

Torah Wellsprings

*Collected thoughts
from
Rabbi Elimelech
Biderman
Shlita*

Shemini



Parshas - Shmini

Sefirah

We are presently in the midst of the Sefirah days. The Arizal taught us that each day of the year is influenced from these days. They are very holy days, and they are also days of mourning. They are days for character improvement, when we work on our middos, increase our ahavas Yisrael, and connect with Hashem.

On the passuk (Shmos 26:10) “*vasisa chamishim lulaos*” [make 50 hooks to connect the two sets of *yerios* (sheets) that covered the Mishkan] Rabbeinu Efraim explains: “This passuk is alluding to the fifty days between Pesach and Shavuos; days when Yidden connect with their Father in heaven.”

The Ramban (Vayikra 23:36) compares this period of time to Chol HaMoed, since it is sandwiched between Pesach on one end, and Shavuos on the other, similar to Succos that has a Yom Tov in the beginning, with Shmini Atzeres

coming at the end, and in between is Chol HaMoed.¹

As we know, there are no marriages during (several days of) the Sefirah. As the Shulchan Aruch (493:1) states: “The custom is not to marry between Pesach and Lag B’Omer because these are the days that the students of Rabbi Akiva were niftar.” The Rebbe of Rizhin zy”a asked: According to the Ramban, there should be another reason not to marry during Sefirah. The Ramban tells us that the days of Sefirah are like Chol HaMoed, and therefore, just as one isn’t permitted to marry on Chol HaMoed, one shouldn’t marry during Sefirah. So what is the reason we refrain from chasunos during Sefirah, is it because of the mourning for the talmidim of Rabbi Akiva, or because of the holiness of these days?

The Rizhiner zy”a replied: It is up to each individual to determine the reason marriages are prohibited during the Sefirah. If he wants to experience the holiness of these

1. The Ramban explains that this is the reason Chazal call Shavuos “Atzeres,” though it is not called that way in the Torah. It is called “Atzeres” because it is similar to Shmini Atzeres that comes at the end of Succos. Shmini Atzeres comes after seven days, and Shavuos is after seven weeks of seven days. For both, the days in between are like Chol HaMoed.

days, marriages are forbidden, because for him, these days are like Chol HaMoed. If he doesn't connect to the specialness of these days, he may also not have chasunah, because these are days of mourning.

When the Torah discusses the holidays, it often tells us the Yom Tov's agricultural season. For example, when the Torah tells us to keep the Yom Tov Pesach, it tells us that Pesach is always in the season of *aviv*, when the wheat crops reach their full growth. Shavuos, the Torah tells us, is in the season of *katzir*, when the wheat reaches its final stages of development and is ready for harvesting. Doesn't it seem odd that the Torah should tell us these matters? The Yomim Tovim are exalted days. It states: "*yeira kol zcurchah es pnei haAdon Hashem*" [on the holidays, everyone goes to the Beis HaMikdosh to see, *kiveyachol*, Hashem]. They are days of spiritual elation. It doesn't seem fitting to associate these lofty days with the simple crops?

The Maharal answers that the Torah tells us what is happening with the crops, for people to draw a parallel and realize that they should be doing the same. The Torah tells us that the wheat crop improves

between Pesach and Shavuos. The Torah tells this to us to encourage people to take note, and to do the same. In other words, just as the crops reach their final growth stage between Pesach and Shavuos, everyone should continue to grow spiritually until Shavuos. The days between Pesach and Shavuos are days of spiritual growth, until Shavuos when we are ready to receive the Torah.

How does one grow during the Omer?

Now that we've established that the days of Sefiras HaOmer are a time for growth, we ask: What must one do during these days? What can one do, to become a better person, to be all ready for *kabalas haTorah*? One of the primary answers is simply: to count the Omer.

The *Or HaChaim* (Vayikra 23:15) writes: "*usfartem lochem* [count for you]: the purpose of counting the Omer is for your own good, for your own purity...Chazal tell us that the luchos were made from *Sanpirin* stone [sapphire].... and the neshamos of Yidden are compared to the luchos. Due to sins and impurity, they lost their luster. The Torah says: "*usfartem lochem*" make yourselves once again like sapphire stone.² Shine brightly once again..."

2. *Usfartem* has the same root as sapphire or *sanparin*

From this Or HaChaim we comprehend that by simply counting the Omer, we are purifying our souls, and are becoming better people.

The Sefer HaChinuch (mitzvah 306) writes: “The purpose for this mitzvah (of Sefiras HaOmer) according to its most basic interpretation (pshat) is because the Torah is primary for the Jewish people. The world was created for Torah... We were redeemed from Mitzrayim in order to receive the Torah on Har Sinai... Torah was even more important to them than the exodus... Therefore we were commanded to count the Omer from the day after Pesach until Shavuous to show our great desire and anticipation for this great day. A slave (or a prisoner) counts the days towards his release to freedom, because counting the days shows that he wants to reach a specific time.”

