

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

One of the most obscure of the Festivals of the Hebrew calendar, whose origins seem to have been buried in the sands of time, is Lag B'omer, (the 33rd day of the count of the Omer between Passover and Shavuot). Despite the fact that it comes as a welcome respite from the days of mourning which precede (and according to some customs also follow) it, and it is therefore an extremely busy day for catering halls and wedding participants, its origins are shrouded in mystery.

Yes, our legal codes (Shulhan Arukh Orah Haim 493,1) record that 24,000 students of the famed Rabbi Akiba died during the period between Passover and Shavuot (either in a plague or in the Bar Kochba rebellion and its aftermath), and they did not die on Lag B'omer. But does the absence of tragedy for one day justify such a national celebration, which is marked in Israel by massive visitations to the grave of Rav Shimon Bar Yohai in Safed and very large bonfires by the teenagers which makes Efrat resemble a pyromaniac's paradise?

The Hidah (OT 223) maintains that Lag B'omer is the date of Rav Shimon bar Yohai's death, which would explain all of the celebrations around his grave; indeed, our mystical tradition records that his last day on earth was the day in which the Almighty revealed to him the Holy Zohar. And Shir Rappaport, the well-known historian of the 19th Century, suggests that Lag B'omer is the day in which Rav Shimon bar Yohai left the cave-which signaled the death of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, the end of the Hadrian persecutions, and therefore the cessation of the horrific persecution and execution of Rabbi Akiba's disciples as the tragic conclusion to the abortive Bar Kochba rebellion!

Permit me to suggest an added significance to our celebrating Lag B'omer as the day in which Rav Shimon bar Yohai left the cave-which is especially important in the light of our present-day Hebrew calendar. The Talmud (B.T. Shabbat 33b) records a conversation between three disciples of Rabbi Akiba: one praised Rome for her market-places, her bath-houses and her bridges; the second was silent; Rav Shimon denigrated the accomplishments, insisting that the market-places encouraged prostitution, the bath-houses were only for individual hedonistic satisfaction

and the bridges levied exorbitant taxes on the average citizen. The Rabbi who praised Rome was rewarded with a ministerial position, the Rabbi who was silent was exiled, and Rav Shimon was given the death penalty.

Rav Shimon and his son escaped to a cave in Pekiin, where a fig tree and a well of water were miraculously created to provide their nourishment. They remained hidden away for twelve years, totally absorbed in the study of Torah. When Elijah the Prophet informed them that the Roman Emperor was dead and his evil decree rescinded, they left the cave-only to see a farmer tilling the ground. "How can you forsake the eternal world of Torah and occupy yourself in the temporal world of agriculture?," criticized Rav Shimon-and a fire emanated from his eyes, about to consume the hopeless farmer. "You left the cave to destroy my world," thundered a Divine voice. "Return to the cave from whence you came!" They returned to the cave for 12 months. They then exited for the second time; and it was Friday, close to dusk, and they saw an old man running with two myrtle twigs. "One is for, 'Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy', and the other is for 'Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy,'" he explained. They returned to the world in peace.

Apparently, the old man taught them that even agricultural activity could be sanctified since myrtle twigs could be used to enhance the Sabbath table and that every area of the material world must be uplifted during the six days of the week if we are eventually to be able to observe and experience the redemptive bliss of a world which is wholly Sabbath.

The Talmudic story doesn't end there. Rav Shimon decided that since he had been miraculously saved from death-he had been granted the privilege of leaving the cave alive-he ought "repair something" in gratitude to the almighty. He noted that when grandfather Jacob had emerged whole from his encounter with Esau (the fore-runner of Rome), he also repaired his city: either by establishing market-places, or building bath-houses, or minting coins. Mark well that Rav Shimon now realizes that the most special of the Biblical Patriarchs had dedicated his creative energies to precisely those aspects of society for which he had denigrated Rome thirteen years before: market places, bath-houses, and moneys which could be used to pay taxes. Rav Shimon then goes on to purify a parcel of land which had been of a questionable status (Safek Tamei), and had therefore been previously considered to be defiled.

