

PARASHAT PEKUDEI



שער הצימצום

The Gate of Reduction

■ From the General to the Specific

The juxtaposition of the weekly portions of Vayak'hel and Pekudei depicts a *Klal u'Prat* structure, i.e., the “general” followed by the “particular.”

Vayak'hel begins as Moshe Rabbeinu gathers the nation of Israel to one place, where he issues the main principles governing the construction of the Mishkan (the Tabernacle) and its vessels. Parashat Pekudei follows immediately after, with a detailed accounting of the amounts of silver, gold and bronze required for the work.

In most instances, as here, the Torah places the general rule before the more specific itemization: It opens with an overall view, the *klal*, and then proceeds to the details, the *prat*. Sometimes the Torah also adds a third element, concluding with another “generalization,” in a structure known as *klal u'prat u'klal*. Either way, with or without another *klal*, it appears logical to begin a mitzvah with an overview of its goals and objectives, so that we can absorb the Torah's spirit as manifest in that particular mitzvah.

But there is also another side to the coin, by which it is beneficial to begin with the particulars. Lecturers often begin a talk not with a general introduction of their topic, but with an interesting anecdote on a specific point – entrancing the audience and grabbing instant attention. It is often

easier for listeners to connect with a directly targeted point, than with general principles whose relevance is not readily apparent.

What approach does the Written Torah take? Let us consider the example of the mitzvah of Kriat Shma. The Torah begins by designating the overall goal: The Unity of G-d, as we read in the seminal verse of Shma:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֶחָד.

Hear O Israel, G-d is our Lord, G-d is One. (D'varim 6,4)

After this general rule, the Torah proceeds to itemize various opposing situations that we must harmonize as we unify G-d's Name:

V'ahavta - You shall love G-d... teach your children these words, and speak them:

- *in your home and on the way;*
- *when you lie down and when you arise;*
- *tie them on your hand and on your head* [in action and in thought],
- *and write them on your doorposts and your gates* [when you enter and when you leave].

The Oral Torah, on the other hand – the Six Orders of the Mishna and the Gemara – often adopts the other approach, beginning with the specific itemization and ending with the more general. For instance, the first two Mishnayot in Tractate B'rachot specify the exact times of night and day for the recital of the evening and morning Shma. That is, the Written Torah *ends* its presentation of Shma with the itemized obligations to recite it at night and in the morning – and the Mishna *begins* with them!

On the other hand, Tractate B'rachot ends with the general teaching that G-d is One, and that He is exclusively responsible for all that happens, good or bad:

One must bless G-d for bad things that befall him, just as he blesses Him for good things, as is written, 'You shall love Hashem your G-d with all your heart, all your soul, and all your being...' (B'rachot 9,5)

In short: The Torah proceeds from the general to the specific, whereas the Mishna takes the opposite route. This difference stems also from the different natures of the Written and Oral Laws. The Written Torah seeks to teach us G-d's way, based on the principles of truth, justice, and compassion. The Oral Law, on the other hand, teaches the bottom line,

i.e., the details of what we must do in practice in the various situations we could face.

The ideal way is to incorporate both the approach of the Torah, *klal u'prat*, and that of the Mishna, *prat u'klal*, in the *klal u'prat u'klal* structure: We must begin with the Written Torah, advance to the Oral Law, and then return to the Written Torah.

■ The Reverse Picture

At the point at which the Written Torah and Oral Torah converge, the picture reverses itself: *klal u'prat* becomes *prat u'klal*. Analyzing this intriguing concept, we discover that every transition from a spiritual world to a physical world is characterized by a reversal of the picture. The Torah itself uses this method to define the transition of the universe from “spiritual creation,” when G-d set the conditions for the formation of the world, to “physical doing,” the actual, physical Creation.

For instance, at the end of the story of Creation, one verse has it both ways:

אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בְּהִבְרָאָם בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹת ה' אֱ-לֹהִים אֶרֶץ וְשָׁמַיִם.

