



The Fabulous Connection between Parshas Bamidbar and Chag HaShavuos

We Should Prepare for Receiving the Torah on Chag HaShavuos by Ensuring that Our Mouths Are Fit to Be a “Klaf” for Torah She’b’al Peh

In honor of the auspiciously approaching Shabbas Kodesh, parshas Bamidbar, we will focus on the ruling in the Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 428, 4): “ולעולם קורין פרשת במדבר סיני קודם עצרת”—we always read parshas Bamidbar prior to Shavuos. For, we learn in the Gemara (Megillah 31b) that Ezra HaSofer arranged for Yisrael to read the “tochachah” (rebuke consisting of a set of curses) of parshas Bechukosai before Chag HaShavuos and the “tochachah” of parshas Ki Savo before Rosh HaShanah. The rationale for this practice is “כדי שתכלה השנה וקללותיה”—so that the year may end along with its curses. The Gemara asks an obvious question: “אטו עצרת?”—but is Shavuos the beginning of a new year? The Gemara answers: “אין עצרת נמי ראש השנה היא, דתנן ובעצרת על פירות האילן”—yes, indeed, Atzeres (Shavuos) is also a Rosh HaShanah . . . on Atzeres, we are judged with respect to the fruits of the trees.

Even so, the accepted practice is to insert the reading of parshas Bamidbar between parshas Bechukosai and Shavuos and, similarly, to insert the reading of parshas Nitzavim between parshas Ki Savo and Rosh HaShanah. Tosafos (ibid.) explain the rationale for this practice: **Because we wish to interrupt and have a Shabbas prior to Rosh HaShanah on which we read a portion that does not mention curses at all; so that the curses are not juxtaposed to Rosh HaShanah. And it is for this reason that we read parshas Bamidbar prior to Atzeres (Shavuos); so as not to juxtapose the curses in parshas Bechukosai with Atzeres.**

Since we follow this practice instituted by Ezra HaSofer, and we read parshas Bamidbar as a buffer between the curses in parshas Bechukosai and “zman matan toraseinu,” Chag HaShavuos, there must be a deeper connection between parshas Bamidbar and the giving of the Torah. In this essay, we will explore the practical lesson, we are supposed to learn from parshas Bamidbar.

HKB”H Instructs the Goyim to Show Him Their Genealogical Record

We will begin to shed some light on the matter by introducing a passage from the Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni Parshas Bamidbar 684). It focuses on the juxtaposition of the conclusion of parshas Bechukosai and the beginning of parshas Bamidbar. Parshas Bechukosai concludes (Vayikra 27, 34): “אלה המצוות אשר צוה ה' את משה אל בני ישראל בהר סיני”—these are the mitzvos that Hashem commanded Moshe to convey to Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai. Parshas Bamidbar begins (Bamidbar 1, 1): “וידבר ה' אל משה במדבר סיני באהל מועד: באחד לחודש השני בשנה השנית לצאתם מארץ מצרים לאמר, שאו את ראש כל עדת בני ישראל למשפחותם לבית אבותם”—Hashem spoke to Moshe in the midbar of Sinai, in the Ohel Mo'ed, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Mitzrayim, saying, “Take a census of the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael, according to their families, according to their father’s house.” Here is the pertinent passage from the Midrash:

The nations of the world were envious of Yisrael when they received the Torah. They protested: “Why are they more deserving than any of the other nations?” HKB”H silenced them. He said to them: “Bring Me your genealogical record . . . like My children bring . . .” Therefore, He counted them at the beginning of this sefer, after recording the mitzvos . . . Because they only merited taking the Torah because of their genealogy.

This explains the connection between parshas Bamidbar and Chag HaShavuot fantastically. The Torah teaches us at the very beginning of the parsha how HKB”H silenced the nations of the world. In response to their protest against HKB”H for choosing to give the Torah to Yisrael, it says: **“Take a census of the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael, according to their families, according to their father’s house.”** Here the Torah teaches us that they received the Torah because of their lineage and ancestry.

