



לקראת זמן מותן תורתינו תשפ"א

A Special Yom Tov Message from
חבר מועצת גדולי התורה באמריקה

שליט"א HaRav Yitzchok Sorotzkin

Rosh HaYeshiva of Mesivta of Lakewood and Telshe



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חברי מועצת גדולי התורה באמריקה

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Preparation for Kabbalas HaTorah

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Rosh HaYeshiva, Mesivta of Lakewood and Telshe

The Purpose of Klal Yisrael

When writing about the mitzvah of *Sefiras HaOmer*, the Sefer HaChinuch explains that the *ikar* of Klal Yisrael is that we received the Torah. Rav Saadia Gaon says, “*Ein umaseinu uma ela b'Torasa.*” We know from Chazal that the Ribbono Shel Olam created the world only because of Klal Yisrael and only because we are the one nation that was going to get the Torah, got the Torah, learns the Torah and is *mekayem* the mitzvos of the Ribbono Shel Olam. Chazal tell us that this was the purpose of our leaving Mitzrayim, and the Ribbono Shel Olam told Moshe that this was the *zechus* in which Klal Yisrael would be redeemed from Mitzrayim. It was all because we were going to receive the Torah.

Chazal tell us that every year, when the *zman* of Shavous comes, Klal Yisrael is being *mekabel* the Torah once again. The idea of counting *Sefiras HaOmer* is to show how we are so excited, how much we are yearning. We cannot wait and are counting the days. When are we going to be *zoche* to be *mekabel* the Torah?

The Prerequisite for Kabbalas HaTorah

There is a very interesting midrash that says that the Ribbono Shel Olam really wanted to give Klal Yisrael the Torah immediately upon their leaving Mitzrayim. But at that point, the Torah refers to Klal Yisrael with a *lashon rabbim*: “*V'yachanu v'yisu.*” This shows that Klal Yisrael were *nosim b'meriva v'chonim b'meriva*, and were therefore neither *ra'ui* nor ready to receive the Torah. *Derachecha darchei no'am vechol nesivoseha shalom*, the Torah is pleasant, and all of its roads are peaceful and harmonious. So the Ribbono Shel Olam said that as long as Klal Yisrael are quarreling and have arguments with one another, it is not the time to give them the Torah because at that stage, Klal Yisrael is not ready to accept such a Torah.

But when speaking of our arrival at Har Sinai, the *passuk* says “*vayichan*” in *lashon yachid*. The midrash teaches us that Klal Yisrael became *hamunia echas*, we became united, unified *k'ish echad, b'lev echad, k'guf echad, k'neshamah achas*. The essence of Klal Yisrael is that they are really one *guf* and one *neshamah*, and that is how we arrived at *Ma'amad Har Sinai*. So the Ribbono Shel Olam said that now He could give the Torah because we were an *umah oheves shalom*, a nation that loves peace and harmony and were now fitting to be *mekabel* the Torah.

What changed?

How do we understand the cause of this transformation? What enabled Klal Yisrael to come to Ma'amad Har Sinai as one unit, as a *guf echad*? When we left Mitzrayim, we were fighting and bickering. Yet all of a sudden, when we came to Matan Torah, we changed: we were unified and *ohev shalom* and *rodef shalom*? What happened? I think that what happened is as follows. There is a beautiful Chassid Ya'avetz on *Maseches Avos* that explains what the work of Klal Yisrael was in the days before *Matan Torah*. During the *tekufas hashanah* from *Yetzias Mitzrayim* until Shavous, the *avodah* was to work on developing wonderful character traits, and Klal Yisrael worked on perfecting their middos. The Ribbono Shel Olam wanted them to work on acquiring middos tovos and uprooting any middah ra'ah because the Torah can only dwell in person who is free of middos ra'os and has middos tovos. We know about the concept of *derech erez kadmah l'Torah*, which means that the Torah cannot really become part and parcel of Klal Yisrael and have the effect that it has on us unless we are a nation that has wonderful middos.

Through their efforts, they acquired such beautiful middos tovos that they reached the level of *k'ish echad b'lev echad*, and that is why they were *zoche* to receive the Torah. That is what we have to strive for every year during this *tekufah* before Matan Torah. We must endeavor to love the other person, to be nice to someone else, to be kind to someone else, to be a *rachman* towards someone else, to be *mevater*, to give to somebody else. This is the beauty of Klal Yisrael, when we can all be together, unified as one homogenous group.