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Rav Shimon learned a crucial lesson: true sanctity comes about not by escaping the material, incomplete world of the present, not by divorcing Torah from society, but rather by involving Torah in all of the regular daily, worldly pursuits and "Kedoshufying" them. True sanctity means going into a place of questionable purity and making it pure!

Let us now return to Lag B'omer. The days between Passover and Shavuot are days of repentance and return to Torah and Israel which define our march towards redemption. Tragically we have fallen short of our goal, and these days have become days of mourning, culminating in the worst tragedy of Jewish exile, the holocaust, with Yom Hashoah just a few days after Passover.

But this period has also seen Israeli Independence Day and Jerusalem Day, specifically as new festivals in our fortunate generation. Rav Shimon bar Yohai's lesson of Lag B'omer when he left the cave for the second time is especially poignant and pregnant with meaning today. We dare not turn our eyes away from the miraculous gift of the Jewish State because it has not yet reached spiritual perfection, because it is still a work-in-progress brought about by G-d and special individuals who accomplish much but falter as well. We must learn from Rav Shimon bar Yohai that the highest sanctity lies in entering an area of questionable status and working towards purifying it, in turning the "beginning of the sprouting of the redemption" into the complete redemption of a world of peace and harmony. © 2005 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's portion clearly states that good people are rewarded while evil people are punished. In the words of the Torah: "If you keep my

commandments...then I will give your rains in their season...but if you will not listen to Me...I will bring terror over you." (Leviticus Chapter 26)

Throughout the ages, this principle has raised difficulty. After all, there are countless examples of good people who suffer and evil people who flourish. This is the famous philosophical question of Tzaddik Vera Lo, the righteous who suffer. Doesn't this reality run contrary to what the Torah states in our portion?

Another problem with the concept of reward and punishment is the directive "not to serve the Master for a reward, but to serve Him with no reward in mind." (Ethics 1:3) This seems to contradict our portion which suggests that good deeds are performed for reward.

One way to approach these questions is to imagine that good people are always rewarded and evil people are automatically punished. In such a world, freedom of choice would be non-existent. If for every ten dollars one gives to charity one would receive twenty dollars-everyone would give charity. Similarly, if every time one speaks slander one's tongue would cleave to the pallet-no one would speak wrongfully.

Indeed, in a world of precise reward and punishment, humankind would be bereft of freedom of choice. Since freedom of choice is central to the human condition, it follows, that in a world of exact reward and punishment, our very humanity, would be jeopardized.

But how can one explain this week's portion which clearly speaks of reward for good deeds and punishment for misdeeds?

Rav Ahron Soloveitchik of blessed memory suggests that the answer may lie in understanding that there are two types of reward and punishment. There is reward and punishment on an individual level and then there is reward and punishment on a collective level.

On the individual level, as the Talmud states, there is no reward for doing a mitzvah in this world- that comes in the world hereafter. (Kiddushin 39b) A promise of reward in the hereafter will not compel individuals to act properly. Human choice would remain intact.

In this world, however, reward and punishment does operate on a collective level. When one does something positive, the larger community benefits. Similarly, when one does something negative, the community suffers.

Note that in this week's portion when discussing reward and punishment, the text is in the plural. Similarly, in the second portion of the Shema recited morning and night, reward and punishment is in the plural. In fact, when reward is written in the singular it refers to an individual's portion in the world to come. An example is "Honor your father and mother that your days may be long." (Exodus 20:1)

We have come full circle. The good can suffer in this world as there is no exact reward and punishment for individuals. However, when doing the

right thing, we do so not necessarily for ourselves, but for the benefit of the community.

In a world that emphasizes the primacy of the self, our portion tells us that fully controlling the destiny of the self is not possible. However, the portion tells us that as a "we," we have tremendous power. We have the ability to wreak destruction on the world, but we also have the power to infuse it with peace and goodness.