The commentaries struggle to explain the connection between the **“sefer yuchsin”** (genealogical record, family-tree, line of descent) and the giving of the Torah to Yisrael. Furthermore, at first glance, this passage seems to contradict an explicit teaching in the Mishnah (Avos 2, 12): **“והתקן עצמך ללמוד תורה שאינה ירושה לך—prepare yourself to study Torah, since it does not come to you as an inheritance.** We see that the Torah is not inherited automatically. A person must exert himself and study it diligently; it must be earned. We will endeavor to reconcile these apparent discrepancies.

The Argument of the Nations of the World Relates to Torah She’b’al Peh which Was Given Exclusively to Yisrael

Let us begin by introducing the difficulty the commentaries have with the objection of the nations of the world: **“Why are they (Yisrael) more deserving than any of the other nations (to receive the Torah)?”** After all, the Torah answers this objection explicitly (Devarim 33, 2): **“ויאמר ה' מסיני בא וזרח—He said: Hashem came from Sinai, and He shone forth to them from Seir; He appeared from Har Paran, and He came with some of the myriads of the holy; from His right hand, He presented a fire of law to them.** Rashi explains: He presented it to the children of Eisav (who dwelled in Seir),

so that they would have the opportunity to accept the Torah; but they did not want it. He also went to Har Paran and presented it there to the children of Yishmael, so that they would have the opportunity to accept it; but they did not want it. The other nations were offered the Torah, but they refused it. HKB”H only gave the Torah to Yisrael after the other nations refused it. Hence, their objection does not make any sense.

To explain the matter, we will refer to what Chazal expounded (Shabbas 88a) regarding the text related to Matan Torah (Shemos 19, 17): **“ויוצא משה את העם לקראת האלקים מן המחנה ויטייבצו בתחתית ההר, אמר רבי אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא, מלמד שכפה הקב”ה עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב, ואם לאו שם Moshe brought the people forth from the camp toward G-d, and they stood under the mountain.”** Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said: This teaches that HKB”H held the mountain over them like an upturned barrel. Then He said to them: **“If you accept the Torah, fine; but if not, your burial will be there.”**

Tosafos pose an obvious question (ibid.): Why was it necessary to coerce Yisrael to accept the Torah in this threatening manner? Hadn’t they already accepted the Torah willingly by proclaiming enthusiastically (ibid. 24, 7) **“na’aseh v’nishma”—we will do, and we will hear?!** This question is answered by the Midrash Tanchuma (Noach 3). What Yisrael accepted willingly was only Torah she’b’chsav. Torah she’b’al peh, however, they were not willing to accept at that time, because it is difficult to learn and its stringencies are difficult to observe. Consequently, HKB”H held the mountain over their heads in a threatening manner to coerce them to also accept Torah she’b’al peh.

Thus, we can explain that this was the objection of the nations of the world: Why did you threaten them and coerce them in this manner? It is likely that if HKB”H had threatened them in a similar manner, they would have also accepted the Torah. This explanation can be corroborated based on a teaching in the Gemara (A.Z. 2b): **“רבונו של עולם, כלום כפית עלינו כמו שעשית לישראל דכתיב ויטייבצו בתחתית ההר—Master of the Universe, “Did You hold the mountain over us like an overturned barrel, and did we nevertheless refuse it, as You did with Yisrael (to coerce them to accept the Torah), as it is written: “They stood under the mountain”?**

According to this Gemara, their complaint was that they were not coerced like Yisrael to accept Torah she'b'al peh.