The Power of Shalom

I would like to share a Gaon that appears at the end of Megillas Esther. The Gaon writes that the *megillah* speaks about how Mordechai was an *ish shalom* who spread shalom to all of Klal Yisrael; it says that he was *dover shalom l'chol zaro*. The Gaon explains that shalom is the *klal* and the *levush* of all of the middos tovos. In order for a person to be an *ish shalom*, he has to have all of the wonderful, beautiful character traits. A person like that has to be a *rachman*, he has to be a *vatran*, he cannot be an *ish ka'as*, he has to have *anavah*, and he has to have *savlanus*. So we see that in order for a person to be able to live and be friendly to other people, he really has to embody a complete list of all of the wonderful, beautiful middos, with shalom at their head.

I believe that this is the point that Chazal intended to make. When Klal Yisrael were fighting and bickering, that meant that in essence, they were not having middos tovos. We were not *vatranim*, we did not have *rachmanus* on others, we did not look for the good in others, and we were not *Ohavei Yisrael*. On the contrary, Klal Yisrael possessed middos ra'os, which caused the Ribbono Shel Olam to say that He was unable to give the Torah to a nation who did not have good, proper middos. Because they were lacking the *derech erez* that is *kadmah l'Torah*, and because the Torah's lesson is shalom. *HaTorah kulah shalom*. The beautiful lessons that we learn throughout the Torah show us the correct *hanhagah* of a Yid who has such wonderful character traits. It is only possible for us to receive the Torah if we are *ohev shalom*, if we live in a fashion that we are nice to each other, we are unified, and we are as one, in a way that I feel towards the other person as if he is my brother, like he is a part of me. Then, we can get the Torah.

The Power of Maseches Avos

The Chassid Ya'avetz says that we know that the *minhag* Yisrael is to learn *Maseches Avos* in the weeks after Pesach leading up to Shavous and to continue learning it after Shavous. He asks why we learn *Maseches Avos* in particular, and he answers that the reason is that *Maseches Avos* includes all of the middos tovos that a person has to have. It also teaches us about the middos ra'os that a person should stay away from and explains what it means to have real, beautiful middos.

Since we are going to be *mekabel* the Torah again on Shavous, we have to prepare ourselves, just like they prepared themselves when they went out of Mitzrayim. The work is *tikkun hamiddos*. Therefore, we are busy learning *Maseches Avos* and internalizing the lessons that we are supposed to learn from studying it.

The Chassid Ya'avetz explains that *Maseches Avos* is divided into five different *perakim*. The sixth and last *perek* is called "Kinyan Torah." He explains that this means that *davka* because we go through the journey of five weeks of proper *tikkun hamiddos*, we are able to reach the point where we can be *mekabel* Torah. This works out perfectly with the *Pirkei Avos* learning schedule, as the sixth week of *limud*, the culmination of *Maseches Avos* when we learn the *perek* of "Kinyan Torah," coincides with the week of Shavous. After going through this process, we are ready to be *mekabel* the Torah.

Now we are left with a question. If the tachlis of learning *Maseches Avos* is to prepare us for Matan Torah by getting us to work on our middos, then why do we continue to learn it after Shavous when we have already received the Torah? We really should stop, but we know that we keep learning *Maseches Avos* straight through the summer months, right up until the new year. Why is that? I think the answer is as follows.

Torah Changes our Middos

There is a beautiful Gaon in Mishlei that says that *HaTorah mevi'ah lidei kol middos tovos. V'al yedei HaTorah ha'adam batuach mikol middos ra'os*. Torah is something that beautifies the middos of a person. Through Torah, a person acquires the most wonderful character traits and is *batuach mikol middos ra'os*. The Gaon explains that without Torah, it is so difficult to work on and change one's middos. And what works to improve one middah will not work for a different middah. Rav Yisrael Salanter is commonly quoted as saying that it is harder for a person to change one bad middah than to learn the entire Shas. But the Gaon tells us that there is one thing that can change a person's middos, and that is *Limud HaTorah*. When you connect with the Toras Hashem and see the *deracheha darchei no'am* of the Ribbono Shel Olam, when you learn from the Torah about all of the wonderful middos of the Avos and Moshe Rabbeinu, it transforms and elevates you to tremendous heights in middos tovos. When you learn Torah, it is natural that your middos are going to get purified even without making an effort because you are working on the Torah, which has the power to purify, elevate, and refine your middos.

