

Who's to Blame, or What's to Gain

There's a short sentence in Parshat Re'ay, that appears to be 'misplaced' – for it commands us to 'remember our slavery in Egypt' specifically on the holiday of **Shavuot!** [See Devarim 16:12]

Would it not have made more sense to include this commandment together with the laws of Passover?

In the following shiur, we'll explain how this 'misplaced pasuk' is precisely where it belongs, by considering its connection to a mega-theme of the Bible (and Sefer Devarim).

Hopefully, it will also shed some light on what we can relate to more 'current' events.

INTRODUCTION

As you were probably aware, the Torah 'repeats' the holidays towards the end of Parshat Re'ay (see 16:1-17). In that section, we find three distinct 'parshiot'; corresponding to Pesach (16:1-8), Shavuot (16:9-12), and Succot (16:13-17).

[In Chutz la'aretz, this section is the Torah reading for 8th day of Passover, 2nd Day of Shavuot, and Shmini Atzeret!]

Even though these laws seem to be pretty much a repeat (or summary) of the laws of the holidays recorded earlier in Chumash (see Shmot 23:14-17, Vayikra 23, and Bamidbar 28-29), this unit adds (and emphasizes) an additional element - the need to celebrate these three 'pilgrimage holidays' at "ha'makom asher yivchar Hashem" [the site that God will choose].

[See 16:2,6,7,11,15 & 17! - In our previous shiur, we explained how this was congruent with theme of "ha'makom asher yivchar Hashem" that began back at the beginning of Parshat Re'ay.]

However, there is another "chidush" [something new] in this section, i.e. the commandment of "simcha" (see 16:11 & 16:14-15) – i.e. to rejoice before God. Yet for some reason, this commandment is mentioned specifically in regard to Shavuot and Succot (and not in regard to Pesach).

To explain why, we must take a closer look at how the Torah words this commandment '**to rejoice**'. In doing so, we will arrive at a deeper understanding why the Torah tell us immediately afterward '**to remember**'.

SIMCHAT YOM TOV – FOR WHOM?

Let's begin our study with the laws of Shavuot in Parshat Re'ay. Note how the opening psukim describe what appears to be a very simple agricultural holiday, thanking God for the seasonal grain harvest.

"**Count seven weeks**; from the time the sickle is first put to the standing corn, you shall begin to count seven weeks. And you shall keep the 'feast of weeks' unto Hashem your Lord – by the measure of the freewill-offering of thy hand, which you shall give as Hashem has blessed you." (16:9-10)

This commandment to keep "Shavuot" is followed by the special mitzvah to rejoice on that holiday. As you read these psukim, pay careful attention to WHO is commanded to be happy: And you shall REJOICE before HASHEM... you & your son & your daughter & your man-servant, & your maid-servant, & **the Levite that is within your gates, & the stranger, & the orphan & the widow**, that are in your midst - in the place which Hashem shall choose to cause His name to dwell there. **And your shall remember that you were once a slave in Egypt...**" (see 16:11-12)

Two obvious questions arise :

1) Why doesn't the Torah just tell us that EVERYONE must be happy? [Why such a lengthy list of people?]

2) What is the purpose of the 'additional' commandment to remember that we were once slaves in Egypt? Wasn't that the purpose of the holiday of Passover, celebrated only six week earlier!

Furthermore, when the Torah continues with the laws of Succot, we find a similar commandment to REJOICE on that holiday as well, followed by an almost identical lengthy list of people who need to be happy (see 16:14)! Yet for some reason, this 'mitzvah to rejoice' is only recorded by Shavuot and Succot, but not by Pesach.

The answers to these questions (as you probably guessed) are inter-related, and relate to the purpose of these two harvest holidays – Shavuot, when we thank God for our grain harvest; and Succot – when we thank God for our fruit harvest.

LAND OWNERS & HAPPINESS

Take a look once again at the list of the people who the Torah commands to rejoice, noting how just about all of them **do not own land**. The **Levite** by the Torah's decree (see 18:1), the **stranger** due to his social predicament, the **orphan and widow** due to a family tragedy.

Note how this list looks more like a roster of those who are NOT happy at this time of the year – as everyone around them are gathering their wealth (while own nothing).

In other words, the land owner will be very happy during this time of year - even if the Torah didn't command him to be happy; while the other people in the Torah's list will not be happy (more likely jealous), commandment or not!

