

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

בס"ד

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Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS VEZOS HABRACHA

Out of This World

And he said "Hashem came from Sinai and He shone forth to them from Seir, He appeared from Mount Paran..." (33:2)

The final *parsha* in the Torah, *Parshas Vezos Habracha*, is read on Simchas Torah as we celebrate the completion of the yearly cycle of reading the Torah in its entirety.

Fittingly, the *parsha* begins with a description of how Hashem came to offer the Torah to the Jewish people. Rashi (3:2) quotes one of the more astonishing Chazal which relates that before Hashem offered the Torah to Bnei Yisroel he first offered it to the nations of the world, beginning with the children of Eisav and then to the children of Yishmael. The narrative of how Hashem came to approach and offer the Torah to Bnei Yisroel is recorded in Chazal, including several instances in the Midrash and the Talmud. The following quote is of one of the more complete versions of the story (*Sifri Vezos Habracha* 343):

When Hashem offered us the Torah, He did not offer it to the Jews alone, but to all of the nations. First He approached the children of Eisav and asked them, "Do you wish to accept the Torah?" They replied, "What is written in it?" "Do not murder." They said, "...Our father [Eisav] was assured; 'By your sword will you live (Bereishis 27:40)!' [i.e. "We cannot accept such a law.]" Next Hashem went to the children of Ammon and Moav and asked, "Do you wish to accept the Torah?" They asked, "What is written in it?" "Do not commit sexual immorality." They responded, "Master of the Universe, our very existence is based on an

immoral act!" [These two nations are descended from the daughters of Lot, who were impregnated by their father (Bereishis 19:37-8). Thus, they also refused the offer.] Hashem then went to the children of Yishmael and asked them, "Do you wish to accept the Torah?" They asked, "What is written in it?" "Do not steal." They responded, "Master of the Universe, the nature of our father was to be a bandit, as the Torah describes; 'And he will be a man of the wild; his hand will be in all...' (Bereishis 16:12) [They also refused.]

There are a number of very troubling elements to this story. First and foremost, the Torah recounts in great detail Avraham Avinu's devotion to Hashem and how Avraham was the first one to bring the awareness of Hashem into the world. Hashem goes on to have a relationship with Yitzchak Avinu and Yaakov Avinu and enters in several covenants with them. How is it possible that Hashem bypasses their descendants and asks every other nation first if they are willing to receive the Torah? Perhaps even more troubling; what would have happened to the promise of a special bond with the children of the *avos* if one of the other nations had actually accepted the Torah first?

The nature of Hashem's offer is also very difficult to understand. If one were to reflect on the *mitzvos* in the Torah that define being a Jew, one would probably consider the *mitzvos* of Shabbos or keeping Kosher far ahead of the



prohibitions of killing, stealing, and immorality. After all, those *mitzvos* are already included in the seven Noachide laws by which every nation is supposed to abide. Furthermore, what purpose was there in Hashem asking Eisav, Yishmael, and the children of Lot to accept a Torah that He defines by the laws in which they are already commanded? Even more problematic, how can they refuse the Torah on that basis when they are already required to keep those laws?

Imagine for a moment a situation whereby a man proposes to seventy women and each one turns him down until he finally gets to the seventy-first one who accepts and agrees to marry him. Would she feel particularly special? Can he then say to her, I didn't give anyone else this engagement ring, only you? It sounds preposterous because he certainly tried to give it away; seventy other times in fact! So how can we say in the Shabbos *davening* of *Shacharis*, "And You did not give it (the holy Shabbos) to the nations of the lands..."? The other nations were offered Shabbos, but they simply refused it. That is hardly an endearing thought or a reason to celebrate Shabbos as being special to us!

The answer to all these questions lies in understanding the fundamental difference between the seven Noachide laws and the laws of the Torah.

When Hashem originally created the world there was an implied partnership with mankind. As Rashi explains in *Bereishis* (2:5), until man was created it didn't rain and nothing grew. Once Adam was created and appreciated the need for rain and what it brought, he was able to pray for rain. Only then did Hashem bring forth the rain that made the plants and trees grow. There was a clear, direct relationship between man and his Creator.