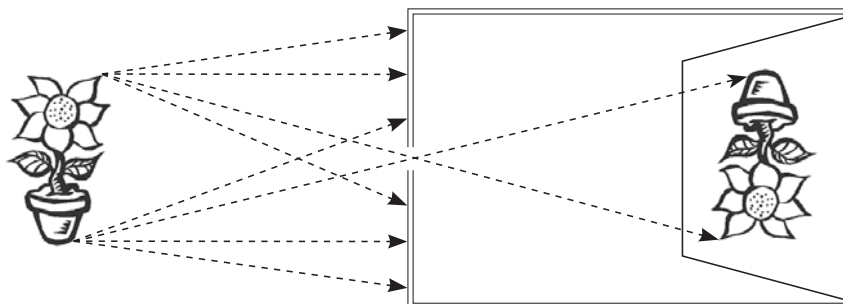
This is the history of the heavens and the earth when they were created, on the day that Hashem made earth and heaven. (B'reshit 2,4)

The heavens first precede the earth – and then the opposite! But in truth, there is no contradiction: The verse first tells us that in the spiritual Creation, the heavens came first, as the Torah's first verse states. But in terms of the actual making and perfecting of Creation, the earth was first. The picture is thus reversed.

This is also the opinion of the Medrash (B'reshit Rabba 1,15) concerning a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel. It determined that the students of Beit Shammai, who said the heavens were created first, were correct when referring to the “spiritual creation,” while Beit Hillel's opinion that the earth was first applies to “physical creation.”

To better understand the “picture reversal” concept, note that when anything passes through the tiny slit of the **point of reduction/contraction**, a reversed picture is formed.

The best examples are the pupil of our eye and a camera, both of which work on similar principles. When light rays pass through a tiny slit, a backwards picture is formed on the retina of our eye or on film. Consider



this picture of a flowerpot outside a box: The box is totally closed – except for a slight crack in the center of the side facing the flowerpot. Light rays strike the flowerpot and are then reflected back in the opposite direction in a straight line. Of all the light rays that hit and then return from the top of the flowerpot, only one succeeds in passing through the slit in the box – and it continues in the same direction towards the bottom, forming a picture of the *top* of the flowerpot on the *bottom* of the “screen” inside the box. The same is true for the *bottom* of the flowerpot: the little slit allows only one light ray to return from the flowerpot to the “screen,” and it appears on the *top*. Thus, the picture received at the end is of an upside-down flowerpot.

Let us return to the different stages of Creation. In order for the spiritual world of Creation to penetrate into its physical counterpart, it must reduce itself and fit precisely in through a tiny slit. This, as we have seen, will reverse the picture.

■ Moshe Rabbeinu and Betzalel

This brings us to the minor dispute between Betzalel, the man who was placed in charge of building the Mishkan, and Moshe Rabbeinu. The Gemara (B'rachot 55a) recounts the following exchange between them:

R. Shmuel ben Nachmani said in R. Yonatan's name: Betzalel was given his name because of his wisdom. For when G-d told Moshe to tell Betzalel to make a Mishkan, Ark, and vessels, Moshe reversed the order, and told him: “Make an Ark, vessels and a Mishkan.”

Betzalel said: “Moshe Rabbeinu! The usual way of the world is that a man builds himself a house and then brings in his utensils! Why do you tell me to build the Mishkan last? When I build the utensils, where will I put them? Perhaps G-d really said to build the Mishkan first?”

Moshe was impressed with Betzalel's sharpness, and said, “Perhaps you were *B'tzel-el*, in G-d's shadow [when He spoke to me], and that's how you knew what He said?”

This Gemara actually reflects an apparent contradiction between Parashat Terumah and Parashat Ki Tisa. In the former, G-d prescribed the order of construction as first the Ark and its accessories (Sh'mot 25,10), then the Table (verse 23), then the Menorah (verse 31), and finally the Mishkan itself (26,1).

