liar in their eyes. What’s more is that if you ask me for forgiveness in public, how will it help my son, who had to leave Vilna out of shame?”

Upon hearing this, the gaon began thinking deeply. All of a sudden, he turned to the man and said: “Please, go find your son who left town. I will take him as a husband for my daughter. In this way, I plan on proving to the whole city that you’re completely innocent!”

Stunned, the man obeyed the Rav. A few days later the engagement took place, as well as the tenaim between the two fathers-in-law, Rabbi Shemuel and the borrower. Thus the stain that had been upon the latter was erased, and everyone realized that he was innocent and upright. They also understood the greatness of Rabbi Shemuel, who recognized the truth and publicly exonerated the borrower.

We learn two important halachot from this story:

1. We must judge every Jew favorably, for the man in the story had repaid his debt, and yet he was accused and suspected of being completely dishonest.
2. Whoever has wronged a Jew is obligated to ask for his forgiveness in every possible way, and to completely restore his reputation and dignity.

– Arzei HaTorah

Ownerless

It is written, “For it is the Jubilee; it shall be holy to you” (Vayikra 25:12).

Why is this verse juxtaposed to, “In the year of this Jubilee, you shall return, each man to his ancestral heritage” (v.13)? The author of Meshech Chochma writes, “The second verse probably explains what the sanctity of the land implies during the Jubilee, namely that we cannot sow or harvest, and fruits should be available to everyone. In this way, each landowner will have less trouble returning his field, which he acquired and now possesses, to its original owner.”

Hence the Torah takes the evil inclination into consideration by declaring this year as being “ownerless,” forbidding sowing and harvesting, and by making fruits available to everyone.

A Torah Sage

It is written, “When you make a sale to your fellow, or make a purchase from the hand of your fellow...” (Vayikra 25:14).

In Hilchot De’ot, the Rambam describes the conduct that a man of Torah should adopt in business:

“A Torah Sage [should conduct] his business dealings with honesty and good faith. When [his] answer is ‘no,’ he says: ‘No.’ When [his answer] is ‘yes,’ he says: ‘Yes.’ He is stringent with himself in his accounting, gives and yields to others when he buys from them, but is not demanding [about what they owe him]. He pays for his purchases immediately. He does not act as a guarantor, or accept objects for deposit, or act as a debt collector for a lender.

“He accepts obligations in matters of buying and selling for which the Torah does not hold him liable, in order to uphold and not go back on his verbal commitments. If others have obligations to him by law, he grants them an extension and pardons them. He lends and bestows gifts.

“He does not encroach upon another’s occupation, nor does he ever cause someone discomfort. The rule is that he should be among the pursued, not the pursuers; among those who accept humiliation, not those who humiliate [others]. Whoever does all the above and their like, of him it states: ‘And He said to me: You are My servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified’ [Isaiah 49:3]” (Hilchot De’ot 5:13).

A Complete Denial

It is written, “You shall not take from him interest or increase, and you shall fear your G-d and let your brother live with you” (Vayikra 25:36).

The Gemara states, “Rabbi Yossi said: Come and see the blindness of those who lend with interest. If a man calls his fellowman wicked, he harbors deep-seated animosity towards him. However [if he lends with interest], they bring witnesses, a notary, pen and ink, and record and attest: ‘So-and-so has denied the G-d of Israel.’” (Bava Metzia 71a).

The Chazon Ish once asked how a person who transgresses this prohibition differs from any other sinner, such that he is described as having “denied the G-d of Israel.”

He answered as follows:

“Our Sages explain that the livelihood of everyone is determined every Rosh Hashanah. A person who lends with interest thereby demonstrates that in his mind, his portion cannot reach him as Heaven has decreed, but only by devious means, namely by lending money with interest. Furthermore, he arises and affirms this in writing, affixing his signature to it. Hence this consists of a complete denial of the G-d of Israel.”

Yamuch

It is written, “If your brother yamuch [becomes destitute]... you shall support him” (Vayikra 25:35).