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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

One of the things that G-d promises us if we "follow His statutes and keep His commandments and do them" (Vayikra 26:3) is to have "peace in the land" (26:6). So much so, that "a sword won't pass through your land," i.e. even if we are not the target. Yet, the next verses promise us that "you will chase your enemies, and they will fall before you, as if [smitten] by the sword; and 5 of you will chase 100, and 100 of you will chase 10,000, and your enemies will fall before you as if [smitten] by the sword" (26:7-8). Even if such success in battle is a tremendous gift from G-d, why, if we have already been promised "peace," are we at war - "chasing enemies" - at all?

Numerous commentators address this question, and give a variety of answers. Some (e.g. Ramban and Ibn Ezra) suggest that "peace" refers to internal battles and disagreements (such as the long standing problems between the Northern Kingdom of Efraim and the Southern Kingdom of Yehuda), while the possibility of external enemies, and therefore battles, still exists. Others merely differentiate between battles being fought in the Land of Israel itself, where "peace" is promised, and battles fought on the enemies' turf, where there will still be skirmishes, although we will be highly successful.

The B'er Basadeh (one of the commentaries on Rashi) quotes from Tehillim (38:4) where Dovid haMelech (King David) said "there is no peace in my bones because of my sins," showing that the word "peace" ("shalom") in this context refers to a person's health. Indeed, we find many times where the question of how one is doing, or feeling, is phrased as "is peace upon" that person. For example, when Yosef asked his brothers how their father was (Beraishis 43:27), he asked "is peace upon your elder father." Similarly, when Elisha asked the Shunamis how things were, he worded the question as "is peace upon you, is peace upon your husband, is peace upon the child" (Melachim II 4:26). The promise of "peace in the land" can therefore be understood as people being healthy, and consequently not a contradiction to also needing to be successful at war. If we want to be even more technical (and literal), we can add that it could refer to having no natural disasters. The verse would then be promising that G-d will protect us from all undirected consequences, such

as diseases, earthquakes/floods and the like, wild animals, and collateral damage from armies attacking a different country.

While these approaches successfully explain how a promise of "peace" is not incompatible with a promise of success at war, there may be another approach that undermines the question completely.

The Mechilta (Parshas Bo, 12) tells us that the fulfillment of the promise of having "peace in the land" is mentioned by Micha (4:4), who prophesized about a time when "[every] man will sit under his grapevine and under his fig tree and will not be afraid." Rashi quotes this Mechilta in his commentary on Micha, a prophecy that refers to a time when "nation will no longer lift a sword towards another nation, nor will they train for future wars. (4:3). These Messianic times have (unfortunately) not yet arrived, and so this promise has yet to be fulfilled. However, in Divrey Hayamim (I 12:14), when it describes the forces that supported Dovid (against Shaul) and made him King, it lists "these from the sons (i.e. Tribe) of Gad, the heads of the army; one of the small ones per hundred (of the enemy), and a large one per thousand." Rashi tells us that this verse is the fulfillment of the verse in our Parsha that promises that 5 will chase 100 and 100 will 10,000. Obviously, Rashi understood these promises as not (necessarily) being for the same time period, as this happened 3,000 years ago, while the promise that precedes it ("peace in the land") has yet to occur.

If the two promises need not be fulfilled concurrently, there is no contradiction between promising peace when we deserve it, and promising success at war when we (need and) deserve it. In other words, the "rewards" promised for following the Torah are not an "all or nothing" proposition that are withheld until we get everything right. Rather, as we climb the spiritual ladder, more of the promises (or of each promise) will come into effect.

Although we are eagerly awaiting the fulfillment of Micha's prophecy, we get one step closer with every mitzvah that we do. And we need not wait until everything has been accomplished before G-d will help us continue to grow- by providing us with the things that will help us take that next step, when we are ready to take it. © 2005 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI RAPHAEL WIZMAN

National Council of Young Israel

The main theme of this Parsha is the blessing we receive from HaShem when the whole Am Yisrael, as a unit, remains loyal to Him and the admonitions and punishments that come upon us as a result of our disloyalty to HaShem and to each other.

