



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת נצבים-וילך תשס"ט • 5769 Parshas Nitzavim-Vayeilech

FEAR ITSELF

POWERFUL EXAMPLE

In pre-exile times, the Jewish people were governed according to the Torah and its system of justice. One aspect of this system was the administering of capital punishment for certain most grievous transgressions.

It is clear that one of the functions of such a severe punishment was to deliver a powerful message to the people. This idea is reflected in the section of the Torah that discusses the *meisis*, the slick-tongued seducer who cajoles others into idol-worship. The Torah is quite explicit in demanding that no mercy be shown to this conniving scoundrel, who leads others on the path of sin. He is liable for the death penalty, and his death should serve as an example to the people to desist in the future from such nefarious activities. As the *pasuk* states:

וְיִסְקְלוּ אֹתוֹ בְּאֲבָנִים וְמָת כִּי בִקֵּשׁ לְהַדְיֹחַ מֵעַל דִּי אֶלְקֵיךָ... וְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁמְעוּ וַיִּירָאוּ וְלֹא יוֹסִפוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת כַּדָּבָר הַזֶּה בְּקִרְבְּךָ.

“And you shall stone him with rocks, and he shall die, for he has sought to lead you away from Hashem your L-rd... And all Yisrael shall hear and see and continue no longer to perpetrate such wicked deeds in your midst,” (*Devarim 13:11-12*).

R' Aharon Bakst (Av Beis Din of Lomza) points out that the impact this must have made was most remarkable. The fact of the matter is that capital punishment was only carried out on very rare occasions, as the Mishnah states (*Makkos 1:9*):

סִנְהֶדְרִין הַהוֹרְגִים אֶחָד בְּשָׁבוּעַ נִקְרָאת חֲבֻלָּתָא. רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה אוֹמֵר, אֶחָד לְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה.

“If the High Court executes a single individual within a seven-year period, it is considered too ‘violent.’ R’ Elazar ben Azaryah says, (this is true even) within a seventy-year period.”

We see from the Mishnah that more than seven years – or according to R’ Elazar ben Azaryah, more than seventy years – had to pass between administrations of the death penalty. Nevertheless, the Torah testifies that capital punishment can serve as a real deterrent for would-be perpetrators. Apparently, then, the effect of a single act of execution on the public’s consciousness would last for generations (*Peninim Mishulchan Gavo’ah, parshas Shoftim*).

When used constructively, fear of this sort can be a significant motivator. And it is not limited to the aftermath of capital punishment. Shlomo Hamelech states in *Koheles (3:14)*, וְהָאֱלֹקִים עָשָׂה שְׂיֵרָאוּ מִלְפָּנָיו (“Hashem has acted so that people will fear Him”). Rashi explains this verse as referring to massive aberrances in nature. When Hashem brings forth a great flood, for example, His purpose is to capture people’s notice and instill them with the fear that had been lacking until then.

In fact, thunder serves a similar purpose. Referring to the *pasuk* in *Koheles*, the Gemara (*Berachos 59a*) tells us: לֹא נִבְרָאוּ רַעְמִים אֶלָּא לְפִשׁוּט עֲקוּמוּמֵית שְׁבִיבָה (“Thunder was created for the sole purpose of ‘straightening the crookedness of the heart’ by awakening a sense of fear within a person”).

THE SHOFAR AND THE DAYS OF AWE

This is also a major function of the *shofar*: to serve as a catalyst for *yirah* (fear). The *navi* declares: אִם יִתְקַע שׁוֹפָר בְּעִיר וְעָם לֹא יִחָרְדוּ (“Shall a *shofar* be

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sounded in the city, and the people will not tremble?”), (*Amos 3:6*). In a similar fashion to thunder, the piercing cry of the *shofar* serves to purify a person’s heart and stir within him a measure of awe.

As with most mitzvos, a *berachah* (blessing) is recited prior to the *shofar* blowing. One might have thought that the most logical wording to be selected for this *berachah* would refer to just that: the *shofar*-blowing. However, we actually do not conclude the *berachah* with the words לתקוע בַּשּׁוֹפָר (“to **blow** the *shofar*”), but with a different phrase: לְשִׁמוֹעַ קוֹל שׁוֹפָר (“to hear the voice of the *shofar*”). Why the deviation?

In his *sefer Ma’alos HaTorah*, the brother of the Vilna Gaon explains that the chosen text of the blessing was quite deliberate, as it demonstrates the true essence of this mitzvah. The *shofar* comes to break through the callousness of our hearts and inject a sense of *yirah* within us. It is through the medium of *hearing* that this feat is accomplished, not through the mere blowing of the *shofar*. (The very *pasuk* quoted at the outset – referring to the warning and example derived from capital punishment – also stresses the notion of hearing as a means for absorbing fear: “And all Yisrael shall hear...”.) This idea is therefore reflected in the *berachah*. The mitzvah is to *hear the sound*, which in turn effects the desired result: an internalization of a sense of trepidation.

It should be stressed that the dread and fear one experiences on this day have an extremely constructive purpose. It goes without saying that Hashem has no desire to purposefully “shake people up” for no apparent reason. Rather, as mentioned by the *Ma’alos HaTorah*, it is fear that

removes the usual callousness of our hearts, which prevents us from serving Hashem to the fullest.

When this blockade is lifted, a person is able to achieve the loftiest levels. He may come to complete *teshuvah* (repentance) and merit a favorable judgment on this day of awe. Furthermore, his heart is opened to achieve the level of *ahavas Hashem* – love of G-d. As the *pasuk* states in this week’s *parshah*:

וּמַל ד' אֶלְקִיךָ אֵת לְבַבְךָ וְאֵת לִבְבֵי זַרְעֶךָ לְאַהֲבָה אֵת ד' אֶלְקִיךָ בְּכָל לְבַבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ לְמַעַן חַיֶּיךָ.
“And Hashem your L-rd shall ‘circumcise’ your heart and the heart of your offspring to love Hashem your L-rd with all of your heart and all of your soul for you to live,” (*Devarim 30:6*).

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