



חבורת מהות היהדות

Weekly Newsletter

Vol. 2, Issue 24

פרשת נצבים

כ"ז אלול תשפ"ה

Feedback? contact@essenceofjudaism.com

From the Chabura
By: Adam Friedmann

Piecemeal Mitzvot: Shema, Shofar, Megillah, and Hallel

Are we allowed to pause in the middle of doing a mitzvah? If we are allowed, how long can those pauses be? Many discussions in the Gemara revolve around these questions. In one of them (*Rosh Hashanah* 34a-b), we learn the following:

If one **heard nineshofarblasts at nine different times of the day, he has fulfilled** his obligation... **And** this is true **even** if one heard the blasts from the different individuals **at intervals, and even** if it took the course of **the entire day**. (Koren translation)

The Gemara applies the same rule to the mitzvot of reading Hallel and reading *Megillat Esther* on Purim. Finally, it includes this story that applies this principle to the Shema:

Rabbi Abbahu was once **walking after Rabbi Yoḥanan, and Rabbi Abbahu was reciting Shema** as he walked. **When he reached alleyways** that were **filthy** with human excrement, where it is prohibited to utter words of Torah, **he fell silent** and stopped reciting *Shema*. **After he passed** through, Rabbi Abbahu **said to Rabbi Yoḥanan: What is the halakha** with regard **to completing Shema** from where I left off? Rabbi Yoḥanan **said to him: If you remained** in the alleyway for an interval **sufficient to complete the entire Shema, return to the beginning** and start again.

The Gemara goes on to explain that Rabbi Yochanan only answered Rabbi Abbahu according to the latter's halachic position. Rabbi Abbahu held that taking an extended break means having to start the Shema again, he just didn't know how long of a break was a problem. But according to Rabbi Yochanan's own view, the Shema is the same as the other mitzvot mentioned above. The halachah that emerges from this Gemara is that the mitzvot of shofar, Hallel, Megillah, and Shema can be fulfilled even with very long breaks in the middle (see *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 65:1, 588:2).

This halachah begs a question. Many, if not most, mitzvot can't be fulfilled this way. For example, one cannot fulfill eating matzah by taking one bite and then taking the next one several hours later. The

same is true even for other mitzvot that involve reciting a text such as *mikra bikurim*. What differentiates the 4 mitzvot mentioned above? At a technical level, the distinction seems to be about what constitutes a “mitzvah unit”. In most cases, the basic unit of a mitzvah is the whole thing: eating the required amount of matzah, shaking all of the *arba’at haminim*, reciting the complete text for the *bikurim*. However, in the case of these 4 mitzvot, the fulfillment of the mitzvah can be broken down into “subunits”. One of these subunits alone does not count as a whole a mitzvah. But each is individually meaningful such that a break before and after it does not break up the flow of fulfilling the mitzvah. Doing all the subunits constitutes a complete fulfillment of the mitzvah (for a similar argument regarding the Shema specifically, see Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Shiurim Lezecher Aba Mori*, vol. 1 pp 32-37).

This is an interesting technical description, but it doesn’t explain *why* these mitzvot should be different. Why is it that for these particular mitzvot “subunits” are relevant? We should note that the reason need not be the same for all of them. The Gemara may have grouped them together because of technical, not philosophical, similarity.

The Shema and the Megillah seem to be the easiest to explain. Both of these mitzvot involve a cognitive process. The goal of reading the Megillah is to review the story. The story can be broken up into many smaller pieces. The cumulative effect of reading each smaller piece is to read the story overall. As we’ve seen in earlier discussions in this newsletter, the goal of the Shema is to constantly review the fundamentals of our beliefs such as the existence and unity of Hashem, and the mitzvot. This is also something that can be accomplished in small pieces. Hallel isn’t a process. It’s a set of praises of Hashem. In this case we can say that there isn’t too much compelling us to look at Hallel as a single unit in the first place. (Though, there is a certain thematic progression throughout the passages of Hallel, see *Talmud Yerushalmi, Berachot 2:4*.) Therefore, it makes sense to say that reciting Hallel can be accomplished in smaller chunks.

The most difficult mitzvah to explain is the shofar. Hearing all the sounds of the shofar would seem to be one large unit like matzah or the *arba’at haminim*. Why can it be broken up? Perhaps we can argue that hearing the shofar is also a process. The Rambam (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4*) argues that one way to understand the shofar is as a wake up call. Hearing the shofar is supposed to disrupt our complacent, routine lives so that we can refocus ourselves on the right goals. Perhaps this is not something that can happen in an instant. Ideally, it requires the alternation between hearing the shofar and time for self-reflection. Today, we include this time in the Musaf prayer that’s interwoven with the sounds of the shofar.

