



## A Burning Bush That Is Not Consumed

So we have a very interesting pasuk that I want to spend a little bit of time with you today on, which I think is quite a powerful musag and musar. And it begins with the pasuk as follows.

We know that Moshe Rabbeinu is a shepherd. He is shepherding his sheep in the desert, and suddenly he notices this extraordinary occurrence. He sees this burning bush, and he notices that the bush that's burning is actually not being consumed.

So he hears the voice as he notices this. God noticed that he notices, and calls out to him from within this bush seemingly: Moshe, Moshe. And Moshe says, yeah, I'm here. Let's go. Let's do this.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים לְמֹשֶׁה. Hashem says to Moshe, "Do not come close. **שְׁלַבְּלֵךְ מַעַל וְגַלְּיךְ**. Remove your shoes from your feet. **כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹמֵד עַלְיוֹן**. For the place upon which you are standing is holy ground."

Okay, so Moshe is being told that this ground, which is holy, prohibits him from being able to approach whilst wearing his shoes.

## Why “Shal”? A Strange Word for Shoes

It is Rabbeinu Bachya who first points out that the word that we use over here, *shal*, is a word which is very unique. *Shal*, we say.

So the classic word that you might use, a word that we've found in other places, is *chalotz*. Take off your shoes. Or *shlof*. *Shlof* also means to remove your shoes.

*Shal* is an interesting word. And Rabbeinu Bachya says something—he shares an idea which is extraordinary.

He says *shal* is *milashon shelilah*. *Shelilah* literally means negative in Hebrew. *Shelili* means to respond in the negative. But *shal* means, so to speak, *milashon shelilah*—from negating.

*Hizhro Hashem*—Hashem warned him—*sheyishlol mimenu bachumriyut*. He should remove or negate from himself *chumriyut*, his physicality, *shehem mashal lane'alam*, which God gave as a mashal, as a parable, by referring to his shoes.

Why?

*Lefi shebachomer davek baguf*. Because physicality is *davek*, is stuck, is attached, to the body—*kemo shebammen'al davek baregel*—like the shoe is stuck to the bottom of the foot.

And in the same way—*u'k'shem sheyesh beyad ba'adam*—in the same way that a person has the ability *lishlol na'alo me'al raglo*, to remove his shoe from his foot, *ken beyado*—so too it is in the hands of a person—*sheyishlol mimenu hachumriyat*.

## **“Asa Li Kol Tzorki” and the Mystery of Shoes**

Rav Shlomo Zalman explained this concept perhaps to a further degree, and he does it by asking a few questions.

First of all, we know in the morning blessings we have a bracha and we say *שעשה לך כל צרכי*. Thank You Hashem for making for me all of my needs.

Classically, the mefarshim explain: what does that bracha relate to? What does it mean that Hashem gave me all my needs?

What else could all of my needs mean? Food? Clothing? Oxygen? Shoes?

The Chachamim tell us the bracha is on shoes.

Why is that *kol tzorki*?

In fact, there's a question related in halacha: on Tisha B'Av morning, is a person supposed to say *שעשה לך כל צרכי*? They're not wearing shoes. It's fascinating.

So why would that be *asa li kol tzorki*?

## **Holy Places, Mourners, and Bare Feet**

The second question he asks is: what is this idea that when a person gets to a holy place, he removes his shoes? Why is that something which is a truism that we find not only by the burning bush, but also in the Beit HaMikdash?

The Kohanim would serve without wearing shoes.

So why is it that a holy place requires this removal of shoes?

Why is it that a person who is an *avel*, who is a mourner, is also prohibited from wearing shoes? We don't say you can't wear clothes. Why is it that he can't wear shoes?

And finally, why is it on Tisha B'Av that we make it forbidden to wear leather shoes? Most people understand that the idea is that we don't want you to be comfortable.

But my Crocs—right, fashion statement aside—are much more comfortable than my dress shoes.

When you get home and you want to slip into something more comfortable, you don't tie on a pair of your nicest leather dress shoes. You just want to relax in—you know—gonna wear these to the pool. Right? That's not what people do.

So if Tisha B'Av is a time of discomfort, of *inuy*, Yom Kippur, why is the decree specifically on leather shoes?

## **The Hierarchy of Creation**

So with all these questions about shoes coalescing, coming together, Rav Shlomo Zalman presents an idea.

And he says as follows.

The Shlah HaKadosh writes a very powerful idea—Rav Yeshaya Horowitz. He says in his siddur, in *Birchot HaShachar*, that the idea here is one that he learned from his rabbi, Rav Shlomo Luria.

And he says that in the hierarchy of creation, there are four distinct quadrants into which creation can be divided.

There is *domem*, which means an inanimate object. *Tzomeach*, something which grows—plant life. *Chai*, something which is living, like an animal. And finally, *medaber*—humanity—humans that are capable of communication.