The Mouth of a Torah Scholar Has the Status of a Sacred Vessel

Following this line of reasoning, we will now focus on the statement in the Midrash: **HKB"H silenced them. He said to them: "Bring Me your genealogical record . . . like My children bring."** We will interpret this based on the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (6, 6) that enumerates the forty-eight ways by which the Torah is acquired. One of them is: "מיעוט שיחה"—**limited conversation** (idle chatter). This can be interpreted to mean that if one wishes to acquire the wisdom of Torah she'b'al peh, one must safeguard the kedushah (sanctity) of his mouth. This is supported by the following teaching (Yoma 19b): "אמר רבא, השח שיחת חולין עובר בעשה, שנאמר ודברת בם, .". **Rava said: One who engages in trivial (mundane) conversation transgresses an asei, for it is stated (Devarim 6, 7): "And you shall speak of them (divrei Torah)." This implies "them" but not other matters.** We can suggest that this is why it is called **Torah she'b'al peh**: Because someone who wishes to master it must be "בעל פה"—someone who is in control of his mouth.

It is worthwhile introducing the exalted, sacred comments of the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh in parshas Pinchas concerning the passuk related to the tribe of Yissachar, the pillar of the Torah (Bamidbar 26, 23): "לְפָנָהּ מִשְׁפַּחַת הַפִּזְוִי"—**to Puvah, the Punite family.** He asserts that the name פִּזְוִי is related to the word "**peh**," meaning mouth. Hence, they are called the **Punite family** implying that they should abstain from unnecessary and excessive speech, from frivolity and jest, and from nonsense, because they interfere with the observance of the Torah. He writes that other respected Jews maintain that the mouth of a Torah-scholar possesses the status of a service vessel used to perform sacred services in the Temple. As such, it is prohibited even to speak mundane matters with it, even if they are not actually prohibited. Thus, the name **Puvah** alludes to a person who is devoted to Torah-study. Similarly, the designation **Punite family** implies that they must clear (לפנות) their mouths of everything except for words of Torah. This applies to several of the forty-eight ways in which the Torah is acquired—limited speech, limited laughter, and limited pleasure.

A Malach Slapped Nevuchadnetzar across His Mouth

We will now refer to a related matter in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 92b). Nevuchadnetzar, the ruler of Bavel praised HKB"H (Daniel 3, 33): "מלכותיה מלכות עלם ושלטניה עם דר ודר, אמר: רבי יצחק יוצק זהב רותח לתוך פיו של אותו רשע, שאילמלא בא מלאך וסטרו." **His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and His dominion is from generation to generation." Rabbi Yitzchak said: Molten gold should be poured into the mouth of that wicked person. For, had a malach not come and struck him on his mouth to prevent him from continuing his praise, he would have sought to overshadow all the songs and praises that David recited in the book of Tehillim.**

The holy Sar Shalom of Belz, zy"a, explains why the malach struck him on his mouth based on a teaching from the holy Maggid of Mezritsch, zy"a, that the kedushah of speech and the kedushah of the "Bris" are interrelated. A person who sanctifies one of them is able to sanctify the other. The source for this notion is found in the Sefer Yetzirah (1, 3); it states the "Bris of the tongue" is aligned with the "Bris milah"—i.e., they are both located in the midline of the body. Additionally, it teaches (6, 7) that HKB"H actually entered into both of these covenants with Avraham Avinu—the "Bris milah" and the "Bris of the tongue."

By fulfilling the mitzvah of "Bris milah," a person becomes worthy and capable of praising and expressing gratitude to HKB"H with a clean, pure mouth. This explains why the malach struck Nevuchadnetzar on his mouth. For, the gematria of פ"ה (85) equals מיל"ה (85)—alluding to the fact that only someone who has been circumcised is capable of using his mouth to express gratitude and praise Hashem. Therefore, the praise extolled by Nevuchadnetzar was meaningless and worthless; on the contrary, it was preferable that he remain silent.

Now, we can also better appreciate the response of HKB"H to the nations of the world: **HKB"H silenced them—סתם פיהן.** Literally, this means that He blocked or shut **their mouth.** It is teaching us that their mouth is not fit to engage in the study of Torah she'b'al peh. To emphasize this point, the Midrash continues: **He said to them: "Bring Me your genealogical record . . . like My children bring."** In

other words, Yisrael trace their lineage back to the holy Avos, who performed the mitzvah of “milah,” which was given to Avraham Avinu. On account of the Bris מיל”ה whose gematria is the same as פ”ה, they are capable of also sanctifying the “Bris of the tongue.” Clearly, this is not true for the nations of the world. They lack the mitzvah of “milah.” Hence, they lack the capacity to study and comprehend **Torah she’b’al peh**.

