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Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Bamidbar/Shavuot



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Averting The Return To PRE-EXISTENCE

The Desert, a Proving Grounds for the Jewish People

Torah: “Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai...”

Midrash citing *Yirimiyah*: “G-d said to the Jewish people, ‘You are the generation that witnessed the Word of G-d. Have I been a desert to Israel, a land of darkness? Yet you came with a claim against Moshe saying: Why did you take us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?’ Did I treat you as if you were in a desert? If a mortal king were to go out into the desert, does he have the tranquility and comfort of his own palace? Does he have the same amount of food and drink available to him? Before you had gone out into the desert you were mere slaves in Egypt. Yet, I had taken you out and placed you in the choicest location in existence...I accommodated you with a setting that is the equivalent of a palace...In addition, I gave you three redeemers who attended to your needs...In the merit of Moshe, you were provided with the Manna. In the merit of Aaron, you were provided

with the Clouds of Glory... In the merit of *Miriam*, who sang praises at the Sea, you were provided with the wellspring.” G-d provided for every possible need of the Jewish people in the desert, yet the Jewish people complained. Why was this so?

Gemara: The manna in the desert assumed the flavor and nutritional value of almost any imaginable food. However, there were a number of foods that the manna would not assume their taste such as garlic, onions, melons, and gourds. The reason for this was because eating such foods would negatively affect the milk of nursing mothers, thus affecting their children. Therefore, G-d did not allow that the manna to assume the taste of these food items.

Torah: When the Jewish people complained to Moshe in the desert, they complained that back in Egypt they had garlic, onions, melons, and gourds; however here in the desert they are being denied such foods. They fondly remembered the cuisine they had eaten in Egypt

without regard of the fact that they were slaves living under the worst conditions. G-d said, "Is this truly the basis for your complaint? It is an indication that you are only looking for a reason to not have a relationship with Me?" If they had every possible amenity, why would they not want a relationship with G-d?

Torah in Bechukosai: "G-d said to the Jewish people, 'You are My subjects....'"

Rashi citing Chazal: "Prior to being redeemed from Egypt you were the slaves of Pharaoh, now you are My subjects..." Since the Jewish people were slaves in Egypt, they were the chattel of Pharaoh who could do with them as he wanted. However, after they were redeemed, G-d is the One who became their master. Regardless of how much the Jewish people believed that they were entitled and thus free to complain, they had no say whatsoever regarding their lives, because they became the subjects of G-d. G-d provided for them in the desert so that they could serve Him without distraction. His accommodation of the Jewish people was no less than if they had been hosted in a palace.

In order to be able to appreciate G-d and internalize the privileged status of being His people one needed to have the *Torah*. Regarding the Ten Commandments that *Moshe* had received at Sinai, the *Torah* tells us that the words of the Tablets were "*charus*" on the Tablets. The meaning of "*charus*" means "engraved."

Mishna in Ethics of our Fathers: The word (without vowels) "*charus*" could be read as "*cheirus*" which means "freedom." Meaning, the only truly person who is truly "free" (not subject to his physical drives and inclinations) is the one who is engaged in *Torah* study. When one complains despite the fact that G-d has bestowed upon him every conceivable need and comfort, it is an indication that he does not value a relationship with G-d. Thus, confirming that he did not sufficiently engage in *Torah* study in order to have a level of clarity. It is only through adhering to the *Torah* that the Jewish people assume the profile of the "chosen people."

In contrast, if a Jew chooses to be disinterested in having a special relationship with G-d and thus does not adhere to the *Torah* and *mitzvos* sufficiently, he relinquishes the special status of being "chosen." The desert was the proving grounds for the Jewish people. If they were willing to subordinate themselves to G-d's Will, then they could appreciate all of the amenities that He provided for them. However, if they had no

interest in being subjugated to Him, all of the comfort and amenities had no value. Consequently, G-d will withdraw Himself from the Jewish people.

