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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Belief in Belief

“They said to Moshe, ‘Were there no graves in Egypt that you took us out to die in the Wilderness?’” (14:11)

Until recently, psychology proposed that willpower was like a battery. You start the day with a full charge, but each time you have to control your thoughts, your feelings or your behavior, you zap the battery’s energy. Then, without the chance to rest and recharge your resources, they run dangerously low, which makes it far harder to maintain your patience and concentration, and to resist temptation.

Laboratory tests appeared to provide evidence for this process. If participants were asked to resist eating cookies left temptingly on a table, they subsequently showed less persistence when solving a mathematical problem, because their reserves of willpower had been exhausted. Drawing on the Freudian term for the part of the mind that is responsible for reining in our impulses, this process was known as “ego depletion.” People who had high self-control might have bigger reserves of willpower initially, but even they would be worn down when placed under pressure.

In 2010, however, the psychologist Veronika Job published a study that questioned the foundations of this theory, with some intriguing evidence that ego depletion depended on people’s underlying beliefs. Job, who is a professor of motivation psychology at the University of Vienna, first designed a questionnaire, which asked participants to rate a series of statements on a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree).

They included the following:

- 1) When situations accumulate that challenge you with temptations, it gets more and more difficult to resist temptations.
- 2) Strenuous mental activity exhausts your resources, which you need to refuel afterwards.
- 3) If you have just resisted a strong temptation, you feel strengthened and you can withstand new temptations.
- 4) Your mental stamina fuels itself. Even after strenuous mental exertion, you can continue doing more of it.

If you agree more with statements one and two, you are considered to have a “limited” view of willpower, and if you agree more with three and four, you are considered to have a “non-limited” view of willpower.

Job next gave the participants some standard laboratory tests examining mental focus, which is considered to depend on our reserves of willpower. She found that people with the limited mindset tended to perform exactly as ego depletion theory would predict. After performing one task that required intense concentration – such as applying fiddly corrections to a boring text – they found it much harder to pay attention to a subsequent activity than if they had been resting beforehand. The people with the non-limited view, however, did not show any signs of ego depletion. They showed no decline in their mental focus after performing a mentally taxing activity.

The participants’ mindsets about willpower, it seemed, were self-fulfilling prophecies. If they believed that their willpower was easily depleted, then their ability to resist temptation and distraction quickly dissolved. But if they believed that “mental stamina fuels itself,” then that is what occurred.

Judaism is the ultimate exercise of deferred gratification. We are asked to reject much of the immediate gratification of this world for the permanent gratification of the World to Come. Your ability to defer that gratification depends on how much you believe that deferred gratification exists.

People tend to think that belief in Hashem is like an on/off switch. You either believe or you don’t believe. In truth, each one of us is on an infinite and constantly sliding scale, whose extremities are total faith at one end and total atheism at the other. “There are no atheists in a fox hole” runs the well-known aphorism, and on the other hand, as Rabbi Elazar says in Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, “Know what to answer an atheist.” And this should also include the “atheist” that may lurk in any of us.

Truth be told, belief is a middah – a character trait – and it can either be strengthened or weakened.

But the key to belief in Hashem is the faith that I can strengthen my belief without limit.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Pharaoh finally sends the *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt. With pillars of cloud and fire, G-d leads them toward *Eretz Yisrael* on a circuitous route, avoiding the *Pelishtim* (Philistines). Pharaoh regrets the loss of so many slaves, and chases after the Jews with his army. The Jews are very afraid as the Egyptians draw close, but G-d protects them. Moshe raises his staff, and G-d splits the sea, enabling the Jews to cross safely. Pharaoh, his heart hardened by G-d, commands his army to pursue, whereupon the waters crash down upon the Egyptian army. Moshe and Miriam lead the men and women, respectively, in a song of thanks.

After three days' travel, only to find bitter waters at Marah, the people complain. Moshe miraculously

produces potable water. In Marah they receive certain mitzvahs. The people complain that they ate better food in Egypt. Hashem sends quail for meat and provides manna, miraculous bread that falls from the sky every day except Shabbat. On Friday, a double portion descends to supply the Shabbat needs. No one is able to obtain more than his daily portion, but manna collected on Friday suffices for two days so the Jews can rest on Shabbat. Some manna is set aside as a memorial for future generations.

When the Jews again complain about a lack of water, Moshe miraculously produces water from a rock. Then Amalek attacks. Joshua leads the Jews in battle, and Moshe prays for their welfare.