A Jew’s Mouth Is the Parchment of Torah She’b’al Peh

With immense pleasure, we will continue this sacred pilgrimage by elaborating further on the profound response of HKB”H to the nations of the world: **סתרם פיהן הקב”ה, אמר להן: סתרם פיהן הקב”ה, אמר להן: סתרם פיהן הקב”ה**. In Shev Shematita (Introduction), the brilliant author of the Ketzot HaChoshen, ztz”l, cites the Maharal of Prague in Tiferes Yisrael (Chapter 68). He focuses on the statement in the Gemara (Gittin 60b): **“אמר רבי יוחנן, לא כרת הקב”ה ברית עם ישראל אלא בשביל דברים שבעל פה—Rabbi Yochanan said: HKB”H only entered into a covenant with Yisrael on account of the Oral Law.** Just like Torah she’b’chsav is written on a “klaf” (parchment); so, too, Torah she’b’al peh must be written on some sort of “klaf”—namely, the mouth of the scholar who engages in the study of Torah she’b’al peh.

Now, from a sefer-Torah inscribed on a parchment prepared from an animal’s hide, the covenant and unique bond that exists between Yisrael and their Heavenly Father is not so apparent. From Torah she’b’al peh, however, that was given to Yisrael to be studied and transmitted orally, this relationship is ever so apparent. When a Jew’s mouth becomes so pure and refined that it serves as a “klaf” for Torah she’b’al peh, the covenant and intimate relationship that exists between Yisrael and HKB”H is evident! For this reason: **“HKB”H only entered into a covenant with Yisrael on account of the Oral Law.”**

Accordingly, the Shev Shematita goes on to address a statement by Rashbi in the Yerushalmi (Berachos 1, 2): **“אילו הוינא על טורא דסיני בשעתא דאתיהיבת תורה לישראל, הוינא מתבעי קומי דרחמנא דיתברי לבר נש תרין פומין, חד דהוה לעי באורייתא וחד דעבר ליה כל צורכיה.”** Had I been on Har Sinai when the Torah was given to Yisrael, I would have pleaded with HKB”H to create man

with two mouths—one to engage in the study of Torah and one to perform all of his personal needs.

Here is the explanation. The “klaf” upon which Torah she’b’chsav is written can only come from a kosher, “tahor” animal; it must be prepared and processed l’shma—with this specific purpose in mind. Similarly, the mouth of a Torah scholar, which is the “klaf” of Torah she’b’al peh, must be “tahor” and prepared l’shma—with the kedushah of the Torah in mind. For this reason, Rashbi wanted a Jew to have a special mouth just for studying Torah, so that it would not be tainted or desecrated by frivolous and improper speech. This would ensure the kedushah of the “klaf” of Torah she’b’al peh.

This explains beautifully the teaching in the Mishnah (Avos 3, 9): **“רבי חנינא בן דוסא אומר, כל שיראת חטא קודמת לחכמתו (Avos 3, 9): רבי חנינא בן דוסא אומר, כל שיראת חטא קודמת לחכמתו חכמתו מתקיימת, וכל שחכמתו קודמת ליראת חטא אין חכמתו מתקיימת.”** Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa says: **If one’s fear of sin takes precedence over his wisdom, his wisdom will endure; but if his wisdom takes precedence over his fear of sin, his wisdom will not endure.** As stated, according to halachah, a “klaf” must be prepared l’shma. Thus, a Jew’s body that serves as the “klaf” of Torah she’b’al peh must be prepared l’shma. This is accomplished by having “yiras shamayim,” striving to fulfill all the 248 mitzvos asei, and heeding not to transgress, chas v’shalom, any of the 365 mitzvos lo ta’aseh.

