



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת שמות תשע"א פסוקים 5771 *Parshas Shemos*

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY

Sometimes it happens that an individual attending a *d'rashah* (Torah lecture) may not be enthralled with the speech. Upon its conclusion, he takes the liberty to share his critiques of the speaker with his peers. The Chofetz Chaim decries this somewhat prevalent practice (*Hilchos Lashon Hara, footnote to 2:12*). Amongst the numerous reasons he supplies in condemning such slanderous behavior, the Chofetz Chaim makes a poignant observation: Simply put, people vary in their tastes. Some prefer to hear a novel interpretation of a verse; others are more eager for an intricate theoretical discourse; and still others favor a nice parable or an interesting story. The end result is that it is nearly impossible for any speaker to satisfy the particular interests of all listeners. That being the case, where is there room, really, for complaints about a given speech? Perhaps the very thing that this individual didn't like was actually quite appealing to someone else; and had the speaker curtailed his remarks to appease the complainer, someone else would be equally disappointed!

Against this backdrop, we have a clear illustration in this week's *parshah* of the multifaceted nature of Torah exposition. When appearing in the Burning Bush, Hashem tells Moshe: *שָׁל נַעֲלִיד מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר* (Remove your shoes from your feet, for the place upon which you are standing is holy ground) (*Shemos 3:5*). In keeping with the theme of people's varied interests, this *passuk* can be understood on a number of levels: practical, philosophical, *halachic*, and inspirational. It is our hope that each individual will find an approach suited to his unique preference.

DON'T TREAD ON ME

This is not the only instance when we find that footwear is considered antithetical to a place of holiness. A similar

situation existed in the area of the Beis Hamikdash, as mentioned in the Mishnah in Berachos (9:5):

לֹא יִכְנֹס לְהַר הַבַּיִת בְּמַקְלוֹ, וּבְמַנְעָלוֹ.

“One should not enter the Temple area with his staff or his shoes.”

What, exactly, is the connection between sacred surroundings and shoe-removal? The *Edus B'Yehosef* sees a practical aspect to this directive. Under normal circumstances, walking barefoot in a desert area is quite a risky venture. Poisonous snakes and scorpions abound, presenting an ever-present danger. But the situation on the ground changes drastically where holiness is a factor. The Mishnah in Avos (5:5) tells us that in the history of the Beis Hamikdash, no one was ever harmed by venomous creatures in its environs. It was the inherent holiness of the place that accounted for this phenomenon (*Tosfos Yom Tov, ibid.*). This is also the intent of our verse. Hashem was reassuring Moshe that at this time, he could remove his sandals without fear of harm, “for the place upon which you are standing is holy ground” (*Talilei Oros*).

The *Divrei Sha'ul* takes a somewhat broader approach, drawing on a classic philosophical idea. This oft-quoted concept divides the inhabitants of the universe into four basic categories, wherein each succeeding level draws its sustenance from its subordinate. In ascending order of sophistication, they are: דומם – inanimate objects (stones, earth, etc.); צומח – “sprouters” (i.e., vegetable matter), which draw their sustenance from the minerals of the earth; חי – living creatures, comprised of the animals who consume the plants; and מדבר – “speakers” (i.e., people), the highest form of existence, who harness the rest for their needs. This complete dominance and superiority is symbolized by the wearing of a shoe. A human takes leather (the hide

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of an animal) and treads upon it. Second only to him, the animal occupies the next-highest rank; by literally stepping upon the animal, man demonstrates that all other forms of Creation are subservient to him.

But there is one element that can upset the whole hierarchy: sanctity. When a given object is infused with holiness, it moves to the top of the pyramid, surpassing even man in stature. And so, in proximity to “holy ground,” man is temporarily knocked off that highest plateau and can no longer exert and advertise superiority. Now, even the דוגמא possesses greater prestige, an idea reflected in our verse. As he stood on holy ground, Moshe had to remove the symbol of the dominance of his kind.

Still others highlight the *halachic* aspects contained in this *passuk*. A number of the Rishonim (medieval commentators) explain the shoe-removal on a most simple and logical level. Shoes are people’s companions in all of their travels (obviously) and end up on the receiving end of whatever unclean substances lay in their path. Hence, the offending material will often be lodged within, rendering them an inappropriate participant in a ritualistically sacred environment (*Chizkuni, B’chor Shor*).

Based on its phraseology, R’ Chaim Kanievsky perceives additional *halachic* undertones to this directive. There is another term – bypassed by our *passuk* – that is commonly used in the context of shoe-removal: חלליצה. This would have indicated a more hands-on approach, where the wearer removes his shoe *manually*. Instead, the word “שָׁל” was employed here, implying a mere sliding off of the shoe without actually touching it. Hashem purposefully instructed Moshe in this manner, to facilitate the communication. Had Moshe actually touched his shoe, he would first have had to wash his hands before engaging in such sacred activity (*Derech Sichah, vol. II*).

THE TIME IS NOW

The Chofetz Chaim himself sees an inspiring message emerging from this particular episode, which reflects the universal struggle of maintaining our standing in Hashem’s Service despite the pressures of daily life.

Oftentimes, the earnest individual will find himself wistfully yearning for that time in the future when the pressures will subside. At that point he will be able to fully devote himself to Torah study and proper Service of Hashem. But for now, unfortunately, he is simply too busy. Spiritual accomplishments will have to wait.

And so the Torah seeks to correct this misconception. As the Mishnah states (*Avos 2:4*), “Don’t say, ‘I will learn when I become less harried,’ for you may never become less harried. Hashem desires that we strive to make the best of our current circumstances. Through this passage, He is communicating a message to every Jew: The very ground upon which you currently stand provides great opportunities to achieve holiness (*Chofetz Chaim al HaTorah*).

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