The list of blessings, though much shorter than the list of punishments, is very thorough indeed. The

Rambam continues to say that the blessings are not limited to the ones written here. (see Rambam Hilchot Teshuva 99:3) In short, everything we can wish for as an ideal and enjoyable life will simply be ours. But only as long as we engage intensively in Torah learning and mitzvos as a nation. As emphasized by Rashi: "Tihyou Amelim BaTorah - You (plural) must engage intensively in the Torah", Observe and perform the mitzvot of the Torah.

The Chafetz Chaim emphasizes that the most essential way to observe the Torah is the "Amal". In Yiddish it is known as "shteig"- to delve deeply and intensively in studies that will lead us to perform mitzvos in a meaningful way.

The Gemara Brachot 28B (also recited after Siyum Masechta) expresses this in a significant way. "Ani amel v'hem amelim" - I "shteig" - strive, work hard, and they the idlers, work hard. "Ani amel u'm'kabel sachar" - I strive hard and receive reward. "Vehem amelim ve'enam mekablum sachar" - They strive hard but do not receive reward. Why should they not receive reward for working hard? Because their striving is for idleness and not for the purpose of Torah and mitzvos. Whereas, our striving, even if we do not succeed in accomplishing the highest level, as long as we SHTEIG to perform the Mitzvos, we are assured a reward.

This is unlike a shoemaker who tried very hard to repair someone's shoes but was unsuccessful. Surely, he can't expect to be paid for the unfinished work. We, however, will receive our reward and blessings even if we don't succeed to become the most learned, as long as we continue to SHTEIG as a nation united in Torah observance.

This is also expressed in Pirkei Avot (2:21) "Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor". One is not required to complete the whole task on his own. "Velo atta ben chorin lehibatel mimena" - yet, one is not free to withdraw from it. One cannot be expected to accomplish all the Mitzvos of the Torah alone. We need the participation of Klal Yisrael. Yet, our obligation is to strive to reach as much as we are capable of reaching on our own. It is then foolish for a forgetful old man to say "why learn at all? I will only forget". The Torah wants us to shteig. Meaning all our thoughts, deeds and conduct should consistently be for the purpose of the Torah and Mitzvos.

This will also explain why the words "I'm B'chokotai telecho" is in plural form. We need the participation of every Jew in Torah observance and performance of Mitzvot in order to receive all the blessing and rewards listed in the Parsha and more. It is very simply expressed here. If we strive to do good as part of Klal Yisrael, then the world is ours. If not, then the opposite is true.

Unfortunately, this is one of the most difficult problems in our history. "Achdut" - unity, the lack of it. The goal of everyone's participation in what's good for Klal Yisrael has not been achieved. This painful reality

is constantly demonstrated in our Holy Land where anti-Torah political parties form particularly for the purpose of liquidating the performance of Torah and Mitzvos. As Rashi comments on the pasuk (26:15) "Ve'im B'chukotai ti'massu" refers to those who hate the ones who perform (see Rashi). The Metzudat David on the passuk of Isaiah 49-17 - "Meharsatich U'machribayich mimech yetzeu" your ruiners and your destroyers will "come out of you", explains it to mean "will come out from within you".

Let us hope and pray that the third and fourth passuk of this parsha will be fulfilled. "V'yshavtem labetach b'artzechem" you shall dwell securely in your land - a protection from outside enemy "venatati shalom ba'aretz" and I will provide peace in the land - a protection from our inside enemy. (Rambam) & (Or Chaim). © 2003 National Council of Young Israel

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's concluding parsha of the book of Vayikra contains a doleful prophecy - the tochacha - of troubles and exile that would befall the Jewish people in its future. It is not only the depressing content of the tochacha but also its gory detail that has always troubled me. And, I also questioned why the Torah should include a tochacha of this nature at all in its writings. After all, warning people about what will happen to them centuries later down the road of history rarely affects their current behavior. People do all sorts of things when they are younger that they know will be injurious to their health and even eventually shorten their lifespan. And yet, they persist for the moment in doing what seems enjoyable and pleasant to them, no matter what the later consequences will be. A fair assessment of Jewish history will indicate that the threat of the tochacha did not prevent the destruction of the First and Second Temples and of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. It is therefore almost reasonable to state that the tochacha is not so much a warning to Israel as it is a sad prediction of events that will happen. But that still begs the question of why so much detail. A general statement of the ills of the destruction of national sovereignty and of forced exile from one's own homeland would apparently have sufficed as a prediction of future events.