And this is exactly what the Torah is talking about!

Unlike our original assumption, the Torah does not command everyone in this list to **be** happy; rather it commands the land owner to **share** his natural happiness with the 'have-nots'.

Surely he must rejoice by thanking God for his harvest, but he accomplishes this by sharing his produce with the downtrodden, helping them rejoice at this special time of the year.

This interpretation also explains why this mitzvah of "simcha" is recorded in regard to Shavuot and Succot – which are both seasonal harvest holidays, and not on Pesach – when the harvest is just beginning, and its outcome remains in doubt

[This does not imply that there is not a mitzvah of "simcha" on Pesach, rather its application by providing for the needy does not apply in realm of agriculture (harvest produce), as it does on Shavuot & Succot .]

REMEMBER YOU WERE ONCE A 'HAVE-NOT'!

This interpretation also neatly explains why the Torah reminds us to remember that we were once slaves in Egypt, specifically after this commandment to rejoice with the downtrodden on Shavuot. Recall once again the juxtaposition of these two commandments:

"... REJOICE before HASHEM... you & your son & your daughter & your **man-servant, & your maid-servant, & the Levite that is within your gates, & the stranger, & the orphan & the widow**, that are in your midst...

**** Remember that you were once a slave in Egypt!"**

This 'reminder' to - remember you were once a slave – should not be understood as an additional commandment, but rather as a 'statement of motivation'. In other words, to make sure that we fulfill the Torah's commandment that we share our happiness with the needy, the Torah reminds us that once the entire nation of Israel was in the position of the 'downtrodden' under Egyptian bondage. That difficult experience should be remembered to sensitize our feelings toward the poor, and hence motivate our commitment to follow God's command to share our rejoicing on Shavuot and Succot with the 'have-nots'.

In fact, that may have been the very reason why God put in through that difficult period of "shiabud mitzraim" – enslavement in Egypt- in order to sensitize our national character, to ensure our constant awareness to care for social justice.

THE SAME PHRASE THROUGHOUT SEFER DEVARIM

To support our interpretation that to 'remember you were once a slave in Egypt' should be understood as a 'statement of motivation' (and not a separate mitzvah). Let's examine how this identical phrase is used numerous times in Sefer Devarim, and always in this same context, i.e. as a motivator to follow commandments relating to social justice.

EVED IVRI

Previously in Parshat Re'ay, in regard to the laws of how to free an "eved ivri" [a Hebrew servant], we find this exact same phrase:

"If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, be sold to you, he shall serve you six years; and in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free. And when our let him go free – don't let him go empty; You shall furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy threshing-floor, and out of thy winepress; of that which Hashem has blessed you...

**** Remember that you were once a bondman in the land of Egypt, and Hashem redeemed you..."** (see 15:12-15)

Clearly, in this context, this phrase serves as a 'motivator' to keep the previous commandment (and not as a commandment in itself). [Note how most all of chapter 15 relates to social justice.]

IN PARSHAT KI-TEZE

Later on in Sefer Devarim, we find numerous mitzvot relating to social justice, and especially in chapter 24. We bring two examples where this phrase is used once again as a 'motivator':

"Do not oppress a hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be your brother or a stranger in your land... In the same day thou shalt give him his hire....

Do not pervert the justice due to the stranger, or to the orphan; nor take the widow's raiment to pledge.

Remember that you were once a bondman in Egypt..."

(see 24:14-18)

Only a few psukim later, when the Torah discusses the laws of "leket" & "shikcha", we find this phrase once again:

"When you reap thy harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go back to fetch it; it shall be for the stranger, for the orphan, and for the widow

When you beat your olive-tree, do not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the stranger, for the orphan and widow. When you gather the grapes of thy vineyard, do not glean it, it shall be for the stranger, for the orphan and widow.

Remember that you were once a bondman in Egypt..."

(see 24:19-22)

IN THE TEN COMMANDMENTS!

Based on these examples, we can bring one final (and thematically significant) proof from Sefer Devarim – and this time from the Ten Commandments!

Recall how the Fourth Commandment - to keep Shabbat - is worded differently in Sefer Devarim. Not only is the opening word "shamor" instead of "zachor", but the very reason for keeping Shabbat is different. According to the Commandment in Shmot, the reason for resting on Shabbat is to remember that God created the Heavens & Earth in seven days; while the reason to rest in the Sefer Devarim version is to allow your workers a day of rest!

