

Mountain Climbing – Yitro

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וְהִגְבִּילָהּ אֶת הָעָם סָבִיב לְאֹמֶר הַשְּׁמָרוּ לָכֶם עֲלוֹת בְּהָר וְנִלְעַב בְּקֶצֶהוּ, כָּל הַנִּלְעַב בְּהָר מוֹת יוּמָת. (שמות יט, יב)

Three days prior to the Shechina descending on Har Sinai for Matan Torah, HKB"H commands Moshe to erect barriers around the mountain to prevent Am Yisrael from approaching and touching the mountain. Nine psukim later HKB"H repeats the command וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה רֵד הָעֵד בָּעָם פֶּן יִהְרָסוּ אֶל ה'. Rashi explains this second passuk, that HKB"H warned Am Yisrael not to go up the mountain, despite having an irresistible urge to do so, to be closer to the Shechina.

The Malbim (ibid) asks "HKB"H already told this to Moshe in the earlier passuk, why does He need to repeat it?" and he brings three reasons.

The first reason is that in the three days prior to HKB"H instructing Moshe to ascend the mountain, neither Am Yisrael *nor* Moshe were allowed to approach and touch the mountain. Am Yisrael requested that at Matan Torah there should be no "barrier" between them and the Shechina and HKB"H acceded to their request by beginning to communicate the Ten Commandments *directly* with no "intermediary". Since Am Yisrael experienced the same proximity to HKB"H as Moshe at this point, when HKB"H subsequently told Moshe to ascend, Am Yisrael might mistakenly think that they too were also permitted to go up the mountain. This is why HKB"H repeated the command a second time, to clarify that only Moshe was allowed to go up, not the rest of Am Yisrael.

The second reason is that in the beginning of Matan Torah, when HKB"H began relaying the Ten Commandments, the light of the Shechina enveloped the *entire* mountain. However, after this, the light of the Shechina moved to the top of the mountain, far from the camp of Am Yisrael, so that the body of the mountain now separated them from the Shechina. Am Yisrael might mistakenly think that they were permitted to advance up the mountain together with the Shechina.

We will bring the third reason shortly, but in order to understand it, we need to examine the Malbim's perush on the previous passuk –

”וְהִגְבִּילָהּ אֶת הָעָם.” בְּזֶה רָמַז גַּם כֵּן שֶׁלֹא יִהְיֶה אָדָם לְהַעֲפִיל לְעֻלּוֹת הָהָר הָעֵינִי בְּעֵינֵי הָאֱלֹהִים לִקְרֹת שָׁמָּה לְמַעַלְהָ מִהַשְׁגָּתוֹ, כִּי יֵשׁ לְשַׁכֵּל הָאָנוּשִׁי וּלְכַחוּתָיו גְּבוּל שֶׁשָּׁם יַעֲמֹד וְלֹא יַעֲבֹר הַגְּבוּל. וַיִּכְמוּ שֶׁהָיָה בְּאַרְבָּעָה שְׁנֵכָנְסוּ לַפְּרִדָּס שֶׁאַחַד עָלָה בְּהָר וְהָצִיץ וְנִכְנַע וְאַחַד מֵת, כִּי לֹא יָכוֹל לְסַבֵּל הָאוֹר הַגָּדוֹל, כִּמְי שְׁיִטְרִיחַ עֵינָיו לְרֹאוֹת בְּאוֹר הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ שֶׁיִּכְהֶה עֵינָיו, אוֹ הַטְרִיחַ שְׁכָלוֹ עַל דָּבָר שֶׁלְמַעַלְהָ מִהַשְׁגָּתוֹ שֶׁיִּמָּצֵא פָּגַע אוֹ בְּטוֹל לְגַמְרִי אוֹ שֶׁיִּצָּא לְתַרְבוּת רָעָה, וְזֶה נִמְשָׁל מִ”ש כָּל הַנִּלְעַב בְּהָר מוֹת יוּמָת (מַלְבִּים שְׁמוֹת יֵט, יב).

The Malbim teaches us that each person has a limitation in their ability to perceive HKB"H. The human intellect and its powers are limited and one should not try to overstep these limitations. The Malbim brings as an example the episode of אֲרַבְעָה שְׂנַכְנְסוּ לַפְּרִידִים, as brought in the Gemara (Chagiga 14b).

