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Rosh HaYeshiva

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Thematic Tie-Ins in Torah – More than Meets the Eye

When studying Chumash, one is naturally motivated to develop an understanding of the unique episodes and commandments by isolating one particular commandment and analyzing it, or delving into a specific story and attempting to comprehend its ideas. Yet another methodological issue confronts us when trying to tie together two seemingly unrelated commandments or stories, demonstrating a thematic continuity in the Torah. More often than not, both the Talmud and various commentators on Torah offer possibilities as to why subject A follows subject B. And often, a cursory reading of these correlations seems to raise even more questions than answers. The Torah portion of Naso is no exception.

The Torah introduces us to the laws of the *sotah* (Bamidbar 5:12):

“Speak to Bnei Yisroel and say to them: If any man's wife goes astray and acts treacherously toward him

Rashi (based on Berachot 63a) comments as follows:

“What is written [immediately] above this subject? 'A man's sacred objects shall be his.' (ibid 5:10) [This implies that] If you withhold the kohein's gifts, then by your life! You will find it necessary to visit him, to bring the sotah to him.”

Rashi is referring to the end of the previous section, where the Torah emphasizes the requirement to bring the *matnot kahuna*, the priestly presents, (i.e. *teruma*) to the *kohanim*. Commenting on that previous verse, Rashi explains that the phrase, “a man's sacred objects shall be his,” is referring to someone who chooses not to give any of his produce to the *kohen*.

So, according to Rashi, the tie-in is as follows: A person who fails to give the required produce to the *kohen* will be meeting up with the *kohen* soon enough due to a *sotah* situation. Clearly, this causal relationship seems to be lacking in intellectual efficacy.

The Ibn Ezra offers a different possibility as to the relationship between the two sections. He writes (ibid 5:12 “and the reason...”):

“The reason for the sotah is יִמְעַלָּה בּוֹ קַמְעַלֵּי”

This seems quite vague.

Rather than looking at the end of the previous section, the Ibn Ezra turns to the beginning of that section, where the Torah uses the similar terminology-- “לְמַעַל מַעַל בְּדִי” -- in reference to the general sin of the individual and the need to bring a sacrifice. Earlier (Vayikra 5:21), where the Torah first uses this expression, the Ibn Ezra (ibid “לְמַעַל מַעַל בְּדִי”) explains that it refers to the violation of commandments between a person and his fellow man--בֵּין אָדָם לְחֵבֶרֶת.

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The Ibn Ezra's correlation can be boiled down to one notion--the use of these same terms implies a central theme or concept. What exactly is this idea? How does one incorporate the overall sin between a person and his fellow man with the *sotah*?

As noted above, leaving these tie-ins without any deeper explanation is problematic. There are those who tend to take these commentators literally, as if just reading their words somehow leads to a greater understanding of Torah. However, without delving deeper, asking the necessary and obvious questions and applying a rational approach to comprehending these important ideas, the deeper concepts these great *talmidei chachamim* are teaching us remain hidden.

Looking at Rashi, we see a focus on the problem of the individual not setting aside the necessary food for the *kohen*. An understanding of the flaw of this individual might set the stage for the tie-in. Why might a person be unwilling to give to the *kohen*? It could be that this individual sees no problem in bringing his sacrifices to the Beit Hamikdash – this is not where he has resistance. Furthermore, he understands the *kohanim* have a job to do. His distortion emerges in his view of their role—it is strictly utilitarian, a practical role, a job like any other. Everyone has a job – farmer, accountant, doctor. The *kohen* is no different, his job being to administer the functions of the Bais Hamikdash. Why should the *kohen* be deserving of his produce? In essence, this individual views the relationship between Bnai Yisrael and the *kehuna* as a purely functional dependency. Herein lies his flaw. The role of the *kohen* is qualitatively different from any position that exists within Bnai Yisrael in that they act to bring people to a higher state of perfection. Whether through *korbanos* and *kapara*, identifying *tzaraas* and the flaw of *lashon hara*, teaching the nation Torah (an often over looked primary role of the *kohanim*), or rectifying the dysfunction brought about through the situation of *sotah* (through her drinking of the waters), the *kohen* is always functioning to guide the Jewish people on the road of being *ovdei Hashem*. The dependency is a metaphysical one, and the individual who does not give his produce to the *kohen* is, by definition, denying this role. It is interesting to note that these are referred to as *matnos kehuna* – the gifts of the kohen. One gives a gift to someone else in part because he values the other person. With the *kohen*, giving this food is not charity. It is recognition of the value of the system of the *kehuna*. It is when the individual sees the role of the *kohen* affecting his own perfection, such as in the case of the *sotah*, that the clear understanding of this role can emerge.

There could be one more additional element Rashi is offering us. The situation of *sotah* is always the result of a damaged relationship between husband and wife. A marriage, in Jewish theology, is not to be viewed as a functional phenomenon, existing merely to satisfy one's physical needs. The role of husband and wife is to help perfect one another, to bring one another to a higher level in their pursuit of the *derech Hashem*. When one views marriage as merely functional, the stage is set for the suspicion of *sotah* to emerge. Therefore, Rashi might be intimating that there is a subtle common issue between resistance to *matnos kehuna* and the emergence of *sotah*.

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The Ibn Ezra offers a different possibility. He focuses on the repetition of language, concluding that this is what creates the relationship between the two sections. He explains that:

“לְמַעַל מֵעַל בְּדִי” refers to sins between mankind. In general, the defect that leads to the violation of these commandments emerges from a misguided sense of self importance. Once an individual views himself as superior to the rest of society, he will engage in these actions that destroy the social fabric crucial to the existence of Bnai Yisrael. The Ibn Ezra is explaining that the very issue that directs one to the violation of *בין אדם לחבירו* leads to the dysfunctional marriage associated with *sotah*. It is true that the nature of the relationship between husband and wife is of a completely different nature from the bond between an individual and society and one might therefore deduce that two different flaws exist that lead to the problems within each. Not so, says the Ibn Ezra. The inflated ego, the distorted view of the self, is the common defect. Therefore, it is more than the use of the same terminology that creates the relationship; the common flaw that leads to these issues is what ties the two *parshiyos* together.

The above is just one example of how analysis is a crucial component when studying the words of the commentators on Torah. Without this analysis, it is easy to miss the fundamental ideas that we are meant to glean, not just from the content of the Torah, but also the context within which that content is placed. The commentators offer more than just cursory explanations of what is occurring and it is imperative that we, in our pursuit of greater learning and yediyas Hashem, delve into the minds of these great talmidei chachamim and bring to light their brilliant ideas.