

A Family Affair Rabbi Moshe Grebenau

There is a very famous *pasuk* in this week's Parsha, but if one takes a look at the context they are in for a surprise. The *pasuk* tells us that "*Banim Atem LaHashem Alokechem*", we are all children of Hashem. But, that is only half the *pasuk*. The rest of the *pasuk* is a Mitzva not to cut oneself in response to the loss of a loved one. What is the connection between the two parts of the *pasuk*?

There is a second puzzling problem with this *pasuk*. The Talmud (Yevamos 13b) tells us that the Rabbis had a deeper level of interpretation to the Mitzva mentioned above. The Rabbis understood that *Lo Tisgodedu* is also a prohibition against having factions within a community. There can not be one city with two different courts that rule differently concerning the same halachic case. Where did the Rabbis see this hinted to in the *pasuk*; what does cutting oneself have to do with how courts of a city rule?

There is another curious *pasuk* in the beginning of the Parsha that we should look at as well. The Torah tells us that upon our entrance to Israel we must seek out and destroy all of the idols and altars etc. that we can find. The *pasuk* then tells us "*Lo Tasu Ken LaHashem Elokeichem*" - do not do this to Hashem your G-d. What exactly is it that we are told not to do?

There is a Machlokes in the Midrash as to the interpretation of the *Pasuk*. Some understand it to be a prohibition against erasing Hashem's name. Others see the *pasuk* as a prohibition against removing any part of the Altar that is found in the Beis haMikdash. Both of these interpretations understand that the *pasuk* refers to the destruction of the idols; that is what we should not do to Hashem. However, there is another interpretation. The *pasuk* mentions that the idols are found in the high and low places and under every leafy tree. We are now being told that we should serve Hashem in a different manner. This interpretation is borne out by the *pasukim* following that tell us, "Rather you should serve Hashem in the place He has chosen for you." The *pasuk* is telling us to serve God in a different way than the heathens. But what is it that we should be doing differently?

Let us return to the *pasuk* of *Lo Tisgodedu* and see if we can answer all our questions. The Rambam (Matanos Aniyim 10:2) quotes the idea of *Banim Atem LaMakom* and makes an interesting extension. The Rambam says that if we are all children of God, then we are also all brothers and sisters. So the *pasuk* is actually telling us that there is a communal bond amongst the Jews.

Maybe this can explain what the idea of *Banim Atem lo Tosgodedu*. When one is faced with tragedy in their life they should not respond by harming themselves or separating from the community. The beginning of the *pasuk* tells us the proper alternative. We should come together as a community at a time of personal crisis. Indeed, we find that there is a special Mitzva of *Nechum Avelim* to comfort the mourner (Rambam Avel 14:1) and the first meal that the mourner eats may not be his own food (Moed Kattan 27b), he must be provided for by the community.

This may also explain the deeper shade of meaning that Chazal saw in the prohibition of *Lo Tisgodedu*. Once we see the connection to the idea of community so it isn't a stretch to see the idea that there should be one communal ruling from the Beis Din as opposed to two separate ones within one community.

Now if we turn back to the beginning of the sedrah we can understand that as well. Here we see that the service of God is in one central place, unlike the non-Jews service of God. This too could be attributed to a sense of community, we serve God in one communal place, in the Beis HaMikdash. We are commanded to all descend on the Mikdash three times a year on the festivals. In times of joy as well we are to rejoice and serve God in a communal setting with our brothers and sisters.