The Talmud at the conclusion of mesechet Makot relates the story of Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues who viewed the ruins of the Second Temple. As they stood there and gazed in awe at the site of what once was the most beautiful structure in the world, a fox emerged from the ruins of where the Holy of Holies had stood. Rabbi Akiva's companions wept at the sight of desolation and despair that now unfolded before their eyes. Rabbi Akiva however laughed in delight. When asked by his incredulous colleagues as to why he was laughing, he answered: "There are two prophecies

recorded regarding the future of the Jewish people. One predicted that a fox would emerge from the ruins of the Temple. The other prediction was that Jewish old men and women would sit in joy and contentment in the streets of Jerusalem and watch children at play. Only when the first prophecy about the fox emerged in reality and exact detail before my very eyes did I realize that the second prophecy would also come true in full detail and accuracy." The Torah told us in awful detail everything that the tochacha entailed. We are living witness to the chilling accuracy of every one of its words. There is no prose or hyperbole in the holy Torah. Every word is the truth. Therefore the Torah spent space and detail in describing the tochacha to us, so that we can rest assured that all of the blessings that also appear in this week's parsha will be fulfilled in every glorious detail. May we merit that speedily and in our days. © 2005 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

When my wife and I first walked into our apartment in Israel, we were struck by the absence of something that we had taken for granted all the years that we had lived in the States. Closets. Not only was there an absence of closets, there was even an absence of closet. Not a one. This certainly complicated the task of unpacking. We managed with a few temporary measures (many of which still bring tears of laughter to this day) but a more permanent solution arrived with the large, wooden crate that contained all of our shipped belongings. Not having been particularly handy until that point in my life but with necessity outweighing all rational considerations, (that necessity being exacerbated by all of the additional newly-unpacked items from that crate) I began to cut that wood in order to build cabinets.

My first creation was a simple kitchen cabinet-three sides, a top, a bottom and shelves. From there I moved on to a clothing closet with a hanging bar and a shelf. An island in the kitchen and eventually top and bottom cabinets in a basement Pesach kitchen rounded out my carpentry credentials.

The pride I felt when that first cabinet was completed. I had invested so much of myself. After having completed it late at night, I awoke early the next morning and ran into the kitchen just to marvel. I proudly told my wife (bringing home the distressing realization that our move to Israel meant that she would now have to endure painful puns in two languages) that we now had something that we could call 'aron' (Hebrew for closet, pronounced 'our own').

You're probably wondering what this has to do with our parsha. All of the blessings and consequential

difficulties that are enumerated this week depend on one primary factor. The very first Rashi clearly states this component as he begins his explanation of the parsha: "If you will toil in Torah." It's not enough to simply study the Torah. It's not enough to fulfill the mitzvos {commandments}. Everything is contingent upon the toil.

As Rav Dessler writes, the more of oneself that is put into something or someone, the more it is treasured. The Talmud teaches that a person prefers one measure of that which is their own, more than nine measures that were made by someone else. It's not that you made it. It's that it becomes an extension of you. You see yourself in it. It's you.

Working hard at Torah. Finding time early in the morning, late at night, carving out a niche during the day, when it's not convenient, when it doesn't come easy, when there are other things that must get done. Treasuring this eternal Torah as Hashem's guiding gift to man and recognizing that it is the only source of true bracha {blessing}.

The toil makes it a part of a person and as such, that eternity and integrity that it embodies becomes a part of that person. By making bracha a part of oneself, one is blessed. It becomes something we can call 'our own.' © 2005 Rabbi Y. Ciner and torah.org

RABBI NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF

Sfas Emes

The parsha begins: "Im be'chuko'sai tei'leichu" (ArtScroll: "If you will follow my decrees.") Translated literally, the parsha's initial phrase is: "If you will walk with my decrees"-an unusual turn of phrase. As just noted, ArtScroll deals with the problem that this unusual phrasing poses by translating "walk" as "follow". But the phrase cries out for other interpretations.

