

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in memory Leila Applebaum.
"May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

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22 TISHREI

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig PARSHAS VEZOS HABRACHA

And Torah for All?

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

The Midrash on this verse (*Yalkut Shimoni ad loc, Sifrei 343*), recounts a remarkable exchange between Hashem and the other nations of the world. Originally, Hashem sought to offer the Torah to all the nations of the world. In other words, before Hashem offered us the Torah, He actually offered it to all the other nations of the world. 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 his father, Yitzchak] that, 'By your sword will you live! (*Bereishis 27:40*)' we cannot accept the Torah."

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.) Thus they too, 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 essence of our father was to be a bandit, as it is written, 'And he will be a man of the wild; his hand will be in all...'" (*Bereishis 16:12*). Therefore they

also refused. Eventually Hashem went to Bnei Yisroel who said "*Na'aseh V'Nishma*" and they alone accepted the Torah.

Yet, this Midrash presents us with a very difficult problem. All of the nations in the world are already commanded to keep the seven Noachide laws. The three prohibitions that Hashem presented these three nations are already included in the seven laws that all the nations of the world must adhere. In fact, the basic

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laws of social justice demand that for the good and continuity of civilization these behaviors are not tolerated. How could the nations refuse to accept the Torah because they didn't agree to these laws? They are already committed to keeping them anyway!

In order to understand this Midrash we must ask a very basic question: Why did Hashem give them, as a litmus test for accepting the Torah, laws that they were already supposed to keep anyway? Wouldn't it make more sense for Hashem to ask them if they would keep Shabbos or *tzitzis*? What message was Hashem conveying to them?



If we re-read the Midrash the answer becomes obvious. Hashem specifically approached each nation with a test of accepting the Torah with a law that runs counter to their specific nature. Why? Because this is the exact difference between the Torah and the seven Noachide laws. The seven Noachide laws are laws of good behavior. The Torah, on the other hand, is a guidebook to elevating and improving one's self. The message that Hashem was relaying is that the real goal of the Torah isn't to legislate behavior; the goal of the Torah is to work on yourself and change your very nature to become an elevated being. The Torah wants us to become God-like. This, of course, is much more than merely how we behave; the real test of whether or not we are keeping the Torah is: Are we becoming better people?

The nations of the world had no interest in this type of self growth. After all, the hardest thing to accomplish is the creation of lasting change in who we are. The other nations chose to remain as they were. They would try to behave, sometimes succeeding and often failing miserably. But they were prepared to deal with those consequences as long as they didn't have to commit to any real personal growth. On the other hand, Bnei Yisroel, following in the footsteps of their forefathers, committed to working on improving their nature. That is what accepting the Torah really means.

It Takes All Types

There is a well-known Midrash (*Vayikra Rabbah* 30:12) that suggests that by binding the four species on Succos, which are also identified as the four different types of Jews, we are expressing a desire for communal unity in the service of Hashem and, in fact, this is precisely what Hashem is requesting of us.

The Midrash goes on to delineate the four types of Jews: The *esrog*, which possesses both taste and fragrance symbolizes those who possess both Torah learning and good deeds. The *lulav* (of the date palm) possess taste but no fragrance, symbolizing those who possess Torah learning but do not perform good deeds. The *hadass* is the inverse of the *lulav*; possessing no taste but having a pleasant fragrance; this is likened to those who are not learned but do focus on doing good deeds. Finally, the *arava* has neither taste nor fragrance; symbolizing those who

possess neither learning nor good deeds.

The Gemara in *Shabbos* (*Bavli* 105b) details the different occasions that one must rip his clothes, known as *kriah*, in mourning. One of the instances that one must perform *kriah* is if one is in the presence of a Jew who passes away. Rashi (ad loc) explains why; “because there is no one among the Jewish people who doesn’t have both Torah and *mitzvos* (and this is similar to a *Sefer Torah* that is burnt – another instance that requires *kriah*).”

This principle, as applied by Rashi, seems to contradict the Midrash regarding the *araba minim*, which stated that the *arava* represents the Jew with neither Torah nor *mitzvos*!

The answer is that both taste and smell are the resultant effects on another entity. In other words, there are many people who have Torah study but don’t really

convey the proper taste of Torah when it comes to their interactions with other people. Likewise, there are many people that do good deeds but they don’t really convey the proper aroma of true *chessed*. Both of these types of people are inwardly focused; they may study because they find it intellectually stimulating or because it makes them feel holy, and they may do good deeds because it makes them feel altruistic or a sense of martyrdom.

In truth, they **have** studied and they **did** do acts of kindness, so Rashi points out that it is important to mourn their passing. But in reality they are missing the key point of studying Torah and doing *chessed* – to achieve a healthy love of Torah and Hashem and to focus on becoming a compassionate person. When a person is able to achieve this he will instinctively convey the taste Torah and/or the pleasant aroma of *mitzvos* to others.

Did You Know...

In keeping in line with the theme of this week’s INSIGHTS, Torah as a means of character development, we bring you a fascinating story recorded by Harav Yisroel Lipschitz author of the famous commentary *Tiferes Yisroel* on Mishnah (this story can be found at the end of 4th *perek* of *Kiddushin* – this story is similarly brought down in the *Shita Mekubetzes* at the end of the third *perek* of *Nedarim*).

When Moshe Rabbeinu took Bnei Yisroel out of Egypt, with all the accompanying miracles, Moshe became a worldwide phenomenon. Seemingly, Moshe became the world’s first media darling, sans of course, the media part. Everyone was astounded with the magnitude of the miracles he performed and the story of the Jews and their new found freedom. There was an Arab king who was very taken with all that he had heard, and this king desired to learn all that he could

about Moshe.

To this end he sent an expert sketch artist to the desert to draw Moshe’s face. The artist did as he was charged and brought back the portrait. The king then gathered his wise men to look at the drawing and analyze what kind of person Moshe was, and what was the source of his strength. After careful examination, the wise men all agreed on one thing: If this was indeed an accurate depiction of Moshe then he was an incredibly evil person. Not only that, but this person had every single bad trait in the world from avariciousness to narcissism. The king thought that he was being deceived and got very angry.

The artist was called in for an explanation, but he insisted that his portrait was accurate. The wise men, likewise, insisted that if this was an accurate portrait, then their unanimous analysis was that Moshe was the very essence of evil. The king decided that he had no choice but to go see Moshe himself. So he traveled to the

desert and the Jewish encampment. Upon entering Moshe’s tent the king clearly saw how great Moshe was and fell on his face to ask forgiveness for his intrusion. He relayed what events had brought him there and asked Moshe who had been mistaken?

Moshe replied that neither was. They were both absolutely right and Moshe really did look like a terrible person. Moshe explained that he used to have all the bad character traits that the wise men accused him of and probably even more. Moshe continued to explain; even though these terrible traits had been part of his nature he worked on himself so much that he turned all of them into the exact opposite, that is, they became the positive character traits of humility and kindness and compassion for others. Moshe did this until they became second nature, and this was the reason that he became beloved in the heavens and Hashem chose him to lead Bnei Yisroel.



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