The sugya in this Gemara deals with studying מַעֲשֵׂה מֶרְכָבָה – HKB"H's "chariot" (this week's Haftara, from sefer Yishayahu, פרק ו'), which describes the reality up in Heaven, with the angels surrounding the כִּסֵּא הַכְבוֹד of HKB"H. There are limitations on who is allowed to study this topic and in which forum. As part of this discussion the Gemara relates the following incident.

Four Chachamim entered the "Pardes" [literally – "orchard", i.e. attempted to uncover the *hidden secrets* of the Torah], Ben Azai, Ben Zoma, Acher (aka. Elisha ben Avuya) and Rebi Akiva. Rebi Akiva, who was of greater stature than the others, warned them - "In the Pardes, the higher realms of the Torah, when you encounter pure marble stones, do not say 'water water', although they appear to be water, as it says לֹא יֵשֵׁב בְּקֶרֶב בֵּיתִי עֹשֶׂה רְמִיָּה דִּבֶּר שְׁקָרִים לֹא יָבוֹן. "לִנְגֹּד עֵינַי (תהילים קא, ז). In other words, even if you perceive things to be a certain way, your limited perception may not allow you to understand the *truth* of what they really are and you could end up interpreting them incorrectly.

The Gemara continues, Ben Azai "glimpsed" the Shechina and died. Ben Zoma "glimpsed" the Shechina and was damaged נִפְגַּע. Acher became a heretic. R' Akiva emerged safely.

The Malbim says that the three who did not emerge safely were not ready to tolerate such intensity of light, like someone who tries to gaze directly at the sun - it will irreparably damage his eyes. Someone who tries to use his intellect to grasp things beyond his perception, will similarly be damaged. He will misinterpret them and this will cause him to stray from the path.

After that introduction, we will be able to understand the Malbim's third reason for HKB"H repeating the warning for Am Yisrael not to get near the mountain.

He quotes the Targum Yonatan as saying "Perhaps Am Yisrael will wish to gaze at the Shechina, therefore HKB"H warns them to not overstep the limits of their perception and think they have seen some kind of 'form'. Since they will not be able to separate what they saw from the limits of their human imagination, they will [chas veshalom] imagine some physical boundary or form based on their physical sight and ascribe some physicality to HKB"H. This will damage their faith and many will fall as a result, as it is tantamount to avodah zarah – making an idol in thought".

וְנִכְל מִמֶּנּוּ רַב, The Targum Yonatan continues "This will also damage the great stature of Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe's greatness (אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים-לְקִיָּם, מִחֻצֵּי) "

(וּלְמַטָּה אִישׁ מִחֲצִיּוֹ וּלְמַעְלָה הָאֶל־לִקְיִים) was purely for the sake of Am Yisrael [Only someone of his stature could ascend Har Sinai and return unscathed, like R' Akiva]. This is why, after the sin of the egel HKB"H tells Moshe לָךְ יֵרֵד, descend from your greatness. Similarly, when the Kohanim serve HKB"H in the Mikdash and enter the higher realms, they must refrain from incorrect perceptions that attribute physicality to HKB"H".

Since this is the parsha of Matan Torah, I would like to delve deeper into this perush of the Malbim because it has direct and immediate ramifications for the way we study and teach Torah.

The Malbim is teaching us that each person has a different capability of perception, and overstepping the limits of their perception can have disastrous results.

If misunderstood, this perush of the Malbim could chas veshalom lead to the greatest "cop-out" in Judaism.

A person might say to themselves "I have an IQ of 105, it is *genetic*, I have had this IQ from when I was born and I will die with this same IQ. Therefore, there is *no point* in me trying to attend Daf Yomi shiurim - they are beyond me. I cannot understand what they are saying most of the time, even though they are speaking English. Someone suggested I try join the Daf Yomi for the new masechet of Menachot. I tried for a few sessions, but they are talking about concepts that I have no understanding of – pigul, kemitza, notar, blila, etc. It is like listening to someone speaking in a foreign language. Better stick to my familiar parshat hashavua shiurim on Youtube, or shiurim about סְפִירוֹת צִדִּיקִים which I can understand – that is more my level! Even the Malbim explicitly says it – don't try to מַעַל הַפִּיפִיק, it could have disastrous results, right?"

Wrong. This is not what the Malbim is saying.

