

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Bo

Pesach and Shabbos

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת הַמַּצּוֹת

You shall guard the matzos (12:17)

CHARACTERIZATION THROUGH REITERATION

A term which features frequently in the pesukim dealing with Pesach is that of “*shemirah*” – guarding. In our pasuk we are told to “guard the matzos”, later in this perek,¹ it states “וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה – you shall safeguard this matter,” twice further on in *Chumash Shemos*² we are commanded “אֶת חַג הַמַּצּוֹת תִּשְׁמֹר – Guard the festival of matzos” and similarly, in *Chumash Devarim*³ we find “שְׁמֹר אֶת חֹדֶשׁ הָאֲבִיב – Guard the month of springtime.” Although each of these pesukim needs to be examined for its own particular message, the Meshech Chochmah observes that the repeated usage of the term “*shemirah*” in connection with Pesach serves to “set the tone” and reflect a significant characteristic of this festival.

What is the nature of the special association between Pesach and the concept of “guarding”?

PESACH AND SHABBOS

In order to answer this question, the Meshech Chochmah prefaces by drawing our attention to another time when the term “*shemirah*” features prominently – the day of Shabbos. The mitzvah of Shabbos is presented to us in the second set of *luchos* with the words “שְׁמֹר אֶת יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת – Guard the Shabbos day.”⁴ In *Parshas Ki Tisa*, the concept of “*shemirah*” appears three times in a brief section that deals with Shabbos:⁵ “אֲדָּ – אֶת שַׁבְּתֵי תִשְׁמְרוּ... וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת... וּשְׁמְרוּ בְּגִי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת – However, you must guard My Shabbasos... You shall guard the Shabbos... The Bnei Yisrael shall guard the Shabbos.” Here, too, the Meshech Chochmah observes that the Torah’s repeated

1 Pasuk 24.

2 23:15 and 34:18.

3 16:1.

4 *Devarim* 5:11.

5 *Shemos* 31:13-14 and 16. See also *Vayikra* 19:3 and 30, and *ibid.* 26:2.

usage of the term “*shemirah*” serves to communicate something about the nature and atmosphere of Shabbos.

The question now becomes: What is the specific connotation of the term “*shemirah*” that features so prominently with regards to both Pesach and Shabbos and what does this tell us about the relationship between these two days?

THE CONCEPT OF “SHAMOR”

The Gemara⁶ explains that the term “*shamor*” has a specific meaning in the realm of halachah, for it connotes a *lo taaseh* (negative commandment). That is, whenever the Torah uses the term “*shamor*,” the focus is on taking care not to do that which is prohibited.

Applying this concept to our discussion, it emerges that when it comes to both Shabbos and Pesach, the emphasis is on avoiding the *mitzvos lo taaseh* connected with those times, i.e. not performing *melachah* on Shabbos and not eating chametz on Pesach.

Having established this idea, the Meshech Chochmah then takes the discussion one step further. Not only does the repeated usage of “*shemirah*” define these days in terms of emphasizing their negative commandments, it even affects the nature of their positive commandments! As if to say, the concept of *shemirah* so dominates these days that the *lo taaseh* element permeates *all of their aspects* – including their *mitzvos aseh*.

How does this express itself?

HALACHIC REVERBERATIONS – EXCEPTIONAL MITZVOS

It is well known that women are obligated on a Torah level in the positive mitzvah of Shabbos – the mitzvah of making Kiddush. This is true notwithstanding the fact that there is a “*עשה שהזמן גרמא* (time-bound positive mitzvah)” from which women are, as a rule, exempt. The background to this exceptional situation is presented in the Gemara:⁷

“Zachor”⁸ and ‘shamor’⁹ were stated together (by Hashem at Har Sinai, which teaches us that) anyone who is obligated in ‘shamor’ is also obligated in ‘zachor’. Since women are obligated in ‘shamor’,¹⁰ they are also obligated in ‘zachor’.

The simple understanding of this Gemara is that Hashem mentioning “*zachor*” and “*shamor*” together had the effect of equating them halachically, with the result that the mitzvah of “*zachor*” becomes exceptional to the general exemption of women from mitzvos of this category. However, the Meshech Chochmah explains that there is a deeper idea expressing itself in this halachah. The mitzvah of Kiddush is indeed unique, not “only” in terms of its halachos, but also in terms of its very nature and classification as a positive mitzvah.

6 *Shavuos 4a.*

7 *Berachos 20b.*

8 Remembering Shabbos, i.e. the positive mitzvah of Kiddush.

9 Guarding Shabbos, i.e. the negative mitzvah of not doing *melachah*.

10 For women are only exempt from time-bound positive mitzvos, not negative ones.

As we have seen, the dominant theme with regards to Shabbos is that of “*shemirah*,” which relates to *mitzvos lo taaseh*. Ultimately, this theme affects every aspect of Shabbos – including the positive ones. This means that even the positive mitzvah of Kiddush partakes of the negative “*shemirah*” aspect of Shabbos. One could call it a “*lo taaseh-diker mitzvas aseh*” – a “negative positive mitzvah”!

It is this composite makeup of “*zachor*” – a positive mitzvah with an “admixture” of negative – that is represented by it being uttered simultaneously with “*shamor*” – the negative mitzvah itself. This unique status, in turn, has Halachic ramifications. Since the mitzvah of Kiddush partakes of the *lo taaseh* qualities of “*shamor*,” women *naturally* become obligated in it, for it now does not *fully* belong to the category of “positive time-bound mitzvos” from which they are exempt!