The letters forming the term yamuch (yud, mem, vav, caph) are the initials of the expression Yesh mitasher ve’ein kol (“Some pretend to be rich, but have nothing” [Mishlei 13:7]). This alludes to the fact that we must pay careful attention to a poor man who only appears to be wealthy, for in this way we fulfill the mitzvah “you shall support him.”

– Birkat Peretz

In the Light of the Parsha

“You Shall Love Your Fellow as Yourself” is a Great Torah Principle

Our Sages teach, “Exile comes to the world for idolatry, for incest, for murder, and for not allowing the land to rest during the Sabbatical year [Shmita]” (Pirkei Avot 5:9). This is surprising: Why does the text confer such importance to the mitzvah of Shmita (allowing the land to rest), to the point that its transgression causes Israel to go into exile? Furthermore, how can this sin be placed on the same level as the three most severe transgressions of the Torah?

Our Sages declare, “Better for a man to cast himself into a fiery furnace than to shame his fellow in public” (Sotah 10b). This means that humiliation is among the sins for which it is better to die than to commit. Nevertheless, it is said: “If a man is commanded, ‘Transgress and or die,’ he may transgress and avoid death, except in the case of idolatry, incest, or murder” (Sanhedrin 74a) – humiliation not being mentioned at all! Tosaphot explain this omission by the fact that humiliation is not an explicit sin in the Torah.

The Mishnah placed transgressing the Shmita on the same level as the three gravest sins in order to demonstrate that a lack of unity among the Jewish people is equivalent to the transgression of these three prohibitions. In fact allowing the land to rest calls for unity, since everyone goes down to a field and takes what he wants without its owner intervening. Just as it is better to be killed rather than to commit these transgressions, so too for the mitzvah: “You shall love your fellow as yourself.”

Guard Your Tongue

Lashon Harah: An Overview

The Torah warns us against accepting Lashon Harah. This means not believing in our hearts that the information is the truth. There is no need for long explanations on who should not accept Lashon Harah, or concerning whom he should not accept Lashon Harah about, for there are almost no divergent views on this subject. In short, every Jew has been commanded to not accept Lashon Harah about a member of the Jewish people. The only exceptions are heretics, informers, or other such individuals, those who are no longer considered as amitecha (“your people”).

– Chafetz Chaim

We have spoken at length about the incredible diligence of the gaon Rabbi Yehoshua Attiya Zatzal in the constant study of Torah. The gaon Rabbi Yinon Yona Shlita also described the magnitude of his diligence in learning, stating: “I once met a great talmid chacham without equal, a man who served as the Rosh Yeshiva of a great, well-known yeshiva. I asked him how he acquired this virtue, and he replied: ‘By the merit of someone who didn’t know me, and to whom I had never spoken, the gaon Rabbi Yehoshua Attiya.’”

He recounted the following story:

“I lived in the Achva neighborhood during my youth, and I would look out the window and see how he remained sitting, studying Torah for long hours without interruption, not getting up even once. One day, I tried to sit down in front of him and imitate him. I took it upon myself (bli neder) that as long as he didn’t get up, I wouldn’t get up either. I didn’t succeed. I tried a second time, but was again unsuccessful. It reached such a point that after thinking about it, I decided to begin by sitting for ten minutes at a time without getting up. I would do this for the first week, then sit for fifteen minutes on the following week, and so on until I was able to sit for several hours.”

He added, “You should know that I wasn’t the only one. There were many people who reached great heights by the merit of the Rav’s diligence, and in this regard it is said: ‘Those who teach righteousness to the multitude [will shine] like the stars forever and ever’ [Daniel 12:3].”

He Didn’t Have the Strength

On one occasion, the Chazon Ish said to those close to him: “Wherever in the book Chazon Ish it is written, ‘I don’t have the Rashba in hand now,’ or something similar, it doesn’t mean that the book wasn’t in my room. Rather, it simply meant that I didn’t have the strength to take it from the bookshelf.”

