
Sichos in English Classics 41

**Torah and the Nations:
Law, Consensus
and Sinai**



**Observations on the Foundation of Law,
Justice and Morality**



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IN PLACE OF AN INTRODUCTION

At the Shloshim of R' Yonah Avtzon A"H, Director of Sichos in English, a resolution was taken to reprint the original weekly Sichos in English publications.

To fulfill this, a weekly booklet including a translation of a *farbrengen* as it was first published will be distributed. Our intention is to reprint the entire set in the near future.

Following the Sichos we will include an addendum with pictures, notes, and insights into the process of its publication.

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TORAH AND THE NATIONS: LAW, CONSENSUS AND SINAI

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Observations on the Foundation of Law, Justice and Morality

Laws and justice are the foundation of every decent society, in fact for every decent life. In the Seven Commands G-d gave mankind at large He includes the command for a system of laws. The Lubavitcher Rebbe Shlita on Yud-Tes Kislev, 5741, examined the foundations of systems of law and their effectiveness in creating a decent world.

WHY EMPHASIZE THE INSIGNIFICANT?

In the Letter¹ that R. Schneur Zalman wrote after his release from prison there are several points that he emphasizes, clearly because he considered them integral to the purpose of his liberation, and by extension, they are crucial to us to ponder and to act upon. One of these points does not seem to have an association with the liberation. He enthusiastically describes the remarkable effects of his liberation on the (non-Jewish) people, “That the Name of the Holy One will be magnified and sanctified among the nations through me, ‘and the far ends of the earth will witness the salvation of our G-d.’” In a related letter he says, “He has made His Name remarkable and magnified for He has been magnified and sanctified publicly, particularly in the eyes of princes and peoples throughout the provinces of the king.² Even in their eyes is this event a wonder beyond understanding, and their response is, ‘This comes from G-d; it is a wonder in our eyes.’”

This calls for understanding:

The arrest was a consequence of disseminating Judaism among Jews who are required to study Torah, and especially for teaching

1. Sefer HaToldos R' Schneur Zalman of Liadi pages 218-219.

2. A play on Esther 1:16.

Chassidus. Gentiles, however, deal only with the “Seven Commands³ of the Sons of Noah,” with all their ramifications and extensions, so why should the Rebbe’s liberation be associated with the nations?

THE DANGER OF LAWS BASED OFF LOGIC ALONE

The Rambam in his Code (Kings VIII, 11) rules that a “Son of Noah” (namely, a non-Jew) must fulfill the Seven Commands because G-d commanded them in His Torah and informed us through Moshe that the Sons of Noah had already been so commanded. This means that the gentile conducts himself in consonance with the seven laws, not because of consensus, logical conclusions and agreement that this is proper conduct, but instead this behavior is based on the command of G-d through Moshe

Only then can the Seven lead to the sort of world envisioned in “Not for chaos did He create it, but that it be inhabited.”⁴ Otherwise the results may not be the desired ones. Our generation does not need proofs that we cannot rely on “logical conclusions” of man, for man is “bribed” with interests other than reason and justice. We have seen what this can lead to. Rather than “logical conclusions” leading men to formulate laws and statutes to build a world, to make it “inhabited,” instead, there was a nation that developed a whole philosophy of laws that brought the greatest destruction and “chaos” that ever existed.

This was based on a philosophy involving scholars and philosophers, and the consequences are there for all to see.

Worse, today there are disciples and yet another generation who cling to their precepts and endeavor to disseminate them, completely ignoring the outcomes we have seen.

There is certainly no need to specify whom we are discussing. We are obviously discussing those who reared a nation on their speculations and philosophy and weltanschauung. This was a nation numbered among the developed and cultured nations, civilized and

3. Six prohibitions — murder, robbery, idolatry, adultery, blasphemy, cruelty to animals (specifically, not to tear flesh from a living animal for food), and one positive command — to establish a system of laws. “Sons of Noah” simply means humanity, as distinct from Children of Israel meaning Jews.

4. Isaiah 45:18.

educated. This brought the world destruction, devastation and unprecedented “chaos.”