As you read this Commandment, note how we find our 'phrase', and how once again it is employed as a 'motivator' – to ensure that we keep this commandment:

"Observe the sabbath day, to keep it holy..."

You shall not do any work, you, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy **man-servant**, nor thy **maid-servant...**

nor the **stranger** that is within thy gates; **in order that** your man-servant and thy maid-servant may rest as well as you!

Remember that you were once a bondman in Egypt and the LORD thy God brought you out..." (see 5:11-14)

We are commanded to rest on Shabbat, in order that our workers can rest – followed by the 'motivator': Remember you

were once a slave in Egypt – and there, your bosses never gave you a day of rest!

Based on these numerous examples, the meaning of the phrase 'Remember you were once a slave in Egypt' is very clear in Sefer Devarim. It consistently serves as a 'motivator' to encourage us to keep a rather wide range of laws, but all relating to social justice – and our need to be sensitive to the needs of others.

A MEGA-THEME

Let's return for a minute to the concluding lines of the mitzvah to keep Shabbat in Sefer Devarim. Even though it is commonly understood that the reason for Shabbat in Devarim is to remember the Exodus ("zecher l'yetziat Mitzraim"), a careful reading of its final lines leads us to slightly different conclusion:

"Observe the sabbath day, to keep it holy ... You shall not do any manner of work... in order that your servant and maid-servant may rest as well as you. **Remember that you were a servant** in the land of Egypt, and **God brought you out with a mighty hand** and an outstretched arm; **THEREFORE God commanded you to keep the sabbath day** " (5:11-14)

Note how the purpose of Shabbat, according to this commandment, is NOT to remember the Exodus, but rather to allow your workers a day rest! This commandment, as we explained above, is followed by the 'motivator' – Remember you were once a slave in Egypt. In other words - when you were slaves in Egypt, your masters never gave you a day of rest. Now that you have become God's special nation, be sure give your servants the kindness that you wished your masters had given you.

However, immediately after this 'motivator' statement, we find an additional comment, which explains HOW God brought us out of Egypt (see again the quote above). It appears that the Torah wants us to remember (on Shabbat) not only that we were once slaves in Egypt, but also HOW God **took us out** of Egypt.

In the context of giving our workers a day of rest, it makes sense that we must remember our 'slavery in Egypt', but why must we also remember that God took us out? Is this simply an expression of gratitude, or does this comment serve as a 'motivator' as well? If so, what is its meaning?

To answer this question, we must return to our discussion of the purpose of "brit bein ha'btarim" (see related shiurim on Parshat Lech Lecha, Sefer Shmot, and the Haggada), and the reason why God forecasted Am Yisrael's 'bondage in a foreign land' at the same time when he chose Avraham Avinu to become the forefather of His special nation.

In those shiurim, we explained how God chose Avraham to establish 'model nation' (characterized by "tzedeq u'mishpat" /Breishit 18:18-19), that would bring the 'Name of God' to mankind. Towards this purpose, God promised Avraham not only offspring and a special land – but He also forecasted the need for his offspring to endure decades of slavery followed by redemption – in order to become that nation. We posited that one of the reasons for that 'slavery experience' would be to 'sensitize' the nation – to encourage them to establish a nation with a much higher moral and ethical standard (than Egypt).

If so, one could suggest that the Torah mentions the Exodus in relation to Shabbat in order that we remember **WHY** God took us out of Egypt (and not simply that He took us out).

In this sense, our mention of the Exodus on Shabbat serves not only as an expression of gratitude, but more so as a 'recognition of destiny and purpose'.

[This would be the deeper meaning of "zecher le'yetziat mitzraim" that we mention in Kidush on Friday night. See also Rashi on Shmot 13:8 ("ba'avur zeh"), where he explain to our children how God took us out of Egypt in order that we eat matza (& keep all of His mitzvot); in contrast to eating matza - because God took us out of Egypt.]

This mega-theme is congruent with Sefer Devarim, for in the main speech, Moshe Rabeinu is teaching Bnei Yisrael the mitzvot that they must keep once they enter the Land of Israel. As the overall purpose of these mitzvot is to establish Am Yisrael as a nation representing God, it only makes sense that we find this theme of 'remembering you were a slave in Egypt' repeated so often. [See Devarim 4:5-8 and 26:16-19.]

