

The Duality Of Shavuos – Keith Goldstein

כ"ז אייר תשע"ו – 4th June 2016 – שבת פ' בחוקותי

The Gemara in Pesachim records a difference of opinion as to how a man should spend Yom Tov; Rabbi Eliezer says either learning all day or eating and drinking all day whereas Rabbi Yehoshuah says half half, in the words of Rabbi Yochanan חצי להי וחצי לכם (the Vilna Gaon points out that the gematria of half of the numerical value of the name of Hashem, 13, added to half the value of lochem, 60, is 73, the gematria of יום טוב !). The Gemara says however that on Shavuos even Rabbi Eliezer agrees that we require to celebrate the Yom Tov by eating and drinking as well, as it is the day of the giving of the Torah. If the reason for eating and drinking is to generate and show happiness for receiving the Torah, similar to Simchas Torah when we feast to celebrate completing the cycle of Torah reading which is the reason for the name given to the Yom Tov as the Rema says, we can understand the concession of Rabbi Eliezer. However, if we are to celebrate in accordance with the spirit of the event, the giving of the Torah, which we are commanded to study constantly, one would expect that both Rabbis would agree that we should spend the entire day learning.

The answer to this is that the Torah was given to man because of his physical aspect; as our Rabbis say Hashem said I created the yetzer hara and I created the Torah as spices to season the yetzer hara. Man's task is to direct his yetzer hara towards service of Hashem as Rashi explains בכל לבבך-בשני יצריך. Our task is to render the physical spiritual. This was the tenor of the reply Moshe Rabeinu gave to the angels who challenged the bestowing of the Torah on the Jewish people. Angels have only the yetzer hatov.

Perhaps the duality of the celebration of Shavuos is reflected in the unique offerings brought on Shavuos namely the Shte Halechem and the kivsei atzeres. On no other occasion in the Beis Hamikdash is there a public sacrifice including chametz nor is there any other public sacrifice which is a shelamim, a peace offering. Our Rabbis refer to the yetzer hara as the שאור שבעיסה, the yeast in the dough which makes it rise, symbolising haughtiness. The shelamim reflects Simcha and is the only animal sacrifice, part of which is eaten by the bringer rather than by the Cohen. It is noteworthy that at the very time of the giving of the Torah the sacrifices that were offered were olos, burnt offerings, completely consumed by fire and shelamim again symbols of the spiritual and the physical.

As stated the Torah elevates the yetzer hara but in order to motivate one to learn Torah one requires to suppress the yetzer hara which tries to prevent this. The yetzer hara has so many facets; as someone commented on the proliferation of new Seforim nowadays, this has to be, as modern technology has produced so many new yetzer horas that we need so many new Torah publications to season them!

Which particular yetzer hara should be resisted in this endeavour? The answer has to be the yetzer hara to promote the self. Torah has to be studied from humility and the most famous attribute of the vehicle for the giving of the Torah, Moshe Rabeinu, was humility. Torah is compared to water which flows from high to low. The famous middle path of the Rambam applies to all characteristics except humility to which one should aspire to the ultimate degree. That is not to say that a person should not value himself; on the contrary according to Halachah a person has to look after his health and in a situation where a person can save only his life or the life of his fellow man, he is required to save his own life. As the Bal Maor Vashemesh says at the beginning of Parshas Reeh אנכי, the value of self can lead equally to blessing as to curse, to curse if one considers that one knows best and need not heed the words of those who came before him and to blessing if one recognises the value of one's contribution and performs the commandments. In truth there are two types of concentration upon self. One is to pursue what one perceives to be the maximum benefit and pleasure for the self, hedonism. The falsity of that attitude is that one is then living a delusion in forgoing eternal bliss by performing the will of the Creator for the sake of transient pleasure. The other is to disregard the need of other people and to concentrate only on oneself, even if such concentration be only in spiritual matters. The antidote to the first attitude is to aspire to humility and to recognise that a person in isolation is ever so lowly and that a person must aspire to have purpose in doing the will of the Creator as part of the Jewish people. The cure for the second attitude is to perform chesed; the more one helps and gives to other people the more one values them, thus, as it is said, one father can care for ten children but ten children cannot care for one father. Hillel and Rabbi Akiva extolled the virtue of loving one's neighbour and as the Gemara says, the Torah is chesed from beginning to end, at the beginning Hashem clothes Odom and Chava and at the end Hashem buries Moshe Rabeinu.