Q & A

BESHALACH

Questions

1. What percentage of the Jewish People died during the plague of darkness?
2. Why did the oath that Yosef administered to his brothers apply to Moshe's generation?
3. Why did the Egyptians want to pursue the Jewish People?
4. Where did the Egyptians get animals to pull their chariots?
5. What does it mean that the Jewish People "took hold of their fathers' craft" (*tafsu umnut avotam*)?
6. How did G-d cause the wheels of the Egyptian chariots to fall off?
7. Why were the dead Egyptians cast out of the sea?
8. To what future time is the verse hinting when it uses the future tense of "Then Moshe and *Bnei Yisrael* will sing"?
9. Why are the Egyptians compared to stone, lead, and straw?
10. The princes of Edom and Moav had nothing to fear from the Jewish People. Why, then, were they "confused and gripped with trembling"?
11. Moshe foretold that he would not enter the Land of Israel. Which word in the parsha indicates this?
12. Why is Miriam referred to as "Aharon's sister" and not as "Moshe's sister"?
13. The Jewish women trusted that G-d would grant the Jewish People a miraculous victory over the Egyptians. How do we see this?
14. Which sections of the Torah did the Jewish People receive at Marah?
15. When did *Bnei Yisrael* run out of food?
16. What lesson in *derech erez* concerning the eating of meat is taught in this week's Parsha?
17. How did non-Jews experience the taste of the manna?
18. The Prophet Yirmiyahu showed the Jewish People a jar of manna prepared in the time of Moshe. Why?
19. Which verse in this week's parsha alludes to the plague of blood?
20. Why did Moshe's hands become heavy during the war against Amalek?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 13:18 - Eighty percent (four-fifths).
2. 13:19 - Yosef made his brothers swear that they would make their children swear.
3. 14:5 - To regain their wealth.
4. 14:7 - From those Egyptians who feared the word of G-d and kept their animals inside during the plagues.
5. 14:10 - They cried out to G-d.
6. 14:25 - He melted them with fire.
7. 14:30 - So that the Jewish People would see the destruction of the Egyptians and be assured of no further pursuit.
8. 15:1 - Resurrection of the dead during the time of *mashiach*.
9. 15:5 - The wickedest ones floated like straw, dying slowly. The average ones suffered less, sinking like stone. Those still more righteous sunk like lead, dying immediately.
10. 15:14 - They felt horrible seeing Israel in a state of glory.
11. 15:17 - "*T'vi-aimo ...*" ~ "Bring them" (and not "bring us").
12. 15:20 - Aharon put himself at risk for her when she was struck with *tzara'at*. (See *Bamidbar 12:12*)
13. 15:20 - They brought musical instruments with them in preparation for the miraculous victory celebration.
14. 15:25 - Shabbat, Red Heifer, Judicial Laws.
15. 16:1 - 15th of Iyar.
16. 16:8 - One should not eat meat to the point of satiety.
17. 16:21 - The sun melted whatever manna remained in the fields. This flowed into streams from which animals drank. Whoever ate these animals tasted manna.
18. 16:32 - The people claimed they couldn't study Torah because they were too busy earning a livelihood. Yirmiyahu showed them the manna saying: "If you study Torah, G-d will provide for you just as he provided for your ancestors in the desert."
19. 17:5 - "And your staff with which you smote the river...."
20. 17:12 - Because he was remiss in his duty, since he, not Yehoshua, should have led the battle.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

After Deborah and Barak led the Jewish People to a miraculous victory against the Canaanite general Sisera, Deborah sang an epic song praising those Jewish tribes that aided their efforts and criticizing those who failed to contribute. In her song, Deborah lauded the tribe of Zebulun by saying "...and from Zebulun, those who pull the quill of the scribe (sofer)" (Judges 5:14). The word sofer appears more than fifty times throughout the Bible, often in the context of royal scribes who wrote down the king's decisions to be disseminated to the masses. But in later Hebrew, a different word is also used for "scribe" – lavlar. Are these two words synonymous, or is there some difference between them? This essay explores that question!

