

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

בס"ד

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This week's Insights is dedicated on the occasion of the Yahrzeit of Phillip Fenster, Zev ben Yehuda Leib. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

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1 NISSAN

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS VAYIKRA

An Offer You Can't Refuse

If you offer a meal offering of your first fruits to the Lord... (2:14)

The third *sefer* of the Torah introduces the concept of *korbonos* – different types of offerings brought in the newly built Mishkan. One of these oblations was the *omer* offering brought from the newly harvested crop of barley. As Rashi (ad loc) points out, "Although the Torah uses the word "*im*" (which generally means if), in this instance it means when." After all, bringing the *korban omer* is obligatory, not optional.

This isn't the first instance of "*im*" being obligatory. In fact, Rashi in *Parshas Yisro* (20:22) quotes the Midrash: "R' Yishmael says, 'Everywhere in the Torah the word "*im*" is used to refer to an optional act (i.e. an act one may choose to do or not to do) except for three places in the Torah.'" The first occurrence is in *Parshas Yisro* when the Torah states "*im*" you will build an altar of stone. The second one is in *Parshas Mishpatim* (22:24) when the Torah states "*im*" you will lend money, and the third occurrence is here in this week's *parsha*. As Rashi points out, none of these *mitzvos* are optional. Bnei Yisroel were commanded to build an altar, to lend money to those in need, and to bring the *korban omer*.

This Midrash is difficult to understand. If the Torah meant to convey that these three *mitzvos* are actually obligatory, why should the Torah use a word that implies that they are optional? As the Midrash itself states, throughout the Torah the word "*im*" indicates a discretionary act, but here it refers to an obligatory act. Why? For what reason

would the Torah use a word that implies the opposite of its common usage? Furthermore, why does it appear specifically by these three *mitzvos*? What is unique about these three?

These three *mitzvos* represent Torah, *avodah* (worship), and *gemillus chassadim* (acts of kindness) – and the Mishna in *Pirkei Avos* (1:2) proclaims that they are the three pillars on which the world is perched. The reason that they are so critical to the existence of the world is that they represent the three relationships that every person must develop. *Avodah* represents man's relationship with his Creator; *Chessed* represents man's relationship with his fellow man; Torah represents man's relationship with himself (the Torah represents one's personal growth from a "rational animal" to a man of elevated spiritual status).

When dealing with relationships, one has to convey to the other party that this is what one **wants to do**, not what one **has to do**. The Torah isn't trying to convey anything about the obligatory status of these *mitzvos*. The Torah uses the word "*im*" to teach us about **our attitude** in performing these *mitzvos*. We must perform these *mitzvos* as if our participation is optional and not obligatory.

Take, for example, the obligation of lending money. If someone in dire need comes to us for help, we must make them feel as if we are helping them because we **want to**, because we care



about them – not because the Torah obligates us to help them. So too with *avodah*; we need to show that we **want** to serve Hashem as if it's our greatest privilege to honor and do so – not act as if we were forced and are simply performing out of obligation.

In this week's *parsha* the Torah discusses bringing the *omer* offering. The Chinuch (ad loc) explains that we bring this barley offering (which is considered animal feed) on the second day of Pesach when we begin to count up to Shavuot, when we received the Torah. Then, on Shavuot, we bring a wheat flour offering (considered the food of people). The fifty days in between represent the change we must make within ourselves, and the effect that Torah has on us – we must discover ourselves through Torah study and thereby transform ourselves to an elevated status. This transformation achieves a healthy self-image and perfected relationship with oneself.

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Personal Put Down

If a person will sin and commit treachery against Hashem...by defrauding his fellow (5:21).

Rashi (ad loc) explains that this sin of defrauding one's neighbor refers to a situation where an employer withholds payment from one of his employees. This doesn't mean the employer never pays the employee; rather the employer tells his employee to come back at a later time or on the following day. In addition, this isn't referring to a situation where the employer doesn't have the funds available to pay his employee, he just doesn't want to pay him at that time.

The word that the Torah uses for "defrauding" is "עשק". Rashi in *Koheles* translates this very same word in a way

that casts this sin in a very different light. On the verse, "Surely oppression ("עשק") confounds a wise man..." (*Koheles* 7:7), Rashi explains that this refers to a foolish person denigrating a *chacham*.