The Sfas Emes cites the first Medrash Rabba on the parsha, which tells us one way (out of several) with which Chazal reacted to the unusual turn of phrase, "If you will walk... ". The Medrash handles this problem by referring us to another pasuk in the Torah in which "walking" is involved. That pasuk is Tehilim, (119, 59). The pasuk there says: "Chishavti dera'chai, ve'ahshiva raglai el eidoseh'cha". (ArtScroll: "Chishaviti-I thought long and hard- dera'chai-my ways, in the sense of which way to go-and I returned my feet to Your testimonies". So much for the pshat pashut-the literal meaning-of this pasuk.

Now comes the Medrash: "Ahmahr David. Ribono shel olam! Bechol yohm vayohm, hah'yisi mechashev ve'omeir: le'makohm peloni ul'bais dira pelonis ahni ho'laych. Ve'hayu rag'lai moh'lichos osi le'batei ke'neisiyos u'lebatei medrashos." That is, Dovid Hamelech said: "Master of the Universe! Every day, I would think things over, and decide to go to such and

such place... But my feet led me to Shuls and to Bahtay Medrash."

Now comes the Sfas Emes, who presents his understanding of the Medrash. The Sfas Emes sees the text of the Medrash as coming in the following context. Dovid Hamelech is telling us what was going on in his life. Every day, he would decide to go to business; but his feet took him instead to Shuls or to Bahtay Medrash.

Next, the Sfas Emes presents his reading of Dovid Hamelech's experience. He sees Dovid saying the following. HaShem's chiyus (life-giving power) is present in every thing and in every place. The chiyus is there in different ways and in different forms; but the inner reality is the same all over. Thus Dovid Hamelech could say: Wherever I go, I encounter HaShem's Presence. For in fact, the world's inner reality is identical everywhere.

As you see, the Sfas Emes is reading the Medrash in a radically innovative way. Most (Almost all? All?) people would understand this Medrash as saying: "I decided I was going to Wall Street. But my feet took me to Lakewood instead". By contrast, the Sfas Emes is reading the Medrash as saying: "I decided to go to Wall Street, and I went to Wall Street. And there I encountered the exact same Presence of HaShem- albeit in different guise-that I would experience in Lakewood!"

(Parenthetically, note that the Sfas Emes views his way of understanding the Medrash as so self-evident that he does not think it necessary even to mention the conventional way of reading the Medrash. Also, note that with this incredible intellectual boldness and subtlety, the Sfas Emes attracted- and retained- thousands of Chassidim. The success of the Sfas Emes as Gerrer Rebbe indicates how thirsty people were- and are- for the "Hashkofa for adults" that he provides.)

Moving on, the Sfas Emes works with the pasuk quoted earlier from Tehilim (119, 59). "Chishavti derachai" ("I considered my ways... ") The Sfas Emes uses the perspective gained from this pasuk to comment on Chazal's dictum that danger lurks on the roads. He notes that the pasuk tells us how to avoid such danger. How? By thinking things through (i.e., "Chishavti") beforehand. (Note that the verb "chishavti" is not in binyan kahl- the simple construction- but rather, is in binyan pi'eil, -- the intensive construction. In this context, binyan pi'eil implies: thinking things through thoroughly.)

Thus the Sfas Emes is telling us that to travel safely along life's highways requires intellectual activity. By thinking ahead and anticipating the problems he/she is likely to encounter, a person can indeed find HaShem's Presence everywhere and in every thing. The Sfas Emes's advice-"chishavti"- is relevant to all of us; for we are all travelers on the highway of life. The Sfas Emes continues to work with the pasuk in Tehilim. He reads the words "... el eidosecha" as coming from

the word "eid"- "witness". Hence, the Sfas Emes tells us that that we have an obligation to bear testimony that the entire cosmos draws its existence from HaShem.

