



PARSHAS VAERA

& the MONTH OF SHEVAT

SHALOSH SEUDOS
TORAH

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The Power to Pray¹

Introduction

Hashem commanded Moshe Rabbeinu to demand of Pharaoh that he allow the Jewish people to leave his country. Moshe Rabbeinu countered, "Why would Pharaoh listen to me? I have sealed lips (a speech defect)¹."

The Torah interrupts the conversation between Hashem and Moshe and delineates the lineage of Moshe and Aharon. Afterwards, the Torah resumes the conversation, but first repeats Moshe's argument of - "Behold I have sealed lips, how will Pharaoh listen to me²?" - in order to remind the reader what it is talking about.

Each letter in the Torah corresponds to a Jewish soul. Each soul has a unique reason for existence; no two people have the same mission on this world.

These two verses seem to be exactly the same. However, these verses correspond to people, of which each one has a different task and essence. How can two verses in the Torah have the same meaning, if the people they correspond to are completely unique?

Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai

There are two schools of Talmudic law; one is Beis Hillel, of Hillel and his students, the other is Beis Shamai, of Shamai and his students. Beis Hillel usually rules leniently while Beis Shamai usually rules strictly.

Today, we usually rule according to the opinion of Beis Hillel, because their rulings are in accordance with the attribute of Chesed (loving kindness) and are more lenient. This is necessary in the present, imperfect state of the world.

However, the Arizal revealed that when Mashiach will come, we will rule according to Beis Shamai, whose rulings are in accordance with the attribute of Din (strict judgment). Their rulings resonate with the perfectly holy era of Mashiach, when evil will not exist. For now, in a world where evil does exist, we cannot rule according to their opinion, because it leaves no room for imperfection.

מדת הדין (Shamai the Elder) is gematria (has the numerical value of) שמאי הזקן, the attribute of Din (they both equal 513).

Two Opinions as to When the New Year for the Trees Begins

The Mishna always states both the opinion of Beis Hillel and Beis Shamai when discussing the halacha (law). The phrasing usually follows this format: Beis Shamai says ... Beis Hillel says...; we first mention the view of Beis Shamai - which we do not follow - and conclude with the opinion of Beis Hillel - according to whom the halacha is finalized.

When discussing the halacha of when the New Year for the trees occurs, the Mishna³ alters its usual format and states: The first of Shevat is the New Year for the trees according to the opinion of Beis Shamai; Beis Hillel says, on the fifteenth [is the New Year for the trees]. The Mishna seems to be giving more weight to the opinion of Beis Shamai than usual.

¹ This is the Shalosh Seudos Torah of תשנ"ו

The reason for this may be as follows:

Knowing when the New Year for the trees begins has practical halachic (legal) ramifications. A farmer is required to tithe his produce using fruits from the same year. According to Beis Hillel, he must scrutinize his trees to see which ones have begun to bud before the fifteenth of Shevat; these will be considered as part of the old crop. According to Beis Shamai, he must inspect his trees to see which ones began budding before the first of Shevat.

Today, we divide the yearly crop according to which ones began budding before the fifteenth of Shevat. When Mashiach will come and we will rule according to Beis Shamai, we will divide the fruit according to which fruit began budding before the first of Shevat.

Now, what would happen if Mashiach comes sometime between the fifteenth of Shevat and the separating of the tithes? The halacha would be according to Beis Shamai, but we would have grouped the fruits according to the opinion of Beis Hillel.

Therefore, the Mishna changes its standard phrasing and says, 'according to the opinion of Beis Shamai,' instead of 'Beis Shamai says.' This is to hint that Beis Shamai's opinion – even today when we rule according to Beis Hillel - is not merely theoretical in this case, but has practical ramifications.

A Jew who hopes for and believes in the coming of Mashiach any day, will go out and check if his trees began budding, not only before the fifteenth of Shevat, but also before the first of Shevat - in case Mashiach will arrive.

In Shevat, One can Perceive Wonders in the Torah

The Chiddushei HaRim explains that the main focus of the New Year for the trees is the renewal of the Torah - which is compared to a 'Tree of Life'. Every year on the first of Shevat we receive a heavenly infusion of new ideas in Torah. Tzaddikim (righteous people) detect a difference between Torah that was originated before the first of Shevat and afterwards.

