

Next Shabbat, in parashat Bahalotcha, we read: “Vayis'u mehar Hashem derech sheloshet yamim” - They traveled a distance of three days from the mountain of the Lord. The Midrash on this pasuk states that Bne Yisrael turned away from God and ran off as school kids run out of class, anxious to get away lest God would come with more commandments. This little episode took place almost a year after the revelation at Har Sinai. What follows is the start of a spiritual downfall of Bne Yisrael, in which the people start to complain about food and water. וַיִּהְיֶה הָעָם כְּמִתְאַנְנִים רַע בְּאַזְנֵי ה' - God gets angry and things turn from bad to worse with the episode of the 12 spies and ends with the punishment of almost the entire generation having to die in the Midbar.

To see the onset of trouble already here as they start travelling from Sinai toward Israel is rather ambiguous. Some meforshim say they traveled 'derech 3 yamim' in one day - covering the distance of 3 days in one single day to get as far away as possible. However, Rashi sees pshat in a positive way: They completed a distance of three days travel in one day, for the Holy One wanted to bring them to the Land immediately. Others highlight the word choice 'mehar Hashem' instead of MeHar Sinai, indicating a travel away spiritually from God. However, only part of the nation - the Asafsuf, or add-ons, were affected by this lack of nearness to God, a lack of spirituality. For these uninspired people the mitzvot were a burden and wanted no more of them. They had lost view of what purpose the mitzvot actually served and influenced the rest of Bne Yisrael. What actually happened then and how does it still influence us today?

A couple of weeks ago it was the 40th anniversary of the invention of the Rubik's cube -the colorful cubical puzzle with independently movable sections along each of the planes. According to Rabbenu Google and Rabbi Wikipedia there are 43 quintillion permutations of the cube. That is a figure with 20 digits. However, any cuber among you knows that one uses algorithms - sets of fixed moves - to solve the puzzle. The average number of algorithms out there to solve the Rubik's cube comes a lot closer to 70 (with a decent standard deviation). 70 is, as we know, still endless, but a number we can actually relate to. There are 70 'panim leTorah', interpretations, of the Torah. 70 as in 'endless'.

God commanded us to study the Torah dilligently: Vehagita Bo Yomam Valayla: which is typically interpreted as "Study hard, toil, day and night". But if we look a little closer what is actually written: Lo-yamush sefer hatorah hazeh mipicha vehagita bo yomam valaylah lema'an tishmor la'asot kechol-hakativ bo ki-az tatsliach et-derachecha ve'az taskil. [The content of] this Sefer Torah shall not be moved from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will be successful in your ways and only then you will become wise. Even though this phrase is used by Chazal to show the importance of learning Torah in its own merit, it still refers to learning for the sake of performing the mitzvot -learning as a means to an end, not the end itself.

Rabbi Norman Lamm in his Torah Lishmah cites Rabbi Hayim Volozhiner as saying that the Torah is not just a handbook of how to practice the Mitzvot, but it is a metaphysical entity representing the entire universe. Hence the study of Torah is equivalent to Science, Philosophy and Kabbalah. Even the practical Mitzvot contain embodiments of the secrets of all being. With this concept in mind, the saying of Chazal "Talmud Torah Keneged Kulam" not only means that learning Torah is the equivalent of all the Mitzvot

since it forms the key to all the Mitswoth, leading to their practice, but it is the essence of wisdom, the very key to understanding the universe. It is God's Will.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein among others therefore distinguishes two different commandments: studying Torah in order to fulfill it, and studying Torah 'lishma' - for its own merit. The question is: what is the underlying purpose for learning Torah 'lishma' for the sake of learning - is there, or even does there need to be a deeper motivation?

Although it is widely reported that the Cube was built as a teaching tool to help understand 3D objects, Rubik's actual purpose was solving the structural problem of moving the parts of the cube independently without the entire mechanism falling apart. There are people - researchers, speedcubers and cubeaholics- that spend their lifetime looking for all possible algorithms and the quickest routes to solve the Rubik's cube. Many of these people never devote any time thinking about the underlying marvel of the cube's moving mechanism, let alone its inventor.

There are some people, lehavdil, that spend their lifetime to discover all 70 interpretations of the Torah, seemingly forgetting what the Torah is actually all about and without being consciously aware of God's presence. On the one hand these people reprimand others if they don't behave according to their interpretation of the Torah and on the other hand fail to live according to ethical standards, specifically 'ben adam lechavero'. Where is the disconnect?

For many many centuries the majority in any given community would support a small group of gifted individuals who would learn Torah constantly in order to keep the legacy going. But also to develop new insights. New ways to understand the sacred texts. New ideas. In addition the local Rabbi, being aware of local circumstances would pasken the Halacha for the local community. It was the rabbi who could make the judgement call whether to pasken according to the most obvious rulings or whether to look for mitigating circumstances.