The word sofer in the Bible is sometimes used as common noun to refer in general to a "scribe" (e.g., Ps. 45:2, Jer. 8:8, Ezek. 9:2-3). But sometimes it appears as an appellation with the definite article ("the scribe") and applies to a specific person, like Seraya the Scribe (II Sam. 8:17), Shemaiah the Scribe (I Chron. 24:6), Shwa the Scribe (II Sam. 2:25, see also I Chron. 18:16), Shebna the Scribe (II Kgs. 18:18, 18:37, 19:2, Isa. 36:3, 37:2), Shaphan the Scribe (II Kgs. 22:3, 22:8-10, 22:12, Jer. 36:10, II Chron. 34:15, 34:18, 34:20), Elishama the Scribe (Jer. 36:12, 36:20-21), Baruch the Scribe (Jer. 36:26), Jonathan the Scribe (Jer. 36:15, 36:20), Ezra the Scribe (Ezra 7:6, 7:11, Neh. 8:1-13, 12:26, 12:36), Tzadok the Scribe (Neh. 13:13), and Jeiel the Scribe (II Chron. 26:11).

In the Mishna, the word sofer means "scribe" (Shabbat 12:5, Pesachim 3:1, Gittin 3:1, 7:2, 8:8, 9:8, Bava Metzia 5:11, Sanhedrin 4:3, 5:5, Keilim 24:6; see also Nedarim 9:2); but the plural form sofrim is often used to refer to earlier rabbinic sages (see Orlah 3:9, Yevamot 2:4, 9:3, Sotah 9:15, Kiddushin 4:13, Sanhedrin 11:3, Keilim 13:7, Parah 11:5-6, Taharot 4:7, 4:11, Tevul Yom 4:6, and Yadayim 3:2). There is one particular Tannaitic sage given the appellation of Sofer – Rabbi Yeshevav HaSofer, although this appellation is not appended to his name in the Babylonian or Jerusalem Talmuds, but only in later sources (like Midrash Shocheh Tov Ps. 9, Iggeret Rabbi Sherirah Gaon, and the Eleh Ezkarah elegy that immortalizes the Ten Martyrs).

The etymology of the word sofer clearly lies in the trilateral root SAMECH-PEH-REISH, which bears a wide range of meanings, including "book," "story," "to tell/relate," "number," "to count," "sapphire," "spherical," "haircut," "border," and more. On the simplest level, sofer relates to the first meaning of this root, because a "scribe" is one who produces a "book." Over the years, I have written much about the trilateral root SAMECH-PEH-REISH, so I won't bore you by repeating all of that again here. Instead, you can look up my earlier essays on the topic.

But I would like to focus on the word sofer and its plural form sofrim by asking why the early rabbinic sages are called sofrim (which should literally mean "scribes")? The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 30a, Chagigah 15b, Jerusalem Talmud Brachot 1:4) explains that the word sofer literally means "one who counts." This term is appropriate for the early rabbinic sages because they were said to "count" the letters of the Torah. This may perhaps be an allusion to a scribal practice attested to amongst the later Masoretes, who used numbers to help establish the most accurate text of the Bible and correct their work. Perhaps the early rabbinic sages did something similar in their role as the guardians of the Written Torah.

*To read the rest of this article, visit us online at: http://ohr.edu/this_week/whats_in_a_word/

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

The Amidah (Part 35) – The Final Paragraph: Personally Speaking

“Prayer is not a miracle. It is a tool, man’s paintbrush in the art of life. Prayer is man’s weapon to defend himself in the struggle of life. It is a reality. A fact of life.”

(Rabbi Avraham Chaim Feuer)

“My Hashem, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully. To those who curse me, let my soul be silent, and let my soul be like dust to everyone. Open my heart to Your Torah, then my soul will pursue Your commandments. As for all those who design evil against me, speedily nullify their counsel and disrupt their design. Act for Your Name’s sake, act for Your right hand’s sake, act for Your sanctity’s sake, act for Your Torah’s sake. That Your beloved may be given rest, let Your right hand save and respond to me. May the expressions of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart find favor before You, Hashem, my Rock and my Redeemer. He Who makes peace in His heights, may He make peace upon us and upon all Israel. And let us say: Amen.”

The final paragraph continues with the request that “Your beloved may be given rest; let Your right hand save and respond to me.” Rabbi Menachem ben Shlomo Meiri, a brilliant thirteenth century Talmudist, explains this as a request for our spiritual and intellectual tranquility. What is the purpose of this tranquility? It allows us to focus on serving Hashem without distractions.