TORAH AS A GUIDE FOR LIFE

The only precaution against such results is, as noted earlier, through recognizing that the fulfillment of the Seven is because “G-d commanded them in the Torah,” when man’s behavior is determined by the instructions of that Being “from Whose true existence all existences came into being.” This Being conveyed “through Moshe” clear guidance, clear and illuminated (for “Torah is light”), for man’s conduct. There is no cranny in the world abandoned to darkness by Torah, and certainly there is no human being on the face of the earth neglected, denied guidance for his conduct. (As was noted above, the Seven are general statements encompassing countless details).

Man living by the light of these instructions forms a world fit to be “inhabited,” settled and productive, enduring. With this approach man will not be “bribed,” for as soon as he is inclined to deviate he will recall that the same Torah commands “Do not take a bribe, for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise and distorts the words of the righteous.”⁵ (Bribery, of course, is included in the Seven, associated as it is with the prohibition of robbery and the requirement of establishing a system of laws.) When he examines himself honestly to be sure he is free from “bribery,” and asks another who is objective, he will avoid the possibility of “blind eyes and distorted words.”

A remarkable fact will be illuminated. The great majority of regimes the different styles of behavior of the religions of the world including those that may be classed as idolatrous —are explicitly based on the Torah of Moshe, as explained at length in Kuzari.

Since the conduct of the world is based on Torah and Torah is bound to every Jew, as each of us declares, “The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the congregation of Ya’akov,”⁶ it follows that every Jew has the responsibility of insuring that the world lives in a manner that leads to “habitation” through observance of the Seven Commands with all their implications and details.

5. Shemos 23:8.

6. Devorim 33:4.

According to the rule of “Adorn yourself first,” each Jew must endeavor to fulfill all 613 mitzvot that he is instructed to as a Jew, with the assurance that “if you strive you will find.” In addition there is the command to illuminate the world around him, through the Seven Commandments.

We can now understand the Rebbe’s emphasis on the effects of his liberation on the “far ends of the earth,” to the degree that “all the princes and peoples in all the provinces of the king” recognize that “This comes from G-d; it is a wonder in our eyes.” For the perfection of a Jew is contingent on his achieving all that depends on him in bringing perfection to the entire world.

What this tells us in practical terms is that we must bring light into all the world, as we shall explain shortly.

LAYERS IN TORAH

The Zohar⁷ teaches that “from Shabbos, are all days blessed,” all days of the subsequent week are blessed by Shabbos, have a special bond with that Shabbos. Yud-Tes Kislev this year (5741) was blessed by the Shabbos of the portion of Vayishlach, which must have guidance for Yud-Tes Kislev. Of course there are numerous subjects and stories in this portion, and stories are instruction too, being part of Torah which means “instruction.” The story actually occurred, it need not be said, for it is part of the Torah of truth, but the intention of the story is to guide and instruct.

Lessons vary, for Torah is understood and interpreted on several planes, the beginning one being *pshat*, simple meaning, accessible to everyone, indispensable for further study.

The portion begins with Ya’akov sending messengers, or angels, to his brother Esav to the land of Se’ir, the field of Edom, and commanded them to say to “my lord Esav, ‘So said your brother Ya’akov, with Lavan *garti*, I have dwelled, and delayed until now.’”⁸ Naturally there are the numerous interpretations, and the simple meaning is found in Rashi, who uses the simple meaning in his commentary.

7. II, 63b, 88a.

8. Bereishis 32:5.

Rashi's commentary is: The word *garti*, I dwelled, equals *taryag*, i.e., the 613 mitzvot; meaning, I dwelled with the wicked Lavan yet I observed the 613 mitzvot and did not adopt his evil ways. Rashi's commentary is, as we have noted, the simple meaning and one with a lesson for us.

A problem arises. Ya'akov sent messengers to Esav, being interested in pleasing him or influencing him, impressing him. The gifts he sent were explicitly "to find favor"⁹ with Esav. Clearly the instructions to the messengers were for the same end. Ya'akov's encounter with Esav is the prototype of Israel's encounters with the nations and Ya'akov's conduct is instruction for such situations. The Jew begins with a clear statement, "I lived with Lavan but I kept the mitzvot." How is this to please or impress Esav?