Mishna in Ethics of our Fathers: "Whoever does not observe the *Torah* in a context of wealth will ultimately not observe the *Torah* in a state of poverty. Whoever, engages in *Torah* study in a state of poverty will ultimately engage in it in a state of wealth." When G-d bestowed wealth upon the Jew it is only the means to facilitate his spirituality through the fulfillment of *Torah*. If he chooses not to utilize the blessing for this purpose, then G-d will withdraw it from him. On the other hand if one fulfills the *Torah* despite his impoverished state, G-d will provide him with wealth so that he will be able to fulfill it to an even greater degree, since he will have the means to do so.

The Purity of the Jew Beyond Reproach

Torah: "*Hashem* spoke to *Moshe* ..., saying 'Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families...'"

Torah: "They gathered together the entire assembly on the first day of the second month, and they established their genealogy according to their families, according to their fathers' household, by number of the names..."

Rashi citing Chazal: "Each person established his pedigree by presenting his documents of pedigree. They also brought witnesses to testify to their birth regarding each one of them and thus identify them with the appropriate tribe, regarding their paternal line."

Chazal: Although the Jewish people were slaves in Egypt for 210 years, no Jewish woman had relations with an Egyptian male (except for the one incident when *Shlomis Bas Divri* was raped by an Egyptian). The pedigree of the Jewish people is pure.

Midrash: After the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai, the nations of the world came to G-d with a claim, "Why did You give the *Torah* to the Jewish people and not offer it to us?" G-d responded, "Can you establish your pedigree as My children have established theirs?" The nations of the world could not respond. They understood that due to their promiscuous behavior, which included incestuous relationships and adultery, they and their progeny were illegitimate. They did not possess the purity that was needed to become G-d's people. This is the reason the

Torah presents the pedigree of the Jewish people after they had received the *Torah* at Sinai. When the nations of the world became aware of the purity of the Jewish people, they were astounded and began singing their praises.

Proverbs: “*Kamu vaneha vayashruha* – her children had risen and praised her.”

Torah: *Bilaam*, the evil one, the prophet of the nations advised *Balak*, the King of Midian to bring severe prosecution upon the Jewish people. He had said, “The G-d of Israel despises promiscuity.” *Bilaam* understood that if he would cause the Jewish people to sin in this area, they would evoke Divine Retribution upon them, and would thus be destroyed.

Torah: The Jewish males did in fact sin with the incident of *Baal Peor* (idolatry) and engaging sexually with the Moabite women. After the incident of *Baal Peor*, the nations of the world came to G-d with a claim, “Now Your children have violated their purity and are no different that we are. G-d answered, ‘Whoever engaged in the sin of *Baal Peor* together with the Moabite women was destroyed by plague (24,000 Jews perished after *Baal Peor*).’” The *Torah* enumerates the names of the tribes as part of the new census that was taken of the Jewish people after the plague. When the verse lists the families of the tribes, the *Torah* adds the letters “*hey*” and “*yud*” to the family names.

Rashi citing *Chazal*: “The nations of the world were mocking the Jewish people when they had take their census. They had said, ‘Why are they presenting their pedigree when it is obviously false. Do you think for one moment that their mothers were not defiled by the Egyptians? If the Egyptians controlled, persecuted and dominated the bodies of the Jewish males in bondage, could one believe that their wives were not defiled by their masters? Therefore, G-d associated His Name “*Yud* and *Hey*” with the families of the tribes to indicate that He personally attests to the fact that the Jewish people are not illegitimate.”

Prior to the sin of *Baal Peor* the area of forbidden sexual relations was not breached by the Jewish people to any degree. They were above reproach in this area. Thus, the nations of the world did not attempt to question the validity of the documents of pedigree. Therefore, G-d did not need to attest to the purity of the Jewish people. However, after the sin of *Baal Peor* when their purity was breached as a result of the relations with the Moabite women, the Jew was seen in another

light. The nations of the world thought the Jew was no different then they were. G-d, thus needed to attest to the fact that they were pure.