That is the hierarchy of the circle of life, with human beings placed at the top, inanimate objects placed at the bottom, and *tzomeach* and *chai* in between.

And each level sustains the level above it, to enable the higher levels of progress to happen in the world.

So if the lowest form is something which cannot grow—that's *domem*—its use is permitted to everything above it. Plant life is only capable of growing to a certain level, so animals consume plants. Animals have the ability to relate, to procreate, to move.

And as we see the progress of growth, level by level, the group beneath it exists to serve that process of growth.

Therefore, says the Shlah HaKadosh, when a human being—who is capable of serving God, speaking with God, communicating with other humans, building relationships *ben adam l'chavero*—when he eats an animal, he's also eating a plant, and he's also, so to speak, eating from the earth itself.

Humanity, in this symbiotic relationship, is not only eating what is beneath him, but also raising it.

Within the plant are the nutrients of the soil. Within the animal are the traces of the plant life that it consumed. And therefore within the human being are the traces of the animal, powering its muscles, its energy, its fat content.

This idea—that all of the world lives within us—and that when we do a mitzvah, we give animals, plants, and the earth the ability to connect with God—is magnificent.

When we talk about humankind raising the earth, lifting it up to God, that happens when you're eating a hamburger. That happens when a person drinks a glass of orange juice.

You take that thing, and by saying a bracha—*Shehakol Nihye Bidvaro, Borei Pri Ha'etz*—you raise it and give it spiritual significance.

But there is one condition for humankind to be able to raise the earth instead of destroy it.

And that condition is: *shal ne'alecha*.

## Shoes as Power, Control, and Human Dominance

And with all of this, I want to talk to you for a minute about what this means according to the opinion of Rabbeinu Bachya.

Rabbeinu Bachya explained that *shal ne'alecha* means removing physicality. But the Shlah goes one step further, explains Rav Shlomo Zalman.

The Shlah HaKadosh teaches us that the removal of the shoe is not just symbolic of physicality in general. He asks: in what way is this removal of the shoe indicative of removing physicality? And he says something unbelievable.

He says that if you think about it, the shoes that we wear represent the human dominance over the world. They represent the ability that we have to have power and control over everything that is.

That is what shoes represent.

So therefore, says Rav Shlomo Zalman, when a person is walking around in a holy place, what is it that we need to give up when we attempt to come toward that which is holy?

We give up our control.  
We give up our quest for power over something.

And instead, we recognize power over us. Control over us.

How silly would it seem to be wearing something where you are literally taking the skin of an animal and using it to protect the lowest part of the human being—your feet—while you tread upon the earth?

The lowest part of the human is stepping on the skin of an animal.

This idea has no place in the Beit HaMikdash, a place where we relinquish control and we relinquish power.

And it has no place in the house of an *avel*.

Because in the house of an *avel*, if you think about it, what are we recognizing? We are recognizing how little power a human being actually has in this world.

When someone dear to us, *lo aleinu*, passes away, we would have done anything and everything to keep them here. And yet it is beyond human power. It is beyond medicine. It is beyond care.

Human life cannot be sustained forever.

These are places where power and control get checked at the door.

## Chalitza and the Second Loss

He brings a fascinating insight from Rabbeinu Bachya as well.

Why is it that at *chalitza* we tell him to take off his shoe?

The idea of *yibbum* is to marry the brother's widow so that a child will be born and named after the brother, so that the brother has a continuation in this world.

*Chalitza* is the decision not to do that.

When you take off your shoe, you are commemorating *aveilut* again.

You lost your brother when he died.  
But you lost your brother again when you refused  
to perpetuate his memory.

So the removal of the shoe is a re-engagement in  
mourning—not by burying him in the ground, but  
by burying possibility.

## Why “Asa Li Kol Tzorki” Is Said on Shoes

My friends, with all of this, we now understand  
why the bracha of *שעשה לך כל צרכי* is referenced  
specifically to shoes.

To wear clothing made of cotton would not  
indicate this idea. Cotton represents subjugation  
over plant life.

Even wool does not illustrate this idea, because  
wool can be taken from an animal while the animal  
is still alive.

The only engagement that we have with an animal  
that requires, so to speak, that it not be here  
anymore is shoes.

And by the way, I was wondering for a while: why  
don't we say *שעשה לך כל צרכי* on a steak?

Because there also you see a human being taking all  
the levels beneath him—animal, plant, earth—and  
using them to sustain himself.

You know what the answer is?

The answer is because human beings are not alone  
in eating meat.

Lions and tigers do that too.

All that would make us is the most powerful animal  
in the food chain.

There is no animal that uses the skin of another  
animal for its shoes.

That is unique.