On the first of Shevat before his passing, Moshe Rabbeinu began reviewing the Torah. "וַאֲבִיטָהּ" 'ואביטה' is gematria "וואביטה", 'Moshe began explaining [the Torah]' is gematria "וואביטה", 'ואביטה' is gematria "וואביטה", 'And I will see wonders [in your Torah]' (they both equal 600). On the day Moshe began explaining the Torah, on the first of Shevat, one can begin perceiving new, wondrous insights in the Torah.

It was Difficult to Pray in the Egyptian Exile

The crux of the Egyptian exile was the strength of the power of impurity. The evil powers that dominated in Egypt made it very difficult for Jews to pray or say any words of holiness. The spiritual power of speech - the ability to pray - was trapped by the forces of evil.

The Jewish people could not connect to their Creator; they could not pray. To symbolize the inability of the Jewish people to speak spiritually, to pray, Moshe Rabbeinu, their leader, had a speech defect.

There are ten words in the Hebrew language that mean 'to pray'; and each refers to a different type of prayer. All of these were trapped in the clutches of the evil powers of Egypt.

The purpose of the ten plagues was to shatter the forces of evil that were dominant in Egypt. Each of the ten plagues destroyed another one of the powers of evil and released one of the ten powers of prayer. That is why we find multiple expressions of Moshe Rabbeinu praying throughout the account of the plagues.

However, we don't find that Moshe Rabbeinu prayed until after the Plague of Frogs. If each plague redeemed one of the ten words which mean 'to pray', we would expect to find one of them right after the first plague.

In Our Times it is Difficult to Pray

R' Yisrael of Rizhin zt"l predicted that in Ikvise DiMeshicha – the time right before the arrival of Mashiach – it will be extremely difficult to pray. He said, "מען וועט רייסן פון די דיבורים" מויל די דיבורים, 'They will rip the words from our mouths'. Only with great difficulty will it be possible to say a few chapters of Tehillim properly.

The only way to succeed in serving Hashem in our difficult times is with hard work. Both the Sfas Emes zt"l and the Belzer Rebbe zt"l said that, in our times, without self-sacrifice it is impossible to achieve anything in the service of Hashem.

We Learn Self-Sacrifice from the Frog

Three great Jewish heroes, Chananya, Mishoel and Azarya, allowed themselves to be thrown into a fiery furnace for their refusal to serve idols. They derived the courage to do so from the frogs that jumped into the Egyptian ovens during the Plague of Frogs in order to fulfill the command of Hashem Who told them to afflict the Egyptians⁵.

The following is a quote from the introduction to Perek Shirah:
Our Sages, of blessed memory, said about David, King of Israel, peace be upon him: When he completed the Book of Psalms, he felt proud and he said before the Holy One Blessed Be He, "Have You created any creature in Your world that recites songs and praises more than I?" That moment, a single frog encountered him and said to him: "David, do not be proud, for I recite songs and praises more than you... What is more, I am involved in a great mitzvah, and this is the mitzvah with which I am engaged: at the seashore there is a species whose sustenance is only from the water, and when it is hungry it takes me and eats me."

From here we see that the frog is a species that personifies self-sacrifice. In fact, the praise the frog sings to Hashem is 'Baruch Shem... ', the phrase we say after reciting 'Shema Yisrael', the verse with which we declare our readiness to sacrifice our lives for the sake of Hashem.

Only with Self-Sacrifice can one Merit Praying Properly in Ikvise DiMeshicha

This may be the reason why Moshe Rabbeinu is not found praying until after the Plague of Frogs. In Egypt, the power of prayer was in captivity, as it is in our times, Ikvise DiMeshicha. The only way to release the power of prayer from the clutches of the evil forces is through self-sacrifice – exerting effort.

Although with the Plague of Blood one of the ten aspects of prayer was released from captivity, the Jewish people were nevertheless unable to access it because it was

still very difficult to pray in Egypt. Their defectiveness in prayer affected their leader, Moshe Rabbeinu; and he, too, was unable to pray.

It was only after the Plague of Frogs – when the Jewish people learned from the example of the frogs how to exercise self-sacrifice – that they were able to overcome their lethargy and give forth words of prayer to Hashem. Then Moshe Rabbeinu was also able to pray, as the verse tells us, "ויצעק משה אל ה'"⁶, 'and Moshe cried out to Hashem'.

Our Prayer is Precious to Hashem Because it Requires so Much Effort

The song of the frog is by no means pleasurable to the human ear. Its guttural croak is very far from even basic music. However, it is precious to Hashem even more than the Psalms of David.