This is the implication of the passuk (Tehillim 111, 10): **“ראשית חכמה יראת ה’”—the beginning of wisdom is the fear of G-d.** Prior to engaging in the study of Torah she’b’al peh, a Jew must develop a fear and reverence of Hashem; this processes the physical body l’shma. Thus, his body will be fit to be the “klaf” of Torah she’b’al peh. Therefore: **If one’s “yirah” of sin takes precedence over his “chochmah,” his “chochmah” will endure,** since his “yirah” prepared and trained his body to be a kosher “klaf.” As a result, **his “chochmah” will endure.** This is analogous to a sefer-Torah that exists on a kosher “klaf.” **But if his “chochmah” takes precedence over his “yirah” of sin, his “chochmah” will not endure,** because, without “yirah,” his body is not fit to be a “klaf” upon which the kedushah of the Torah can take effect. As a result, his “chochmah” will not endure.

In the Merit of the Mitzvah of Milah the Body Is Sanctified to Serve as a “Klaf”

I had a wonderful idea. According to Rabbi Yochanan in the Gemara cited above, HKB”H only entered into a covenant with Yisrael for the sake of Torah she’b’al peh. Yet, in parshas Lech Lecha, when HKB”H instructed Avraham Avinu to perform the mitzvah of “milah,” it states explicitly (Bereishis 17, 7): **והקמיתי את בריתי ביני ובינך ובין זרעך אחריך לדורותם לברית עולם להיות לך לאלקים—ולזרעך אחריך—and I will uphold My covenant between Me and you and your offspring after you, throughout their generations, as an everlasting covenant, to be a G-d to you and to your offspring after you.** In other words, HKB”H entered into a covenant with Yisrael in the merit of the mitzvah of milah. So, we have an apparent contradiction.

In truth, we can reconcile this apparent contradiction simply by accepting that both statements are true—HKB”H entered into a “Bris” with Yisrael both in the merit of the mitzvah of “milah” and in the merit of Torah she’b’al peh. The problem, however, is that Rabbi Yochanan uses the word **“only”**: HKB”H **“only” entered into a covenant with Yisrael on account of the Oral Law.** This implies that the covenant was solely in the merit of Torah she’b’al peh.

Based on what we have just discussed, we can resolve this question as follows: Indeed, Rabbi Yochanan’s statement is correct; however, there is a prerequisite for studying Torah she’b’al peh—a Jew must first sanctify his mouth, so that it is fit to be a “klaf” upon which to effectively record Torah she’b’al peh. As we have learned, this is impossible without first performing the mitzvah of “milah,” since the kedushah of the Torah is incompatible with the tumah of the foreskin.

So we see that the two are intimately connected. Indeed, Rabbi Yochanan specified that **HKB”H “only” entered into a covenant with Yisrael on account of the Oral Law.** However, there is a prerequisite; a Jew’s body is not fit to be a kosher “klaf” for Torah she’b’al peh until he has performed the mitzvah of “milah.” This coincides magnificently with the gematria we learned from the esteemed Sar Shalom, zy”a—that **מיל”ה** and **פ”ה** share the same numerical value. This teaches us that on account of the kedushah of the “Bris,” one can acquire the kedushah of the “peh.”

The Holy Avos Sanctified Their Bodies to Be Parchments for Torah She’b’al Peh

Following this sublime path, we can now shed some light on the response of HKB”H to the nations of the world: **HKB”H silenced them. He said to them: “Bring Me your genealogical record . . . like My children bring . . .”** It is well-known that the holy Avos were able to acquire and observe the entire Torah before it was given to Yisrael at Har Sinai due to their extraordinary level of kedushah. As we are taught in the Gemara (Yoma 28b):

“אברהם אבינו זקן ויושב בישיבה היה, שנאמר ואברהם זקן בא בימים, יצחק אבינו זקן ויושב בישיבה היה, שנאמר ויהי כי זקן יצחק, יעקב אבינו זקן ויושב בישיבה היה, שנאמר ועיני ישראל כבדו מזקן... אמר רב קיים אברהם אבינו כל התורה כולה, שנאמר עקב אשר שמע אברהם בקולי [וישמור משמרת מצוותי חקותי ותורת]... קיים אברהם אבינו אפילו עירובי תבשילין, שנאמר תורת אחת תורה שבכתב ואחת תורה שבעל פה.”