But later, in Ki Tisa, G-d reverses the order: “*They [Betzalel and his assistant Oholiav] will do all I have commanded you, [to build] the Mishkan and the Ark for the Tablets... and all the vessels*” (Sh'mot 31,6-7). G-d here places the Tabernacle chronologically before the Ark and the other vessels, as if saying: “Moshe, the original order was only for you to hear – but for those who actually build it, please have them build the Mishkan before the Ark.”

Why? Because Moshe understands that in the spiritual realm, Hashem is the “Place of the World;” this is why G-d is often called *HaMakom*, “the Place.” Accordingly, the Ark of the Covenant, which holds the Tablets of the Law and which represents G-d’s word, is the very basis for the entire Mishkan. It is its soul, and should be built first. Moshe understands this.

But in the physical world, the world of those who are engaged in the actual construction, the Mishkan is the structure into which the Ark will be placed, and therefore the Mishkan must be built first. This is why Moshe instructs Betzalel and the others to build the Mishkan before its vessels. [The Gemara adds that Moshe originally told Betzalel the first order because he thought that Betzalel was on the same spiritual level as himself.]

In this connection, let us note Moshe’s emotional prayer as the Mishkan was being built:

תַּפְּלָה לְמֹשֶׁה אִישׁ הָאֶל־לֵהִים. ה', מָעוֹן אֶתָּה הָיִיתָ לָנוּ...

The prayer of Moshe, the man of G-d:

“G-d, You were an abode for us...” (Psalms 90,1)

“It is not the Tabernacle that is *Your* home,” Moshe is telling Hashem, “but rather, You are *our* home. You preceded the world, and You carry it upon yourself.”

In any event, Betzalel, a practical-minded master craftsman, did not understand. “If I build the Ark first,” he asked, “where will I put it?” Moshe then remembered the order of the commands in Ki Tisa, after Betzalel’s appointment. Moshe saw, then, that Betzalel was correct – for Hashem had truly told him to tell Betzalel and Oholiav to build the Mishkan first. Realizing this, Moshe said to Betzalel, “You are in ‘the shadow of G-d’ – not

in the spiritual world of light, but rather in the practical world, the shadow.” When Moshe gathered the nation to issue the actual instructions for building the Mishkan and its utensils, we see that he placed the Mishkan itself at the top of the list:

וְכֹל חָכֵם לֵב בְּכֶם יָבֹאוּ וַיַּעֲשׂוּ... אֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן אֶת אֹהֶלוֹ... אֶת הָאָרֶן וְאֶת בְּדָיו...

*Every wise-hearted person among you shall come and make...
the Tabernacle and its tent...*

the Ark and its poles... (Sh'mot 35,10-19)

But something is not clear: The Torah does not state outright that Moshe originally told Betzalel to build the Ark before the Tabernacle, so why does the Gemara assume that this was the case? We can find a hint to the answer in the two different accounts of the order of instructions. In Parashat Ki Tisa, we see that Hashem gives the following commands:

1. Betzalel's appointment (31,2)
2. Building the Mishkan (verse 7)
3. The Sabbath (verse 13)

Yet, in Parashat Vayak'hel, when Moshe carries out G-d's orders, he does it differently:

1. The Sabbath (35,2)
2. Building the Mishkan (verses 10-12)
3. Betzalel's appointment (verse 30)

Moshe speaks first of the spiritual – Shabbat – before giving the orders to build the Tabernacle. This perhaps alludes to his having mentioned the Ark before the Tabernacle when speaking to Betzalel.

■ Ilfa and Rav Yochanan

At the center of the human eye is the pupil, which adjusts the amount of light available to the eye, as an aperture does. When there is light in abundance, such as during the day, the pupil contracts and becomes smaller; with less light, it expands. As we explained above regarding the dissemination and reflection of light rays, the picture that appears on the retina of the eye is reversed – but the brain generally knows how to interpret it and present it to us as if it were right-side up. An exception is a baby: he has not yet learned how the world works, and therefore sees everything upside-down.

But what happens when we read a book, document, or story? Certainly the impression left at the end of the story is greater than that given at the beginning. Nevertheless, since we know that this conclusion will not necessarily give us an accurate memory of the story, we consciously make the required adjustment and assign more weight to the beginning, and thus remain with a more correct understanding. Youngsters, however, who have not yet learned how to correctly analyze a story, are very liable to absorb the wrong message.