The level in prayer we are capable of attaining in our time – even with our utmost effort – is laughable compared to only a few generations prior. Our prayer, despite its inferior quality, is - like the frog's - very precious to Hashem because it requires so much self-sacrifice on our part.

Self-sacrifice means to go against our natural instincts. Our natural instinct is to relax and take it easy. To go against that, and muster the enthusiasm and joy necessary to pray properly, means to exercise self-sacrifice.

The prophet Malachi compares "עובד ה' לאשר לא עבדו"⁷, 'The one who serves Hashem to the one who does not serve Him'. The Gemara⁸ categorizes these two types of people as following: The 'one who does not serve Hashem' is not referring to an evil person, rather it refers to someone who reviews his learning a hundred times; the 'one who serves Hashem' refers to a person who reviews one hundred and one times.

The Tanya⁹ explains this Gemara as follows: In the era of the Gemara, when Torah was transmitted orally, the standard practice was to review one's learning one hundred times in order to commit it to memory. Someone who reviewed his learning one hundred and one times was doing beyond what he was used to.

One who learns Torah and does mitzvos because that is what he is used to is not really 'serving Hashem', he is merely doing what is natural to him. It is when he goes beyond his natural inclinations that he can be described as 'serving Hashem'.

In our times, merely praying with basic concentration and emotion requires going beyond our natural disposition and can earn us the title of 'serving Hashem'.

The Month of Shevat has the Power to Heal the Spiritual Power of Speech

The Rabbeinu Bechaya reckons when each of the plagues occurred. The Plague of Hailstones was in the month of Shevat.

After the Plague of Hailstones, Moshe Rabbeinu left the city in order to pray. Usually, he prayed within the city. The reason he had to leave the city in order to pray this time was because he engaged in a very elevated and powerful type of prayer called פרישת כפיים, spreading out one's hands in prayer.

The Midrash¹⁰ notes that in the beginning, Moshe described himself as "not a man of words"¹¹. At the end of his life, his final and lengthy explanation of the Torah is introduced with the words - "These are the words that Moshe said"¹². Moshe Rabbeinu

went from being 'not a man of words' to being able to speak words of Torah eloquently. The Torah healed Moshe Rabbeinu's speech defect.

The month of Shevat has the power to heal the spiritual power of speech – the ability to pray. This is because it was on the first of Shevat that Moshe began reviewing the Torah and explaining it in all seventy languages. Shevat contains the healing powers of the Torah.

The Plague of Hailstones took place in the month of Shevat. Therefore, it was very effective in curing the spiritual speech impediment of the Jewish people, and Moshe Rabbeinu was able to pray on a very high level.

The month of Shevat, in which new ideas of Torah are originated (as discussed above), and when Moshe Rabbeinu began his grand review of all of the Torah, has the power to heal our ability to pray - the spiritual power of speech.

Why the Torah Repeats the Fact that Moshe had a Speech Defect

The souls that cannot pray because they lack access to the spiritual power of speech correspond to the letters in the Torah where Moshe Rabbeinu declares that he cannot speak because of his speech defect. His physical speech defect was a reflection of the people in his generation's spiritual speech defect.

The letters composing the words which declare that Moshe Rabbeinu had a speech defect – the first time - correspond to the souls who could not pray because of the power of impurity of the Egyptian exile.

Then the Torah lists the lineage of Moshe, Aharon and some of their descendents, concluding with Pinchos the son of Elazar, the grandson of Aharon. This is the Pinchos who is also Eliyahu Hanavi – the one who will herald the Ultimate Redemption.

The Torah then repeats that Moshe Rabbeinu had a speech defect. This corresponds to the souls in exile in the time right before the Ultimate Redemption. Before the coming of Mashiach, it is - once again - very difficult to pray. The spiritual power of speech is once again trapped by the forces of evil. The reason why the Torah repeated the verse stating that Moshe Rabbeinu had a speech defect was to allude to our generation, the one living in the times of Ikvisé DiMeshicha.

Just as we were redeemed from Egypt, may we merit a speedy redemption from our current exile.

¹ שמות ו:יב

² שמות ו:ל רש"י שם

³ ראש השנה פרק א' משנה א'

⁴ דברים א:ה

⁵ פסחים דף נ"ג ע"ב

⁶ שמות ח:ח

⁷ מלאכי יח:ג

⁸ חגיגה ט:ב

⁹ פרק ט"ו

¹⁰ דברים רבה פרק א' סימן א'

¹¹ שמות ד:י

¹² דברים א:א