But this arouses a question: Why do we count the days that are passing (‘today is one day in the Omer... Today is two days of the Omer’), why don’t we count the days that are left until Shavuous (there are another 49 days to Shavuous)? Don’t people, who are looking forward to a special event in the future count the days that are coming and not the days that are passing?³

The Chidushei HaRim answers: The korban Omer consisted of barley. On Pesach, the Jewish nation was still on a very low level (being that barley is used as fodder, implying that we were still on the level of animals). We count down towards Shavuous, when the *Shte HaLechem* that is made from wheat flour (fit for human consumption) is brought. This indicates that during the days of the Omer we go from the lowly level of an animal, up to being a proper human being who can receive the Torah.⁴ This is the reason we

3. The Sefer HaChinuch also asks this question. He answers that when there is a long waiting period, people tend to count the days that passed, and not the days that are coming. 49 days is a very long time to wait for someone who is waiting anxiously, therefore, we don’t want to say: “Shavuous is forty nine days away,” because that seems like a very long time away. Therefore, we begin the count with the days that passed, and since we begin the count in this manner, this is how we continue counting all 49 days.

4. The Aruch HaShulchan (489:3) explains that the Korban Omer [that was brought on the second day of Pesach] was made from barley flour, and barley flour is animal feed. On Shavuous, the *Shte HaLechem* [two breads] was brought,

count the days that passed: because each day that passes is a gain, it takes us further away from being animal-like and prepares us for Matan Torah.

Since, during these days we go from being like an animal, to being a person, it is logical that we should practice, acting as a human being would during these days.

We recite daily, by the korbanos, “*mosar haadam min habehamah ayin.*” This can be translated as: “What makes a person better than an animal is “*ayin*” his ability to say no. An animal acts on impulse, while a person has intelligence, and can choose what he does, and how to do it.

We mentioned earlier that Chazal call Shavuous “Atzeres.” Atzeres means to hold back. My grandfather, Rebbe Moshe Mordechai of Lelov zt”l would say: *Atzeres laHashem Elokeicha* the main service that a Yid does for Hashem is to hold back, to be able to refrain and to say “no” to improper and sinful deeds. When we practice this during the Sefirah, we will be elevating ourselves from the level of an animal to the level of a human being.

However, we mustn’t forget that even the simple deed of counting

the Omer accomplishes a lot. Because it is so simple, and so painless, it is easy to lose sight of its potential. Counting the Omer purifies us, takes us from the stage of animal to human, and prepares us for Matan Torah.

But there is another primary focus that we must keep in mind to improve in during the days of Sefirah, and that is ahavas Yisrael.

Ahavas Yisrael

In the Shulchan Aruch (493:1) it states: “The custom is not to marry between Pesach and Lag B’Omer because these are the days that the students of Rabbi Akiva were niftar.”

There were many other Tanaim, Amoraim, and great tzaddikim who suffered untimely deaths, and yet we don’t have days of mourning for them. What is unique about Rabbi Akiva’s students that we mourn for them every year during the days of Sefirah?

The answer is that the reason for Rabbi Akiva’s students deaths is still prevalent today. The Gemara (Yevamos 62:) tells us that they died because they didn’t honor each other sufficiently. Sadly, this situation still prevails among us. Therefore we mourn on these days, and we bemoan their deaths – more than

what we do for any other Tana or Amora – because in addition to mourning their demise, we seek to improve our ways. When we mourn for these great talmidei chachamim, we are reminded to repent, and to increase our ahavah [love] to our fellow man.⁵

The Gemara (Menachos 68:) tells us that the great sage, Rabbi Tarfon, had a halachic question which he didn't know the answer to. Rabbi Yehudah bar Nechemyah answered

the question. Rabbi Akiva saw that Rabbi Yehudah bar Nechemyah's face was shining from happiness. Rabbi Akiva told him: "Yehudah, your face shines because you were able to answer the great scholar [Rabbi Tarfon]. But I am doubtful that you will live for long."

(For the scholars of the Mishnah and Gemara, the greatest pride was when one was able to properly understand the Torah, and likewise, the greatest embarrassment was

made from wheat flour – from a food that is fitting for a human. This is to indicate that during the days of Omer we rise from being like animals, to human beings.

5. The Torah (Bereishis 45:14) tells us that when Binyamin and Yosef met after years of separation, "[Yosef] fell on his brother's Binyamin's neck and cried, and Binyamin cried on [Yosef's] neck."

