

Thoughts on Shavuot

Rabbi Bernie Fox

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Building a Community

In the third month from Bnai Yisrael's leaving Egypt, on that day, they came to the wilderness of Sinai. They traveled from Refidim. They came to the wilderness of Sinai. They camped in the wilderness. And Israel camped there opposite the mountain. (Sefer Shemot 19:1-2)

I. Hebrew verbs

These *pesukim* describe the arrival of the Jewish people to the wilderness of Sinai. The nation arrived in the third month after leaving Egypt. They camped at the foot of Mount Sinai.

Rashi responds to an unusual element of these passages. Hebrew verbs are conjugated to correspond with the subject of the sentence. The specific conjugation is determined by a few factors. These include whether the subject is singular or plural. When the subject of the sentence is Bnai Yisrael, the Torah uses the plural form of the verb. Most of the verbs in the above passages conform to this convention. "They came", and "they camped" are plural verbs. The final verb in the passages is an exception. The verb "camped" in the final sentence is conjugated in the singular.

II. Sinai unified the people

The reason for this departure from convention is that the subject of the sentence, "Israel" is treated as a singular noun. Why does the entire nation receive this characterization? Rashi responds that they camped as a single person with one heart. In

other words, the nation was unified in anticipation of receiving and accepting the Torah.¹

In this response, Rashi identifies the Torah as a unifying force. The shared commitment to accept and observe the Torah unifies us and forms us into a single nation with a shared purpose. The Talmud Yerushalmi uses this principle to respond to a difficult question.

Do not take vengeance or bear a grudge against a member of your nation and love your neighbor like yourself. I am Hashem. (Sefer VaYikra 19:18)

III. The Talmud questions a commandment

This passage forbids us from avenging harm or even bearing a grudge. It tells us that rather than harboring hatred, we should love other members of our nation as we love ourselves. The Talmud Yerushalmi asks, "How is this done?" The Talmud is asking, "How does one simply dismiss and forgive harm?" What is bothering the Sages? They understand that the passage is not restricting only taking revenge. It is not forbidding only acting on my anger. It is forbidding even feeling animosity toward one who caused me harm. This is the meaning of not bearing a grudge. I am required to overlook or forgive one who harmed me. The Talmud is asking how this is achieved. How do I control or suppress my feelings?

The Talmud responds:

¹ Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), *Commentary on Sefer Shemot 19:2*.

One was cutting meat and the knife came down on his hand. [Would one imagine that] in response, he should bring the knife down on his [other hand]? (Talmud Yerushalmi, Mesechet Nedarim, 9:4)

The Talmud explains that all Jews comprise a single body. When one Jew hurts another, it is analogous to one limb hurting another limb of our body. Would we dream of punishing the offending limb? If I accidentally cut my hand with a knife, would I punish and cut the hand wielding the knife? I would never resort to this ridiculous response. It only causes me more harm.

IV. A simplistic response

The Talmud's response seems to be an extreme and simplistic application of Rashi's principle. It is true that we are one people and that our responsibility and commitment to the Torah should unify us. However, the allegory employed by the Talmud demonstrates the limits and the inapplicability of this principle to the Talmud's question.

The reason I will not cut my offending hand is that it did not act willfully to harm me. An accident occurred. Unintentionally, one hand cut the other. There is nothing to be gained by punishing my hand for its unintended act.

The person who harmed me is more like a hand over which I have lost control. It no longer serves my needs. It is autonomous and wantonly strikes me. My enemy is like a limb infected with gangrene. It endangers the entire body and if not removed, will take my life. Similarly, my enemy did not act as part of my body. He acted as my body's enemy, and he must be punished.