Avraham Avinu was an elder sitting in a yeshivah, as it states (Bereishis 24, 1): “And Avraham was an elder, well on in years.” Yitzchak Avinu was an elder sitting in a yeshivah, as it states (ibid. 27, 1): “It was when Yitzchak became an elder.” Yaakov Avinu was an elder sitting in a yeshivah, as it states (ibid. 48, 10): “And the eyes of Yisrael were heavy from age.” . . . Rav said: Avraham Avinu fulfilled the entire Torah, as it states (ibid. 26, 5): “Because Avraham obeyed My voice.” . . . Avraham Avinu fulfilled even “eiruvei tavshilin,” for it is stated (in this passuk) “My laws” (in the plural), referring to both Torah she’b’chsav and Torah she’b’al peh.

Let us elaborate. Although Torah she’b’chsav was not yet given during the times of the Avos; nevertheless, in the merit of the mitzvah of “milah” that they all performed, they were privileged to hear the entire Torah as a form of Torah she’b’al peh directly from the mouth of HKB”H. As they expounded in the Midrash (B.R. 64, 4) on the passuk (ibid. 26, 5): **“Because Avraham obeyed My voice”—there is not a single day that HKB”H does not introduce a new halachah in the heavenly court . . . Avraham knew even those halachos.** In other words, Avraham Avinu was privileged to hear the voice of HKB”H introducing new halachos daily. This qualifies as **Torah she’b’al peh** to which HKB”H attests: **“Avraham**

obeyed My voice.” The same was true of Yitzchak Avinu and Yaakov Avinu, who sat in the yeshivah and were privileged to study and observe the teachings of Torah she’b’al peh.

This then is the message HKB”H conveyed to the nations of the world who objected to the fact that Torah she’b’al peh was given exclusively to Yisrael: **HKB”H silence them—סתם”** **פיהן**—because their mouths are not fit to study Torah—because they defile their mouths with prohibited speech and prohibited foods. He told them: **“Bring Me your genealogical record . . . like My children bring.”** Yisrael are the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, who sanctified their mouths; Yisrael are privileged to inherit their neshamos from these holy Avos. Hence, they merited receiving the Torah she’b’al peh that the Avos were privileged to hear from the mouth of HKB”H.

In truth, however, HKB”H was conveying to them a more profound message. Yisrael, My children, are themselves a type of **“ספר יוחסין”**. Since they are a “klaf” for Torah she’b’al peh, their bodies are like a sefer Torah. You, the nations of

the world, cannot make this same claim, because you are uncircumcised and are not vessels fit for kedushah.

In conclusion, this discussion teaches us a vital lesson. The true preparation for receiving the Torah on Chag HaShavuot—“zman matan toraseinu”—is to renew the covenant HKB”H entered into with Yisrael for the sake of Torah she’b’al peh. As explained, this is accomplished by sanctifying our mouths to be fit to serve as a “klaf” for Torah she’b’al peh. From the aspect of **“סור מרע”**—refraining from doing something wrong or negative—this entails limiting one’s speech, avoiding idle, meaningless chatter and, of course, refraining from lashon hara. From the aspect of **“עשה טוב”**—doing things that are good and positive—it is incumbent upon us to sanctify our mouths to be worthy of studying Torah she’b’al peh and davening with kavanah for Hashem to help us succeed in our pursuit of the chochmah of the Torah. In this merit, may we be privileged to renew our covenant with HKB”H on the auspiciously approaching Chag HaShavuot by receiving Torah she’b’chsav and Torah she’b’al peh on each one’s respective, kosher “klaf.”



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