A SIGNIFICANT CONTRADICTION

This apparent contradiction in regard to the reason for Shabbat between Shmot (to remember Creation) and Devarim (to be kind to your workers) carries a very powerful message.

By intentionally 'contradicting itself', the Torah expects the reader to notice this contradiction and contemplate why! In other words, why would the Torah first provide a reason for Shabbat in the realm of one personal relationship with God ("bein adam la'makom"), and in a later version of the Ten Commandments provide a totally different reason in the realm of man's relationship with his fellow man ("bein adam le'chaveiro").

This contradiction may be precisely the message! The simple recognition by man that God created the heavens and earth is not enough. For that knowledge to become meaningful, man must translate his intellectual understanding into the realm of his daily actions, or in our case, to the realm of social inter-action. In this manner, he not only shows God his belief in Creation, but also his recognition of its purpose.

[It should be noted that these two 'complementing' reasons for Shabbat appear in Sefer Shmot itself (and are not only a contradiction between Devarim and Shmot). See Shmot 23:9-12, noting the context on Shabbat within the laws of Parshat Mishpatim.]

BACK TO SHAVUOT

With this background, we can return to the laws of Shavuot in Parshat Re'ay. Recall how the first commandment is to rejoice before God at the time of your grain harvest (see Devarim 16:9-11) – which was followed immediately afterward by the commandment to rejoice together with those who don't own their own land.

Here we find a theme very similar to what we found in regard to Shabbat. The Torah wants the farmer to recognize that his harvest comes from God, but to formalize that intellectual understanding, the Torah commands the farmer to take action. He must rejoice in front of God by sharing his harvest with those who are needy - with those who would otherwise be rather depressed during this time of the agricultural year.

We find a beautiful expression of this understanding in Rashi's commentary to these psukim:

"The Levite, stranger, orphan, and widow: - My four against your four: your son, daughter, servant, and maidservant. If you make My four happy, I [God] will make your four happy." (See Rashi on 16:11.)

BACK TO SEFER SHMOT

This concept, that our slavery in Egypt should serve as a 'sensitizing experience' for all future generations of Am Yisrael, finds a similar expression in Sefer Shmot – both at the beginning and end of a full set of ethical laws within Parshat Mishpatim (see 22:19 thru 23:9). That section of ethical laws begins with:

"And a stranger shalt thou not wrong, neither shalt thou oppress him; **for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.** Do not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. Should afflict them in any wise--for if they cry at all unto Me, I will surely hear their cry...."

And concludes with:

"Keep thee far from a false matterDo not take a bribe... **Do not oppress the stranger - for you know the soul [nefesh] of a stranger, seeing you were strangers in the land of Egypt.**" (see 23:7-9)

This theme which he have discussed in Sefer Devarim had already emerged when the Torah presented its first set of laws that followed the Ten Commandments (in Parshat Mishpatim).

BACK TO THE FUTURE

We will never know for sure exactly why God found it necessary to put us through such a difficult bondage in Egypt. Was it in punishment for the sins of our forefathers, or was it in preparation for the challenges of our future?

We may conjecture and ponder, but we trust that God is just in all His ways (see Devarim 32:4-6).

However, based on our shiur, we do have a pretty good idea of how God wanted us to learn from those negative experiences; and how our national suffering can become the impetus for the improvement of our own behavior.

Similarly, we will never know for sure exactly why God has brought upon us such calamity throughout the thousands of years of our history, even in our own time. We may conjecture and ponder, but we will never know for sure.

But we can be pretty sure that God would expect that we become sensitized by our experiences.

After the difficult events of the last month, we could dedicate our energies in search of who's to blame, or to gloat in 'I told you so', or to conjecture regarding God's deeper motives.

However, we can also take 'hint' from God that he would like us to improve ourselves. To increase our sensitivity for those who are homeless, for those in need of food, and for those in need of friends.

Over the last few weeks, we have seen the brightest side of our nation, in acts of "chessed" [kindness] and "gevurah" [bravery]; as well its darker sides in the neglect and corruption of its institutions, and the despair of those in need.

If we follow the lesson from Parshat Re'ay, we have much to gain – if we can translate the understanding of our experiences into actions of increased "chessed", "mishpat", and "tzedaka" in the months and years to come.

If not, we will only have ourselves to blame.

shabbat shalom,
menachem