What were they crying for? Rashi explains: "[Yosef] was crying for the two Batei HaMikdosh which will be built upon Binyamin's lot, and will be destroyed, and Binyamin cried on Yosef's shoulder for Mishkan Shilo which, in the future, will be in Yosef's lot, and will be destroyed."

Rebbe Yechezkel of Kozmir zy" a asked: Why were they crying for the destruction now? Was this the ideal time? They just met after 22 years of separation. Couldn't they forget, for a moment, the impending destruction and rejoice with their reunion? The Rebbe of Kozmir answered: Their crying for the destruction of the Beis HaMikdosh was directly associated with their present reunion. Yosef was sold due to *sinas chinam* [vain hatred]. The trait of hatred was now being corrected, as the brothers were together in peace. But Yosef and Binyamin both saw that *sinas chinam* wasn't perfectly corrected. They saw that years later, hatred among Klal Yisrael would cause the destruction of the Beis HaMikdosh. Therefore they cried, because they saw that their present rectification still wasn't perfect. *Sinas chinam* still prevailed.

Similarly, we mourn during the days of the Omer for the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's students. We aren't only crying over the past, we are bemoaning the present, because the source of their deaths – disrespect – is still among us. Therefore, the goal isn't only to mourn, but to rectify – and not perpetuate – the errors of the past.

when one made a mistake in Torah. When Rabbi Yehudah bar Nechemyah answered Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Yehudah was feeling proud, but it brought Rabbi Tarfon shame. Therefore, Rabbi Akiva told Rabbi Yehuda that it was likely that he would be punished for inadvertently causing embarrassment.)

“Rabbi Yehudah b’Rabbi Eloya said: ‘This episode occurred by *pras haPesach*.⁶ When I went to the yeshiva for Shavuous, I inquired about Rabbi Yehudah bar Nechemyah, and I asked where he was. They told me that he was *niftar*.’”

The Gemara tells us that Rabbi Yehudah bar Nechemyah was punished during these days, during the days of the Omer. The Gemara tells us this to underscore the importance of respect for one’s fellow man during these days. This is the season when we must increase our *ahavas chaveirim*, our love to our fellow man. These are days when we should be more caring for our fellow man. Therefore Rabbi

Yehuda was punished specifically during these days.⁷

Seeing the good in others

Once, on Chol HaMoed, Reb Isser Zalman Melzer zt”l asked his chavrusah Reb Dovid Frankel zt”l to bring him a pen and paper. Reb Dovid Frankel asked him whether it is for a matter that one is permitted to write on Chol HaMoed: “Can I assume that you need the pen and paper to record a *dvar Torah* that you are afraid you may forget, because this one is permitted to write on Chol HaMoed?”

Reb Isser Zalman answered: “It is much more important than that. It is *pikuach nefesh* [a matter of life and death].”

Reb Dovid gave him a pen and paper and he saw Reb Isser Zalman write the *passuk*: (Mishlei 4:25) “*Einecha lanochach yabitu vafapeicha yashiru negdecha*” [Your eyes should see the truth, and you’re your eyelids should look straight.]

Reb Dovid Frankel didn’t understand; how is this *passuk* a

6. Rashi writes that *pras haPesach* is two weeks before Pesach.

7. Reb Chaim Palagi writes: “I testify with heaven and earth that there were two brothers who were partners, but they got into a dispute, and they were punished. If they would have been wise and given in to each other and made peace, then *midah keneged midah*, Heaven would have given them much reward.

matter of life and death. Reb Isser Zalman explained: “Many people visit me on Chol HaMoed, and I obviously strive to look at everyone positively, in a good light. I focus on their good, and not on their bad. But I fear that I may see someone’s *chesronos* [faults]. Therefore, it is my custom to write this passuk before Yom Tov, and I keep it in front of me as people come to visit, to remind me to see everyone’s good. I remind myself of the explanation of Rebbe Yaakov Mi'Lisa (Nesivos Hamishpat) on this passuk. He explained: “*Einecha lanochach yabitu* [when you look at someone else] “*vafapeicha yashiru negdecha*” [first look at yourself], because when one is aware of his own shortcomings, he will not dwell on the bad in others. He knows that he is also imperfect, and therefore there is no reason to harp on other people’s faults.

“This year as well,” Reb Isser Zalman told him, “I wrote this passuk erev Yom Tov, but I lost the paper. Therefore, I needed to write it again, and I consider it important to write even on Chol HaMoed, so I can always look at this passuk and remember to see my own faults, and other people’s qualities.”

We are always judging people. When we meet someone, we

immediately draw a conclusion in our mind how high (or how low) they rate by us. We must seek to judge everyone favorably.

In Pirkei Avos it states “*hevu mesunim badin*” [be patient in judgment]. This seems to be a law for judges; they must be deliberate and careful before reaching their decisions. The Yaavatz asks: Why is this Mishnah in Pirkei Avos? The purpose of Pirkei Avos is to teach proper conduct for each individual. The laws for judges are written in Sanhedrin, and not in Pirkei Avos.