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life By: Dovid Campbell

Rosh HaShanah 1:2 — The Paradox of Judgment

The Mishnah in Rosh HaShanah 1:2 teaches that “on Rosh HaShanah, all creatures pass before Him like *bnei maron*.” Rambam, in his commentary, explains the phrase as “like sheep,” counted one by one. On the plain level, this means that each individual is judged for life and death, health and sickness, and all other conditions of human existence. That, Rambam says, is clear enough. But he immediately adds: *“Its hidden meaning is undoubtedly very difficult.”*

What is so difficult here?

Tosafos Yom Tov (ad loc.) explains. The mishnah implies two opposite things: on the one hand, each creature is judged individually, one after the other, like sheep in a pen. On the other hand, God is not like us—He does not deal with one case at a time, then move on to the next. The mishnah quotes the verse: “He Who fashions their hearts together, Who considers all their deeds” (Tehillim 33:15). His vision encompasses all beings at once, in a single glance. For us, sequential attention and simultaneous attention are opposites. Yet the mishnah ascribes both to God.

This, says Tosafos Yom Tov, is why Rambam found the matter so difficult. To explain *how* God judges both one-by-one and all-at-once would be to explain God’s very mode of knowledge and providence—and that is impossible. Just as we cannot grasp His essence, so too we cannot grasp His ways of overseeing the world. The mishnah therefore speaks to us in metaphor, not in literal description.

This leaves us with an important lesson for Rosh HaShanah. We often wonder: what exactly happens in the heavenly court? How is judgment written, sealed, and executed? Rambam and Tosafos Yom Tov remind us that such questions, while natural, will never yield a satisfying answer. The most we can have is a metaphor that hints at realities beyond our comprehension.

And that limitation can be taken in two ways. It can be frustrating, leaving us in the dark at the very moment when our lives hang in the balance. But it can also be comforting. For if God’s judgment is truly beyond human categories, then we are never trapped within the strictures of human logic. His ways are not our ways, and His judgment is not bound by the limits of our imagination. There is always room for hope, for mercy, for unexpected kindness from the Judge who sees all at once and yet cares for each sheep individually.

On Rosh HaShanah, we step into that mystery—not in order to untangle it, but to let it untangle us.

Sforno on the Parsha

By: Nochum Spiegel

Introducing: The End

The introduction of an author to his book is often a key to understanding the work as a whole. There he may lay out motifs and patterns which will animate the text in a whole new manner for the conscientious reader. When skipping an introduction in a rush to get to “the good stuff”, a reader risks missing out on key messages which the author was seeking to convey.

In Sforno’s introduction to his commentary on the *Torah*, he highlights a common theme appearing in all five of its *sefarim*. In each, events occur where bonds have been broken, despair, and utter loss of hope reign. He uses the Hebrew word *yai’ush* to describe the situation, one has given up on maintaining or attaining an ideal so coveted and desired. However when we reach the end of each *sefer*, *Hashem* shows the eternal depth of his connection to the Jewish people, balance is re-established, and relationships are restored.

In *Bereishit*, *Yaakov*’s family had been torn apart by the sale of *Yosef*, the legacy of the *Avot* was in jeopardy. Yet *Hashem* orchestrates a family reunion, which assures the continuity of the nation in Egypt. *Sefer Shemot* relates the loss of the highest spiritual levels after the chet *ha’egel*. Despite this, *Hashem* provides the *Mishkan* and opportunities for repair, and ultimately rests the Divine presence (*Shechina*) amidst the Jewish encampment. In *Vayikra* after relating the punishments that will result when the nation does not keep the *Torah*, *Hashem* informs them that He will remember the covenant which he formed with their fathers and once again be a G-d for them (see Sforno *Vayikra* 26:45). *Sefer Bamidbar* details the preparations to enter *Eretz Yisrael*, subsequently brought to a halt by the insurrections instigated by the *meraglim* and *Korach*. *Hashem* will provide them with more *mitzvot*, and many years later lead them to the border of the promised land.

We arrive at *Devarim*, and now in these last *parshiot* the final elements of Moshe’s teachings are coming to a close. In *Ki Tavo*, the curses resulting from a life not lived in accordance with the voice of *Hashem* are presented, followed by a new covenant being forged in addition to the one from *Sinai* which had been weakened (*Devarim* 28:69).

In *Nitzavim* (Sforno 30:1-15) *Moshe* now teaches that in the midst of an eventual exile resulting from sin, there is hope. The keys for redemption are in our hands. Even in the belly of the nations, we never lose the ability to return to *Hashem*. It does not require a prophet or some distant inaccessible scholar to be actualized. It is not bound by borders or the constraints of time. No external resources are necessary. If we properly utilize the souls and minds with which *Hashem* endowed us, we have the capacity for sincere reflection. We are capable of acknowledging our failings, regretting their negative impact and admitting this before the Creator from whom we have strayed. While the passage is phrased as a *mitzvah* describing the far reaching scope of *teshuva*, it at the same time declares that *Hashem* will redeem His people once again. The despair of generations will be comforted and the *Torah*’s ultimate message will come to fruition.

To receive this newsletter via email visit www.essenceofjudaism.com/newsletter