

PARSHAS VAYELECH

תשפ"ב

What does it mean for a yeshiva bochur to do teshuvoh, when he is sitting and learning in yeshiva all day – every day, trying to do what he is supposed to be doing? What is there to do teshuvoh for? A bochur will mature over the years and learn that there is more to teshuvoh than reading a list of aveiros in a viduy booklet. Why is malchus shomayim so important? Why have we been emphasizing it again and again? But, the same questions apply to most people who sincerely keep Torah and mitzvos daily.

We live in a world where the concept of absolute authority is a foreign idea. Once, most people lived under an absolute authority figure and lived in fear of that authority. They knew that even the slightest deviation from the wish of that absolute authority had devastating consequences. Today, when we live in a democracy and have little respect for our elected leaders, this concept is almost gone and people don't understand what it means to live with an authority over their life. Chazal say that the malchus above is reflected by the malchus below. One of the reasons that the ideal government of the Torah is a monarchy is for Klal Yisroel to have a model which can instill in them the concept of malchus shomayim.

There used to be a concept of parents being authority figures for their children as they grow up. But no longer. Most parenting rejects the parent being an authority figure. Parents are more afraid of their children than children of their parents.

The idea of an authority figure is the foundation of our relationship with Hashem, and Rosh Hashonoh is primarily about accepting His malchus over us. Hashem is the prime authority in our lives, and every human authority figure is supposed to be a reflection of the Divine authority over us. A human king cannot waive his honor even though a talmid chochom can. The Maharam Mi'Ruttenburg explains this halacha with the piyut that says that all human kings get their authority from Hashem – for Hashem is the King of kings – the human king is given his authority in order to represent Hashem's malchus in this world.

The source of all authority ultimately comes from Hashem. A parent is an authority figure. A rebbe is an authority figure. Chazal tell us that these authorities should be feared and revered on the same plane as one's fear of shomayim. The ability to accept different levels of authority figures is crucial to one's Yiddishkeit.

This is why Moshe Rabbeinu, in the beginning of the parsha, makes it clear to Klal Yisroel that although he seemed to have been the one who took Klal Yisroel out of Egypt, split the Yam Suf, brought the Torah down from Har Sinai and brought the water and the manna – Yes, but it isn't me; I am just a messenger of Hashem. When Moshe steps down and Yehoshua takes over, it will just be Hashem all over again. For forty years, Moshe Rabbeinu has been dominating Klal Yisroel's journey in the desert. He did all the miracles and the people might have been led to think he has independent power. So Moshe tells them in no uncertain terms that he is not doing anything. It is all from Hashem.

When Moshe Rabbeinu addressed the entire nation of Klal Yisroel throughout Sefer Devorim, there are at least three million Jews gathered in front of Moshe. But somehow without the aid of any amplifiers, Moshe Rabbeinu is able to be heard by all of them. How was this possible? Chazal tell us the Shechinoh was talking through Moshe's throat and this is what projected Moshe's voice for everyone to be able to hear.

There is an additional deeper understanding of what it means for the Shechinoh to talk from Moshe's throat. Every human being has a neshomo – a Divine element from above which gives us our ability to speak. But most people have two voices – the divine voice and the human ego which is also speaking and obscuring our neshomo's voice. Moshe Rabbeinu was the most humble of all men – he had no ego. Only his divine neshomo was expressing itself and this was the authentic voice of Hashem talking through Moshe.

Moshe Rabbeinu represented the highest authority throughout the forty years in the desert, but this is coming to a close. Yehoshua is taking over this position, and Moshe's career will be over. Now Yehoshua will be leading Klal Yisroel into Eretz Yisroel and will perform all the miracles in conquering the nations. But it was never Moshe and it isn't going to be Yehoshua. It is always Hashem. These human beings – as great as they were in leading Klal Yisroel – are only representing Hashem's absolute authority in the world.

This is why we stress the idea of malchus – Hashem's ultimate authority underlies our entire relationship with Him.

How should one approach his avodah of Rosh Hashonoh? Where is he supposed to change? Isn't he doing all the right things all day?

The place of growth lies internally. In our frum society, it is too easy to just follow the trend – just getting on the yeshiva track. It is what I call 'getting on the escalator of life'. The only decision you make is to get off one staircase at the end, turn a few feet, and get on the next staircase ahead. All these escalators are bringing you up automatically. You just need to keep moving on the path ahead of you – without thinking and without choosing. You go from elementary school, to high school, to beis midrash without really changing who you are.

The prime avodah on Rosh Hashonoh and Yom Kippur nowadays is an internal focus on how seriously do we relate to Hashem as an absolute authority figure and how has this become obscured through the lack of real authority figures in our lives.

It is interesting to realize that Moshe Rabbeinu wrote 13 sifrei Torah. He wrote one copy for each shevet, and one master sefer Torah that was kept in the Mishkon, by which all other sifrei Torah are checked and corrected. It prevented errors and changes that might creep in while each shevet is making their own copies of the Torah through the centuries. Moshe's original Torah is preserved in the Beis Hamikdash and guarantees that the same Torah remains unchanged for all generations. Some day, when all the lost items will come back, we will recover this original Torah as well.

The parsha describes the mitzvah of Hakhel where the king makes a public reading of Sefer Devorim on Succos after Shemittah. Klal Yisroel will come to hear it and recharge their yiras shomayim – even those who are too young to understand anything being read. This tells us an important principle that the basis for yiras shomayim is limud haTorah.