The Sfas Emes concludes this paragraph of his notes by presenting his perspective on Learning. The Sfas Emes's view here is complex. On the one hand, he feels very strongly that we should subordinate our intelligence and knowledge totally to the service of HaShem; that is, to His will. On the other hand, the Sfas Emes recognizes that to reach that state, one must start with intellectual activity. Thus, the pasuk in Tehilim begins with "Chishavti".

The Sfas Emes attempts to resolve this inconsistency by saying that, at any rate, the goal of our cogitation should be non-intellectual, but rather to subordinate our intelligence to HaShem. But true to his intellect, the Sfas Emes recognizes that reaching that objective requires "da'as ve'cheshbon" (knowledge and analysis); i.e., intellectual activity.

The Sfas Emes leaves us with the picture of a person constantly seeking- and attaining- higher intellectual levels in order to achieve ever greater degrees of intellectual subordination to HaShem. In fact, this is how the Sfas Emes understands the famous phrase (quoted in the parsha's first Rashi): "Sheh'tiheyu a'meilim baTorah". That is, we are enjoined to "toil" in learning Torah. As the Sfas Emes reads it, that statement is telling us to view Learning as a religious activity- a form of serving HaShem- rather than an intellectual activity. © 2005 Rabbi N.C. Leff & Torah.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

The passage of blessings and curses ends with, "These are the decrees and laws and instructions which G-d gave, between Him and Bnei Yisrael, at Mount Sinai in the hands of Moshe" [Vayikra 26:46]. This verse seems to mark the end of a central section of the Torah, starting with the events at Sinai and arriving at the current point. This does in fact include: (1) Chukim, decrees, such as: "Put a belt on them, on Aharon and his sons, and let them wear hats, and they will be decreed as priests forever" [Shemot 29:9]; "This is an eternal decree for all your generations, wherever you live, that no fats or blood shall be eaten" [Vayikra 3:17]. (2) Mishpatim, laws, such as:

"These are the laws you shall place before them" [Shemot 21:1]. (3) Torot, instructions, such as: "This is the teaching of the Olah" [Vayikra 6:2]; "This is the teaching of the Mincha" [6:7]; "This will be the teaching of the Metzora" [14:2]. It is easy to understand why this conclusion describing the different types of laws is followed by the blessings which can be expected "if you follow my decrees, and you observe my mitzvot and perform them" [26:3], and by the curses which may come "if you do not listen to me and you do not do

these commandments. And if you despise my decrees and are disgusted by the laws" [27:14-15].

In view of all of this, one may well wonder why the book of Vayikra does not end here. In fact, after the blessings and the curses there is another full chapter, 27, which discusses the issues of monetary values of donations and sanctification. Evidently, this chapter can be considered an appendix to the issues described previously, and it even ends with its own summary:

"These are the mitzvot which G-d commanded Moshe to tell Bnei Yisrael at Mount Sinai" [27:34]. Why was this chapter added on to the book of Vayikra, after the general summary at the end of Chapter 26?

The answer to this question can be seen from the contents of Chapter 27. This chapter is concerned with different categories of items that a person can sanctify, either as is or by replacing them with their monetary value, and it gives details about the laws and the effects of such sanctification. This subject is very different from everything that has been discussed up to this point, since it is related to a private initiative, something which is not obligatory at all. These different types of sanctification are not the same as voluntary sacrifices, which at least provide some benefit to a person (for an Olah, "He will be atoned by it" [Vayikra 1:4], and in the case of a Shelamim, the owner eats some of the flesh, as a way of joining the holy table). On the other hand, in this last chapter of Vayikra with respect to sanctification, no reward is promised. Rather, this seems to be an act that is simply complete dedication, nothing more, stemming from a desire to make a complete gift to G-d.

And this explains why this chapter is not included as part of the laws or the instructions, which ended with the blessings and the curses. The passage of donations and values of holy items is not part of the system of rewards. Somebody who does not make a donation or sanctify an item is not punished, and no blessing is promised to somebody who does donate. Thus, the Torah leaves room for a pure initiative, not related in any way to the system of reward and punishment.

