



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Chukat

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July 16, 2016

Chukat

Of Minstrels and Metaphors



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

A sermon is majorly enhanced by a good story, anecdote, or parable. Nothing like a solid metaphor or sharp analogy to express an idea which resonates with an audience.

But what about life – is life literal or metaphorical? Is the food we eat only food, or does it represent something more? Is there a hidden message secreted within the surface reality that we experience on a daily basis?

A verse in this week’s Torah reading quotes the poets who speak in parables, the minstrels who deal in metaphors, the soliloquists who trade in symbolic simile.

In Hebrew they are called the *moshlim*. Who are they?

The Talmud and the Kabbalah call them the “rulers.” What do they rule?

And what do they teach us about ruling life, about finding poetry – metaphorical and literal – in day to day occurrences?

The answers and questions – and this sermon as a whole – are greatly enhanced by a pair of exquisitely crafted parables from the inimitable Maggid of Dubno.

To be taken literally (and metaphorically).

**OF MINSTRELS AND METAPHORS:
A LITERAL SERMON ABOUT PARABLES, ANALOGIES,
ALLEGORIES AND SIMILIES**

1. Maggid of Dubno

Rabbi Yaakov Kranz – better known as the Maggid of Dubno – was a story teller who lived in the 18th century. He was a master of the parable, gifted with the sublime ability to deploy the appropriate analogy in order to convey a fine and abstract truth in a concrete yet digestible manner.

He was once asked why it is that people love parables so much. Of course, he answered with a parable, a story about two characters – one named *Emet* (which means “truth” in Hebrew) and one named *Mashal* (which means “parable”):

Emet was once walking down the street stark naked, bedecked like the day his mother gave birth to him. No one invited *Emet* in for a cup of coffee; everyone shunned *Emet* like the plague; all wanted *Emet* as far away as possible from their homes. Whoever came upon *Emet* in the street, ran away from him in fear.

One day, all sad and alone, *Emet* met *Mashal* on a street corner. *Mashal* was festooned in the latest fashions, swathed in haute couture. Said *Mashal* to *Emet*: “Tell me, good sir, why do you roam the streets all downcast and bitter?”

“I’m old,” replied *Emet*, “very old, and no one wants to know me.”

“Not because you are old do people not love you,” countered *Mashal*. “I too am old, and yet the older I get the more people love me. I’ll let you in on a little secret about these folks: they love it when things are dressed up; they adore things that are adorned. Allow me to dress you up as I dress myself, in the latest fashions and the hippest duds, and you will see that people will love and embrace you.”

Emet heeded *Mashal's* advice. Until this very day, *Emet* and *Mashal* walk hand in hand and people admire, love and embrace them wherever they go.¹

That is an excellent parable – a parable about a parable (perhaps: a parable wrapped in a parable). No one likes the naked truth. But a *mashal* – a parable, a proverb, an anecdote, a metaphor, an analogy, a simile – creates a magnificent garment to help us bedeck truth in such a way that it is acceptable to us.

2. What is a Mashal?

The English language has various words to convey this concept of mashal: .

- parable – a story that conveys a deeper truth;
- analogy or allegory – comparing one word to another (such as heart and pump for example);
- metaphor – a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable: “I had fallen through a trapdoor of depression,” said Mark, who was fond of theatrical metaphors;
- simile – a figure of speech involving the comparison of one thing with another thing of a different kind, used to make a description more emphatic or vivid (for example, crazy like a fox, or as brave as a lion);
- proverb – a pithy saying conveying a deep truth, called in Hebrew *mashal*, or its plural: *mishlei*, as in the book of *Mishlei*, Proverbs.

King Solomon, author of the Book of Proverbs, was called the wisest of men because he could dress up the profoundest truths in the most relatable proverbs and parables.

¹ <http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36184&st=&pgnum=24>.

The first *mashal* in history is, believe it or not, the Torah. The Torah is in fact called by King David *Mashal HaKadmoni*, the Proverb of the Ancient One, the primordial proverb.² The Torah's lessons are cloaked in stories, in occurrences, episodes and events. These events certainly happened in real time, but additionally they convey G-d's word, and as such are also vehicles and metaphors for the ineffable levels of reality.³

Let us then look into the *Mashal HaKadmoni* to understand what a *mashal* is all about and how it can better our lives.

3. Parshat Chukat

Our Torah reading this week, *Parshat Chukat*, contains many fascinating truths – some of them blatant and revealed for all to see; others dressed up in the beautiful garments of parable and analogy.