People should study the words of 'Ahavoh Rabboh' in birkas kriyas shema. In it, we ask Hashem to have mercy on us and teach us His Torah. The first level is to know the practical details of observance. The second level is to understand, so that we will do everything. Until you understand hilchos Shabbos you cannot be sure that you are doing everything. This applies to all mitzvos. Then we ask for "ho'air aynaynu besorasechoh". We don't want to be satisfied with a superficial understanding. We want a deep and thorough understanding of all

the mitzvos in a complete way. This is what glues us together with the mitzvos. We and fulfillment of the Torah are one. This type of learning and understanding gives us a deep connection to Hashem – we achieve love of Hashem, fear of Hashem, and yichud halev. What is yichud halev? It means our hearts are purely dedicated to serving Hashem. It is the only focus of our lives.

We are given a three-step process of how to get to the highest level of Torah and dveykus. There is knowing how to perform mitzvos practically, then there is dveykus, and finally there is total dedication of our hearts.

The midrash says the same idea. There were three stages of Klal Yisroel's history of involvement in limud haTorah. We had the first set of luchos, which brought us back to the level of Odom Horishom before the sin. The Beis Halevi writes that we had superior insight into Torah Shebichtav which gave us the entire Torah Shebaal Peh. But then we sinned with the golden calf and lost that level of understanding when the luchos were shattered. Hashem then had to give Torah Shebichtav and Torah Shebaal Peh separately. This version of the Torah we have today was given on Yom Kippur. This is why we celebrate Simchas Torah right after Yom Kippur.

But then there was a third stage. After Klal Yisroel came back from the golus of Bavel and rebuilt the second Beis Hamikdosh, we still lacked some very basic elements through which the Jewish masses connected to Hashem. We lost nevuah and ruach hakodesh and the Urim VeTumim. We lost the palpable presence of Hashem, and the Anshei Knesses HaGedolah were very concerned that there was no longer an available way to connect to Hashem directly.

During Bayis Rishon, the average Jew connected to Hashem through their experience of the Shechinoh in the Beis Hamikdosh. A deep connection to Hashem through Torah learning was not experienced by the masses until Anshei Knesses HaGedolah davened before building Bayis Sheni that there will be an explosion of Torah Shebaal Peh and for its secrets to be available to all Jews.

This means that for us today, the primary means of connecting to Hashem is through limud haTorah. Torah is a tremendously precious gift that we have been given. Hashem gave you an opportunity to connect to Him on the highest level available to us today.

The authority figure of Hashem has to become real. Hashem gave us the deepest way to connect to Him through a deep understanding of Torah and mitzvos. Hashem tells us in this week's parsha that limud haTorah brings one to yiras Hashem.

But then the parsha predicts that Klal Yisroel will not stand up to the challenge. They will fail and they will fall from their level. But Hashem makes a promise – an incredible promise – that the Torah will never be forgotten. So when we sit down to a sugya in Shas, it is the same Torah of 3500 years ago. It was never forgotten. We try to understand how rishonim of 800-900 years ago understood the tannoim and amoraim going back even farther, who tried to understand halacha l'Moshe mi'Sinai going back generations. There is no other body of knowledge

in this world that has a continuous chain of mental effort and total preoccupation with understanding the dvar Hashem throughout history. It defies natural explanation – it is only because of Hashem's promise.

The world is collapsing all around us because it lost all spiritual values. But we can hang on to the Torah and use it to understand what is happening and how to pull ourselves out of the decay that is happening.

The final idea in the parsha is the concept of hester ponim – concealment of Hashem's supernatural protection. Because in the world's natural state, the nations of the world are wild animals who prey on the weak. As long as Hashem protects us, we are spared. When He pulls back that protective shield, the nations will do what they do naturally and will attack us. But Klal Yisroel will not realize why these tragedies are happening. They will cling to all the theories of blind historical forces which seem to cause things to happen. And then Hashem pulls back even more and it will be much harder to see Hashem's guidance of world events.

How do we wake up to the presence of Hashem in this world? A chossid of the Kotzker asked his rebbe: where is Hashem? The Kotzker answered: He is wherever you let Him in. How do you pull yourself out of this spiral of using natural explanations which remove Hashem from the picture?

The midrash says that at the time of Creation, Hashem divided the various nations among the various angels who control their fate, and Klal Yisroel ended up with Hashem Himself being in charge of Klal Yisroel's destiny. Chazal are telling us that all other nations may be subject to forces of history and the laws of political science, and they can go up and down. But Klal Yisroel isn't subject to anything but Hashem's direct hashgocho.

As we are approaching the Yom HaDin, we need to realize that Hashem's presence in our lives is real. We daven to Him – take it seriously. He is our absolute authority figure and realize the incredible opportunity you have to connect to Him through limud haTorah. Hashem gave you this amazing tool to have a relationship with Him amid all the craziness that the world is experiencing. Grab on to it! Hold on to it!

It may be difficult – no one said it would be easy. But in the end, it is extremely rewarding. This is the avodah how we take Torah seriously. How seriously do I take my davening not to rush through it and mumble the words? When I see someone with his shirt untucked and sipping a cup of coffee during davening – does he realize that he is standing before the King of Kings? If he really believed it, he would look differently. When one sits down to learn a sugya, does he really appreciate that he is connecting his mind with the mind of Hashem? This is a serious challenge today. Hopefully, shemiras Shabbos isn't a challenge for us – although when you learn hilchos Shabbos, you realize it isn't so simple. The deeper avodah for us is making avodas Hashem serious in our life and accepting ol malchus shomayim in a sincere way – making Hashem our King.