However, Adam subsequently chose to be independent from Hashem and expressed this desire by transgressing the one commandment given to him; the prohibition of eating from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. This sin inexorably led to Adam getting exactly what he desired: a separation from Hashem. He was exiled from the Garden of Eden and no longer immortal because his spiritual soul could no longer sustain the physical body. This disconnect also meant that mankind had to provide for himself with great physical toil and effort, and that Hashem's participation was no longer easily discernible.

Thus, the physical world became a place seemingly devoid of Hashem's presence and He was concealed (the Hebrew word for world is related to the word נעלם which means vanished). Although quite a few of the first twenty generations of man had a relationship with Hashem, it was a personal one. The first person who desired to have a relationship with Hashem and bring knowledge of Hashem into this world was Avraham Avinu. Avraham sought to create an awareness of Hashem and to explain what that relationship meant to the common person.

Once Adam sinned the world began to exist on a wholly physical plane. People had limited potentials, as is dictated by a physical state of being. Therefore, much of what drove people's actions were their

physical desires. Thus, they were given the Seven Noachide Laws to govern their day to day life. In essence, the Seven Noachide Laws became laws of social justice – a way to bring order and harmony to everyday life in society.

But Avraham Avinu desired a relationship with Hashem and made it his life's mission to bring this mandate to the people of his generation. He was interested in Hashem's truths and Hashem's ultimate purpose for this world because he wanted to draw nearer to his Creator by emulating and following His ways. This is why, in *Parshas Vayeira*, Avraham leaves Hashem's presence to care for his guests – because emulating Hashem is the ultimate expression of the desire to be one with Hashem.

This is the primary difference between the Torah offered by Hashem and the Seven Noachide Laws, which were given to mankind as a set of "House Rules" by which they have to abide. The Seven Noachide Laws govern behavior, while the Torah outlines a relationship with Hashem. This is why when the Jewish people accepted the Torah they undid Adam's sin and death once again left the world (unfortunately this was short lived – it returned by the sin of the Golden Calf, which was also driven by a desire for a degree of separation from Hashem).

In truth, Hashem never intended to offer the nations of the world the entirety of the Torah. He never intended to offer them Shabbos or Kosher or any of the *mitzvos* outside of the Seven Noachide Laws. Hashem merely offered them the relationship aspect of the Seven Noachide Laws. In other words, the Seven Noachide Laws would no longer just serve to dictate their behavior, but would be an avenue for the nations of the world to build a relationship with Hashem and connect to Him.

If the nations of the world had accepted

Hashem's offer, they would no longer keep the Seven Noachide Laws because that was the best way to have a functioning society; rather they would keep the laws because their Creator desired it so. Murder, theft, and immorality wouldn't merely be prohibited for social justice reasons, they would be prohibited because the Creator says they are immoral and wrong. Accepting this change in the Seven Noachide Laws would mean capitulating to the supremacy of Hashem and His law.

To this, the nations of the world responded: No. They were not interested in accepting Hashem as the driving force in their lives. They answered that they preferred the world as it was and that they could not accept that those actions were wrong because they were part of their DNA. They may agree to abide by them, but it merely governed their behavior; they were not interested in the moral purpose or reasons.

Thus, the legacy of the forefathers was never challenged. The intimate relationship that Hashem, as it were, desired to share with the Jewish people would never have been abrogated and offered to the other nations of the world. Shabbos, Kosher, and Eretz Yisroel were always to be solely in the domain of Bnei Yisroel. By accepting the Torah and all of its obligations and requirements, we expressed our desire to be one with Hashem.

The rest of humanity are of course Hashem's creations as well, and thus were also offered a deeper connection, however, they refused. Ironically, their refusal made our acceptance much more meaningful and in fact gave us one more responsibility; that of bringing the rest of mankind back into the fold, which is the ultimate legacy of the first Jew – Avraham Avinu.