A TALE OF TWO ESAVS

The Talmud discusses two aspects of Esav. Esav had the status of a *mumar*, a rebellious Jew, Jewish but not conducting himself Jewishly; then Esav is described as "he is Edom"¹⁰ and "Deliverers shall ascend Mount Zion to judge Mount Esav,"¹¹ ascribing non-Jewish status to Esav. This is an apparent contradiction.

The explanation is that there is a difference between the person Esav, son of Yitzchak and Rivka, on the one hand, and Esav referring to his children who were children of tribeswomen in Canaan, and therefore non-Jews. These were the majority in Esav's company. Ya'akov was addressing Esav and his group, a Jew and non-Jew simultaneously.

We are taught here that when we intend to bring another Jew closer to Judaism, we are not to forego any part of Torah, diminish Torah to impress or please him, and thus persuade him. It won't work. When you approach anyone at all, tell him at the outset that you kept all the 613, the full strength of Yiddishkeit evident and without any embarrassment or apologetics. Open with a forthright declaration that Yiddishkeit is not something kept hidden away at

9. Bereishis 32:6.

10. Bereishis 36:1.

11. Ovadiah 1:21.

home even when living with Lavan, and the word for “living” may also mean “stranger” as Rashi points out, a Ya’akov proudly declares that he keeps all of G-d’s commands.

Ya’akov understood an Esav perfectly well. He knew what impresses and influences an Esav. Torah formulated this as an instruction for any Jew addressing another, for his intentions are doubtless to do him good and make him better than he has been. He is not to describe himself as a deficient Jew, that he is like everybody else of other nations but a bit better. Tell the truth, that we belong to a people whose every member is one of the “faithful and children of the faithful,” and he therefore observes all the 613. The other will trust him then, for he doesn’t disguise himself or make compromises, he is not deceptive but straightforward in describing himself as one of the faithful and a child of the faithful.

The Rambam rules that every Jew regardless of his situation wants to observe all the 613 mitzvot, except that his evil impulse overpowers him at times. This is not his true self but the domination of the evil impulse, while he is truly in a state of “I keep the 613 mitzvot.” One should address another with a frank heart, stating who he is — a grandson of Ya’akov, an heir to Moshe’s Torah, the entire Torah, and inheritance is not contingent on becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah or attaining a degree of intelligence. A newborn infant is a total heir. Anyone of the “congregation of Ya’akov” is an heir. One descendant of Ya’akov addressing another, intending the other’s welfare and improvement, must begin with, “I lived with Lavan and kept the 613 mitzvot,” for this is the true status of every Jew.

This leads to success, as the narrative continues. That Jew camouflaged as an Esav “embraces and kisses”¹² him, and they weep together, with the deepest affection we can imagine. Rashi stresses this point in his commentary of “simple meaning.”

IDENTITY FIRST

There is guidance here for those whom Providence has placed in positions of influence on non-Jews, whether a city or state or an entire country. It is possible that they might calculate that to fulfill

12. Bereishis 33:4.

their mission for improving their neighborhood or city or state or country they must declare, “like all nations is the House of Yehudah,”¹³ they must act like others do in order to truly be Israel.

It must be stated forcefully that with this approach the non-Jew will instantly sense that he is being deceived, for every people has its ways and nature and its own guides. Israel has the Torah of Moshe for guidance and this applies to every individual Jew, wherever he may be and however he may be, always to live like a Jew.

And how does one live like a Jew? Each one of the “congregation of Ya’akov” has the guidance of Ya’akov himself. Ya’akov had to confront the non-Jew in the persons of Esav’s children, for they were indeed gentiles, the forebears of the kingdom of Edom, which eventually wrought the exile of Edom in which we live today. This is the reality even when by G-d’s blessing the Jew is successful, being in a land of kindness which assists the Jew in living as he sees fit, giving him the freedom to fulfill his mission of “choose life” by choosing the Torah of life and fulfilling the mitzvot that one “lives by them.”