Torah: After *Moshe* killed the Egyptian who had beaten the Jew, he needed to flee from Egypt because the court had ruled that he needed to be put to death. The Egyptian that he had killed was the one who had raped *Shlomis Bas Divri*, the only Jewish woman who was defiled in Egypt. *Moshe*’s act was more than avenging the defilement of a married Jewish woman, it was a sanctification of G-d’s Name. Throughout the 210 years of bondage not a single Jewish woman was defiled by an Egyptian.

It was not until the rape of *Shlomis Bas Divri* that a Jewish woman was defiled. *Moshe*’s killing of the Egyptian was necessary, because although it would cause him to flee from Egypt, it communicated to the world that the Jewish women in Egypt, although they were slaves, were not defiled by their masters. Thus, their progeny were truly from their fathers. *Moshe* established the pure pedigree of the entire Jewish people when he killed the Egyptian.

One would think that *Moshe*’s behavior regarding the Egyptian was considered irresponsible. Not realizing the consequence of his behavior would cause him to flee. *Moshe*, being a prince in Egypt was in a powerful and influential position. He was necessary to petition their cause. However, when he killed the Egyptian, his standing in Pharaoh’s court came to an end. He killed the Egyptian in order to establish to the world they the Jewish people were indeed pure and worthy to receive the *Torah* at Sinai as G-d’s People.

Maharal of Prague in *Gevuras Hashem*: If one fails in the area of promiscuous behavior it is an indication that his essence is earthy and mundane. His life is dictated by his animalistic drive and is not able to rise above his inclination. However, since the essence of the Jewish people is spiritual, this behavior has no relevance to them. When *Moshe* killed the Egyptian he demonstrated to the world that the Jewish people are spiritual people who exist as human beings. They are thus qualified to receive G-d’s *Torah* and engage in an intimate relationship with Him.

Fierceness Rooted in Truth

Gemara in Tractate *Yevamos*: There are characteristics that are unique to the Jewish people. The Jewish

people possess the characteristics of “Mercy, shame (conscience), and the propensity to do acts of kindness (*gemilas chasodim*).” These characteristics are innate in every Jew because they are part of the gene pool that was inherited from the holy Patriarchs. If one does not possess these three characteristics, his lineage is in question.

Torah: Avraham is “*Avraham Ha’Ivri* (literally – from across the river).”

Chazal: The appellation of “*Ivri*” identifies *Avraham* as the person who was on one side (*eiver*) and the rest of the world was on the other. He single-handedly took on the world to disseminate monotheism. *Avraham’s* conviction of belief was so deeply rooted in his being that it gave him the strength to stand up against the entire pagan world. His dissemination of truth could not be disturbed or impeded despite the threat to his life and his personal suffering.

Chazal: Before *Avraham* our Patriarch began his dissemination, G-d was known as “the G-d of heaven”; however, after his espousal, He became known as “G-d of heaven and earth.”

Mishna in Ethics of our Fathers: “Be fierce as a leopard (*aaz k’namer*)...” Meaning, despite the opposition and perception of others, *Avraham*, due to his characteristic of “fierceness (*aazus*)” was not deterred by the opposition of the world. *Avraham* not only believed in a monotheistic Being, he also took the initiative to disseminate his belief.

Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos*: “The signet of G-d is truth.” Although one may revere truth, one may not take the initiative to establish or disseminate it. In order for one to do this, one must possess the characteristic of “fierceness.” One who truly internalizes truth, as *Avraham* our Patriarch had done, is motivated and committed to its dissemination because it becomes his essence. This individual will be undeterred by perceptions and opinions of others regardless of the consequences.

Midrash citing *Psalms*: “‘The glory of the daughter of the king is in concealment, even greater than garments laden with gold...’ Who is considered to be ‘the daughter of the king’ it is *Moshe*...The verse states, ‘I sealed Egypt with difficult masters which were the plagues that came upon the Egyptians...and the king that was powerful will dominate Egypt (‘*aaz*’ – the word ‘*aaz* (powerful)’ is derived from the same root as ‘*aaz*-fierce’)’ Who is

the king with power ‘*aaz*’ it is *Moshe*? He is the king of *Torah*, which is referred to as ‘*aaz*’ (power). As it states in *Psalms*, ‘G-d gives His people strength; G-d blesses His people with peace...’ Where do we find that *Moshe* behaved with fierceness?

