

Appreciation in
the Parashah

The Best Witnesses.

Witnesses play an important role in giving testimony. Have we ever heard of witnesses who are not even human? We actually see this at the beginning of our *parashah*. The heavens and the earth were called upon to serve as witnesses to Hashem's covenant with us, since they would always be there. This was unlike Moshe Rabbeinu, who was soon going to pass away. It is still difficult to understand, though, why the heavens and earth were chosen. They are inanimate objects. How could they serve as witnesses?

Rav Moshe Feinstein offers a remarkable answer. In fact, the heavens and earth are among the greatest witnesses possible, because they themselves testify to the greatness of Hashem. The towering mountains, beautiful hills, vast skies and incredible world around us are all products of Hashem's extraordinary creation. When we stop to admire their beauty and appreciate the incredible wisdom behind them, we are seeing testimony to the greatness of their Creator. (Kol Ram, Haazinu)

There are things we see every single day that are nothing short of incredible, yet because we are so used to them, we barely notice them. We wake up, open our eyes and see the beautiful world around us. We walk, talk, hear and see. We look at the sky, trees and flowers, yet rarely stop to consider just how extraordinary they really are. Sometimes the most amazing things in our lives become the things we take for granted simply because they are always there. The beginning of our *parashah* reminds us that their constant presence is itself a reason to appreciate them. The heavens and earth are an eternal testimony to Hashem's precise involvement in the world around us.

This idea applies to so many of the gifts we experience in our lives, both physical and spiritual. One of the greatest spiritual gifts Hashem gives us is something we have the opportunity to experience every year, yet perhaps because it comes so regularly, we do not



always stop to appreciate just how precious it is: Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is a day when Hashem gives us the opportunity to put the past behind us, return to Him and begin again. When we stop to think about what an incredible gift that is, it becomes much easier to understand why Chazal describe Erev Yom Kippur as a day of such great *simchah*.

In fact, we find that is a mitzvah from the Torah to eat on Erev Yom Kippur. Why is this so? It seems rather surprising. Yom Kippur itself is a day when we fast and afflict ourselves, yet just a few hours before it begins, we have a mitzvah to eat. Chazal even teach that someone who eats on Erev Yom Kippur is considered as though he fasted for two days (Yoma 81b). What is the meaning behind this?

Rabbeinu Yonah explains that Klal Yisrael are so filled with *simchah* over the opportunity of Yom Kippur that we celebrate with a festive meal. We cannot eat on Yom Kippur itself, so we eat beforehand to thank Hashem for giving us this incredible opportunity. We are so happy that we have been given a day on which we can erase our sins and begin again that we celebrate before the day even starts. Our eating on Erev Yom Kippur is therefore an expression of our appreciation for the incredible gift of Yom Kippur. (Shuarei Teshuvah 4:9)

We can make mistakes and fall short, yet Hashem gives us a way back. The gates of teshuvah are open, and we are invited to return to Him. We can ask forgiveness, repair what we have damaged and begin again. Hashem loves us and wants us to be close to Him, and Yom Kippur is one of the greatest expressions of that love. Every thought of teshuvah, every *viduy* and every small effort we make to express our desire to draw closer to Him is precious to Hashem.

One Yom Kippur, a simple shepherd boy went to shul. He was uneducated and didn't even know Aleph Beis, yet he was so moved by the fervent tefillos of those around him. There is nothing he wished more than to daven to Hashem as well, but he didn't understand any of the tefillos. Innocently, he decided to whistle a

tune to Hashem as that is what he knew how to do. Everyone was taken aback by what they saw as a lack of respect. However, the renowned Tzadik, the Ba'al Shem Tov who was present, silenced them. "Until now I sensed that there was something blocking our tefillos," he said. "Yet, when this shepherd boy started whistling, all the barriers were broken and our tefillos ascended straight to Shamayim! His love for Hashem was just so sincere and pure that it made a great stir causing all our tefillos to ascend straight to Shamayim!"

