

PARSHAS YISRO

תשפ"א

This week, not only do we read about kabbolas haTorah but we reenact it.

The Mogen Avrohom records two minhogim surrounding the kriyas haTorah of the aseres hadibros. One is to read them with the taam elyon and the other is to read them with the taam hatachton. Rav Chaim explained that these two minhogim actually correlate with the two minhogim of the tzibbur to listen to kriyas hatorah generally – either while standing or while sitting. What does one have to do with the other? Rav Chaim explained as follows.

There are two approaches to kriyas haTorah. One is that it is a form of public Talmud Torah. The other is that each week is a new mini-kabbolas haTorah of those parshiyos.

If it is a public form of Talmud Torah, then, the gemara Megillah says we need to learn sitting down. If it is a kabbolas haTorah, we need to stand.

The taam elyon of the aseres hadibros divides each dibroh into a separate unit. We accept the dibros one-by-one as they were given on Har Sinai. If it is limud Torah we sit. In taam hatachton, each posuk is a separate unit.

The general minhag of chutz lo'oretz during the year is to read the aseres hadibros with the taam elyon. The general – but not exclusive – minhag in Eretz Yisroel is to read with taam hatachton.

What is the essence of kabbolas haTorah?

The very first halacha we learn after Parshas Yisro is the laws of a Hebrew slave. If he wants to stay with his master beyond six years, he needs to have his ear pieced by the doorway to signify that he didn't listen carefully enough at Har Sinai. That was when Hashem said that we are His slaves and not slaves to human masters. This is why Hashem took us out of Egypt.

In Parshas Bechukosai we read that when the yovel year comes, we must free all Hebrew slaves. He cannot remain enslaved to his Jewish master indefinitely. Because he is really Hashem's slave.

When we left Egypt, we brought everything we had in Egypt out with us to the desert – all the sheep and cattle. Why? Moshe Rabbeinu said to Pharaoh that we don't know what Hashem will demand of us when we get to Har Sinai. He may demand everything and we need to be prepared. This means that leaving Egypt wasn't a release from slavery. It was exchanging human slavery for slavery to Hashem. We have to be prepared to give Him everything He will demand of us – just like a slave.

Slavery is a foreign idea to us in the modern world. What does this mean in our context? Rashi writes in the gemara Rosh Hashono that mitzvos are not for our enjoyment but as a yoke upon our necks.

Kabbolas ol malchus shomayim is an integral part of tefillas shacharis. We don't just keep mitzvos when it is convenient. That is not what it means. Mitzvos and the service of Hashem are an absolute commitment of ours and we don't make any decisions about that – yes or no. We are avodim. We make no independent decisions.

Another concept in this week's parsha is that Moshe is told to convey to the Jewish people that they are to become a mamleches kohanim and a goy kodosh.

The verse says the Jewish people encamped facing Har Sinai. Rashi

comments that they were as one person with one heart – they were totally unified. It should also be emphasized that the Jewish people were facing Har Sinai – with their backs to the world – their backs to Egypt and Canaan. They were single-mindedly focused on receiving Hashem's Torah. Kabbolas ol malchus means not caring what the rest of the world thinks and does.

Moshe is reminding them that the ten makkos were lessons to Klal Yisroel. Hashem could have taken them all out at the very beginning. He kept them there for a whole year during the makkos to teach them lessons of Hashem's control over all forces of nature. Kriyas Yam Suf taught an extra lesson. Every Egyptian received the exact punishment he deserved for torturing Jews. The Jewish people saw Hashem's precise reward and punishment. They saw how Hashem controls every aspect of the world. This is part of kabbolas ol malchus shomayim – knowing that there are rules that Hashem laid out – with the power to enforce them.

Hashem brought 3 million people – probably more – out of Egypt in an instant. He brought them to Har Sinai in six weeks. Such a mass amount of people can't travel by foot for such a distance in desert conditions by natural means. It's not possible. Hashem reminded them of this to show how much He wanted us to enter the bris with Him at Har Sinai. If you agree to this slavery to Me, you will be My treasured nation.

What does being Hashem's treasured nation mean?

The brocho one makes after getting an aliya to the Torah is "v'nosan lonu Toras emes, v'chayei olam notah b'socheinu". The standard translation of this phrase is that giving us Torah allows us to earn olom haboh. But Rav Chaim Volozhin, based on the Rambam in Pirush Hamishnayos, explained this differently in Nefesh HaChaim. It means that Hashem runs this entire world around the Jewish people. We are the source of the existence of the entire universe.

The Brisker Rav had a unique explanation of a gemara in Avodo Zoro. The gemara says at the end of days, all the nations of the world will come to Hashem to get their final judgment. They will ask for a reward for all the things their civilization did to help the Jewish people learn Torah. Hashem will reject their claims by saying they only had their own interests in mind. But the question is, what were these nations thinking? Why did they think they deserved reward in the first place?