The last verse in chapter twenty-seven of Tehillim reads, “Trust in Hashem, strengthen your heart, and trust in Hashem.” The Brisker Rav points out that the implication of the verse is that one who has trust in Hashem will be rewarded with even more trust in Hashem, which is seemingly incongruous. After all, if a person already trusts in Hashem, why is more trust a fitting reward? The Brisker Rav cites Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Paquda’s Chovot HaLevavot (Sha’ar haBitachon), who writes that the calmest and most tranquil person in the world is someone who trusts in Hashem. If so, asks the Brisker Rav, what reward is the most fitting for someone who has trust? The Brisker Rav ponders the answer that, perhaps, they should be “blessed” with wealth. But, paradoxically, such a reward would probably have the opposite effect. It would actually cause the person to lose their tranquility because they will be constantly worrying about their wealth – thinking of ways to keep it safe and make it grow even more. This is why the only appropriate reward for trusting in Hashem is even more trust. Parenthetically, the Brisker Rav once related this idea to an extremely wealthy man. The man was visibly excited and commended the Brisker Rav on his brilliant explanation. The Brisker Rav then suggested to the man, “If it is such a good idea, perhaps you should strengthen yourself by trusting in Hashem and being less involved in your business dealings. If you do that, you can then dedicate more time to learning Torah and serving Hashem.” Strangely enough, the man wasn’t very taken with that idea. He enjoyed hearing about the greatness of trusting in Hashem, but he just wasn’t ready to actually put it into practice.

In Hallel, King David declares (Tehillim 115:2), “Why do the nations say...” The Chassidic masters interpret the words homiletically as, “Why? The nations say” – meaning that the nations of the world are constantly questioning Hashem’s ways in this world. We, the Jewish nation, on the other hand, declare (ibid. 3), “Whatever He pleases He does” – and it is our joy to do whatever pleases Him.

There is a thought-provoking idea found in the writings of the Ba’alei Mussar about the word da’agah – worry. Da’agah is spelled using four out of the first five letters of the Aleph Bet: dalet, aleph, gimel and heh. The only letter missing is the letter bet. Our Sages teach that the letter bet signifies bitachon, trust. A Ba’al Bitachon – a person who truly trusts in Hashem – does not worry, because they know that Hashem is looking after them.

Rabbi Shimon Schwab explains that the reference to Hashem’s right hand is to remind us of the miracles that Hashem performs. Why are they mentioned at this point? To teach us that Hashem’s miracles are a prerequisite for the Final Redemption.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa (1765-1827) was one of the foremost Chassidic leaders in Poland. The effect of his teachings are still felt throughout the Chassidic world, as they were central tenets of some of the most influential Chassidic courts that followed him. Rabbi Simcha Bunim would repeat to his students that there are two overt miracles contained within the world that we live in. The first miracle is the Creation itself. Wherever one looks, one is met with the most intricate and intriguing details. The Divinity and the beauty of the Creation are obvious. Even a cursory investigation of the wonders of nature, when undertaken honestly, will reveal Hashem's presence in every detail. The second miracle, says Rabbi Simcha Bunim, is that people see these wonders all the time and fail to recognize and appreciate them. And, then, Rebbe Bunim would add that the inability to recognize Hashem within nature is an even greater miracle than the Creation itself!

PEREK SHIRA: The Song of Existence

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

The Song of Sheep and Goats

Small Kosher Domestic Animals say:

“Who is like You among the mighty, Hashem! Who is like You, immense in holiness, too awesome for praise, Who does wonder!” (Shemot 15:11)

Sheep and goats are small and vulnerable, and they are easy prey when left unprotected. They are entirely submissive to their masters, who make use of their milk and fleece, or slaughter them for their meat and hides.

Observing the phenomenon of the survival of the Jewish People scattered in exile among all the nations of the world, the Caesar Adrianus remarked to Rabbi Akiva, “Great is the sheep that stands amongst seventy wolves!” Rabbi Akiva replied, “Great is the Shepherd Who saves it and protects it!”

Thus, sheep and goats sing the song of the miraculous survival of “Hashem’s flock.” They sing, “Who is like You among the mighty (‘eilim).” The word “eilim” can also be interpreted to mean “the mute.” This signifies that silence is the greatest sign of might. For example, when Hashem allowed the nations to conquer us and even sacrilegiously destroy His holy abode, the Beit HaMikdash, this silence was an expression of His confidence that nobody can truly harm Him or entirely destroy the eternal nation under His custody. He watches carefully, and when He sees the time has come for Him to gather His scattered flock at the day’s end, none will stop Him.