The Yaavatz answers: This Mishnah is for everyone, because everyone is a self-appointed judge. They look at people and determine whether their fellow man is good or bad, acting correctly or wrongfully, whether they are sinful people or righteous, etc. The Mishnah warns everyone to be *mesunim badin*, to think things through carefully, before reaching a negative verdict.

One way to do this is to place yourself into the other person’s shoes. When you see, or when you know, that someone did something wrong, imagine that people caught you doing the very same bad deed. What would you say to excuse yourself? People are often able to excuse themselves, but they find it hard to find exonerate others. When

you place yourself inside the other person's predicament, you may be able to find excuses for him, to prove his innocence, or at least, to lessen the severity of the crime.

The Chasam Sofer taught us this counsel from the following Mishnah in Pirkei Avos: (1:6) "*hevi dan es kol adam likaf zchus*" [judge everyone favorably]. "*Hevi*" is extra, since it could have simply stated: "*dan es kol dam likaf zchus*" [judge everyone favorably]. "*Hevi*" implies that that before one judges his friend, he should view himself as though he himself acted this way, and then he will find many excuses to exonerate and to explain why one might do such a thing.

From the very same Mishnah, the Sfas Emes found another wise counsel to help us judge others favorably. The Mishnah states: *hevi dan es kol adam likaf zchus. Kol*

adam means to take into account the entire person. When one takes into account the person's past history, and the challenges that he is enduring in the present, one will understand that he is not entirely guilty for his bad deeds.⁸

Good children

Honoring one's fellow man has many benefits. Among them, the Chasam Sofer taught, are good children.

The Chasam Sofer related:

There was a man who had a very special son, truly a prodigy, destined for greatness. The father was certain that he would derive much nachas from him, but the child was niftar.

People came to console the father [*nichum aveilim*] but he was inconsolable. Weeks past, but the father couldn't get back to himself. He was certain that had this son

8. The Chovas HaLevavos (Shaar HaKniyah 10) writes: "People asked a chacham: 'How did you merit being the leader of the entire generation?' He replied: 'Everyone I met, I saw that they have a quality that is greater than mine...'" Everyone has their own quality. This chacham always focused on the good in others, in the matter where they were better than him, and in this manner, he respected everyone, and everyone revered him.

When one accepts this approach – of always seeing the good in his fellow man – it will protect him from disgracing or degrading his fellow man. People hurt others, when they don't respect them. Therefore, a means for improvement during the days of Sefirah, is to find the goodness in everyone, to consider everyone to have qualities that are better than their own, and then there will be peace, harmony, shalom, and the proper environment that Hashem desires it to be.

lived, he would have become from the great people in the generation, and the child was taken away from him, so quickly.

One night, in a dream, he saw his son. He envisioned his son alive, as an adult, but his son was sinning. In his dream, the father was extremely distraught to see his son sinning, and he began pulling the hair out of his head in distress. *How could this happen to me? Why did my son become such a great sinner?* When he awoke, he realized that it was a dream, and then he was consoled from his loss. He understood that Heaven was showing him that had his son lived, his son would have strayed from the path, and sinned. The father was finally consoled. He was happy that his son died righteous, rather than to remain alive and to sin.

The Chasam Sofer (Droshos vol. 1, page 164) repeats this episode, and tells us that it was a true vision.

What is the reason this child prodigy wouldn't grow up well if he would have lived? Why would he end-off being a sinner? We don't always know the reason things happen, but

this time, the Chasam Sofer tells us an explanation. He tells us that his parents didn't respect others, and when parents degrade and look down at their fellow man, it affects the future spiritual success of their children. Contrarily, when parents respect their fellow man, their children have the potential to grow up properly, with yiras Shamayim.

This can be explained rationally. When children see their parents looking down at others, they acquire a negative view on mankind. They cannot accept authority, and they are always suspecting people. Their warped view of others causes them to disvalue themselves as well. These factors prevent them from growing properly in avodas Hashem.

But disrespecting others affects the growth of children on a sublime level as well. The Gemara (Nedarim 81.) tells us several reasons that talmidei chachamim often do not have offspring who are scholars.⁹ Rav Ashi said: "It is because they call people donkeys." The commentaries explain that their greatness in Torah can cause them to look down at others who aren't on

9. Among the reasons that the Gemara list is: (1) People should know that Torah isn't inherited, and cannot be acquired without toil (2) If Torah would become a family asset, it could lead them to haughtiness. (3) They don't say Birchas HaTorah.

their level. The Gemara tells us that this affects the children, and prevents them from becoming Torah scholars. Because when parents do not respect their fellow man, the punishment is children who aren't learned in Torah.

