

# Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

Yisro 5769

**And all the people answered together and said, “All that Hashem has spoken, we will do!” (19:8)**

In Parshas Mishpatim (24:7) a similar verse occurs, but with two changes: there it does not say that the people answered together, and it says that the people said, “We will do and we will listen.” What is the reason for these differences?

Chazal say that when Moshe Rabbeinu went up to Heaven to receive the Torah, the angels protested that the Torah should be given to them. G-d commanded Moshe to answer the angels. Moshe was afraid they would burn him with their fiery breath, so G-d told Moshe to hold onto the Throne of Glory. Moshe then said to the angels, “The Torah says, ‘I am Hashem your G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt.’ Did you go down to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? The Torah says further, ‘You shall not have other gods.’ Do you live among nations who worship idols? The Torah says further, ‘Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it.’ Do you work, that you should need to rest?” Moshe continued to demonstrate that the commandments of the Torah do not apply to angels. When he finished, all the angels became his friends and offered him gifts (Shabbos 88b-89a).

What were the angels thinking when they asked for the Torah? Didn't they know that its commandments are only meant for humans? And what was the point of Moshe holding onto the Throne – how did it protect him? And if Moshe was so afraid that the angels would be angry at his answers, why did they become his friends at the end?

The Chasam Sofer answers these questions based on the Ramban in his introduction to his commentary on the Torah. The Ramban says that the entire Torah is made up of combinations of Divine names, and they can be read in different ways. In our world, they are read as the story of the Jews in Egypt, the Exodus, the spies and so on. In the world of the angels, the letters are combined differently and contain other meanings. The angels are so far from our earthly existence that they cannot understand the Torah the way we do. But Moshe Rabbeinu and other great tzaddikim are able to understand Torah not only on the earthly level but on the levels above, symbolized by the Throne of Glory.

The angels wanted to receive the Torah on their own level, not in its earthly form containing commandments and stories. Moshe was afraid that they would burn him when he answered that the earthly Torah only applied to humans, because they would say, “Why are you better than us? The Torah applies to us on our level just as it applies to you on yours.” Therefore G-d said, “Hold onto my Throne to show the angels that you understand the Torah on all its levels, from the Throne down to the earth.” Moshe held onto the Throne but, out of respect for the angels, did not boast openly about his understanding of the Torah on all levels; because of this respectful gesture they became his friends.

Based on this, Rabbi Yaakov Teitelbaum explained the difference between the verses noted above. When the people were speaking all together, they said “we will do” because in the practical observance of the commandments all Jews are equal. But when they said “we will do and we will listen” they were not together, because everyone “listens” (i.e. understands) on his own level. Some understand the Torah on a simple level, some delve into the meaning of emunah, and some understand the hidden meaning of the Torah.

A Jew is not obligated to understand the mitzvos that he performs. However, if he has the wrong thoughts and intentions while doing a mitzvah, it is worse than having no thoughts at all. The prime example of this is animal offerings. If a man slaughters his offering with no thoughts at all, it is kosher. But if he has in mind to eat it after its time limit, the entire offering is invalid and the severest penalty, kareis, is given to one who eats it even within the time limit.

The Ramban says that the words “cursed is he who does not uphold the words of this Torah” (Devarim 27:26) apply to any Jew who does not believe in one or more of the mitzvos, or does not believe that those who keep them will be rewarded and those who transgress them will be punished. Even if this Jew personally keeps all the mitzvos, he is cursed. But a Jew who believes in the mitzvos and the principle of reward and punishment, even if at times he succumbs to his desires and violates the Torah, is not cursed. We see here that the “we will listen” – Jewish belief – is more important than “we will do” – practical observance of the mitzvos. Not everyone is obligated to understand Jewish belief on a high level, but if one tries and has it wrong, it is more destructive than a sinful act.

Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk was once speaking terrible words about himself: “I am the worst person, the lowest person...” The Koznitcher Maggid said to him, “You are such a man of truth! How can you say such falsehood about yourself?” Rabbi Elimelech replied, “I will give you an analogy. If a big, heavy beam falls on a man, even on his head, it is possible that he will survive. He may have to be hospitalized for a few weeks, but his wounds will probably heal. But if he is pierced by a needle, even in a minor part of his body, it can sometimes lead to his death. It is true that I am not afraid of practical sin – the beam – but I am afraid of sinful thoughts, doubts about emunah – the needle.”

Once the Shinnover Rebbe was staying at a man’s house in a village for Shabbos, and when it came time to make kiddush on Friday night, he said, “I cannot make kiddush. Look carefully around the house to see if there is any heretical book here.” The people looked but did not find. So the Rebbe got up himself and looked, and found the Torah with Moses Mendelssohn’s translation. He threw the book out the window, and then began to say kiddush. (Kol Yaakov, pp. 74-77)

The Brisker Rav said that his father, Reb Chaim, was not a crier by nature. But there were three times when he cried. One of the times was on Rosh Hashanah, during the prayer that describes G-d as “He who examines hearts on the day of judgement.” He explained: “With his physical actions a person can be careful not to sin, but who can be careful with his thoughts, to make sure that every thought matches exactly with true emunah in Hashem Yisborach? Sinful thought is among the three sins people commit every day (Bava Basra 164b).” The other two times he cried were on Yom Kippur during the “Al Chet” prayer, and when he found out that one of the women in his family knew how to write in the gentile language. The Brisker Rav commented, “From these things we could see what really troubled my father.” (Uvdos Vehanhagos Leveis Brisk v. 3 p. 181)

If great tzaddikim like Rabbi Elimelech, the Shinnover Rebbe and Reb Chaim Brisker were afraid of heretical thoughts, what can we say for ourselves today?

Those who do not have e-mail can now receive this sheet free every week by regular mail. To order write to the address below.



True Torah Jews  
183 Wilson St. PMB 162  
Brooklyn, NY 11211

For additional copies of this publication,  
or to sponsor an issue,  
**PLEASE CALL 718-841-7053.**