We should humbly realize that we are as vulnerable as sheep, and that there is little we can do to control our lives except to keep as near as possible to the Shepherd. We should feel tranquil in Hashem’s hand, focusing our energies on accomplishing our life goals. With our silence and calmness, we sing of the unrivaled might of our Shepherd.

Sources: Gittin 56b; Yaavetz; Kol Rinah; Perek B'Shir; Tanchuma, Toldos §5

*In loving memory of Harav Zeev Shlomo ben Zecharia Leib

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Nedarim 86-91

The Length of a Pause

“Toch kdei dibbur k’dibbur dami” – literally, “within the time of speech is like speech.”

This intriguing sounding statement means that a person can retract or correct what he said if he does so within a very short time after saying it. This statement is made by Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi in a beraita on our daf, and our sugya teaches that it is the halacha, with four exceptions.

The exceptions are: one who curses Hashem, one who worships idols by speech, one who marries a woman, and one who divorces a woman. These four cases cannot be “undone” by immediate change of mind. One reason offered to explain these exceptions is that these four cases are more serious matters than all others, and, therefore, a person would not do them unless he had made a final and irreversible decision to do them – one that cannot be changed. (Rabbeinu Nissim)

Nedarim 87a

Credibility and Brazenness

Rav Hamnuna said, “A woman who says that her husband had divorced her is believed since we can clearly assume that the woman would not brazenly lie to her husband's face.”

This assumption is made despite the fact that one might contest that the woman might be interested in another man and may therefore be lying brazenly to her husband. Rabbeinu Nissim states that the halacha is in accordance with Rav Hamnuna and that she receives her ketuva payment as well.

Nedarim 91a

To be continued

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LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Herschman

Weapons of Faith

With their matzahs in one hand and weapons to defend themselves in the other, the newly-freed slaves were led out of Egypt. Their destination, of course, was the Promised Land, the Land of Israel. But G-d purposely chose not to take them on the direct route to Israel. That was too straightforward and close – and G-d suspected they would flee back to Egypt – home base – at the first sight of war, even though they were outfitted with weapons. Instead, He would lead them through the desert, in a roundabout way.

We see here that the people possessed no trace of the power and courage with which they could have attained their own freedom, and not even enough courage to retain that freedom. Both the attainment and retainment was through the work of G-d alone. If it had been up to them, then, upon seeing war on the road to independence and freedom they would returned to the slavery of Egypt – this despite the fact that they were fully armed!

Aside from lacking courage in their hearts, they were lacking something even more fundamental. They still lacked trust in G-d – the quality that itself gives a person determination and courage, no matter what the task and under any circumstance. They needed this not only for their own courage and success, but also because it was an essential aspect of the Jewish mission. The Jewish nation was to be the single nation fully aware of G-d as the source of all success and failure, triumph and defeat, prosperity and ruin.

The Land they were being led to does not, by its nature, provide material prosperity and political independence. Quite the contrary – it is unpredictable in its yield and

vulnerable to invaders. And, in furtherance of the nation's mission, precisely for this reason it was chosen.

Peace and prosperity in this Land will be granted or withheld directly by Hashem. It is situated at the crossroads where Europe, Asia and Africa meet, ensuring it will be caught in the crosshairs of conflict and war between other nations. Only by devotion to G-d and His Torah can the Jew hope to find peace and prosperity in the Land of Israel.

However, the Jewish People were not yet ready for this way of life. Only extraordinary experiences would educate them to the awareness that G-d's Providence not only saves His adherents from destruction but also sustains them, day by day, in all conditions and in all situations.

This was the meaning of the detour through the desert. Within their first few days they were to experience the miraculous salvation of the sea splitting and then drowning their Egyptian pursuers, and learn of G-d's special closeness at extraordinary moments. Then, through the provision of the manna, they will learn that one can – indeed must – place his trust in G-d under all circumstances, and for the provision of everyday necessities. When they will see that their attempts to secure tomorrow's sustenance in contravention of G-d's instruction results in the manna's spoilage, they will learn that hoarding one's storehouse against G-d's Will never yields the desired prosperity or security.

By the time their detour is complete, the people will be armed with a different sort of weapon – allegiance to and trust in the Almighty.

Sources: Commentary, Shemot 13:17-8, 16:20; Bereishet 14:1

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