How crucial is it therefore, to respect everyone, and to consider everyone to be special. In addition to being an obligation and the proper way to view one's fellow man, it is also conducive for having good children.¹⁰

From the gravest sins

To cause harm to one's fellow man is from the gravest sins.¹¹

The Torah tells us that when one is in a state of tamei [impurity] he may not go into the Beis HaMikdosh. When one is in a state of greater impurity, he may not even come near the Beis HaMikdosh. He must leave the entire mountain [Har HaBayis] area. There is only one tumah that requires people to leave the entire city of Yerushalayim, and that is tzoraas [spiritual leprosy]. As

10. The Gemara states: (Shabbos 105) "Why do children die young? It is because the parents didn't mourn for an *adam kosher* [a G-d fearing, Torah observant Jew]. Because whoever mourns for an *adam kosher*, all of his sins are forgiven, because of the honor he allots him."

The Chasam Sofer explains: Why do people fail to mourn the *adam kosher*? Once again, it is because they don't respect people. They look down on people, and don't consider them to be special and deserving of a eulogy.

The Chasam Sofer now combines both Gemaras (Shabbos 105 and Nedarim 81) and reaches the following conclusion: The Gemara in Nedarim tells us that when people do not respect others, their children will not grow up to be Torah scholars. The Gemara in Shabbos discusses people who do not respect others (and therefore they don't eulogize the *adam kosher*) and they are punished that their children die. The Chasam Sofer explains that since they aren't respecting others, and their children will not turn out well, they prefer, chas veshalom, that their children die young and pure, rather than to live and be a sinner. (Like the father who dreamed seeing his son as a sinful adult, and then was consoled that Hashem took him away earlier.)

11. Someone asked the Chazon Ish: "Chazal tell us that one must learn with the intention to keep what he studies [*lilmod al m'nas lasos*]. What does this mean?"

The Chazon Ish replied: It means that one should seek never to cause distress, even with a slight word, and even for a small moment, to one's fellow man.

we know, tzoraas comes from speaking lashon hara. The Sefas Emes said that this teaches us that the greatest impurity comes from harming one's fellow man.¹²

A tragedy occurred, rachmana litzlan, and Reb Shlomo Zalman Aurbach's grandson prepared a hesped [eulogy] that he planned to say at the levayah. He showed it to his grandfather, to see whether he approved of the inspirational ideas that he planned to say.

Reb Shlomo Zalman zt"l looked it over and replied: "It is very good, but you won't stop the *malach hamavos* [the angel of death] with this. The *malach hamavos* is only stopped with *bein adam lechavoro*¹³.

The Yerushalmi (Dmai 1:3) teaches: "Reb Pinchas ben Yair was going to the beis medresh, and when he came to the Ginai River, he saw that the river was very high. He said to the

river: 'Ginai, are you going to prevent me from going to the beis medresh?' and the river split for him. His students asked him: 'May we cross too?' Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair replied: 'Whoever is certain that he never hurt or disgraced another Yid throughout his life, may pass, and he will not be harmed.'

Reb Pinchas ben Yair didn't say any other quality, other than the trait of someone who never harmed his fellow man. Someone who does this, is worthy of miracles. He deserves that the river should split for him.

Two birds

The Zohar (Tazria 46:) teaches: "Just as a person is punished when he speaks lashon hara, one is also punished for the times when he had the opportunity to say good words to his friend, and he refrained..."

A metzorah takes two birds for his purification (see Vayikra 14:4). The

12. Towards the end of this week's parshah the Torah discusses the laws of kashrus. Several pesukim are allotted to teach this important lesson. However, many more pesukim discuss the laws of tzoraas. Almost the entire parshios of Tazria and Metzora are discussing the laws of tzoraas. This should indicate to us the gravity of what comes out of our mouths is even more than what one brings into his mouth. It implies the severity of lashon hara, of harming one's fellow man.

13. Someone once complained to Rebbe Hershele Ziditchover zy" a that there was someone who is chasing him, and always seeking to harm him. The rebbe replied: When two people are pulling at a rope from opposite ends, and one lets go, the other will fall down. Therefore, stop thinking about the other person, stop thinking angry thoughts about him, and he will stop chasing after you as well.

chirping birds represent speech. One bird is to atone for the lashon hara that he spoke; the other bird is to atone for him, for the times that he remained silent, and didn't speak up when people could have benefited so much from his words.

A person can do a lot of good with his speech. With a few kind words, one can help his fellow man – sometimes immensely. Therefore, just as we are cautious not to harm our fellow man with our words, we must seek to help them out as well, with our words.