The Gaon says that this concept is hinted at in the last Mishnah of *perek hei* of *Avos*. Ben Bag Bag says, “*Hafach bah v'hafach bah... v'ein lecha middah tovah heimenah.*” The Gaon explains that Ben Bag Bag was saying that when a person starts learning *Maseches Avos* and sees so many middos tovos, he might despair because he will think to himself, “How am I ever going to acquire all these middos tovos? How am I going to combat all of the middos ra'os? What is the *eitzah*?” So Ben Bagbag is giving us the *eitzah*. He says, *varfzich arain in lernin*, delve into Torah, *hafach bah v'hafach bah*. Learn Torah, and the more you do, the more you are going to improve. *Ein lecha middah tovah heimenah*, there is no other way of acquiring middos tovos. That is what Ben Bagbag is telling us. He is reassuring us that we do not need to worry about how we are going to attain all of these middos tovos; all we have to do is learn Torah and we will automatically develop tremendous middos.

Marry a Talmid Chacham

There is an interesting Rambam in *Hilchos Issurei Bi'ah* that comments on a Gemara in *Pesachim*. The halachah is that a person should marry off his daughter to a Talmid Chacham. But you would not believe the reason why one is supposed to do so. The Rambam states, *ki ein davar meguneh v'lo meriva b'veiso shel Talmid Chacham*; marry off your daughter to a Talmid Chacham because of the Talmid Chacham's good middos. There won't be any quarrels, any fights. We are living through times of so many problems in *Shalom Bayis*. The Rambam tells us that if you want your daughter to have *Shalom Bayis*, make sure to get a son-in-law who is a Talmid Chacham; they will have such wonderful *Shalom Bayis* and middos tovos of wanting to live beautifully with one another.

I want to share a very interesting story with you. People know half of the story, and I think I have an understanding of what the other half was. Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky became a son-in-law to Rav Elya Lazer, the *dayan* of Vilna, at a very young age. His future *shver* wrote a letter to the great Rav Yisrael Salanter talking about the illustriousness of the *chosson*. Rav Elya Lazer told Rav Yisrael that he has such a Talmid Chochom, such a *gaon*, such a holy person. He gave so many accolades about Rav Chaim Ozer because he wanted to share that *Baruch Hashem*, he was *zoche* to get such a special *eidem*. Everyone says that Rav Yisrael responded by asking why Rav Elya Lazer was telling him all of that and why it was so important. He said that the Torah does not tell us that we are supposed to marry a *gaon*, a Talmid Chacham. It says that a person should marry a *mensch*: *Ki yikach ish ishah*. But you did not write anything to me about his *menschlichkeit*.

Is he a *mensch*? Does he have middos tovos, or not? This is the way everyone tells the story.

I believe that Reb Lazer wrote back to Rav Yisrael, “If I told you that he is a Talmid Chacham, then you know that he has the most sterling, wonderful character traits. This is self-understood because someone who learns Torah and is a Talmid Chacham is an *ohev shalom*. We know from Chazal that Talmidei Chachamim are *marbim shalom ba'olam*. How do they increase shalom and middos tovos in the world? Because it says, “*v'chol banayich limudei Hashem, v'rav shalom bonayich.*” By spreading Torah, by showing the world the beauty of Torah and causing everyone to want to learn Torah and emulate the Talmidei Chachamim and grow from the *limudim* that they hear from the Talmidei Chachamim, that develops the one who learns into a Talmid Chacham who will have the most wonderful middos tovos.

