



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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SERMON TITLE:

DID MOSES MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICE?

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In loving memory of

ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל  Emil W. Herman
who loved and supported Torah learning.

1ST DAY SHVUOS

DID MOSES MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICE?

Chassidim used to often ask the Rebbe advice regarding what to name their child. The Rebbe almost never answered this question, leaving the decision in the hands of the parents. There were many other instances that the Rebbe refused to answer people – even when (in my opinion) he could have solved the problem easily.

Tzadikim are “walking in the footsteps” of G-d, and this type of relationship can be found with G-d and the Jews as well.

We are now celebrating the holiday of Shavuot, the day on which the Torah was given to the Jewish People. Now, what actually happened on this day? What happened is that G-d revealed Himself to the Sons of Israel (that’s our ancestors) and spoke the Ten Commandments.

Then, Moshe climbed Mt. Sinai and remained there for 40 days and 40 nights—“He ate no bread and drank no water,” as the verse tells us. Finally, after 40 days, when G-d gave him the Tablets of the Covenant, G-d told him, “Go and descend, for your nation has corrupted itself ... they made for themselves a golden calf.”

Down below at the foot of the mountain, something very grave was taking place: the “chevra” had made the Golden Calf, and were worshipping it. So, the verse tells us, Moshe “cast the Tablets from his hands and shattered them under the mountain.”

The Talmud (Tractate Shabbos 87a) tells us that this action was one of the three things that Moshe did of his own accord, and which G-d agreed with: “... he shattered the Tablets... and how do we know that G-d agreed with him? Because the verse states, ‘... the Tablets which you broke’—“Yasher Koach” that you broke them.”

Now, not only did G-d agree with Moshe, but even thanked him for his action—as the Talmud puts it, G-d congratulates him.

Seemingly, this is not understood. If G-d wanted Moshe to break the Tablets, and He liked it so much that He even said “congratulations”, so why didn’t G-d tell Moshe to break them in the first place when he came down from the mountain?

There is a Chasidic saying, "Some things we must understand ourselves." These are things that no one else can teach us, things which no one can tell someone else to do. The person alone needs to recognize that this is the right thing to do—if he's doing it simply because he was told to do so, it completely loses its value.

G-d could not command Moshe to shatter the Tablets—it was something that needed to come from him.

This is the basis for certain decisions made by Jewish leaders in generations after Moshe.

We all know that there are two parts to the Torah: the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. In the beginning, only the Tanach was committed to writing, and the Oral Torah, the interpretation of the Torah, was forbidden to be written down and Jews were permitted to study it from memory alone. As the Talmud (Tractate Gittin 60b) states, "Things written, you are not permitted to orally state; things oral, you are not permitted to state them in writing."

That's how it was until Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi came along. He lived approximately 70 years after the Destruction of the Second Temple. He saw that the Jewish People were "migrating to the fringes", meaning they were going into exile. Thus, so that the Torah would not be forgotten by the Jewish People, he decided to remove the prohibition and record the Oral Torah just like the Written Torah.

Certainly, Rabbi Yehudah had his opponents who argued that his decision was against the Torah. But history proves him to have been right.

G-d did not instruct him to make his decision. It was one of those things that one must understand alone.

We find the same thing regarding the subject of Kabbalah. Everyone has heard of the legend that one is forbidden to study Kabbalah before the age of 40. In Jewish law, however, it's a little different.

Maimonides writes that a person must learn Jewish law before he approaches the study of Kabbalah.

Still, along comes the Arizal, the greatest of the Kabbalists of all generations, who lived in Safed 500 years ago, who established that "it's a mitzvah to reveal this wisdom"—it's not just permitted to study Kabbalah, but even a mitzvah.

And the Baal Shem Tov, whose yahrzeit falls on the holiday of Shavuos, was the one who realized this in actuality. He revealed and spread the wisdom of the Kabbalah to the masses without inspecting whether they were ready for it. Why? Because in recent generations, the Jewish People could not stand strong without the wisdom of the Kabbalah, without the inner secrets of the Torah.

Where did the Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi & the Arizal get this liberalism, to break the prohibition against transcribing the Oral Torah, and spreading Kabbalah? They learned it from Moshe, who shattered the Tablets of his own accord to rescue the Jewish Nation, with G-d Himself only approving after the fact, even saying "congratulations."

Today, the entire Jewish People says "congratulations" to Rabbi Yehuda for transcribing the Oral Torah, and to the Baal Shem Tov too for popularizing the teachings of Kabbalah and Chasidus.

What does all this teach us?

There are things that must be done in every Jewish community—but you can't tell someone to do them. They are things that a person must do on his or her own.

For example, you may constantly ask your kid, "Why didn't you turn off the bedroom light?" and he says, "You never asked me to!" So you ask him, "I need to tell you that?! You should have known that on your own!"

Nu... Don't wait for directions and invitations. Start to do!

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