Interestingly, we find a similar situation when it comes to Pesach. Although eating matzah on Seder night is a positive time-bound mitzvah, women are nevertheless obligated in it on a Torah level. Here, too, the background to this exception is presented in the Gemara:¹¹

The Torah juxtaposes the prohibition against eating chametz with the mitzvah of eating matzah,¹² (teaching us that) whoever is obligated not to eat chametz is obligated to eat matzah.

Here, too, the Meshech Chochmah explains that the halachah is not being derived from the simple juxtaposition of the positive with the negative; but rather, the juxtaposition itself is indicative of the influence that the *lo taaseh* of not eating chametz has on the *aseh* of eating matzah. For, as we have seen, the concept of *shemirah* is dominant in the festival of Pesach as well, with the result that it even influences the positive mitzvah of matzah and hence, women are obligated in that mitzvah.

This is the stunning and penetrating analysis of the Meshech Chochmah, whereby taking note of the way in which the *pesukim* describe a mitzvah yields an appreciation of its unique nature, which can then provide a basis for an “inner” understanding of its halachos as well.¹³

11 *Pesachim 43b.*

12 See *Devarim 16:3.*

13 This analysis can have further ramifications relating to this halachah. In a brief parenthetical comment, the Meshech Chochmah remarks, “And Tosafos’ question from shaatnez and tzitzis is thereby removed.” The reference is to a question of Tosafos in Yevamos (4a) where the Gemara identifies a hekesh between the mitzvos of not wearing shaatnez and making tzitzis. *Tosafos ask, why are women not obligated in the mitzvah of tzitzis? Let us say, “Whoever is included in the issur of shaatnez is included in the mitzvah of tzitzis” in the same way that we said regarding chametz and matzah! According to the Meshech Chochmah, we can understand why there is no such halachah. The way Chazal learned that women are obligated in kiddush on Shabbat and matzah on Pesach is not based on a hekesh and juxtaposition alone. Rather, it was through an understanding of how the positive and negative mitzvos in each relate to each other, with the negative dominating. Shaatnez and tzitzis have no such relationship to each other, and therefore there is no reason not to exempt women from the timebound mitzvah of tzitzis.*

ROOT SIMILARITIES

To summarize what we have seen so far: Shabbos and Pesach are similar in that the negative mitzvos within those days form the “dominant theme,” affecting even their positive mitzvos. The question we may wish to ask is, why are these two days different in this way?

This question is not addressed by the Meshech Chochmah in our Parsha, but perhaps may be gleaned from a parallel discussion which may be found later on, in Chumash Devarim.¹⁴ There, the Meshech Chochmah surveys the *Shalosh Regalim* of Pesach, Shavuos and Succos and notes that they represent a progression in terms of passivity vs. activity on the part of Bnei Yisrael in their relationship with Hashem.

The festival of Pesach was bestowed upon us by Hashem with very little input from our side. On the contrary, our actions at that stage left much to be desired, including even avodah zarah, and were not conducive to forming a connection with Hashem. Nevertheless, Hashem initiated the connection with us unilaterally, and that is represented by the festival of Pesach. In contrast, the later festivals saw more active participation on our part, with Shavuos being preceded by three days of preparation to receive the Torah, as well as by our attaining the state of national unity which would make us eligible to receive the Torah, culminating in our formal and total acceptance with the words “*ונעשה ונשמע*.” Succos, too, saw us involved in donating towards the building of the Mishkan, enabling the return of the Clouds of Glory which the succah commemorates and celebrates.

COUNTING THE OMER – “FROM THE MORROW OF THE SHABBOS”

Historically, therefore, of all the three festivals, Pesach was the one where our role was the most passive.¹⁵ In this respect, it is essentially similar to Shabbos which commemorates the creation of the world, something in which we had no part at all. Indeed, this aspect of similarity between these two days may be perceived within the words of the Torah itself.

The mitzvah of counting the omer is presented with the words,¹⁶ “*וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמָּחֳרַת*” *הַשַּׁבָּת* – You shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the rest day (Shabbos)” We know from tradition that the word “Shabbos” in this pasuk actually refers to the first day of Pesach. In this regard, the Gemara¹⁷ goes to great length in demonstrating, through various applications of midrash halachah, that this is indeed the case. The question persists, however, as to *why* the Torah would refer to Pesach as “Shabbos,” and not simply as “Pesach” or “Moed”?

The mitzvah of counting the omer accompanies our preparation to receive the Torah. In terms of the journey from Pesach towards Shavuos, it represents the graduation from playing a passive role in our relationship with Hashem to a more active one. Therefore, in the context of this mitzvah, Pesach itself is referred to as “Shabbos”! The Torah commands that we begin counting from the morrow of *the festival which partakes of the*

14 5:12.

15 Although, as we discussed last week, Bnei Yisrael had outstanding merits through which they were deserving of redemption, such as not changing their names or language etc., these, too, were passive in nature, representing refraining from doing that which was incorrect.

16 *Vayikra 23:15.*

17 *Menachot 65a-66a.*

passive quality of Shabbos, towards a stage where we are more active participants.

Coming back to our Parsha, perhaps this is what lies behind the emphasis on “*shamor*” – avoiding negative prohibitions – in the two mitzvos of Shabbos and Pesach. Since each of these mitzvos reflect a passive role on the part of the Jewish people, the dominant *halachic* theme *within the mitzvos themselves* is also one of passivity and avoiding that which the Torah has forbidden on those occasions.

All this exemplifies a trademark feature of the Meshech Chochmah, namely, the synthesis and interplay between the realms of halachah (the dominant role of *lo taaseh* in Shabbos and Pesach), *machshavah* (the differing historical roles of Bnei Yisrael in the various festivals) and *parshanut* (the reiteration of a term in various contexts as indicating the distinct nature of that mitzvah), blending them all together into a symphony called Torah.