Torah: When *Moshe* saw an Egyptian beating a Jew, whose wife had been raped by the Egyptian, he smote the Egyptian regardless of the consequences of his action. Subsequently, he needed to flee Egypt. Since *Moshe* was not willing to compromise on truth, he acted with fierceness to uphold it.

Torah: Pinchas acted zealously when he killed *Zimri*, the prince of the tribe of *Shimon* because he openly desecrated G-d’s Name. It was only due to *Pinchas’* act of zealotry that caused the plague to cease from the Jewish people. *Pinchas* was able to be the zealot because he possessed the characteristic of “fierceness.” He was not concerned for his safety or for what others would say regarding his behavior.

Midrash: After *Pinchas* killed *Zimri*, he was vehemently criticized by the tribes. They had said, “How does he have the right to kill a prince of Israel when he descends from a pedigree that fattened calves to be used for idolatry (*Yisro*).” The *Torah* thus immediately identifies the prestigious pedigree of *Pinchas* by tracing it to *Aaron*, the High Priest. As it states, “*Hashem* spoke to *Moshe* saying: *Pinchas*, son of *Elazar*, son of *Aaron* the *Kohen*, turned back My wrath from the Children of Israel...”

Mishna in Ethics of our Fathers: *Aaron* loved peace and pursued peace.

Gemara in Tractate *Nidarim* gives an example of how this characteristic was implemented by *Aaron*. There was a man who had an argument with his wife. He had taken a vow that prohibited all of his possessions to his wife unless she would spit in the eye of the High Priest. The vow would only not come into effect if she fulfilled his precondition. *Aaron*, becoming aware of the wife’s dire situation, came to the woman and told her that he had an eye ailment that could only be cured if she would spit in his eye. Although *Aaron* was the High Priest, the most prestigious position among the Jewish people, because he wanted to bring peace between husband and wife, he was willing to compromise his own honor. He not only loved peace, he pursued peace. This is a demonstration of the characteristic of “fierceness.” The characteristic of fierceness in the context of spirituality can come only from the study of *Torah*.

Mishna in Ethics of our Fathers: "Ein am haaretz chasid— An unlearned person cannot be scrupulously pious."

Rabbeinu Yonah: "It is inferred from the Mishna that although one can only become a "chasid" if he is learned; however, he can become devoutly righteous (tzaddik) even if he is unlearned. One can only be a tzaddik if he does everything correctly – in conformance with what the Torah prescribes. If so, how can the person who is ignorant of Torah, be a tzaddik when he is not aware of what the Torah dictates?"

One can be a *tzaddik* regardless of his lack of *Torah* knowledge if he is instructed by another how to conduct his life as a proper Jew in every situation. However, in order for one to become a *chasid*, which is one who goes beyond his obligation, he must internalize the value of the service of G-d. The only way one can be motivated to go beyond his obligation is through the study of *Torah*. Thus, the unlearned person, who does not have the *Torah* as a motivator, cannot achieve the level of *chasid*."

In order to be able to go beyond one's obligation one needs to possess a special level of enthusiasm. It is the *Torah* sage who possesses this enthusiasm. It is because the *Torah* that he has internalized is the equivalent of fire that burns within him. As the verse states, "G-d said, 'My Words are like fire...'" This motivates him to act for the sake of G-d, regardless of the consequences.

Mishna in Tractate Bava Kama: Fire is one of the four damagers. It is characterized as a damager that moves.

Chazal: Avraham, our Patriarch, fulfilled the entire Torah, including rabbinic laws, before it was given at Sinai to the Jewish people. He had the fire of Torah that burned within him. Avraham, our Patriarch, having this dimension of being thus possessed the fierceness to oppose the entire world and present it with the truth.

G-d's Association with Creation

Torah: "G-d spoke to Moshe saying, 'Behold! I have taken the Levites from among the Children of Israel, in place of the firstborn...Count the sons of Levi...'" G-d chose the tribe of Levy to be His officiants in the Mishkan because they were the most beloved to Him.