Let us illustrate this via the following fascinating Talmudic story of two friends and great scholars in R. Yannai's Beit Midrash, Ilfa and Rav Yochanan:

Ilfa and R. Yochanan suffered from abject poverty. Though they immersed themselves in Torah study, their situation became so difficult that they said, "Let us go and engage in trade, in fulfillment of the verse, *'There will be no destitute among you.'*" (D'varim 15,4)

They went, and along their way, they sat to eat aside a flimsy wall. Two ministering angels appeared, and R. Yochanan overheard one of them say to the other, "Let us kill them by dropping this wall upon them, for they are leaving life of eternity (Torah study) and engaging in temporal, material life." The other one answered, "Leave them be, for one of them will achieve greatness."

R. Yochanan asked Ilfa if he had heard anything; Ilfa said he had not. R. Yochanan then thought to himself, "Since I heard and Ilfa did not, it is apparently me [to whom they were referring]." He said aloud, "I've decided to return to Torah study, in fulfillment of the verse, *'Poverty will never cease among you'* (D'varim 15,11)." R. Yochanan returned, Ilfa remained.

Much later, by the time Ilfa returned from his business endeavors, R. Yochanan had been inaugurated as the Rosh Yeshiva, a position of great prestige and wealth. The townspeople said to Ilfa, "Had you stayed and learned Torah, wouldn't you have become the Rosh Yeshiva?" When Ilfa heard this, he suspended himself atop the mast of a ship, and proclaimed: "If anyone can ask me about a teaching by Rav Chiya and Rav Oshaya in the Baraita and I cannot identify its source in the Mishna, I will jump down and drown myself!"

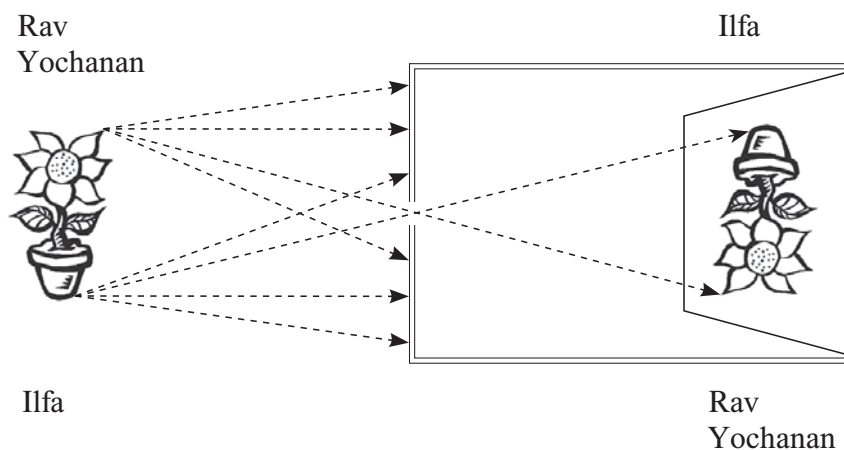
Came along an older man, who quoted a complex teaching about the

deathbed instructions of a man on how to support his sons. He then asked, “Whose opinion does this law support?” Ilfa answered, “It is Rabbi Meir, who taught that we must fulfill the request of a dying man.” (Taanit 21a)

What is the message of this story? If we ask a young student, he will likely answer that it teaches that even if one leaves his studies in order to make a living, he can still remember all that he learned, just like Ilfa did. This, after all, is what happened at the end of the story, and that is what leaves the strongest impression.

But a more intelligent and mature analysis will lead us to precisely the opposite conclusion. The Gemara’s real message in telling us this story is that one’s ability to survive in difficult conditions of poverty and the like is the true test of greatness – as we see from Rav Yochanan. He pushed himself to return to his Torah studies even without the minimal physical conditions for living – and in this merit, he ended up being the chief Torah sage in the entire Land of Israel.