In the last 200 years this balance has been disturbed.

The orthodox community starts to separate itself off in response to an ever increasing secularization. The orthodox Ashkenazi Jews formed communities that only admitted fully observant individuals, disassociating themselves from their less- or non-observant brothers and sisters. A step, that interestingly enough, was NOT taken in Sefardi communities, communities that were equally struggling with similar movements of secularization.

Resulting from this effort to cordon oneself off and keep secularization at bay, the following idea got shape as written by the Chatam Sofer: "Chadash asur min HaTorah" - Any new interpretation, any new idea, deviating from those that are taught by chachamim before us, and straying from the quote "tradition" is forbidden by Torah Decree. He used a pun on the word 'chadash' - new. The word Chadash actually refers to newly harvested grain that could only be consumed after the Omer offering was brought in the Temple on today's Chag: Shavu'oth. Without the Temple the current importance of this Halacha is highly debated and large contingencies within orthodox Jewry agree that there is no Chadash these days to worry about.

The Idea “Chadash asur min HaTorah” had ramifications on many levels: not only on the way how to pasken Halacha, but also on the way how to learn Torah ‘lishma’.

Appointed rabbis were no longer independent but were literally with political and/or commercial strings attached to their rabbinical alma-mater, the source of their ordination. This led to halachic paralysis and the 11th commandment: Thou shalt neither be lenient nor creative in psak halacha - defense of 'tradition' is paramount. The lack of sensitivity for local mitigating circumstances and the fear of rabbis for being ostracized by the rest of the orthodox rabbinical community has led to some very deplorable situations throughout the Ashkenazi Jewish world.

Learning Torah ‘lishma’ started to become narrow and follow well beaten paths – only interpretations were ‘allowed’ that were deemed "safe" and according to accepted tradition. Wilner shass was in, Steinsaltz was out. Fixed prescribed algorithms to solve the puzzle. Who was still thinking of what learning Torah actually came to serve?

Rabbi Cardozo points it out as follows in “Conversations” (Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, Issue 13, 2012). We have separated halacha from conscious awareness of God. "Halacha is meant to be a protest against taking life for granted, the attempt to undo the attitude of 'everydayness'." But if we think that by mechanically following halachic demands we will automatically draw closer to God, we are guilty of self-deception. In fact, one can use halacha to run away from God and avoid facing the work of being God-conscious. Even learning Torah itself: 'More learning, more Gemara, one more tosaphot will do the trick' is often given as answer to honest questions about religion, God and the meaning of life. Again, this is self-deception.

A situation wherein Observance of mitzvot and learning Torah has become mechanical and where the importance of the way how to execute mitzvot is more important than the execution itself can lead to something I would recognize as Obsessive Compulsive behavior.- specifically in the absence of any God-consciousness.

When Chazal taught their wisdom regarding 'Vehagita Bo Yomam Velaila' - to study Torah all day every day, when The Gemara presents a disagreement between Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who says a person should learn Torah the entire day and somehow he will find a way to support himself and his family, God is not mentioned. His presence was obvious, to the point it needed no mentioning. These people lived with acute awareness of God. So much so, that for Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai any other activity than learning Torah was inconceivable... Rabbi Yishmael disagreed since God Himself commanded us: "veasfta deganecha vetiroshcha veyitzharecha" (Deut. 11:14): you shall harvest etc.: other activities are not only conceivable, they are actually mandated by God himself.

I looked again at the word 'Vehagita' . Lehagot means a whole spectrum of ideas, starting with: to meditate, to conceive ideas and express them, to mutter words, to incantate spells and to openly declare. It describes the path of initial inspiration to being fully aware of God's presence. In that state of mind, with inspiration, we need to approach and immerse ourselves in Torah day and night. Only then will we be successful in everything we do.

I asked several of you: what are the key ingredients for inspiration?

The main answers were: Passion and Respect

Passion for God, passion for Torah, Am Jisrael and Erets Jisrael. Without passion, inspiration flounders and dies out.

Respect. Excluding people from our community is a proven method to show disrespect. Unity of Clal Yisrael is more important than making sure traditions are preserved like mummified bodies. In that sense we can learn a lot from our Sefardi and Chabad rabbis who went out of their way to keep less observant Jews be part of the community and preserve shalom, peace.

There are 70 ways to explain the Torah. For each and everyone of us a specific way that will inspire us and make us aware of our Creator and allows us to form a deep relationship with Hashem.

Eize hu Chacham? Who is a Chacham? He who allows himself to be inspired by anyone! Rabbi Ozarowski, Rabbi Olitsky, R Greenberg , someone from the Kollel.

As Rabbi Cassrdozo puts it: Without allowing ourselves to being inspired, and remain conscious of God's presence, the Torah and the Halacha is flat, paralyzed. Mitswot become mechanical and a burden.

Let us be open to anyone who can inspire us and exclude no one.

Chag Sameach!