Appreciation in the Siddur



Matir Asurim (2)

There is another beautiful dimension to the berachah of *Zokef Kefufim*. It is not only an expression of gratitude for the physical ability to stand upright; it can also remind us of the elevated purpose for which we were created.

Chazal teach that there are three ways in which a human being resembles the *malachim*. We possess understanding, we speak in *Lashon HaKodesh*, and we walk upright. Our ability to stand tall is therefore not merely a feature of the human body. Chazal themselves associate it with the higher qualities that distinguish a human being. (*Chagigah* 16a)

The *Sefer HaYashar*, attributed to Rabbainu Tam, develops this idea further. He explains that a person stands upright as a distinction between man and the animals. Yet there is a deeper reason as well. The *neshamah* within a person comes from Above and naturally draws him upward toward its source. An animal, whose life is rooted in the physical earth, is naturally drawn downward toward the ground. (*Sefer HaYashar* Ch. 1)

This gives *Zokef Kefufim* an added depth. We thank Hashem for the wonderful physical gift of being able to straighten ourselves, stand tall, and move freely. At the same time, we can appreciate what our upright posture represents. Hashem has placed within us a *neshamah* and entrusted us with the ability to rise above the purely physical and live with a higher purpose.

Things to appreciate: Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is one of Hashem's greatest gifts, giving us the precious opportunity to erase the mistakes of the past and begin again. Through *teshuvah*, we can leave yesterday behind and open a fresh, clean page. So lofty is this day that we rise above our ordinary physical lives and are compared to the *malachim*, emerging from Yom Kippur purified, renewed, and closer to Hashem.

Parashah Pearls

It is interesting that *Haazinu* is referred to as a *shirah*, a song, which naturally brings to mind joy. Yet when we look at *Haazinu*, we find words of rebuke and a painful foretelling of the exile that would come as a result of our sins. How, then, can this be referred to as a *shirah*? Our Rabbis teach that Klal Yisrael were sent among the nations so that we could elevate the sparks of holiness found within them. Through our Torah, mitzvos, and avodas Hashem, we bring those sparks of holiness back to their source. In this way, even while in exile, we are accomplishing something profound and preparing the world for the *Geulah*. This is why *Haazinu* is called a *shirah*. Although it speaks about exile, it also contains the deeper joy of knowing that our time in exile has a great purpose. Every spark of holiness we uncover brings us one step closer to the *geulah*. Knowing that even within the darkness we have a role in bringing the world closer to its ultimate redemption is itself a source of *simchah*. (Based on *Kedushas Levi*, *Haazinu*)

The poetic song *Haazinu* begins, "May My utterance flow like dew" (32:2). Rashi explains that "utterances" refers to Torah. Why is Torah compared specifically to dew? Dew is something that everyone is happy to receive. Rain, despite its great benefits, can sometimes be experienced as an inconvenience. This teaches us something fundamental about the way we should approach Torah. Just as dew is something that brings pleasure and is gladly received, Torah should be learned with happiness and delight. Therefore, we need to try and learn with joy. This is what we ask for every morning in the blessings of the Torah: "Please make it sweet for us..." (*Tiv HaSimcha*, p. 237) When we learn with *simchah*, our learning is worth 1000 times more! (*Orchos Tzadikim*, Shaar HaSimcha)

Chazal cite the opinion of Rav Yehudah that reciting *Bircas HaTorah* each day is actually a mitzvah from the Torah. He derives this from a verse in our *parashah*: "When I call out the Name of Hashem, give greatness to our G-D" (*Devarim* 32:3). Yet, where do we see in this verse a mitzvah to recite a blessing before learning Torah? The *Maharsha* explains that the answer lies in the words "the Name of Hashem." The Torah is composed of the names of Hashem. Therefore, when we engage in Torah learning, we are calling out the Name of Hashem, and before doing so, we first "give greatness to our G-d" by expressing our appreciation for the gift we are about to receive. This gives us a greater appreciation of the privilege to learn Torah. We are being given the opportunity to engage with the words of Hashem Himself. Every word of Torah carries incredible holiness, bringing blessing and light into our lives in this world and the next.