

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

MAY 4, 2019

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Barry Ross, Binyomin Yitzchak ben Meir. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

VOLUME 9, ISSUE 25

29 NISSAN

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS ACHAREI MOS

Time After Time

You shall observe My decrees and My laws; which a man shall carry out and he shall live by them – I am Hashem (18:5).

In this week's *parsha*, the Torah introduces a new concept regarding observing the *mitzvos*: they give a person "life." Rashi (ad loc) is troubled with the literal meaning that a person can achieve life through observing the *mitzvos* and asks, "Is it not man's destiny to die?" Thus, Rashi explains that this "life" refers to the eternal reward that a person achieves in "The World to Come."

Interestingly enough, both of the Aramaic translations of the Torah, Targum Onkelos and Yonasan Ben Uziel, understand the plain meaning of this verse in exactly the same manner – that this "life" refers to the reward a person receives in the next world.

Yet this understanding of the verse to simply refer to the "life" a person receives in the next world is difficult to accept in light of the following discussion in the Talmud (*Yoma* 85a). The Gemara relates that R' Akiva, R' Yishmael, and R' Elazar Ben Azaryah were traveling together with a few others and the question was raised, "From where do we know that one is obligated to violate Shabbos to save a person's life?"

The Gemara then records each of the *tanaim's* opinions as to why we are obligated to violate Shabbos to save a person's life. Most of the opinions were based on brilliant logical inferences in Jewish law. One by one the Gemara takes them apart and invalidates them as the ultimate source for this law. The Gemara then quotes the *amora* Shmuel, that the source for this law is based on this very

verse from this week's *parsha*: "and he shall live by them."

The implication of this verse is that a person must live through the *mitzvos* and that one should not die through the observance of the *mitzvos*. Thus, the Gemara concludes that the literal meaning of this verse is that the preservation of a person's life overrides the obligation of keeping *mitzvos* (the only *mitzvos* that are excluded from this and for which one must give up his life to fulfill are murder, idolatry, and illicit relations). Indeed, Maimonides (*Hilchos Shabbos* 2:3) quotes this very verse as the source for this law.

This is very difficult to understand in light of the literal translations according to Rashi and the *targumim*. According to Rashi and the *targumim*, the life mentioned in this verse doesn't refer to a person's life in this world. How is it possible that the source for saving a person's life in this world is the very verse that they say refers to the life one merits in The World to Come?

The Torah is teaching us one of the most fundamental principles of Jewish philosophy. People in this world have a very temporal existence. Thus, the most precious possession that any person has is time. Yet, without a greater purpose to one's life, one's most precious possession is merely a depreciating asset. In other words, if an average person lives 70-80 years, approximately 27,375 days, then every day that passes is one less in his possession.



Anyone who lives on savings knows the insecurity of contemplating what will happen when the savings runs out. A person's temporal existence is the very same issue but on a much larger scale. This gnawing feeling that one's life is merely slipping away is undoubtedly the source for many questionable decisions that come as result of this issue. This is why one often sees older people wearing "hip" clothes or sporting ponytails – fashions which are generally reserved for teenagers and young adults – because they are trying to hold on. This feeling, that one's life is slipping away, is also the reason people go through midlife crises.

Chazal are teaching us a fundamentally different way of viewing our lives – one that should change a person's outlook on life. By observing the *mitzvos*, a person merits "life" in The World to Come. As Rashi points out, earning "life" in this world is essentially meaningless because it's temporal. But receiving a share in The World to Come is achieving an eternal existence. Therefore, our lives here aren't merely a diminishing asset; each day provides an opportunity to deliver an incredible eternal existence.

This is the very same reason that we violate Shabbos (or other *mitzvos*) to save a person's life. Because the value of our temporal life is based on the fact that through it we have the potential to achieve eternal life.

Happiness of Holiness

For on this day He shall provide atonement to cleanse you... (16:30)

Much of this week's *parsha* is dedicated to discussing the service that the *kohen gadol* does in the *Beis Hamikdash* on *Yom Kippur*. According to the Gemara (85b), this verse is the source that Hashem grants atonement on *Yom Kippur*. Interestingly, the day itself provides atonement for certain sins, even without a person's complete repentance for those transgressions.

The Gemara (*Ta'anis* 30b) suggests two reasons why the *Mishna* considers *Yom Kippur* to be one of the two happiest days on the Jewish calendar: because a person receives atonement on this day and because on *Yom Kippur* the Jewish people received the second set of tablets.

Even though receiving the second tablets signified that Hashem forgave His people for the sin of the Golden Calf, this forgiveness cannot be the reason why *Yom Kippur* is considered a very happy day as that would be the same reason as the first (i.e. Hashem grants atonement). What is the connection between receiving the second set of *luchos* and the day a person receives forgiveness?

At the end of *Gemara Megilla* (31a) the Talmud lists all the Torah readings for the different days of the year. Among this list is the reading for *Yom Kippur* and it is quite interesting to note that all of the readings of the day come from this week's *parsha*.

In the morning we read from the beginning of this week's *parsha*, which discusses the *avodah* and other *Yom Kippur* observances (fasting etc.), while in the afternoon we read from the end of this week's *parsha*, which enumerates all the illicit relationships. While the

morning's readings are quite understandable, we must try to understand why Chazal instituted the reading of forbidden relationships on the holiest day of the year. It seems a little incongruous.

In the beginning of the *parsha*, we find a fascinating Rashi (16:1). Rashi describes the reason for observance of the *mitzvos* is not as one might think – because Hashem's relationship with the Jewish people is one of a king-subject relationship – but rather as a doctor-patient relationship. This concept is very important to internalize.

Just as a doctor advises his patient on what's the best way for him to act in order to live, so too the reason that Hashem gave us the Torah is so that we would have a guide to living our best lives possible. Only by observing Hashem's *mitzvos* can we have the most remarkable physical, emotional, and spiritual lives. The Torah and *mitzvos* are in place for our sake.

A person who lives his life with little structure and is driven to continuously experience succeeding levels of a hedonistic lifestyle essentially defeats his own purpose for existence. This is because the physical body is only capable of experiencing a limited amount of pleasure (e.g. you can only eat and drink so much). Anything physical is limited to physical boundaries.

The more continuous physical pleasure a person seeks, the less pleasure he receives from the same acts, and eventually a person becomes a slave to his very desires. Consider a drug addict: the first time the pleasure may be

beyond belief, but for the rest of his drug filled life he is trying to achieve that same original high – a feat which cannot be reached and ultimately causes a spiral of destruction.

Yom Kippur is the day that, through Hashem's beneficence, we "reboot" and begin anew. We distance ourselves from all physicality and contemplate our lives and the sins that we are driven towards by our physical bodies. Hashem grants us forgiveness, much in the same manner one declares bankruptcy; thus it is a chance to start over and begin anew to lead a productive life.

This is the reason we read about the forbidden relationships as *Yom Kippur* draws to a close. It's a reminder that focusing merely on seeking higher and more exotic physical pleasure leads to destructive and debasing behavior. In addition, just as a sugar addict must seek continually higher and higher sugar levels to enjoy food and drink, and eventually loses the ability to enjoy typical healthy foods, so too the constant pursuit of any physical pleasure is self-defeating in that eventually it causes us to be unable to enjoy the physical pleasures that life offers.

This is why on this day of "rebooting" we also received the second *luchos*. The Torah is the manual given to us by Hashem to lead the most incredible life. The structure that Hashem put into place is the only way to achieve the maximum physical, emotional, and spiritual pleasure from life.

