

# LESSON 1

This lesson is designed for you to deliver in approximately an hour and fifteen minutes.

## LESSON OVERVIEW

### SECTION ONE מנוא ||| 8 MINUTES

This *maamar* fleshes out the idea of *mesirus nefesh* according to Chasidus. It is based on a *mamaar* from the Frierdiker Rebbe that was said under conditions of extreme *mesirus nefesh*.

#### A. Learning Exercise ||| 4 MINUTES

#### B. Historical Background of the Frierdiker Rebbe's *maamer* ||| 4 MINUTES

### SECTION TWO מתי קבלו בני ישראל את התורה? ||| 12 MINUTES

At *Har Sinai*, the nation was in an ascendant state both spiritually and physically. Nevertheless, their reception of the Torah at that time was not authentic and absolute. The true acceptance of the Torah occurred when Jews were under threat of annihilation in the Persian Empire during the story of Purim.

#### A. The Purim Acceptance ||| 4 MINUTES

#### B. Why Purim ||| 8 MINUTES

### SECTION THREE כוחה של מסירת נפש ||| 8 MINUTES

The time of Purim was indeed a challenging period, but because it brought out the power of *mesirus nefesh*, it gave the Jews an edge they did not have at *Har Sinai*. *Mesirus nefesh* is an activation of the *etzem baneshamah* and when that comes out, every obstacle can be overcome.

#### A. A National Moment of *Mesirus Nefesh* ||| 5 MINUTES

#### B. *Mesirus Nefesh* In the Historical Account ||| 3 MINUTES

### SECTION FOUR וחי בהם או שימות בהם? ||| 10 MINUTES

Why is *mesirus nefesh* necessary to accept the *mitzvos* authentically? Isn't *mesirus nefesh* a last resort when it comes to *mitzvos*? Aren't we supposed to avoid dying for Hashem in most circumstances?

#### A. Live By Them ||| 2 MINUTES

#### B. Willingness To Die ||| 6 MINUTES

#### C. Potential Versus Actual ||| 2 MINUTES

# SECTION FIVE

## מה נתחדש בהר סיני?

### A. TORAH BEFORE *HAR SINAI*

We are accustomed to thinking that Hashem gave us the Torah at *Har Sinai*. After all, that is what the words *Matan Torah* mean.

The truth is that Jews, dating all the way back to Avraham Avinu, learned Torah and observed *mitzvos*. And not just some of the *mitzvos*, but all the *mitzvos*.

TALMUD, YUMA 28B

Rav taught: Avraham Avinu fulfilled the entire Torah, as the Torah states, “because Avraham listened to my call” [i.e., my *mitzvos*].<sup>22</sup>

אָמַר רַב: קִיִּים אַבְרָהָם  
אָבִינוּ כָּל הַתּוֹרָה כּוֹלֵה,  
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: “עֲקֵב אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַע  
אַבְרָהָם בְּקוֹלִי וְגו’”

If indeed the Jewish people had practiced Torah and *mitzvos* long before *Matan Torah*, what happened at *Matan Torah*? What was lacking in the sphere of Torah and *mitzvos* until that point, that *Matan Torah* came to complete?

THE REBBE, *SEFER HAMAAMARIM MELUKAT* 3, P. 70

The difference between the Torah and *mitzvos* as they were practiced before *Matan Torah* and the Torah and *mitzvos* as

שהחידוש דמתן תורה  
לגבי התורה ומצוות שהיו  
קודם מתן תורה, הוא  
שהמצוות של האבות

<sup>22</sup> The *Gemara* goes on to demonstrate that Avraham Avinu even kept *mitzvos derabanan* such as *eruv tavshilin*. This *Gemara* infers this from the fact that the Torah says Avraham observed תורות—my Torahs, in the plural. This refers to two Torahs. The Torah *Shebichsav* and the Torah *Sheb'al Peh*. The Torah *Sheb'al Peh* includes all the rabbinic decrees that had not yet been promulgated in the days of Avraham Avinu. Yet, the *Gemara* tells us that Avraham Avinu knew and kept all the future *gezeiros derabanan*.

they are practiced after *Matan Torah*: The *mitzvos* of the *avos* (and all Jews before *Matan Torah*) were spiritual. Some of the *mitzvos* were practiced in a spiritual manner [through meditation and the like].

(For example, the Mitzvah of *tefilin* could not be fulfilled in the ordinary manner since it contains mention of the Exodus from Egypt, which had not yet occurred.) Even the *mitzvos*

that they practiced in a physical manner, could only draw holiness into the spiritual realm. The physical item with which they performed the Mitzvah, remained unholy.

(ובכלל קודם מתן תורה) היו רק ברוחניות. דנוסף לזה שכמה וכמה מצוות קיימו רק ברוחניות (כמו תפילין שנזכר בהם יציאת מצרים ואז עדיין לא הי' גלות מצרים), הנה גם בהמצוות שקיימו בגשמיות, היתה המשכת הקדושה רק ברוחניות ולא בדבר הגשמי שבו קיימו המצוה.

Let's unpack what we just read:

Every mitzvah consists of two components:

1. The physical performance of the Mitzvah.
2. Our *kavanah* while performing the Mitzvah.

### Discussion Group

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If I was only able to either: (a) contemplate the spiritual significance of the Mitzvah, or (b) do the action mindlessly without any focus; which one should I choose?

Which is more essential?

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Allow your students to discuss this, but guide the conversation to the following conclusion.

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The answer is, it depends on the era in which you live—pre or post *Matan Torah*.

Before *Matan Torah*, *mitzvos* were entirely *kavanah* oriented. While the *avos* practiced all the *mitzvos*, many were not performed with physical items as they are today, but rather through meditating upon the spiritual significance of the Mitzvah. *Tefilin* is but one example, there were surely many others.