V. Step 1: Reconsidering the allegory

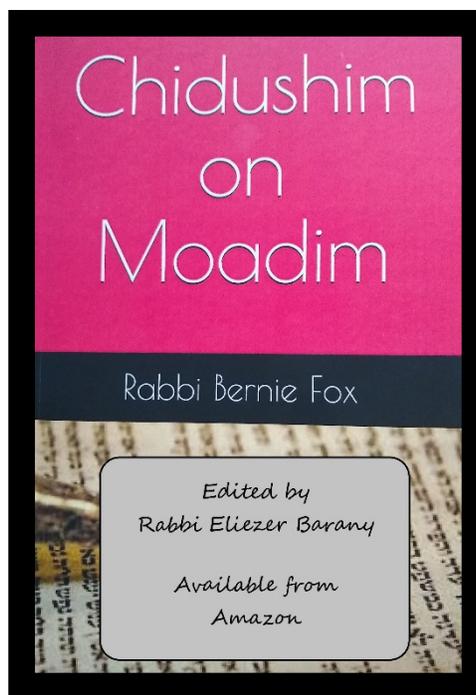
Three steps are needed to understand the Talmud's comments. The first step is to reconsider our interpretation of its allegory. The Talmud compares all Jews to the limbs of a single body. In

what respect are we like these limbs? First, because we are all parts of a single organism, the harm experienced by one of us impacts all of us. However, as demonstrated above, there must be more to the comparison. What is this other element?

VI. Step 2: The missing piece

The second step is to identify this element. This second element will seem strange at first. The Talmud is arguing that harm caused by one Jew to another can only be viewed as accidental as one hand cutting the other. How can the Talmud take

this position? One hand cuts the other through an unintended action. When a Jew seeks vengeance or bears a grudge, it is because he has been willfully harmed and not because of an unintended accident.



VII. Step 3: Defining the reasoning

The third step is to define the Talmud's reasoning. The Talmud is not naively suggesting that one Jew never intentionally hurts another. Sadly, such things occur. It suggests that when it occurs, it must be an accident. How can intentional harm be regarded as an accident?

Let's return to the allegory. How does it happen that one hand cuts the other? Maybe, while using the knife, the person was distracted. Maybe, the knife slipped and cut in an unintended place.

Maybe, a nick was made when passing the knife from one hand to another.

The Talmud suggests that when one Jew harms another, it should be viewed similarly. He may have been distracted by anger and momentarily forgotten their fraternal relationship. In the pursuit of some objective, he may have harmed those in his way. He may have been thoughtless and inconsiderate, not realizing he was hurting others. In all these examples, he is not saying, "I want to hurt my brother." He is like the hand that slips and cuts the other hand.

VIII. A deeper understanding

Let's understand this more deeply. We decide how to see each other. We choose how to respond to those who hurt us. When someone harms me, I can allow that interaction to completely shape my understanding of the person. I will see the person as evil and as an enemy. Alternatively, I can refuse to allow this incident to define the person. I can insist on continuing to see the person as a brother, whose action was an aberration – just an accident. This does not mean that I convince myself that the harm was unintentional. It means that I do not allow a brother to be defined by his worst moment.

In other words, the Talmud is not requiring that I delude myself and imagine that my brother did not intentionally harm me. I am never required to replace reality with imagination. The Talmud's message is about how I treat that unfortunate interaction within the framework of my overall relationship with a fellow Jew. It is telling me to not treat that person's improper – even evil action – as indicative of his essential character. I must remember that we are brothers. That unfortunate act was an aberration and does not define our relationship.

IX. Festivals and community

This is an appropriate message for Shavuot. The festivals are called *Mikra'ei Kodesh*. This can be translated as Days of Sacred Assembly. To what assembly does the name refer? Ramban – Nachmanides – comments:

The meaning of Mikra'ei Kodesh is that on this day we should all be summoned and gathered to sanctify it. For it is a commandment upon all Israel to gather in the house of the L-rd and publicly sanctify the day with prayer and praise... (Ramban, Commentary on Sefer VaYikra 23:2)

On Shavuot and our other festivals, we assemble in our synagogues as a community to pray and praise Hashem. We serve Hashem as a community and nation.

To achieve this, we must set aside the differences that divide us and reflect upon the values and the traditions that unite us. We must disregard our brothers' worst moments and not allow them to define our relationship. Instead, we must remember that every Jew has a role in the body of the community. Each is an important limb of the body of our people. This is the relationship that should guide our attitude and not our brothers' worst moments.

Banner art: The Jewish people before Mount Sinai

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