R' Akiva managed to emerge safely from the Pardes, but imagine if Akiva (before he became Rebi Akiva) tried to study מַעֲשֵׂה מִרְכָּבָה, when he was just starting out!

Akiva, the shepherd, son of a convert, who married Kalba Savua's daughter Rachel, was illiterate. He didn't even know the alef bet. He thought he was a hopeless case and that remaining a shepherd was the destiny HKB"H had planned for him, until one day he saw a rock under a constant stream of dripping water – drip ... drip ... drip..., one solitary drop ... every ten seconds. From the constant dripping of water on this rock, year after year after year, the water began to make an impression in the rock. Akiva said "If water has the power to do that to granite, then there is hope for me."

He ditched his day job as a shepherd and sat himself down in a classroom with 5-year-olds to learn the alef bet (the mesirut nefesh of his penniless wife Rachel, who had been dispossessed by her father for marrying Akiva against Kalba Savua's wishes – was the reason he was on the student's bench in the first place). One letter ... another letter ... and another. One word ... to one sentence ... to one paragraph ... to one chapter ... to one book ... day in and day out ... for ... forty years!

Imagine if Akiva's Rebi told him, when he was starting out, that it would take him forty years to amount to anything. Akiva would *never* have persevered. He would have said to himself "Forty years! Who knows if I will even *live out* the next *twenty* years! What is the point?" Instead, his teacher (R' Eliezer ben Horkenos) patiently taught him, block by block, drop by drop and the years flew by. One day, without even noticing it, the now *Rebi* Akiva was a Rebi himself with 40,000 students! He was like a Moshe Rabbeinu, who could enter the Pardes and emerge unscathed.

How did his teacher know this is the way to teach? Because R' Eliezer ben Horkenos himself, had been taught the *same* way by *his* Rebi, R' Yochanan ben Zakai. Eliezer was learning disabled. He was approaching thirty and he couldn't even recite Shma Yisrael, let alone study Torah. His father, the millionaire Horkenos, gave him menial tasks in the family business befitting his IQ. But something in Eliezer's heart *yearned* to study Torah, some inexplicable force was pushing him in that direction, despite the statistics, the circumstances. He ran away to Jerusalem and was adopted by R' Yochanan ben Zakai who made him repeat single sentences, over ... and over again ... *hundreds of times* ... until it finally sank in. Years later, R' Eliezer Hagadol became R' Akiva's teacher and mentor.

The Malbim is telling us "Don't jump ahead too quickly *before you are ready*". He is not telling us "Don't jump at all, stay as you are for the *rest of your life*!"

Not all of us are destined to be a R' Eliezer HaGadol or a R' Akiva or ... a Moshe Rabbeinu. For some, the pinnacle of our Torah study will be סְפִירָה וְצִדִּיקִים. HKB"H is not interested in the endpoint, He is only interested in the "delta" between the endpoint and the starting point – how far have you progressed? Have you progressed at all?

Today you may not understand the terms "pigul, notar, kemitza, blila", especially when they are rattled off at high speed in a Daf Yomi shiur. So, start at the beginning, like R' Akiva, build it up block by block. Start off by learning what "pigul" is, what "blila" is. Build up your alphabet one letter at a time, your vocabulary one word at a time. You may not yet be ready for a Daf Yomi shiur on Menachot right now, but make it your goal that *one day you will be*. R' Akiva only

began the process when he was in his forties, others (like me) started even later. It is *never* too late!

"But that drudgery – pigul, notar etc. is so boring and uninspiring!" you may say to yourself, "I prefer to learn *inspiring* things, philosophical things, *profound* things, like the meaning of life, how to become my best self, how to inspire others!"

One person's drudgery is another's inspiration.

One person may be naturally attracted to numbers. I am not one of them. When we have our regular annual meeting with our accountant prior to filing the tax report, after five short minutes of him rattling off figures in the report, my mind is already floating in other stratospheres. I am daydreaming about the Lechem HaPanim, archeological coins and ancient handwritten manuscripts of Rashi.

Another person, when they think of archeology, the Lechem HaPanim, they feel a nap coming on and their eyes begin to droop. But talk to them about the latest updates in the stock exchange and market trends, and they come alive!

Everyone is naturally drawn to something that interests them. There is not a single person on the face of the earth who is not interested in *something*. The Vilna Gaon calls it our own personal Ruach HaKodesh, that steers us to our ultimate purpose in life.