His brother-in-law, the gaon Rabbi Yaakov Israel Kanievsky Zatzal (known as the “Steipler”), was careful to wear his hat when reciting Birkat Hamazon. At a certain point, he told those close to him that we should not derive practical halachic conclusions from the habits of the Chazon Ish, since he was ill and weak, studying Torah to the point of exhaustion. For example, it sometimes happened that the Chazon Ish did not put on his hat to recite Birkat Hamazon. This was because his hat was not near his seat, and he didn’t have the strength to arise and get it, especially since the Gemara does not make this an obligation. He did not make an effort to get his hat, for during those minutes he could study something that would take us two hours to understand!

The Steipler also recounted that the Chazon Ish sometimes didn’t even have the strength to read a certain commentary from Rashi or the Ba’alei HaTosaphot in the Gemara. At such times, he would ask his sister (the Steipler’s Rebbetzin) to read it to him. Since she didn’t understand the text, she would read it with mistakes; however the Chazon Ish understood what it meant.

The Service of the Chassid

In his advanced years, near the end of his life, the gaon Rabbi Israel Yaakov Fischer Zatzal suffered from a heart condition. His lungs were not functioning well either, resulting in respiratory problems. On his doctor’s orders, he was told to use an oxygen mask. Everyone else

in this situation would have been hospitalized and confined to bed, but Rabbi Israel Yaakov, despite his serious pains, continued to live normally without changing a thing.

(As an aside, we should point out that a doctor once saw him entering the hospital and couldn’t believe his eyes. He said, “How is it possible for the Rav to still be alive? According to our medical knowledge, he should have died three years ago.”)

The gaon Rabbi Yaakov Hillel Shlita, the Rosh Yeshiva of Ahavat Shalom, said the following in his eulogy for him:

“We are well aware that during his life, Rabbi Israel Yaakov was careful to pray Vatikin with a large minyan in his Beit HaMidrash, Zichron Moshe. Immediately after prayers, he sat down to give a class of mishnayot to a few dozen of the faithful. At the end of class, he returned home. Every day on his way back, people waited to ask him questions, obtain his advice, and so on. He continued to give classes at the Beit HaHora’ah, and from there he returned to learn, then go to the Beit Din, then to learn until the early morning hours.

“In his old age, I saw with my own eyes how the Rav brought his oxygen machine with him everywhere he went, for he needed it to breathe. He brought it to the yeshiva, to pray, to his classes, to the Beit HaHora’ah, and to the Beit Din, without skipping a single day from his normal schedule. And so he went, without tiring or changing anything from his daily schedule, which was inordinately full, until his dying day.

“Anyone who personally witnessed the impressive sight of the Av Beit Din of Jerusalem going from the yeshiva to synagogue, and then returning to the yeshiva, learning, praying, teaching Torah, issuing halachic responses and rendering legal decisions at the Beit Din – all with an oxygen mask on his face and a machine on wheels that followed him everywhere – would understand just what G-d demands of us, and what level of perfection can be reached by a Jew who serves his Creator to the point of exhaustion. He would also understand what true devotion is, even to the last moments of life. It was an extraordinary and awe-inspiring wonder!”

He Lifted his Head and Continued Learning

His son-in-law, Rabbi Elimelech Rothman Shlita, recounted the following:

“Everyone saw that each day of my father-in-law’s life was filled with an immense effort to study Torah. From the time that I first knew him, when I was a young man at the Etz Chaim yeshiva, where he served as the Rosh Yeshiva, until the very end of his life, he never stopped learning Torah, even under the most difficult of circumstances. On the last Shabbat of his life, I was at his home for Seuda Shelishit, and I saw how weak he was, having no strength whatsoever. I therefore asked him if his oxygen levels should be increased.

“After Havdalah, I was stunned to see him take out a Gemara. I couldn’t understand why he didn’t go to sleep, or at least rest for a few moments. He began learning, but since he suffered from a lack of oxygen in his bloodstream, he fell asleep and his head rested on the table. However my father-in-law immediately woke up and lifted his head. He continued to study a few lines, but fell asleep once more. With immense efforts, he lifted his head once again and continued learning. Look at the effort that he made to learn, without taking his condition into consideration!”