The Jew is required to “pray for the welfare of the city,” do what is your duty for the city and country, for “your peace is dependent on its peace.”¹⁴ It is in his own self-interest, that he repay kindness with kindness, making it stronger and its foundation more firm. This is attained by efforts to insure that all its affairs be conducted according to the Seven Commands and all their ramifications.

Before he expounds on the substance of his message, there must be an introduction, who exactly is speaking and what is he, with what authority and power does he speak and urge proposals and make suggestions. He must state why others should heed his words and do as he wishes. This opening was indicated by Ya’akov, the first of the “congregation of Ya’akov,” with his first words — “with Lavan have I lived.” He is forthright in acknowledging his status in exile as a “stranger,” while emphasizing that even in exile he maintains the full force and authenticity and essence of his selfhood, without concealing himself to deceive anyone.

What is his essence, his identity, his true being? His observance of the 613.

13. Yechezkel 25:8.

14. Yirmiya 29:7.

THE POWER OF AUTHENTICITY

With this beginning statement — that he is a Jew, that he maintains the “pride of Ya’akov,” and that he has responsibilities imposed on himself by his Jewishness, even more than the usual responsibilities for the welfare of city and country, and he speaks therefore with the strength of his adherence to the 613; he personally lives by his commitment [This was the introduction Ya’akov made, first through his messengers then repeated by himself] — Then Ya’akov has influence and fulfills his duty speaking as a representative of Jews who have elected him and non-Jews who elected him. True, he is a man of many parts, not of one dimension, but his primary characteristic is that he is a son of Avraham, Yitzchok and Ya’akov, part of the congregation of Ya’akov

Since he is fully of that congregation of Ya’akov, actually fulfilling the 613 and publicly, the preparation has been made to earn everyone’s attention when he makes his proposals for the conduct of the world or country or city or neighborhood. He is heard because others have a sense of confidence that they are talking to a man of truth, who seeks truth and wants to disseminate truth, for he personally lives by the teachings of the Torah of Truth and Life that teaches how to live in the ordinaries of life as an individual and as a public figure interested in the welfare of the nation.

Though there may be any number of opinions and views, eventually there is agreement and even affection as noted earlier that when light is increased and goodness introduced, the darkness of exile is diminished and weakened. This hastens the fulfillment of “until I come to my lord in Se’ir,”¹⁵ as Rashi notes that this refers to the days of the Moshiach, when “Deliverers shall ascend Mount Zion to judge Mount Esav,” with the conclusion that “the dominion will be G-d’s.” The true and full redemption will ensue through Moshiach in our own lifetimes.



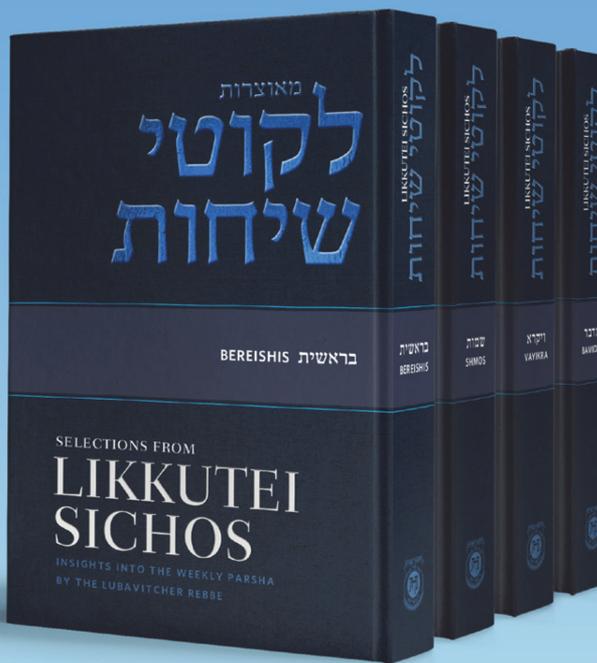
15. Bereishis 33:14.

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