By all means devote your Torah study time to things that interest you. You may love ספרי צדיקים, learning about the midot and hanhagot of our gedolim. Devote your time to studying it if this is what grabs you. But keep delving *further* into it, digging deeper. *Advance*, do not remain static. It may begin with simple stories of the Avot, but it will eventually evolve into Mesilat Yesharim, Sha'arei Teshuva and other intricate philosophical works.

As you dig deeper into your personal interest in the Torah, you will find how *everything is connected* and things that you thought had nothing to do with your realm of interest suddenly pop up. Hearing numeric financial reports from the accountant puts me to sleep, but as it turns out, calculating gematriyot while looking for hints in psukim has become one of *my main methods of analysis*. I spend hours and hours on it. Numbers. Who would have thought? When something is applied *within the context* of a subject you love, the whole game changes.

You may not think right now that the concept of "pigul" or "notar" has anything to do with your subject of interest, but I can guarantee you that it does, somehow. Eventually you will discover it and come to understand it in that context.

This is how we *should* be studying Torah. Not by going through a curriculum that *everybody else* tells you to, sequentially, in an order they tell you. But rather by choosing a subject that you love and using it as your gateway to the rest of the Torah. Studying something because you are told to and have to will never have the same value as studying something you love. When you love something, you won't need anyone to force you to study Torah related to that, you will do it willingly and often, because you enjoy it. You will end up crisscrossing masechtot and sefarim, studying an excerpt here, another excerpt there, rather than learning them sequentially from the beginning of the book to the end.

The end result will be the same, however. You will eventually visit the *entire Torah*, learnt through the prism of חֵלְקָהּ בְּתוֹרָה. This is what we daven every morning - וְתֵן חֵלְקִי בְּתוֹרָתְךָ, asking HKB"H to give us *our own personal* חֵלְק in the Torah, from which we will branch out and traverse the entire Torah – thus making the Torah an extension of ourselves.

This is the first profound lesson of the Malbim. Study something that grabs you and build it *slowly*, don't skip steps. Our modern world is an "instant" world. Everyone wants *everything* now, now, now! Nobody has any patience for anything anymore. We have to have instant communication with others, instant information on tap, instant gratification, instant meals, instant coffee, instant education, instant military victory, instant Geulah! Nobody in today's screen swiping generation can contemplate the thought of something taking a longer time. Nobody wants to *invest* the time. When you rush things, when you skip important steps, says the Malbim, you risk becoming exposed to things you are not ready for and they can irreparably derail you. Stupidity is not a result of low IQ - it is a result of *laziness*.

The first "side of the coin" of the Malbim's perush relates to students, we who study Torah.

The flip side of the coin relates to *teachers*, we who teach Torah. Everyone who studies Torah eventually becomes a teacher of Torah, it does not necessarily need to be a formal type of teaching, like in a shiur or a classroom. It can be as "mundane" as teaching by example – personally applying the things we learn in ourselves and behaving accordingly. Our behavior teaches other people – for good and sometimes, unfortunately, for bad.

To be an effective teacher, you have to be able to identify each person's "gateway", to clarify what their personal interest is and use it to present the subject to them in such a way that it is an *extension of their personal interest*. When the person sees that what you are teaching them is tailor made and personally applicable to something that they are interested in, they will listen, they will learn. When you teach something generically, they will hear, not listen and they will not learn.

This is the disadvantage of the modern education system where everything is generic and production line. Students are swallowed up in a class with 30+ other students and unless the teacher is superhuman, there is no way he/she can possibly interact with each and every student on the level required to penetrate and make an indelible mark.

If you ask me to highlight *one* specific thing that I learned in my *entire* school and college career, that left an indelible mark on me that I have not long since forgotten, there is only *one*. It was taught to me by my 6th grade Gemara teacher and it had nothing at all to do with Gemara. *He taught me to bake whole grain bread*. I attended his Gemara classes day in and day out for two years and I remember *nothing* from them, I learned nothing from them. What made an indelible mark on my life was a brief, fleeting moment when he dealt with me on a *personal level* and connected with me in a subject that we mutually loved. He did it with such passion and intensity that it was unforgettable. It was that love for baking that eventually became my gateway into studying Torah. I have since studied a LOT of Gemara and I remember it all, because it was Gemara that *interested me*, that I discovered was *necessary for me* to further my personal interest. It was not just some generic Gemara that was spoon fed to me by a production line system. Ironically, much of it was Gemara that this same teacher taught me in 6th grade, which I didn't realize had a personal value to me back then. This is what makes a *great teacher*, not a cog in a system covering a syllabus to thousands of students who will never remember what they learned.