Midrash: "The tribe of Levy was more beloved to G-d than all of the tribes of Israel. The verse in Shmuel states, 'I chose them to be My Priests, to come upon My Altar...' Where do we find that G-d chooses one of His

creations to be more special than His other creations? G-d created days and He chose one of them to be unique and special...Which one is this?

"Reb Levy says, 'It is Shabbos.' He created years and one of them is special to Him. Which one is this? The verse states, 'It is to be a Shabbos L'Shem (Shabbos for G-d).' This is the Sabbatical year (seventh year, which corresponds to the seventh day of Creation - Shabbos). He created units of seven years and chose one of them. As it states, 'It was in the fiftieth year (Yovel)...' He created many lands and He chose one of them. It is the Land of Israel. As it states, 'It is the Land that Your G-d seeks out continuously...' G-d refers to it as 'My Land...'

"G-d created the heavens and the earth and He chose one of them...G-d created seventy nations and He chose one of them. He chose the Jewish people. As it states, 'You are My chosen people...' Why did He choose them over the others? It is because He loved them the most. He created tribes but He chose one of them because they were the most beloved to Him. As it states, 'I have taken the Levites...'" Although the *Kohen* is the most special component of the tribe of *Levy*, the entire tribe is beloved to G-d. What is the significance of G-d choosing one entity among His creations to be special?

Maharal of Prague: Although we refer to G-d within the context of His Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, one does not truly understand the essence of G-d. When G-d is referred to as "Merciful" or "Kind" it is not a description of His essence, but rather it refers to a manner in which He chooses to interact with existence. The only way one can describe G-d is that He is One. Nothing exists outside of Him and everything emanates from His Oneness and Unity. Thus, anything in creation that reflects the characteristic of "one" assumes a level of distinction because it reflects the characteristic of G-d being "One." When G-d chooses to associate Himself with something it becomes holy.

For example, when G-d descended upon Mount Sinai to give the *Torah* to the Jewish people, it assumed a holy status. However, when His Divine Presence ascended from the mountain it returned to its ordinary status. The source of the holiness of the Jewish people is that they were taken to be His people. Their state of holiness will never be removed because G-d promised that He will be associated with them forever. *Shabbos* is the holiest day of the week because G-d associates Himself with that day.

Chazal: *Shabbos* is a semblance of the world to come. Anything that reflects the profile of “one” assumes a holy status because G-d associates Himself with that which reflects His Oneness. This is the reason the *Shmita* year and *Yovel* (Jubilee year) assume a holy status. The tribe of *Levy* is the holiest tribe amongst the Jewish people because G-d chose to associate Himself with them to a greater degree.

Chazal: The tribe of *Levy* are referred to as “the King’s legion.” They were not subject to the punishment that came upon the generation of the spies who perished in the desert over a forty-year period. Due to their uniqueness, they are a reflection of His Unity. We find something similar regarding G-d’s association with something that reflects His characteristic. The first born assumes a special holy status upon its birth. Just as G-d is the “first,” the firstborn is the first.

Initially, the firstborn were meant to be the officiants of G-d (*Kohanim*) because they naturally reflected the characteristic of being the “first.” They are the first to open the womb of their mother. However, they forfeited their status despite being the first because they became tainted with the sin of the golden calf. G-d then chose the tribe of *Levy* to replace the first born because they did not participate in the golden calf and were thus untainted by idolatry. As it states, “I have taken the Levites from among the Children of Israel, in place of the firstborn...” The tribe of *Levy* was given the status of the first.

Adam’s Dimension of Spirituality

Torah: “If you will follow My Statutes and observe My Commandments and perform them...I will place My Sanctuary among you; and My Spirit will not reject you.”

Rashi citing *Chazal*: “This is referring to the building of the Holy Temple.”

