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Chayah *bas* Eliezer *HaLevi a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

A “Simple” Approach to Mitzvos

PARSHAS BEHAR 5776

R' Yosef Ya'avetz was one of the seminal figures who lived through the Expulsion from Spain in 1492. Known as the “Chassid (the Pious) Ya'avetz” in testament to his stature, he made a poignant observation of the events of his time. As is known, the Expulsion was a most unfortunate period in the annals of Spanish Jewry, whose history was transformed from golden to tragic. Once the governing powers decided they no longer needed nor wanted their Jews, they forbade the practice of Judaism under penalty of death. And so began another phase in this tragic saga: there were those who sacrificed their entire wealth and even their lives rather than abandon the Torah. There were others, however, who succumbed to pressure and temptation and traded their loyalty to Hashem in order to secure their standing amongst the gentiles.

The Chassid Ya'avetz observed in these events a certain tragic irony (which he discussed at some length in his *sefer Ohr Hachayim*). At the time, there were many scholars who not only amassed Torah knowledge, but also turned to the pursuit of philosophy, thereby adopting an approach to *mitzvos* based on logic and reasoning. *And it was largely these individuals who were the first to succumb to the threat* and abandon *mitzvah* observance. But the common and often ignorant folk, who worshipped Hashem from simple loyalty, remained steadfast and dedicated to the end.

As we shall see, it appears that this form of *avodas Hashem* (service of Hashem) has its roots in this week's *parshah*.

Logic Can Be Perilous

R' Moshe Feinstein (*Darash Moshe, parshas Behar*) discusses a parallel situation from earliest times. One of the earliest *yeshivos* of all time was the *yeshivah* of Shem and Eiver, son and great-great-grandson of No'ach, respectively. These were the illustrious members of their generations, and their *yeshivah* is mentioned quite favorably a number of times by Chazal and the commentators. They were both blessed with long years, and, presumably, the *yeshivah* was around for quite some time and produced numerous disciples. With all that, R' Moshe points out, we do not find that multitudes of righteous generations stemmed from these disciples; rather, the record seems to run dry, as if they simply petered out. What could account for this phenomenon?

R' Moshe explains that the responsible factor was a fundamental shift in the approach to Torah and *mitzvos* before and after Sinai. There were *mitzvos*, of course, even before the revelation at Sinai; to be precise, the world had been commanded in the observance of the “*sheva mitzvos b'nei No'ach*” (seven Noahide laws), which included such directives as the prohibition against stealing, murder, idolatry, and the like. Now, these were repeated through Moshe Rabbeinu at Mount Sinai. But although there was a prohibition against stealing (for example) beforehand, the nature of the command re-issued at Sinai was much different. That is, the approach that was in effect before Sinai – when the commands were originally issued to

Adam and No'ach – was one of *reason*. The precepts were to be fulfilled on the basis that they were logical; society can only function with laws that preserve order. But the people proved that they were not up to this approach, as there existed herein a certain peril. Since following adherence was dependent on people's own reasoning, later generations could end up "adjusting" their logic – and hence the laws – to suit their own needs. As such, the people who practiced this form of service were unable to properly preserve the laws and persevere in keeping them.

At Sinai, however, the emphasis changed. No longer was the notion of "reason" a factor; rather, the sole basis was simply to carry out the command of Hashem. Thus, the laws of the Torah endured for generations, and Torah observance remains strong even to this day.

The King's Decrees

It is for this reason, R' Moshe explains, that the *parshah* opens as it does. In coming to discuss the particulars of the laws of *Shemittah* (the Sabbatical Year), the *parshah* begins with an emphasis on "Sinai": וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי לֵאמֹר – "And Hashem spoke to Moshe on **Mount Sinai**, saying..." (*Vayikra 25:1*). Rashi comments on the significance of the Sinaitic reference here: "(This teaches that) just as *Shemittah... was issued at Sinai, so were all the mitzvos... issued at Sinai.*" In other words, R' Moshe explains, this was to be the approach from here on in: We fulfill Hashem's *mitzvos* out of simple devotion, because He commanded us so at Sinai.

We find this notion emerging, as well, from a well-known Mishnah that discusses the propriety of certain prayer-compositions. Specifically, it focuses on a scenario whereby an individual was contemplating the mitzvah of *shilu'ach hakan* (sending away the mother bird before taking its eggs, as recorded in *Devarim 22:6,7*). This individual perceived herein an act of mercy and composed a prayer to this effect. The Sages, however, did not approve of this formulation, as they express in the Mishnah (*Berachos 5:3*):

הַאֲמַר עַל קַן צִפּוֹר יִגְיַעוּ רַחֲמֶיךָ... מְשַׁתְּקִין אוֹתוֹ.

"One who says, 'Your mercy extends to a bird's nest,' is silenced."

What exactly was so improper about the composer's sentiment? The Gemara (*ibid. 33b*) explains along the lines of the above: מִפְּנֵי שְׂעוֹשֶׂה מְדוּתָיו שֶׁל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרַחֲמֵי הוּא רַחֲמִים וְאֵינָן אֶלָּא –גִּזְרוֹת – "Because he characterizes the precepts of Hashem as (promulgated on the basis of) mercy, when in fact they are (intended principally) as simple decrees (to be followed unquestioningly)." For as we have seen, presuming to perceive a logical basis for *mitzvos* leads the individual down a dangerous path.

In fact, this is the very reason why *Shemittah*, of all *mitzvos*, was selected to convey this important lesson. As R' Moshe explains, *Shemittah* itself is a directive that seems to defy simple logic. Instructing an entire agrarian society to simply refrain from agriculture for an entire year? Allowing all self-grown produce to be deemed ownerless, available to be taken by anyone? It is clear, then, that the basis of this mitzvah is just that: we follow the directive as a simple show of obedience to the King Who so commanded at Sinai. And "just as *Shemittah* is from Sinai" and warrants such an approach, "so are all the *mitzvos*" to be so considered. And in this way, we may learn the lesson of history and ensure that Torah observance will endure forever.