



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת במדבר תשס"ח • Parshas Bamidbar 5768

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

It used to be that the *olam* (general populace) would engage in a type of alternative medicine known as ‘blood-letting’, wherein the extraction of a quantity of blood from an individual was considered to be therapeutic. The pros and cons of employing such a method are not the subject of our discussion here; rather, an important *halachah* surrounding the issue actually reveals some interesting things about the upcoming *Yom Tov* of *Shavuos*.

BLOOD, DEMONS, AND SHAVUOS

The Rama (*Orach Chaim 468:10*) records the custom to refrain from blood-letting on any *erev Yom Tov*. From the Gemara (*Shabbos 129b*), it is apparent that the real ‘problem’ stems from *erev Shavuos*, when blood-letting — normally beneficial — is considered to be particularly dangerous. As a safeguard, the Rabbis proscribed blood-letting on any *erev Yom Tov*.

What is the danger? The Gemara (*ibid.*) explains that on *erev Shavuos*, a certain pernicious demon known as ‘*Tavuach*’ (from the Hebrew root טבח, which means ‘slaughter’) is granted temporary ascendancy. His mandate is to meander around with an eye on the actions of *klal Yisrael*. If they accept the Torah, well and good; if not, the *Tavuach* may proceed (*chas v’shalom*) to wreak havoc upon them by rending their flesh and spilling their blood. In order to minimize the danger, *Chazal* instructed us to refrain from blood-letting so as to avoid presenting the *Tavuach* with any opportunities to cause harm.

This appears to be a very queer situation, for the following reason: Such a restriction would be understandable preceding the original *matan Torah* at *Har Sinai*, when the Jews had not yet received the Torah. However, the issue becomes apparently moot

concerning every *Shavuos* after that. Why not pay a visit to one’s local blood-letter on *erev Shavuos 5768*? After all, the Jewish people already accepted the Torah thousands of years ago; what danger does the *Tavuach* pose today, when the question of accepting the Torah is no longer on the table?

STRIVING FOR A FAVORABLE OUTCOME

Perhaps the Mishnah can shed light on this subject. The Mishnah in *Rosh Hashanah (1:2)* discusses the different time-periods in which the world is subjected to judgment:

בְּאַרְבַּעַת פְּרָקִים הָעוֹלָם נִדוֹן, בְּפֶסַח עַל הַתְּבוּאָה,
בְּעֶצְרַת עַל פְּרוֹת הָאֵילָן, בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה כָּל בְּאֵי
הָעוֹלָם עוֹבְרִין לְפָנָיו כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן... וּבַחֵג נִדוֹנִין עַל
הַמַּיִם.

“The world is judged at four junctures throughout the year. During *Pesach*, judgment is rendered on the produce for that year (i.e. the quality and quantity of the crop is determined at that time); on *Shavuos*, the judgment concerns the output of fruits of the tree; on *Rosh Hashanah*, all people pass in review before Hashem’s scrutiny, just as sheep who pass in single-file before the shepherd who inspects them...; and on *Succos*, the world is judged for water.”

Quoting R’ Akiva, the Gemara (*Rosh Hashanah 16a*) describes the special offerings and practices of each of the aforementioned *Yomim Tovim* as corresponding to the timely judgment. On *Pesach*, when the judgment focuses on produce, the Torah mandates the bringing of the meal-offering known as the *Korban Omer*. Brought from the barley crop, this offering reflects a plea to Hashem to decree that the upcoming crop should be a bountiful one. Likewise, on *Succos* a special libation of water was offered on the altar, in the hopes of tipping the scales towards a judgment of plentiful rainfall. The unique prayers

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and *shofar*-blowing of *Rosh Hashanah* are similarly intended to grant us a favorable remembrance before the Ultimate Judge.

The *Shavuos* offering, known as the *shte halechem*, was a wheat offering apparently unrelated to the fruits which are judged at that time. To properly understand the timeliness of the *Shavuos* offering, it is necessary to make a brief departure back in history.

EATING SMART

One of the remarkable trees in *Gan Eden* was the *Eitz Hada'as*, the Tree of Knowledge. The Gemara in *Berachos (40a)* records a three-way dispute regarding the type of fruit that grew on the *Eitz Hada'as* (sorry, not one of the *Tannaim* says that it was an apple tree). According to R' Meir, it was actually a grape-vine; R' Nechemiah is of the opinion that it was a fig tree; while R' Yehudah maintains that the 'tree' produced wheat.

On *Shavuos*, two loaves of wheat-bread were brought as an offering, corresponding to the judgment concerning 'fruit of the tree'. As we have seen, R' Yehudah is of the opinion that wheat is actually classified as such, since it comprised the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

What connection does wheat in particular have with *Shavuos*? The Maharsha (*Rosh Hashanah, ibid.*) explains that wheat has certain wisdom-generating properties; hence its association with the Tree of Knowledge. The wheat offering is particularly well-timed, therefore, as it coincides with the festival of the giving of the Torah — the ultimate manifestation of Divine Wisdom.

A quick re-cap of the facts highlights the true essence of this *Yom Tov*. The Torah mandates an offering of wheat specifically at this time, as it increases one's intellectual capacity. If the *Yom Tov* of *Shavuos* was little more than a commemoration of the events that occurred many years ago at Har Sinai, what need is there for a special device to improve the I.Q.?

Emerging from the Maharsha's insight is the following revelation: *each and every year, the Torah is granted anew to the Jewish people*. In other words, *Matan Torah* was not a one-time event which took place at a particular point in history. The requirement to bring the wheat offering on a yearly basis – to transform the individual into a receptacle for Torah knowledge – is testimony to the fact that the Torah is presented each year at this time to the Jewish people.

We can now appreciate the precautionary measures taken annually against the *Tavuach* on *erev Shavuos*. Since another *Matan Torah* is about to take place (same Torah, obviously, just a renewed transferal), the *Tavuach* once again rears his ugly head to see whether the Jews will accept it.

Let us continue to disappoint him this *Shavuos* through a renewed acceptance of, and commitment to, the Torah and Torah learning.

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