

We mentioned last week that maamad Har Sinai is divided into two parts. Parshas Yisro begins with Klal Yisroel arriving at Sinai forty-nine days after they left Egypt. After kriyas Yam Suf, they were given a number of mitzvos and a takano to read the Torah in public every three days, in order to solidify the uplifting spiritual experience they had at kriyas Yam Suf. The moment they become weak in Torah learning, Amolek comes and attacks them. When they strengthen their commitment to learning, they become victorious.

Hashem gives Klal Yisroel an extra six weeks after kriyas Yam Suf before receiving the Torah. Why? The midrash says Klal Yisroel needed time to absorb the messages they had been getting until now. They have to be able to make a conscious decision to accept the Torah and not be swept into making the bris. Immediately after Yam Suf would be too close to the overwhelming events.

Hashem explains what the bris is all about. It is two parties making commitments to each other. Klal Yisroel have to agree to separate themselves from the rest of the world and become a different kind of nation. But Hashem can do what He wants with the entire world – He controls everything in the entire cosmos! Still, He is taking a small group of people on Planet Earth to be His representatives. This nation is going to be the center of everything in this vast universe. It really makes no sense.

Klal Yisroel said 'naaseh' – we will fulfill the bris.

Then Hashem says He wants to ensure Moshe Rabbeinu can be absolutely relied upon to convey the rest of the Torah. Once Klal Yisroel will overhear Hashem speaking with Moshe, telling him what to say to the people, the people will have no doubts that Moshe Rabbeinu is telling them exactly what Hashem told him. It will be the ultimate proof for all future generations that the Torah is straight from Hashem. It also means Hashem planted an extra degree of ruchniyus in the neshomo of each Jew that can never be extinguished.

But each person needs to respect their limitations. They cannot all go up Har Sinai. They purified themselves to prepare for matan Torah. Then they received the overwhelming experience seeing the fire, the smoke and the sounds of thunder and the shofar. Chazal say Hashem held the mountain over their heads to coerce them to accept the Torah. What does this mean? The Meshech Chochmo explains that because of this overwhelming experience, Klal Yisroel had no choice but to accept the Torah. The true nature of reality was made so clear to them that they had no free-will to reject it. This is why Chazal in Shabbos say that later in history, Klal Yisroel needed to accept the Torah again willingly at the time of Mordechai and Esther. It was a deep acceptance of the Torah amidst the hester ponim, without being overwhelmed.

After the entire experience, Hashem tells Moshe to tell Klal Yisroel that all of them heard Me speak to you. They know first-hand that Moshe is an authentic messenger of Hashem.

In Parshas Mishpotim, Hashem says He will send a maloch to lead them. Why? Klal Yisroel haven't yet totally internalized this experience. Hashem can't keep revealing Himself on the level of Har Sinai. So Hashem is leading them into Eretz Yisroel via a messenger.

All of Klal Yisroel were in the perimeter around the mountain and Moshe approaches the mountain and enters the cloud. Before he left, Moshe wrote a sefer habris and Klal Yisroel made a higher acceptance of 'naaseh venishma' – to study and analyze the sefer and understand

its depth – not just to obey a list of laws.

Then Klal Yisroel offered a korbon shlomim. This is critical. A shlomim has different parts. Some parts are offered on the mizbeiach, some parts are eaten by kohanim, and the rest is eaten by the owner. This is very different than an olah, which is totally burnt. A non-Jew can only bring an olah – not a shlomim. Why? Because a non-Jew's spirituality cannot integrate the physical world. For a non-Jew to be spiritual, he has to divorce himself from the physical. Hence the olah – which is totally burnt on the mizbeiach and not eaten – is the only type of korbon a non-Jew can bring. A Jew on the other hand can use ruchniyus to uplift and elevate his physical life and make it kodosh. A Jew can use the physical world as a means of his avodas Hashem. Eating a korbon shlomim is how a Jew serves Hashem.