This is also part of the avodah of the Sefirah. The Bnei Yissaschar teaches us that the 49 days of Sefirah are *gimatriya leiv tov* [good heart]. During these days, we don't only hold back from harming our fellow man, we also increase our caring for them. And, instead of using our mouths to badmouth others, and to harm them, we use our mouths to help them.¹⁴

The Gemara (*Bava Basra* 9) teaches: "Someone who gives a coin to a pauper is blessed with six brachos and those who say kind words to appease the pauper are blessed with

eleven brachos." We see that many more blessings are allotted to the one who says kind words. The Maharal explains that this is because the coin that was given for tzedakah will be spent in a few short moments and nothing will remain. But the nice and kind words that the pauper hears can remain in his heart for a very long time. Weeks and years can pass, and he will still feel comforted, when he reminds himself of the kind words that he received.

The Beis Avraham zy" a said that this is the meaning of "*michayeh meisim bimamoro*": one can give life and joy to others with his words.

Everyone needs to hear a kind word, and everyone needs encouragement. Sometimes, it can make all the difference. A great tzaddik once said that if someone would have encouraged him in his younger years, he would have reached even higher levels.

Sometimes, a good word can literally cause *techiyas hameisim*. Reb Gad'l Eisner zt"l related that during the holocaust, the Nazis forced him and his group to travel by foot from one place to the other.

14. When one cannot find the right words to say, he can often help by simply listening. Sometimes a listening ear is the greatest chesed. The Imrei Emes zy" a said that this is alluded to in the passuk: (Bereishis 37:21) "*Vayishma Reuvan vayitzeleihu miyadom* [Reuvan listened and saved him].

Those who weren't able to keep up were shot. It came a point when Reb Gad'l felt that he couldn't keep on going anymore. He didn't have the willpower, nor did he have the strength, to keep running with them, so he sat down on the ground awaiting his inevitable fate. Just then, someone said to him: "Gad'le, loyf" [run]. This gave him renewed strength and it saved his life. Reb Gad'l added that all the Torah that he learned after the war, and all the merits he has from teaching his students, is all to the credit of this Yid, and to those two words that he uttered, which ultimately saved his life.¹⁵

Improving one's middos

The Gemara (Chulin 58) tells us about a bug called baka that doesn't live for more than a day. The Gemara asks: "Don't people say that a female baka bug rebelled against her husband for seven years? [So, apparently, these bugs live longer than a day, and even up to seven years. The Gemara answers]: That was seven of their years."

This means that the baka bug really only lives for a day, but if we would consider that day, in the terms of life

as we know it, then the rebellion that occurred, was for seven years.

What is this unusual Gemara telling us? The Baalei Mussar explained: To the eyes of man, seventy years of life seems like a very long time, and therefore, when someone harms them, or slights their honor, they get angry, and are ready to take revenge. Many years and much energy can be invested in fighting a wrong. But life is short. Taking this into account, we wonder: is it really worth it? If someone would see the baka bug fighting, he would laugh at it and say: "Don't you know that you only have one day to live? Is it worth making a fight in this short existence?" The life of man is similar. It is short. It is ridiculous to waste it on vain battles.

The passuk says: (Tehilim 90:4) "A thousand years in Hashem's eyes is like yesterday." If a thousand years is like one day, how long is a life of seventy, eighty years? According to this scale, a person only lives for approximately two hours. Is it worth all the strife and machlokes? Wouldn't it be wiser to spread peace among his fellow men, and to enjoy

15. Imrei Noam (Hakadmon) explains the passuk: (Bereishis 49:21) " *Naftali ayalah shluchah*" [Naftali quickly brings salvation to Klal Yisrael, like a swift ram] " *hanosein imrei shefer*" [and he merits this, because he says kind words to others.]

his family, rejoice with neighbors,
and live happily?¹⁶

Reb Elyah Lopian zt”l told the story of a certain court case that occurred in Russia: Someone was caught with twelve bags of counterfeit money. The police interrogated him, and discovered that he was the distributor of the counterfeit money. The distributor revealed the name of the person who printed the bills. The judge ruled that the distributor would go to prison for a year. The one who counterfeited the money was sent to jail for seven years.

The counterfeiter complained to the judge: “This isn’t justice! The distributor was caught with twelve bags of counterfeit money, and he only needs to go to jail for one year. You didn’t find any counterfeit money in my home at all; therefore, I shouldn’t need to go to jail at all.” The judge explained: “You own the machines which print counterfeit money. There is no way we can estimate how much counterfeit

money you already printed, and how much more you were planning to print. Therefore, your decree is harsher.”

Reb Elyah Lopian said that this episode expresses the severity of bad middos. The problem with bad middos isn’t only what is done with it, it is the potential that is there. When one has bad middos, it is as if he has a machine within him that is capable of doing immeasurable harm to others. His negative tendencies are worse than the actual bad deeds that he does, since there is no limit to the destruction that bad middos can accrue.