It begins with the mitzvah of the Red Heifer, and it concludes with a victorious war against the Amorite kings, Sichon and Og. In this war, the Nation of Israel captured the land east of the Jordan River, a location from which it would march into the Promised Land. This is how the Torah describes that war:

*Israel sent messengers to Sichon the king of the Amorites, saying: "Let us pass through your land. We will not turn into fields or vineyards, nor drink well water. We shall walk along the king's road, until we have passed through your territory." But Sichon did not permit Israel to pass through his territory, and Sichon gathered all his people and went out to the desert toward Israel. He arrived at Jahaz and fought against Israel. Israel smote him with the sword and took possession of his land from Arnon to Jabbok, as far as the children of Ammon, for the border of the children of Ammon was strong. Israel took all these cities, and the Israelites dwelt in all the cities of the Amorites, in Cheshbon and all its villages. For Cheshbon was the city of Sichon, king of the Amorites, and he had fought against the first king of Moab, taking all his land from his possession, as far as Arnon.*⁴

² I Samuel 24:13-14 and Rashi ad loc.

³ See Sefer Halikutim, erech Mashal.

⁴ Numbers 21:21-26.

Then the Torah continues with a verse that seems very odd:

Al ken yomru hamoshlim bo'u cheshbon tiboneh v'tikonem ir sichon.

The minstrels (hamoshlim⁵) therefore say: "Come to Cheshbon. Build and establish the city Sichon."⁶

And here is where things get interesting:

The Torah uses the Hebrew word *hamoshlim* for minstrels who dabble in parable and metaphor, but that word can also be translated as "rulers."

The obvious question here is: What is this verse coming to add? Why do we need *moshlim* (minstrels) to tell us the obvious? We already know from the previous narrative that Cheshbon is the city of Sichon and that Israel captured it from the Amorites.

4. The Talmudic Explanation

The Talmud feels compelled to explain this verse in a metaphorical way. Why? Because its simple meaning seems to have already been conveyed but the reason for the repetition is not clear. Says the Talmud:

Why is it written, *The minstrels [hamoshlim] therefore say...? Hamoshlim* refers to those who rule (*moshel*) over their natures.

Why does it say *come to Cheshbon...? This means come let us calculate* (since *cheshbon* is a "calculation/account" in Hebrew) and take an accounting of this world (*cheshbono shel olam*)... the loss of a mitzvah against its gain, and the gain of a sin against its loss.

⁵ The commentaries translate the word *hamoshlim* in different ways: poets, or makers of parables (Targum Yonathan; Rashbam; Bachya), possibly denoting prophets (Rashbam), women who make up parables (Lekach Tov), or people who speak in parables (Septuagint). *Mosh'lim* in Hebrew also means 'rulers' (Radak, Sherashim; Tur), possibly the governors under Sichon mentioned in Joshua 13:21 (Yehudah HaChasid). Some say that they were Balaam and his father Beor (See Numbers 22:5; Bamidbar Rabbah 19:30; Rashi; Sefer HaYashar). See Jeremiah 48:45.

⁶ Numbers 21:27.

Why does it say *T'baneh v'tikonen, Build and establish...*? If you do so, you will build in this world and establish [a reward] in the world to come.⁷

In other words, the Talmud interprets this verse so as to teach us something new and profound. Those who rule over their natures will come to wisely calculate that the effort of a mitzvah is surely worth the gains while the ease of a sin is surely not worth the losses. Such people build a life in this world and establish a life in the next world.

5. A Spiritual Explanation

That's how the Talmud explains the metaphor of the verse. And then come the teachings of Chassidut, the inner dimension of the Torah, to explain the metaphor of the Talmud in spiritual terms.

In the mystical literature of Chassidut,⁸ whose teachings reveal the inner meaning behind life's profound parables, metaphors and analogies, the matter is explained as follows:

Our souls come down into this material world where true reality is hidden. All we see is the façade, the dressings concealing the essence of existence. So say the *moshlim*, the rulers of their natures: "Come let us take a calculation of the world (*olam*), of the hidden (*helem*)."

World in Hebrew (*olam*) comes from the root of the word for concealment (*helem*).

We come into this concealed world to rule – to control and rule over our natures, revealing the hidden, which is couched in the parable of the material layers of existence.

⁷ Bava Batra 78b.