How does a person reach the level where he can enjoy a good tasting physical meal of meat and wine and still use it as avodas Hashem? It is only after he has been thoroughly trained in controlling his physical desires by living a life of Torah and mitzvos. The idea of kabbolas ol mitzvos is a number of things. Every Jew knows that when he is hungry and sees a piece of food, there are 20 questions he has to ask himself before he can eat it. He can't just devour it to satisfy his hunger immediately. His hunger drive is under his control.

When it comes to working and making money, every Jew knows that when Shabbos arrives, everything stops. There is nothing more he can do. And there are certain limits to what kinds of business deals he can make. There is a whole section of Shulchan Aruch that tells us which business deals are permitted and which are forbidden. A Jew doesn't let the pursuit of money take over his entire life. He lives a disciplined, controlled life. You can't just do what you want.

Once you have learned to live under restrictions and controls of Torah and mitzvos, you have a sense of discipline in every area of life. The Raavad says that Hashem designed the Torah in such a way that there are halachos and restrictions in every area of life. Clothing, pleasure, business, everything is disciplined and controlled. These urges don't suck you in and totally take you over. As the Ramban explains in Kedoshim Tihiyu, these desires and pleasures can't become an end in themselves – they can't be in control over your life. You are trained by Torah and mitzvos to maintain the right perspective. It allows you to properly evaluate the true worth of any given activity instead of getting carried away by passions and strong emotions of the moment.

Once you have control over your desires and urges, you can eat a delicious korbon and have it be a part of avodas Hashem.

The posuk says the people ate and drank and saw a vision of Hashem and the hand Hashem wasn't sent to them. Rashi says their eating was actually a sin and they all deserved to die, but Hashem refrained from punishing them on the spot. They had a prophetic vision, but they didn't treat it as they should and instead focused on the taste of the food.

Onkelos says it is a praise. They were sitting down to a meal with all sorts of food, but their pleasure came from the fact that their korbon was accepted. They celebrated by enjoying the meat – but their joy came from the close relationship with Hashem that they just forged. It is the same basic lesson of Rashi – had they been focused on enjoying the food instead of the vision, it would have violated the whole spirit of the experience. This is why they weren't punished.

This teaches us a lesson about how to approach the physical world. The rishonim quote the Yerushalmi that says in the future we will have to give a din and cheshbon for each pleasure in the world that we didn't enjoy. Hashem created a beautiful, enjoyable world and we can enjoy it – if we keep perspective. The Ramban writes that everything in this world is neutral. You can use everything for a sacred purpose or for a profane purpose. The human hand can write a sefer Torah and create an item of kedushoh that didn't exist before. Or it can murder someone and increase evil and tumoh in the world. There is nothing in this world which is intrinsically evil or good.

Rav Nachman's wife Yalta teaches us that for every food that the Torah forbids, there is an equivalent food that is permitted with the exact same taste and flavor. The Torah isn't out to deprive the Jew of pleasure. You can enjoy the world, but you have to enjoy it under the proper constraints. It is an entire approach to life.

Everything is a tool. The greater potential something has to use

it for good, means the greater potential to use it for evil. We have boundaries and constraints to make sure we use the physical world for good and not for evil.

This is why the first thing Klal Yisroel did after receiving the Torah was to offer a korban shlomim in front of Hashem as a real Jew. Can they sit down to a delicious meal and still focus on the joy of ruchniyus they were experiencing? Or were they focused on the physical enjoyment of the food – disconnected from the prophetic vision and violating the whole spiritual experience they just had?

This is the critical lesson we learn after kabbolas haTorah at Har Sinai – how the Torah we just received then helps us uplift the pleasures of the physical world as part of our avodas Hashem and doesn't let the physical world control us. It teaches us how to approach everything we encounter in the world – it can be used for avodas Hashem or it can be misused. We live a life of restrictions to realize we can just do what we want. We are here to use this world to serve Hashem.