Sforno: Had it not for the sin of the Golden Calf, the Jewish people themselves would have been qualified to be the location of the Divine Presence. However, since they became tainted with the idolatry of the golden calf, they needed to build the *Mishkan* to be the medium through which the Divine Presence would dwell in their midst. The verse states that if the Jewish people will adhere to the *Torah*, “I (G-d) will walk among you...” This implies that the Jewish people have the spiritual potential to be the location of the Divine Presence if they were to actualize the

Torah (at a special level). Wherever they will go, G-d will walk with them.

Chazal: The holy Patriarchs were the location of the Divine Presence. As it states regarding the Patriarchs, “they, they are the chariot (of the Divine Presence) – *hein hein haMerkava*” They possessed the spiritual dimension and purity to be qualified to host the Divine Presence.

Gemara in *Bava Basra*: *Rav Banaah* was identifying and marking the graves in the *Machpelah*, which is the burial location of the holy Patriarchs. The purpose of marking the graves was so that the Priests (*Kohanim*) should not unknowingly pass over the graves and contaminate themselves. (It is a *Torah* violation for a Priest to contaminate himself by coming into contact with the dead).

Torah in *Chukas*: “This is the *Torah*, (when) a man (*adam*) dies in the tent...*Zos Chukas ha’Torah adam ki yamus b’ohel...*” There is an argument in the *Gemara* if the grave of a non- Jew contaminates in the same manner as the grave of a Jew. The *Gemara* cites a verse from *Yechezkel*: “‘You (the Jewish people) are called *adam* (man).’ It is inferred from the verse that the nations of the world are not called *adam*.” Since only the Jew has the classification of “*adam*,” his remains contaminate if one comes in contact with the grave (or is in the same closed location). However, if one were to come in contact with the grave of a Noahide (non-Jew), he would not become contaminated.

Tosfos: If the grave of a Noahide does not contaminate, as the grave of a Jew, why was it necessary for *Rav Banaah* to mark the grave of the Patriarchs since they lived before the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai? Their classification was Noahide. The grave of *Avraham* contaminates because the verse refers to *Avraham*, our Patriarch as “*Adam haGadol* (the great man).” Despite the fact that he lived before the giving of the *Torah* and was thus classified as a “Noahide,” his dimension of being was the equivalent of “*adam*.” Seemingly, the reason for this is that he fulfilled the entire *Torah* including *rabbinic* fences before it was given. Why would observing the *Torah* before it was given elevate a mere Noahide to the status of “*Adam*?”

Chazal: Before *Adam* had sinned with the Tree of Knowledge, the location of the Divine Presence was intended to be on the terrestrial plain. *Adam* was meant

to be the officiant of G-d. However, after *Adam* putrefied himself and existence by eating of the Tree, physical existence was no longer qualified to be the location of the Divine Presence.

Adam thus became disqualified to be the location of the Divine Presence. He forfeited the ability to perfect existence. It was not until the Jewish people accepted the *Torah* at Sinai that the Divine Presence could once again dwell on the terrestrial plain. They assumed the posture of *Adam* before he had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge. Thus, the Jewish people are classified as "*adam*," because the Jew has the capacity to have an intimate relationship with G-d. What gave the Jew the capacity to be the location of G-d's Presence?

It was from *Avraham*, our Patriarch who is the father of the Jewish people. After the sin of *Adam*, it was not until *Avraham*, our Patriarch, who introduced G-d into existence and proclaimed Him as Master was there

a potential for the Divine Presence to dwell on the terrestrial plain. *Avraham* through his observance of the *Torah* and spiritual purity became the location of the Divine Presence. He thus assumed the posture of *Adam* before he ate of the Tree of Knowledge. Therefore, although *Avraham* was a Noahide and not yet classified as "Israel," his grave contaminates as that of a Jew because he had assumed the classification of "*adam*."

Torah in the Portion of the blessings of the *Tochacha*: if the Jewish people adhere to the dictates of the *Torah*, they will be the location for the Divine Presence. As it states, "If you will follow My Statutes...I will walk among you..." Although the Jewish people achieved the potential to be the dwelling location of the Divine Presence at Sinai, they need to actualize their potential through the study of *Torah* and the adherence to its *mitzvos* in order to qualify to be the location for the Divine Presence.



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