Hence, this concept is about power and control.

## Returning to Moshe Rabbeinu

And now we come back to Moshe Rabbeinu.

Hashem is calling Moshe for *nevuah*.  
Hashem is calling Moshe to take the Jewish people  
out of Egypt.

But really, Hashem is already revealing His plan.

“I'm not taking them out just so they're not in  
Egypt.  
I'm not taking them out just so they're free.”

“You will know you succeeded when  
*ta'avdun*—when they are here at this mountain.  
When they receive the Torah. When they become a  
people charged with improving the earth, lifting it  
up, creating a heavenly domain in an earthly  
abode.”

So what is the first test?

Moshe sees a bush that is burning—*vehasneh  
bo'er*—and yet *einenu ukkal*, it is not consumed.

What did I tell you shoes represent?

The consumption of the lower by the higher.

Hashem is saying to Moshe:  
If you are the right person, will you notice?  
  
Can you see a possibility where power exists but is not exercised just because it can be?  
  
Can you imagine a fire that burns but does not destroy?  
  
If you can, step forward.

שֶׁל מַעַל מַעַל רַגְלֵיכֶם

Because the land you are standing on is *admat kodesh*.

It is not for nothing that God mentions to the highest level—humanity—not to stand using shoes, the middle level standing on top of the earth, while noticing plant life that is not being consumed.

All four levels are present in one moment.

## Consumption, Ideology, and Reality

Today, as a society, we are obsessed with consumption. Make no mistake.

And it might sound like I'm describing a world where people don't control others. And people might think that sounds like socialism or communism.

But the problem is that in every single instance of communism and socialism, it always boils down to the highest form of control.

Control over finances.  
Control over property.  
Control over thoughts.  
Control over media.

And it winds up being the closest thing to despotic monarchy—where the people at the top seize everything while telling a story of equality.

In a utopian world, where no one would seize power and no one would be greedy, you know what we call that?

Mashiach.

That is swords into plowshares.  
That is the lion and the lamb lying together.  
That is might not exercised simply because it exists.

But this is not that world.

Is democracy better? Is capitalism better? On some levels, yes.

But we have to recognize that we have reached stages of consumption—even us, in the religious world—that are very far from what God requires in order to approach Torah.

“You want to talk to Me, Moshe?  
You want to bring them to Torah?  
Can you take your shoes off?”

## From Survival to Excess, From Shoes to Slavery

We are in what I believe is uncharted territory.

Where we are today—not just as a Jewish people, but as a world—is a place humanity has never really been before.

For the vast majority of human existence, the question was very simple.

Did you have food for your family?  
Could you live without marauding armies coming in and taking over where you lived?  
Would you freeze to death, or would you have enough money or resources for firewood to keep your family warm?

These were the questions for most of history.

Just understand something. We were learning not long ago—actually, it wasn't the other day, it was already quite a while ago—we were learning in Moed Katan.

The Gemara discusses a person washing his clothing on Chol HaMoed. Is he allowed? Is he not allowed?

And the Gemara says, *kan bechaluk echad*.

What are we talking about?

We're talking about a person who owns one article of clothing.

One.

Do you know anybody who owns one article of clothing?

Does anyone know anyone?

It's a wild thing. We can't even comprehend it.

And yet, look at what we chase. Look at what we need. Look at the finicky nature of what we feel we must have in order to function.

Now understand something important.

It is a wonderful thing to enjoy the beautiful things that the world has to offer. That is why God created

them. God created the world so that we would appreciate it, be grateful for it, and share it with others.

That is what it is here for.

But the minute a person *needs* something, the order has reversed.

You are no longer in control of it.  
It is in control of you.

If that creature comfort is something you cannot live without, then you are not controlling it.

If without it you are not functional, who is in control of whom?

And this applies to everything.

If it's a car.  
If it's a vacation.  
If it's a place to live.  
If it's a style of dress.  
If it's food.  
If it's restaurants.

Whatever it might be.

Before we even begin the process of redemption, Hashem says:

All of your people are enslaved in the highest form of slavery.

And here comes the redeemer.

Who is he?

He is the one who is capable of removing his shoe.

**Why Moshe Could Do It**

And remember, this is not somebody who never had shoes.

That would not be impressive.

What makes Moshe extraordinary is that he grew up in a palace. He had everything.

And here he is, taking off the very last thing he has.

The last bit of physicality.

The last symbol of control.

How did he lose the opulence of royalty?

Because he stood up for what was right.

He saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Jew for no reason, and he intervened. He chose morality over luxury. Ethics over brand. Doing the right thing over having the right status.

That was the beginning of shedding the trappings of royalty.

And it doesn't stop there.

He stands up again—for the daughters of Yitro at the well. He protects people that no one else is willing to protect. The vulnerable. The overlooked.