⁸ See Likkutei Torah, Chukat, pp. 64dff (and citations). Ohr Hatorah, Bamidbar, Chukat, p. 883ff. Sefer Hamaamorim 5684 pp. 238ff. Kuntres 12-13 Tamuz 5696, beginning.

Our souls descend into this world to find the hidden messages concealed beneath the outer layers of matter and biology. We do so by ruling over our natures and weighing the short-term gains of doing what's momentarily pleasurable against the effort and work of doing what's right. Though the reward is hidden in mystery, and the truth is dressed up in metaphor and parable, we don't get distracted and seduced by instant gratification. Instead, we rule over the concealment by uncovering the inner truths beneath the shrouds and behind the curtains.

And when we live like this, *t'baneh v'tikonem*, our lives will be built now, here, in this physical world, as well as be established for all eternity in the world to come.

6. Sichon

That leaves us with the repeated and mysterious reference to the city of Sichon. What is that all about?

Sichon is spelled with a *samach*; but it could be read with a *shin*. It could be read as *Sichah*, talk,⁹ which actually refers to talking to G-d, to prayer.¹⁰

So this is the message: "Come let us make a calculation about this hidden world and let us make it within prayer."

Prayer is like an oasis. You set aside all other matters and you focus on the true meaning of your life. Only during prayer can we achieve the peace of mind and wherewithal to stop right here and now – in this world – and make a calculation of what existence is all about.

Mindfulness is all the rage today. But long before it became popular Jews have been praying for thousands of years, putting everything aside, and focusing on the inner truths that are concealed in the shrouds of our outer experiences.

⁹ See mystical sources cited *ibid*.

¹⁰ Genesis 24:63.

7. Personal Lesson

Everything in life is literal but it is all also an analogy for something higher. When you eat, sleep, work and play, you encounter literal food, bed, desk and plaything, but they are also a means, a springboard, to something higher.

Imagine that: Every object, experience and encounter in your life is a metaphor and parable to express a higher truth. And you are charged with being the unraveler and decipherer of these parables.

You are born to rule and calculate the hidden choreography in your life in order to reveal the meaning of the parable in all things. When you do, you build something real and lasting in this world and establish your reward in the world to come. You do this through prayer.

Jews pray three times a day. We do this not for G-d's sake, but for our sake, in order to make the space for this calculation to happen.

We all ask ourselves: Why am I here? Safe-zones of prayer make the space to ask and answer that question.

When we do make the space, the realization is swift and complete: the world is a parable for the Divine; every physical entity is a means to do a mitzvah.

8. Hitting the Bull's Eye (Story)

As I said at the beginning, the Maggid of Dubno was famous for his parables, which always hit the bull's eye. With a short story he could illuminate a Torah idea, lighting up the eyes and the minds of all who listened.

The Vilna Gaon once asked him how it was that he was able to relate such wonderfully telling parables that always seemed to hit the mark. Naturally, he replied with a parable:

There once was a prince who desired greatly to become a master archer. One day while he was traveling, he came to a small village. An archery contest was in progress. The prince noticed that one of the contestant's accuracy was uncanny, almost to be unbelievable. Each of his targets was pierced exactly in the center.

The prince asked this fellow how he was able to achieve such striking results. This was his reply: "Well, first I aim at a tree. Then, once I hit the tree, I run up to it and paint circles around the arrow."

Said the Maggid of Dubno to the Vilna Gaon: "I do the same. First of all I find an interesting story, then I look for a relevant verse or Torah thought to attach to it."

9. Conclusion

There are two ways we may approach life: we may try to fit the Torah into our lives; or we could try to fit our lives into the Torah.

The Torah says eat kosher – so we can ask: how can I adjust my diet to fit in with this truth? This is much easier than saying, I must eat this and this, so let me try to fit the laws of kosher around my diet.

The same is true with any mitzvah – marriage and relationships, Shabbat and holidays, charity and kindness.

The Torah is your arrow; now paint your target and bulls eye around it. Don't make your comfort zones your reality while attempting to shoot a bull's eye with the arrow that is Torah. That's too difficult. You have to be an expert marksman for that. Rather first shoot the arrow of Torah and paint your life around that.

We ought to make our lives metaphors for G-d's plan in the Torah, rather than the other way around.

As we have learned today – prayer gives us the peace of mind to do what we need to do, to calculate and draw the right conclusion.

If you know that the Torah is true reality and that the world is the canvas painted around it, you will surely build a perfectly beautiful life here in this world and establish a life for all eternity in the world to come. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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