Therefore, the Rambam teaches: “Just as one must repent for his misdeeds, he must do teshuvah for his bad middos.” The bad middos are in a way worse, because there is an unlimited amount of badness they can produce. Now is the time to cleanse ourselves from every bad trait, and to acquire good middos and genuine ahavas Yisrael.¹⁷

16. We say (at the end of kadish) *ose shalom bemromav hu yaasah shalom aleinu*.

We can explain: when one thinks in Hashem’s terms [*bemromov*] of life, we realize that we should have peace, because there is no time for disputes.

17. The Torah says: (Vayikra 2:11) “All leaven [*seor*] and honey may not be sacrificed for Hashem.”

Rebbe Chaike Hamdura zy”a explained that leaven represents gaavah [haughtiness – because it grows and expands, more than it really is] and bees’ honey represent anger (because Chazal say that bees’ honey has *aks* [a poison] in it, and *aks* have the same letters as *kas* [anger]). The passuk is teaching us that

Not to despair from sin

With great fear of Hashem, and with fiery ambition to bring atonement and salvation to his community and to all of Klal Yisrael, the Sar Shalom of Belz zy”a placed the shofar to his lips, to blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. But then he saw that he accidentally tore off one of the hairs of his mustache. This startled him. He felt that he had somewhat transgressed the Yom Tov at this prime moment, and thereby lost the opportunity to bring atonement for himself, for his entire community, and for all of Klal Yisrael. He was on the verge of becoming depressed about it, but then the Sar Shalom realized that these were the thoughts of the yetzer hara, so to himself he said to the yetzer hara: “Strangle yourself with the hair! I am now a new person,” and then, with joy and exalted pride, he blew the shofar for his community.

We mustn’t forget that we are human, and therefore, it is natural that we will make mistakes at times. The yetzer hara however takes advantage of our failures to make us feel that all is lost, and then we cannot achieve anything. Certainly, if the Sar Shalom would

have succumbed to depression at that time, he couldn’t have accomplished nearly as much with his shofar. But he overlooked the past, and girded himself with joy and pride. The pride is the belief that Hashem still desires his service. When he did so, he certainly brought atonement and salvation to Klal Yisrael with the shofar.

This very important lesson is also seen in this week’s parshah.

This week’s parshah is Shmini, which means “eight.” The eighth passuk of this week’s parshah is: “*vayakrav Ahron el hamizbeiach vayishchat es eigel hachatas asher lo*” [Ahron came to the mizbeiach, and he sacrificed his calf as a sin-offering]. It wasn’t easy for Ahron to bring this korban. It was Rosh Chodesh Nissan, the day the Mishkan was to be erected, and Ahron was chosen by Hashem to bring the sacrifices, and to inaugurate Hashem’s presence upon the Mishkan. The hopes of Klal Yisrael, for many months, were dependent upon him. But right then he saw an image of a calf on the mizbeiach, reminiscent to the Golden Calf that he helped create. The yetzer hara began playing in his

even when it is for Hashem’s sake, don’t use anger and do not use gaavah. Even when one’s intention is l’shem shamayim, avoid using these bad middos.

heart, causing him to despair. The yetzer hara told him that the calf is there to demonstrate that his sins weren't forgiven, and the korbanos wouldn't be accepted. If he would have listened to the yetzer hara, all would be lost. But he overcame the yetzer hara, brought the korbanos with pride and joy, and the Mishkan was established.

A student of the Avnei Nezer said that this can be the intention of the Gemara that teaches: (Sota 5) "Every Torah scholar needs a '*shminis shebishminis*' an 1/8th of an 1/8th of gavah [pride]." One needs pride, to believe that Hashem wants him, and his service, despite his faults. A '*shminis shebishminis*' can represent the eight passuk of parshas Shmini (which means 8), which describes how Ahron garnered his pride, and brought the korbanos.

We will quote here the Ramban who describes Ahron HaCohen's struggle: "Ahron saw the image of a calf on top of the mizbeiach, and was afraid of it. Moshe Rabbeinu came to him and said: 'Ahron, my brother, do not be afraid. Be

proud...' and Ahron came to the mizbeiach with zrizus. Because Ahron *kedosh Hashem* didn't have any other sin other than the *eigal* and this sin was always on his conscious. As it states: (Tehilim 51:5) '*vechatasi negdi samid*' [my sins are always in front of my]... Therefore, Moshe told him: '*hagas datcha* [be proud]. Do not be so humble, because Hashem] desires your deeds."