Two Types of Derech Eretz

The Rambam writes in *Hilchos De'os* that “*Hachacham nikar b'chachmaso u'veidosav*, you can discern a Talmid Chacham not just by his wisdom but also by his wonderful, beautiful character traits. The Rambam says that the Talmid Chacham is *muval bahem misha'ar ha'am*, he is on a higher plane than everyone else; just like his *chochma* is greater, so too he is on a much loftier level of middos tovos. There is actually a different Shulchan Aruch for the middos of a Talmid Chacham than for a regular person. There are two *masechtos* that discuss *derech eretz*: *Derech Eretz Rabbah* and *Derech Eretz Zuta*. *Derech Eretz Rabbah* is for regular people, and *Derech Eretz Zuta* is a special *masechta* just for Talmidei Chachamim that instructs them how to conduct their lives. The opening sentence of *Maseches Derech Eretz Zuta* says that Talmidei Chachamim are *anavim*, *shiflei ru'ach*, and *memuleh*—the Nachlas Yaakov explains that *memuleh* means that they are full of middos tovos. Why do Talmidei Chachamim have a separate *masechta* for *derech eretz*? Their middos tovos are the product of their learning Torah, and the Torah elevates them and brings them to a higher level of middos tovos than regular people. You cannot compare the middos of the Talmid Chacham to the middos of a regular person.

In addition, a Talmid Chacham cannot say that he will just act the way everyone else does, as he is expected to live on a higher level of middos tovos. I believe this concept is what the *tanna* Rav Elazar ben Azaria meant when he said, “*Im ein Torah, ein derech eretz, v'im ein derech eretz, ein Torah*, Without Torah, you cannot have *derech eretz*, and without *derech eretz*, you cannot have Torah” This sounds contradictory; where does it begin? It seems to me that his message is as follows. *Im ein derech eretz, ein Torah*. There is a certain level of *derech eretz*, of *kadmah l'Torah* that must be present in order for Torah to be absorbed by the person and be able to change him. This requires that a person work on his middos and make the *tikkun hamiddos* of *derech eretz kadmah l'Torah*. But that is not the end result. After you learn Torah, then *im ein Torah, ein derech eretz*. This is talking about a totally different *derech eretz*. The first one is the *derech eretz rabbah*, and the second one is the *derech eretz zuta*. So the *ma'amar* is saying: *Im ein derech eretz rabbah, ein Torah*. But *im ein Torah, ein derech eretz zuta*.

This answers the question of why we continue to learn *Avos* after Shavous. At that point, it is a different *Avos*. It is supposed to be taken on a higher plane, on a higher level of refinement. Once we accepted the Torah, once we learned the Torah, and once we got elevated from the Torah, our *darga* and our middos are now at a different, higher level, and that is why we continue to learn *Avos* after *Matan Torah*.

The Talmidim of Rabi Akiva

Everybody is familiar with the Gemara in *Yevamos* that says that Rabi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of *talmidim*. The Ribbono Shel Olam took out a *charon af*, and they all died, *rachmana litzlan*, in the *tekufah* between Pesach and Shavous. Can you imagine? 24,000 *talmidim* were *niftar*, the prime students of Rabi Akiva. The Gemara tells us that the world was desolate; it was destroyed because of this loss. The *talmidim* all died from a terrible *machalah* called *askara*, which affects the throat and the stomach (some say it is diphtheria).

The Maharsha asks why they died specifically from this illness. The Gemara tells us they were *lo nahagu kavod zeh l'zeh*, they did not treat each other with proper respect. The Maharsha explains that not treating the other person with *kavod*, not seeing his *ma'alos*, and looking down at his *chesronos* leads to speaking *lashon hara* about him, saying that he is not so great, etc. The *talmidim* of Rabi Akiva were speaking negatively about each other, and that *lashon hara* is what caused them to die from this terrible *machalah of askara*.

There is a midrash in Koheles that says that Rabi Akiva said that his *talmidim* were *einehem tzarah b'Torah zeh lazeh*. They hated each other. The Bais Yosef notes that they were not nice to one another, they did not love one another, and they did not want to help each other in Torah. They had *tzaras ayin*, *merivah*, and *machlokes*; their *middos tovos* were lacking. I believe this is the reason why they died specifically in this *tekufa* between Pesach and Shavous. Since this *tekufah* is the time when we are supposed to work on our character traits, this is when the *talmidim* of Rabi Akiva were taken to task for their failure to do so.

Who Was Rabi Akiva?