The Brisker Rav answered that when the end of history arrives and the truth about everything is revealed, all the nations of the world will realize this truth – that everything that happened in human history was for the sake of the Jewish people. They will come to understand that all their technological advancements and development of civilization were actually tools to help the Jewish people learn Torah. So naturally, they think they deserve credit for what they did! But Hashem will reject their claim because it was Hashem who was using their accomplishments as tools for advancing Torah. This was the furthest thing from the minds of the non-Jews at the time and they would never have wanted it to be used for Torah's sake. They don't deserve any credit.

The Jews are the life of the universe. We are Hashem's treasured nation and the world's events revolve around us – even though these nations have no clue how it relates to the Jews.

This theme is repeated throughout Chumash. Hashem created the entire world for a small group of people who will be His representatives

in this world. If you will tell this to Putin and Kim Jong Un, they won't know what you're talking about. But it doesn't matter. Everything they are doing is somehow because of Klal Yisroel – whether they are aware of it or not. It is simply a reality that the chaye olam has been planted within us.

We accepted slavery at Har Sinai. We are completely subservient to Hashem in every aspect of our lives. But a parallel process took place. It is different than ordinary slavery. We entered a contract to become Hashem's slaves in return for becoming Hashem's chosen, superior nation. If we learn Torah for its own sake, we are uplifted and exalted beyond all other human beings.

The Rambam writes in a letter about a businessman who is traveling far and wide to make connections and form lucrative deals. He works hard and makes difficult journeys and makes this enormous investment of time money and effort. But he makes it willingly – knowing he will get a return on his investment. So too, we make ourselves Hashem's slaves willingly and with joy – because we know it is an investment that will reap infinite dividends. We become an elevated and superior people when we fulfil our side of the contract.

We are a mamleches kohanim – a nation of royalty. Why? Because we represent Hashem in the world. We are a goy kodosh. Goy means we are a unified organism. What binds us together as a nation? Kedushoh. The ultimate purpose of this world is not the physical world but something that is beyond this world. The pursuit of kedushoh. We are striving to live our lives on an elevated level.

Much of the lifestyle of contemporary Orthodox Jewry has nothing to do with being a goy kodosh. The alcohol abuse in our community certainly does not benefit a goy kodosh. This is not being a goy kodosh – pursuing a life of kedushoh. Avodas Hashem means understanding what it means to be a Jew – to have higher goals and meaning to your life than the rest of humanity. Klal Yisroel stood facing Har Sinai with their backs to the world.

This week we said Naaseh. Next week, we said Naaseh Ve'nishmoh. It goes in steps.

The Sifri says that Hashem went to all the nations of the world peddling

the Torah. They asked what is written in it, and He told each nation one mitzvah – either not to kill, not to steal, or not to be adulterous. They told Hashem it is too hard to accept. Each nation complained that this mitzvah goes against their whole national culture. They wanted a way to bend the rules to conform to their preferences.

Hashem came to Klal Yisroel and they accepted it right away without even asking what is written. They accepted complete slavery. Why? Because Hashem showed Klal Yisroel in Egypt that He is in charge of all nature and dispenses exact reward and punishment. Now He wants to make a contract – without stating what all the conditions are – not telling them what the mitzvos are beforehand. But Hashem does tell them what they will get out of it. They will become a mamleches kohanim ve'goy kodosh. They will be Hashem's precious chosen nation. So they accepted the deal without knowing the conditions. It could have been rejected, but they made the commitment. They said naaseh. They knew that whatever they had to do – it would be worth it.

Moshe Rabbeinu came back and told the Jewish people that they will not be able to go up the mountain during kabbolas haTorah. The Rambam in the end of Hilchos Meiloh says that when you are dealing with concepts of Torah and ruchniyus, you can't treat it lightly. You have to first be worthy – you can't move up so quickly. You have to grow in stages – step-by-step.

There is a halacha that when you daven shemoneh esrei in Chutz Lo'oretz, you only face Eretz Yisroel. You don't face the mokom hamikdosh or Yerushalayim – even today when GPS makes it quite easy to do so. When you are davening in Eretz Yisroel, you only face Yerushalayim – not Har Habayis. When you are in Yerushalayim, you only face the Har Habayis – not the kodesh hakodoshim. At each level of kedushoh you only strive to attain the immediate next level. You don't try to jump ahead to the highest level kedushoh possible.

This is what Moshe Rabbeinu was telling the Jewish people – you cannot climb up Har Sinai and jump to the highest level of gilui Shechinoh right away. Each person has to work his way to the next level of kedushoh and then the next level. This is how we act as a mamleches kohanim ve'goy kodosh.