We can portray the different understandings of this story with the picture seen here – the same as above, but with important additions: The distorted picture depicted on the screen in the box is the reverse of the accurate, correct reality. One must utilize his intellect and mature understanding to reverse it a second time in order to understand it truthfully.



■ Babylon and the Land of Israel

Delving a bit deeper into the relationship between Rav Yochanan and Ilfa, we will uncover additional treasures. Once, when the two of them were still learning together in the yeshiva, they sold all their belongings to support

themselves. In fact, the story of how Rav Yochanan sold everything he owned so that he could study appears in many Medrashim.

The point at which they had nothing left to sell is the point at which our story starts: one gives up, and the other does not. One of them was able to study only when he had with what to support himself, and the other was able to study even with nothing. Ilfa is *yesh me'yesh*, something from something. But greater than him is Rav Yochanan, who subsisted on nothing at all – *yesh me'ayin*, something from nothing, ex nihilo.

That Ilfa represents *yesh me'yesh* is also shown in the way he proved that he was a Torah scholar. His proof centered around the fact that he could find a source for a law that had been taught elsewhere: something from something. But this is not enough to get him appointed as Rosh Yeshiva in the Land of Israel.

Rav Yochanan, on the other hand, represents *yesh ma'ayin* - not only in terms of physical subsistence, but in the way in which he learned Torah. He was able to infer and deduce one point from another, and uncover that which could not be seen at first glance. This is the attribute that is needed for the wisdom of the Land of Israel.

To back this up, consider this anecdote from the Jerusalem Talmud:

Rav Chiya bar Abba found a source in the Mishna for a teaching of Rav Yochanan. Rav Yochanan responded to him with a smile, “Babylonian! If I hadn’t lifted up the clay lid, would you have discovered the pearl underneath it?”

That is, only after Rav Yochanan taught his novel understanding of the law, was his student able to derive it from the Mishna.

Why did Rav Yochanan call him “Babylonian”? It was an expression of the resentment on the part of the Sages of the Land of Israel towards those of Babylonia, for not having come to Eretz Yisrael when the Second Temple was being built. (Yoma 9b)

From the standpoint of the Sages of Eretz Yisrael, the Babylonian Sages were to do nothing more than “maintain” the Torah, and not introduce new concepts or insights. The privilege and skill of delving into the depths of Torah was saved for the Sages of Eretz Yisrael. As is written:

כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא תּוֹרָה וּדְבַר ה' מִירוּשָׁלַם.

*From Zion, Torah shall go forth,
and the word of G-d from Jerusalem.* (Isaiah 2,3)

We learn this from the Gemara more than once. The Talmud in Tractate B'rachot, for instance (p. 63a-b), recounts how R. Hanina, nephew of R. Yehoshua, went to the Diaspora and tried to assume the powers of the Eretz Yisrael sages by ruling on leap years and leap months. He was even threatened with excommunication for this; *“From Zion, Torah shall go forth, and the word of G-d from Jerusalem,”* he was told, and the sanctification of months can only be done where the Divine Presence is found – the Land of Israel.

In another incident, the Sages of Babylon were trying to decide whether Rav Yosef or Rabba bar Nachmani should be appointed their head. Rabba bar Nachmani was known for his sharpness – so much so that he could “uproot mountains” with his penetrating logic – while Rav Yosef knew the entire Torah and was compared to Mount Sinai in terms of his breadth of knowledge. The question was sent from Babylon to Eretz Yisrael:

“Who is greater: Sinai, or he who uproots mountains?” The Eretz Yisrael Sages sent back this answer: “Sinai is greater, for everyone needs one who collects wheat, that is, one who gathers various teachings together.” (B'rachot 64a)

In other words, the Sages of Eretz Yisrael instructed the Babylonians that all they need is to preserve the Torah as is, the way it was given on Mount Sinai. The ability to discern truly new thoughts and innovative approaches is reserved for the Sages of Eretz Yisrael – for they dwell in the Land of the Divine Presence, of prophecy, and of Divine Spirit.