And Hashem says to Moshe:  
All the signs are there.

Can you take the last step?

The last step is without shoes.

The last step is barefoot.

## Not Taking Off Shoes — Eliminating Them

I don't know what this means to each of you.

I know what it means to me.

This is not just about occasionally taking off shoes.

This is about negating the idea of shoes altogether.

*Shal — milashon shelilah.*

Looking at all the beautiful things life has to offer and saying:

I will enjoy you.

I will make a bracha on you.

That is what you are there for.

But you do not matter to me in the way that you control me.

You are not the boss of me.

I am the boss of you.

Take this as a moment to think about one area where we have gone too far.

What creature comfort do we *have* to have?

What power or control do we feel anxiety over losing?

How much stress do we carry simply because we are not in charge of everything?

That is *shal ne'alecha*.

That is the negation of the shoe.

**Prayer Is Not Control**

I get this all the time as a rabbi.

“But Rabbi, what am I supposed to do?”  
“What am I supposed to do with this person?”  
“What am I supposed to do with this child?”  
“What am I supposed to do with this situation?”

Sometimes the answer is:  
There is nothing you can do.

And nothing you can do is also a viable option.

We have such a hard time accepting that.

If someone does not love you, there might be  
nothing you can do.  
If someone is unwell, there might be nothing you  
can do.

You can pray.

But understand something very important.

Prayer is not an attempt to grab control.

Prayer is the relinquishing of control.

People say, “There’s nothing to do now except for  
prayer.”

What a misnomer.

First of all, prayer *is* doing something.

But second of all, prayer is not when *you* do  
something. Prayer is asking someone else to do  
something.

All I can do is recognize that there is nothing I can  
do.

That would be a more honest sentence.

## Forgetting My Phone

Yesterday I came to shul, and I forgot my phone at  
home.

I had to borrow someone’s phone to record the  
shiur. It was a whole thing. Big file. Can’t send it.  
Can’t download it. It downloads, it’s corrupt.  
Hours and hours.

Why?

Because I forgot my phone at home.

When I came into shiur yesterday, I said:  
“I’m so happy I forgot my phone at home.”

Someone said, “Oh, because nobody bothered  
you?”

No.

People can bother me in person just as easily as they  
can on the phone.

I was happy because it is still possible for me to  
forget my phone.

That means it is not attached to me in a way that it  
cannot be left behind.

## The Trojan Horses

We have allowed things into the palace gates.

Trojan horses.

They have entered our homes.  
Our families.  
Our lives.

And we can't push them out.

You don't need ninety-four sauces with your burger.  
You don't need every upgrade.  
You don't need the highest level of luxury on every vacation.  
You don't need exactly this car.

It has gotten so far out of control.

I imagine an image for this class.

Not a shoe on a man's foot.

A shoe covering an entire human being,

All you see are his feet at the bottom.

We have gone into the shoe.

Like the woman who lived in a shoe—we have raised a family inside it.

And it is time.

It is high time.

To disengage from this unhealthy obsession with having everything and controlling everything.

## A Takeaway from the Lecture

I want to be very clear about what I am taking away from all of this, and I am saying it only because it is already fully contained in everything I have said until now.

The command of *shal ne'alecha* is not a one-time instruction to Moshe Rabbeinu. It is a description of what it means to be able to approach God, Torah, and purpose.

Shoes represent power, dominance, control, and consumption. They represent humanity's ability to stand on everything beneath it and say, "I own this. I control this. I need this."

And the Torah is teaching us that redemption, nevuah, and connection to God do not begin with more control, more possession, or more consumption. They begin with relinquishing control.

Moshe was not chosen because he never had power. He was chosen because he had power, had comfort, had opulence—and was able to let it go.

The burning bush that is not consumed is not just a miracle. It is a test. It is a vision of a world where strength exists without exploitation, where power exists without destruction.

And the question that echoes through the entire lecture is simple and uncomfortable:

Can I live without my shoes?

Not take them off occasionally.  
Not pretend I don't like them.  
But truly negate the idea that I must have them to function.

That is the movement from slavery to Torah.  
That is the movement from consumption to holiness.  
That is what it means to stand on holy ground.

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TORAH TO OUR AMAZING  
BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN  
AM YISRAEL

## Five Shabbat Table Discussion Questions

1. Where in my life have comforts quietly shifted from being things I enjoy to things I feel I cannot live without?
2. How does the idea that “prayer is relinquishing control” challenge the way I usually think about tefillah?
3. Why is Moshe’s background of wealth and power essential to understanding why *shal ne’alecha* is such a defining moment?
4. In what ways does modern abundance make it harder—not easier—to approach Torah with humility?
5. What would it practically look like to “negate the shoe” in one specific area of my life without rejecting the world Hashem created?