In other words, the word "עשק" means to put someone down. Thus, the Torah is teaching us the mindset of one who withholds wages from his employee. This isn't a crime of financial fraud, after all it wasn't until modern times that financial institutions began to calculate the overnight interest rate of keeping monies in one's own account. This sin isn't motivated by greed and it isn't fraud

related, it is an overt act of aggression against the employee. This is a statement by the employer that he is in charge and that he will pay his employee when it suits him. He desires to see the employee squirm and be forced to beg for what is owed to him.

When one sins, one must try to understand the underlying principles of what caused one to behave in such a manner. Was it simply an uncontrollable desire fulfilled or is it something deeper, a character flaw that must be addressed (e.g. in our *parsha* it is an act of cruelty). In either situation, we must strive to correct our trespass; but in order to fix the issue we must be able to first identify the underlying cause and reason for why we behaved in such a manner.

Partners for Life

This week we read *Parshas Hachodesh*, the last of the four *parshios* that were instituted to be read on Shabbos in the weeks prior to Pesach. *Parshas Hachodesh* discusses the *mitzvah* of blessing the new moon – *Kiddush Hachodesh*. Moshe was instructed to set the Jewish calendar by the new moon and to regard Nissan as the head of all the months of the year. Hashem even showed Moshe exactly the standard by which the new moon is to be identified and gave him the exact calculation of a lunar month (29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes, 3 and 1/3 seconds).

This *mitzvah* holds a special significance as it was the first one given to the Jewish people as a nation. In fact, the very first Rashi at the beginning of the Torah points out that the Torah should have logically begun with this very *mitzvah* instead of the story of creation. Maharal explains Rashi's rationale: the Torah is a book of *mitzvos*. For this reason, Rashi questions that perhaps it would be more sensible for the Torah to begin with the first *mitzvah* given to Bnei Yisroel.

Still, this assertion seems odd for a few reasons. Based on the assumption that the Torah is a book of *mitzvos*; wouldn't it be more logical for the Torah to begin with the mass revelation at Sinai, when the entire

Jewish people received Hashem's commandments? The Torah could have begun with the Ten Commandments, which encapsulate all of the 613 *mitzvos*, and then filled in the remaining information afterward.

This would seem to be far more appropriate than beginning with a revelation experienced by two individuals (Moshe and Aharon). After all, every religion in the world is based on a supposed "revelation" experienced by a single individual or a small group of people. The very foundation of our knowledge of the Torah's truth, on the other hand, is based on the fact that the Giving of the Torah was witnessed by millions of people. Following Maharal's explanation of Rashi's reasoning, it would be much more logical to begin the Torah with the story of the revelation at Mount Sinai. So what does Rashi mean that the Torah should have begun with this *mitzvah*?

The answer lies in understanding what the significance of this *mitzvah* is and why Hashem chose it to be the first one given to the newly formed nation of Bnei Yisroel.

In fact, the *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hachodesh*, that of establishing the new month, really goes far beyond merely establishing a Jewish calendar. This *mitzvah* establishes Hashem's intention for Bnei Yisroel to be His partners in running the world. The *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hachodesh* is the very definition of the relationship between Hashem and the

Jewish people.

Hashem created the world and everything in it, but the management of this world, and Hashem's interaction with it, is in the control of the Jewish people. Giving the Jewish people the power (and responsibility) to establish the calendar and to determine when each month begins means that we have control over time.

In other words, if we decide that today is Rosh Chodesh, Yom Kippur falls out on one day. If we determine that tomorrow is Rosh Chodesh, Yom Kippur falls out on different day.

This is incredibly significant. In essence, we are the arbiters of how and when Hashem interacts with the world because we hold the power over time. We can actually imbue days with holiness based on our decisions. This is a profound statement of the trust Hashem has in the Jewish people, and defines the depth of our relationship with Him.

This is why it was the first *mitzvah* given to the Jewish nation – it defines their role within creation and the role Hashem expects us to play within His divine plan for the world. It is for this reason that Rashi suggests that the Torah should have begun with the section of the Torah known as *Parshas Hachodesh*.



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