Moshe Rabbeinu was this type of great teacher, perhaps the greatest. He saw with prophecy *exactly* who the person standing in front of him was and what his "gateway" to learning Torah was and ... he taught it to him in that unique, personal way. There was only one problem. Just like any teacher cannot possibly deal with a class of 30 students on a personalized level, Moshe Rabbeinu could never possibly deal with 600,000 students on the personal level each required. This is what Yitro was telling him. וַיֹּאמֶר חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֵלָיו, לֹא טוֹב הַדִּבֶּר אֲשֶׁר אָתָּה עֹשֶׂה. נָבַל תִּבְלֶגַם אֶתָּה גַם הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עִמָּךְ, כִּי כָבֵד מְמֹךְ הַדִּבֶּר לֹא תוּכַל עֲשֹׂהוּ לְבַדְּךָ (שמות יח, יח-יט). One person cannot possibly effectively teach 600,000 people - you need to decentralize authority. Moshe accepted Yitro's advice and established a network of teachers/judges who could interact with each person on a personalized, individual level.

Incredibly, Moshe indirectly (or perhaps directly) ended up giving us the most inspiring fundamental principle in teaching ... the very same principle that later resulted in a R' Akiva.

At Mei Meriva, Moshe said שְׁמַעוּ נָא הַמּוֹרִים הַמֵּן הַסֵּלַע הַזֶּה נּוֹצִיא לָכֶם מִיָּם (במדבר כ, י). We all assume that Moshe was rebuking Am Yisrael for rebelling against HKB"H, but I believe that was not what Moshe was saying at all. Moshe was addressing *teachers* forever more - שְׁמַעוּ נָא הַמּוֹרִים. What is the effective way to teach? מִן הַסֵּלַע הַזֶּה נּוֹצִיא לָכֶם מִיָּם. Even if you think that your brain and

soul are like granite, immutable – that you will never be able to learn and change who you are – look at the stone. By dripping drops of water on it, one at a time ... drop by drop ... the water will eventually make its mark in the stone and change it forever.

The correct way to teach (and to learn) is at a pace that each individual person (each of us is different) can tolerate and sustain. If you try to shove too much too quickly, you will have derailment. The person will mistakenly think they are capable of perceiving the next level, even though they are not, they will advance too quickly and fall, sometimes irreparably. It takes a teacher who loves their student to understand what the required pace is, to build the vessel.

This is the lesson Moshe learned at Har Sinai. Am Yisrael were not ready to absorb the intensity and volume transmitted at Matan Torah. This resulted in the sin with egel. HKB"H tells Moshe לֹךְ רַד – you are at the high level, you are capable of climbing the mountain, but the rest of Am Yisrael are not yet. Do not let them even try to climb the mountain yet or they will fall. You need to drop down to their level and slowly "drip on the stone" for forty years in the Midbar. R' Akiva took forty years to become R' Akiva, Am Yisrael took forty years to attain the level necessary to enter Eretz Yisrael. Some things cannot be rushed.

David HaMelech says צַדִּיק כְּתֵמָר יִפְרָח כְּאֶרֶז בְּלִבְנוֹן יִשְׁגָּה (תהילים צב, יג). Why do you need two types of trees to describe a tzaddik? What is the difference between them? The difference is in the stages. The first stage is יִפְרָח, when the tzaddik is still *growing*, still learning and has not yet reached the high level. At this stage he is compared to a date palm, whose fruit are sweet. For teachers to effectively teach their students requires sweetness, both regarding the teacher's relationship to the student and also the method of teaching - the material also needs to be "sweet", attractive and applicable to the student. If a teacher teaches like that then the student will climb to great heights, כְּאֶרֶז בְּלִבְנוֹן יִשְׁגָּה. However, if you mistakenly skip the first stage of יִפְרָח כְּתֵמָר and try to go straight to the high level without the necessary foundation, instead of יִשְׁגָּה it will be יִשְׁגָּה, a terrible mistake.

Climbing mountains requires patience, persistence, but above all ... it requires love.

Shabbat Shalom

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