Ahron, and the entire Jewish nation, were afraid once again, because after sacrificing all their karbanos, Hashem's presence still didn't reside in the Mishkan. Rashi writes: "Ahron was distressed. He said: 'I know that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is angry at me, and because of me the Shechinah didn't come down to Yisrael.' Ahron said to Moshe: 'Moshe, my brother, what did you do to me, to embarrass me so much? [Why did you ask me to bring these karbanos?]' Moshe and Ahron went into the Mishkan to pray and [then] the Shechinah came down."¹⁸

Without despair, a yid will reach even higher levels.

18. The following passuk states: (10:23) "A fire came forth from Hashem and it ate [the sacrifices] on the mizbeiach... the nation saw and they rejoiced and they fell on their faces."

The Divrei Shmuel in the name of the Alshich HaKadosh explains that the Jewish

The Arvei Nachal (quoting Rebbe Boruch'l of Mezibuz) teaches that when one wants to take a great jump, he will generally begin with jump start. He goes back a few steps, springs forward, and the momentum helps him jump higher. In this same manner, before rising to a higher spiritual level, one needs to go back a few steps, and then take a leap and go further. He feels that he is falling, but if he doesn't lose hope and continues serving Hashem, he will reach an even higher level than before. In the holy sefarim, this is called a *yeridah letzorech aliyah* [a fall that leads to growth].

This is alluded to in the following passuk in this week's parshah: (11:7) "*vees hachazir*" [when a person feels that he is going backwards] he should know that he isn't falling, rather, "*ki mafris parsah hu...*" [It is for the purpose of taking a large step forward].¹⁹

Only he must be careful that he doesn't remain in his fallen state. This is the meaning of the end of the passuk: *vehu geirah lo yigor* [he shouldn't live there].²⁰ He mustn't remain on this lower level. He should strengthen himself and grow even higher.²¹

nation fell on their faces because they were ashamed. They were embarrassed that they even considered that Hashem may not want them, and may not desire to rest His Shechinah among them.

19. Chazir means to return, and *parsah* means to take a step. He isn't returning and falling back, he is taking a larger step forward.

20. *Geirah lo yigor* is from the word *gar*, to live. He must be careful not to remain at this lower level.

21. After one falls from his level, he will reach afterwards an even higher level, if he strengthens himself in avodas Hashem. The Torah relates that Reuvan moved the bed of his father, and it seemed that he sinned. But then the Torah writes: (Bereishis 35:22) "*vayihiyu bnei Yaakov shneim asar*" [the children of Yaakov were 12] and Reuvan is listed among his brothers. Rashi explains: "This passuk is telling us that they were all equal and they were all tzaddikim, because Reuvan didn't sin."

A commentary asked: How do we see from this passuk that Reuvan didn't sin? Perhaps he sinned, and he did teshuvah? The answer is that if that would have been the case, Reuvan would be on an even higher level! He wouldn't be equal to all the rest. Because when one falls, and rises up again, he becomes greater than before.

This week's parshah begins with the words: "*Vayehi bayom hashmini.*" The

As we discussed before, the days of Omer are days of preparation for Mattan Torah. The Ran (Pesachim 28.) writes: “When Moshe Rabbeinu told the Yidden that they would serve Hashem [and receive the Torah] by Har Sinai, they asked him when this will take place, and Moshe replied that it will be in fifty days. Each person began to count fifty days, and this is the source to Sefiras Ha’Omer.”

They were (and continue to be) days of preparation, but when we study about the Yidden in the desert, we discover that they didn’t only go to higher levels. There were many falls during these fifty days as well. They were in Refidim, and Chazal tell us

that they weren’t learning Torah sufficiently (*rafu yadeihem midivrei Torah*) and they questioned whether Hashem was with them, (*hayeish Hashem bikirbeinu im ayin*) and because of these matters, Amalek attacked them. They were in Alimah, and they began to cry and complain that they don’t have water to drink. In the Yam Suf, they also had their share of sins. They weren’t perfect all the fifty days of preparation for Mattan Torah. But we must realize the preparing for Mattan Torah is a process. There are ups and downs, but the main thing is to continue believing that Hashem desires our service, and then from each descent, we can rise to an even greater level when we get up again.²²

Gemara tells us that whenever it says “*vayehi*” it is expressing something sad that happened and on this day, Nadav vaAvihu died). The Beis Avraham (Slonim) tells us another reason the parshah begins with the sad expression of “*vayehi*.” The parshah tells us that Ahron HaCohen’s sin was forgiven, and this distressed Moshe Rabbeinu. He was upset that Ahron was able to come to a higher level (because of his sin and repentance) while Moshe, who didn’t sin, didn’t have this opportunity.

22. Reb Gad’l Eizner would relate a story about a drummer who continued drumming even after someone got angry at him and slapped him in the face. The drummer said: “I got a beating, and I continue drumming happily.” Because this is an important principle of life that one must acquire: even when he falls from his level, he should continue onwards with his avodas Hashem.