But it is really even deeper than that. The Chassid Ya'avetz on *Avos* gives us the following insight. Why did the daughter of Kalba Savua marry Rabi Akiva? Rabi Akiva was not a prestigious person, nor did he have a good lineage. He was an *am ha'aretz*! Nevertheless, she wanted so badly to marry him, even though it was against her father's will. What is it that drove her to marry Rabi Akiva? The Chassid Ya'avetz says that she wanted it because of Rabi Akiva's *middos tovos*. Kalba Savua's daughter saw that Rabi Akiva possessed the most wonderful character traits, and she understood that with those *middos tovos*, Rabi Akiva was a *kli muchshar* to be *mekabel Torah*. She realized that the Torah would dwell in him and that he would grow when he would start learning it. Rabi Akiva did not have the opportunity to learn, and he did not think he could make anything of himself. And then he got inspired. She pushed him as a wonderful wife, and she encouraged him by telling him that he had great potential. And the rest is history. Rabi Akiva became the *amud of Torah shebe'al peh*. In the beginning of *Maseches Megillah*, the Gemara tells us, "*kulho stimtai aliba d'Rabi Akiva*, all Torah comes from Rabi Akiva. All the Torah that we have came from Rabi Akiva and his *talmidim*."

But there was a problem with the *talmidim*. They had a rebbe like Rabi Akiva who personified the most *helige* *middos* possible, yet they did not emulate him. They did not follow in his ways and develop their *middos tovos*. Without proper *middos tovos*, they were unable to be the ones to transmit the Torah to future *doros* because Talmidei Chachamim have to bring out the most wonderful, sterling character traits. So the Ribbono Shel Olam said that it was not possible to build a world based on their Torah, and he took them all away from this world. Instead, Rabi Akiva built a *kometz* of new *talmidim* who were concerned about each other and the world. They lived as an *ish echad*, *b'lev echad*, *k'guf echad*; they were nice to each other and felt so much for one another. Those were the *roshei ha'am* that the Ribbono Shel Olam wanted for Klal Yisrael.

What Does This Mean for Us?

We need to act upon the lesson of what this *zman* obligates us to do. We are heading towards *Kabbalas HaTorah*. The Torah is our essence, our life—it is not only our *tachlis* but also the *tachlis* of the entire *b'riah*. Torah is what makes us the most beautiful nation in the world. We see what the world looks like without Torah. *Rachmana Litzlan*, the terrible *hashchasa* in the rest of the world has emerged. We see such middos ra'os, such *achzariyus*, the most terrible, the lowest of the low in middos. But we look at ourselves and say, “*Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu, u'ma naim goraleinu.*” We should be dancing for joy that *Baruch Hashem*, the world does not appreciate us because they are jealous of us. As the Gemara says, “*lama nikra shma har Sinai? Ki m'sham yatzah sinah l'olam.*”

Today we see how the world has been driven to the pits by liberalism and has descended to the level of Dor Hamabul, *rachmana litzlan*. This serves to highlight our *tachliss*. Let us be so full of *simcha* that the Ribbono Shel Olam chose us, the *am segula*, the *am hanivchar*, the nation that has the most wonderful middos tovos.

Our Kabbalas HaTorah

Even if Klal Yisrael has a small deficiency, we still see the beauty—*mi k'amcha Yisrael*. Let us be happy with Kabbalas HaTorah by working on our middos in advance so that we will be *ra'ui* to get the Torah. *Be'ezras Hashem*, if we all improve our middos beforehand, then the Torah will be able to elevate us to higher *madreigos*, and we will be *zoche* to attain *deracheha darchei no'am v'chol nesivoseha shalom*. This will cause us to bring out a tremendous *Kiddush Shem Shamayim* in the world, and that is the *tachlis* of Klal Yisrael. To show what it means to be a Yid, to show *hecherkeit*, there should not be any *machlokes* in Klal Yisrael. There should be shalom in Klal Yisrael. Everyone should try to live together and think about another person, help another person, be kind to another person, and be loving to one another. When we will all be *ohavei shalom* and *rodfei shalom* and have these wonderful, beautiful character traits, then we will be *zocheh* to the *bi'as Go'el Tzedek* because the Mishnah in *Idiyus* says, “*Ein Eliyahu ba ela la'asos shalom b'yisrael.*” Eliyahu is primarily going to come, the Rambam explains in his *peirush* on the Mishnah, to eradicate *sinah* in Klal Yisrael, to ensure that Klal Yisrael is going to be a nation that is *k'guf echad b'lev echad*. Let us prepare ourselves properly so that we are *zocheh b'karov* to *Bi'as Mashiach Tzidkeinu bimheira b'yameinu amen*.

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