So, how did they fulfill these *mitzvos*? Through deep *hisbonanus* into the spiritual properties represented by the Mitzvah. This elevated their consciousness and attached it to the divine attributes upon which they meditated.

The Zohar (I p. 162a) tells us that Yaakov fulfilled the Mitzvah of *tefilin* with physical items: not the leather boxes that we use, but rather wooden sticks. However, after performing the mitzvah, Yaakov would throw away the sticks because they had not become holy. Can you imagine throwing away a pair of *tefilin* when they grow old? We would never throw them away.

That is because physical items that are used for a Mitzvah after *Matan Torah*, become holy, but when Jews used physical items for a Mitzvah before *Matan Torah*, the item remained mundane.

Before *Matan Torah*, the purpose of the Mitzvah was not to influence the physical. This is why many *mitzvos* were performed at that time through meditation and without physical action. For those *mitzvos* that required physical action, the action was just a tool to allow their minds and hearts to access the spiritual energies associated with the Mitzvah.<sup>23</sup>

## B. TORAH AFTER *HAR SINAI*

Then came *Matan Torah*. At that time, an important shift occurred:

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<sup>23</sup> The Alter Rebbe explains in Tanya, that the **bodies** of the *avos* were so refined that they became a *merkavah* to Hashem. Doesn't this imply that their *avoidah* did, in fact, permeate their bodies? The answer is that only the *kedushah* that could be reached in the lower realm permeated their bodies, but they had no access to the higher realms of *kedusha* that are available to us after *Matan Torah*. However, precisely because the *kedushah* that we access after *Matan Torah* is so lofty, there is less visible impact upon our bodies. When Mashiach comes, we will be able to see this impact. For more on this, see *Likutei Sichos* 15, p. 77.

## C. THE UNBRIDGEABLE DIVIDE

The pre *Matan Torah* decree made perfect sense. In fact, annulment of the decree makes little sense.

When you consider the vast gulf between Hashem and us, you can easily see why it should be unbridgeable. Hashem is Creator, whereas we and the world that we live in, are His creations. Hashem is a necessary existence, whereas we are contingent on Hashem for our existence. Hashem transcends time, whereas we are temporal and subject to time. Hashem is limitless and formless, whereas we are finite and confined to our given form.

How can there be a relationship between us? How can infinite Hashem fit into a finite vessel? How can we bridge this unending divide?

This is why the pre *Matan Torah* severance between the higher and lower realms makes perfect sense.<sup>26</sup>

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Ask them, which is more significant: To do something for Hashem that He instructed you to do or to do something for Hashem of your own volition without Him requesting it?

The answer is that each is better in its own way. If you volunteer without being asked, it shows that you are deeply connected to Hashem—you truly care to be close to Him. It is like giving your spouse a gift for no specific reason but rather—just because I love you. On the other hand, when you give what your spouse asked for, you provide something he or she wants as opposed to something you feel like giving.

From your perspective, giving without being asked is higher because it demonstrates a higher degree of attachment. From your spouse's perspective, giving after being asked is better because you provide something your spouse wants. It tells your spouse that his or her wish is your highest priority.

This is especially poignant when it comes to Hashem because there is nothing that we can give to Hashem that He does not already have. It is akin to giving a king a scarf that you knitted yourself. The king has many scarves and doesn't need one more. From his perspective you contributed nothing that He wants though he appreciates you going to the length of knitting it as a token of your admiration and appreciation. On the other hand, if the king is outdoors without a scarf and asks for one, you can provide something that the king actually wants.

The same can be said about the pre *Matan Torah mitzvos* and the post *Matan Torah mitzvos*. The *avos* went all out and devoted their lives to Hashem. They achieved the highest attachment to Hashem that one can achieve in this world. But since Hashem did not instruct them to do it, they did not provide something that He wants. He appreciated them to no end, but they did not give Him something He wanted. As Iyov said, "If you are righteous, what have you given Him?"

After *Matan Torah*, we have the chance to give Hashem something He asked for. This means that we are providing a service that Hashem actually wants.

<sup>26</sup> If your students require further clarification, consider using the following analogy:

Suppose Albert Einstein visited a Kindergarten class and delivered a lecture on his special theory of relativity. The children wouldn't understand a word he said, which is precisely why Einstein never lectured to Kindergarteners.

This divide made perfect sense. But suppose Einstein insisted one day on delivering his lecture to his grandchild's Kindergarten class, can you imagine any pedagogic technique that Einstein might use to help them understand?

The answer is likely no.

Earlier in this section we asked what *Matan Torah* accomplished if Jews were practicing *mitzvos* before *Matan Torah*. We learned that *Matan Torah* enabled a merger between Hashem and the physical world. But now, we have turned that answer on its head. Is such a merger even possible? If the answer is yes, what occurred at *Matan Torah* to make the impossible possible?

## Summary

Before *Matan Torah*, *mitzvos* were a means to focus the mind on Hashem. After *Matan Torah* *mitzvos* became a means to bring holiness to the world. This was initiated by Hashem who descended onto *Har Sinai* and instructed Moshe to ascend to Hashem.

If Hashem is infinite and the world is finite, how can *mitzvos* bridge this divide and bring Hashem into the world?

The Rebbe will answer this question in the next section.

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Now keep in mind that the gap between Hashem and our world is infinitely greater than the gap between Einstein and the Kindergarten students. While Einstein and the children are on different levels, they both possess wisdom, Einstein just possessed it in greater quantities. The difference between Hashem and our world is immeasurable even by infinite degrees of magnitude. How can this divide ever be bridged?