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Out of the Depths

This portion contains the tochacha, the stern admonitions and treacherous warnings of what will happen to the Jewish people lest they not observe the Torah. Of course, the prescient predictions of misfortune are preceded with a bounty of blessing if we keep the Torah.

Unfortunately, however, the good comes with the bad, and the unfavorable penalties are not omitted. They are hauntingly clear and undiluted. The Torah details calamity with Divine accuracy. It predicts enemies with foreign tongues will come from foreign lands to capture us. The Torah forewarns that these

conquerors will not act like most, to leave the subjugated in their own land. They will, says the Torah, disperse the Jews throughout the entire world. Frightfully, the parsha foreshadows the horrors of the inquisition and Holocaust with descriptions of barbarism, Jews betraying Jews, and mass starvation. The predictions are amazing in their accuracy; and more depressing, we were the victims. It's a very difficult parsha, but the Torah must apprise us about the pain and suffering we will eventually endure.

This essay is in no way attempting to answer why those bad things happened to good people. But two thousand years before the events, the Torah predicts events that are unprecedented in the annals of conquerors and the vanquished. And it happened. Yet the Torah doesn't end it's tochacha only with notes of despair. The strong admonitions close with a promise that, though we will be spread throughout the world we will always yearn for our homeland, feel connected to it, and that an enduring spirit and love for Judaism and our Father in Heaven will never cease. Three thousand years and countless massacres, crusades, inquisitions later it still works. Pretty powerful.

That would have been a great way to end off quite a depressing portion. It would have even been a wonderful way to end the Sefer VaYikra. But the Torah ends the portion with quite an anticlimactic group of laws.

Immediately after the tochacha, it discusses the laws of erechin. A person has the right to donate his own value or the value of any of his possessions to the Temple. He can declare his home, his animals, even himself as subject to evaluation. Moreover, the Torah assesses a value to any living soul. And that value, whether 30 silver shekels or 50 shekels, is to be donated to the Temple. What connection is the last part of the parsha to the stern and ominous portion that precedes it?

After the Nazis invaded the small village of Klausenberg, they began to celebrate in their usual sadistic fashion. They gathered the Jews into a circle in the center of town, and then paraded their Rebbe, Rabbi Yekusial Yehuda Halberstam, into the center. They began taunting and teasing him, pulling his beard and pushing him around. The vile soldiers trained their guns on him as the commander began to speak. "Tell us Rabbi," sneered the officer, "do you really believe that you are the Chosen People?"

The soldiers guarding the crowd howled in laughter. But the Rebbe did not. In a serene voice, he answered loud and clear, "Most certainly." The officer became enraged. He lifted his rifle above his head and sent it crashing on the head of the Rebbe. The Rebbe fell to the ground. There was rage in the officer's voice. "Do you still think you are the Chosen People?" he yelled.

Once again, the Rebbe nodded his head and said, "yes, we are." The officer became infuriated. He

kicked the rebbe in the shin and repeated. "You stupid Jew, you lie here on the ground, beaten and humiliated. What makes you think that you are the Chosen People?"

From the depths of humiliation clouded in dust, the Rebbe replied. "As long as we are not the ones kicking and beating innocent people, we can call ourselves chosen."

The Kotzker Rebbe explains that the Torah follows the portion of tochacha, the story of Jews kicked and beaten from their homeland, with an even more powerful message. No matter what happens, we have great value as individuals, and as a nation, now and for eternity. Hashem understands that even in the depths of the Diaspora each and every one of us is a great commodity. Lying on the ground, beaten and degraded, a Jewish man, woman, or child can declare his value to the Temple, for no matter how low any nation considers him, G-d values his great worth. And he is considered cherished for eternity. Until the great day when all the nations of the world will also realize the precious value of the tiny nation that dwells amongst them. © 1997 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & Torah.org

RABBI SHMUEL CHOUKA

The Rabbi's Message

“If you will walk in my statutes...” (Vayikra 26:3)
The perashah begins a whole series of blessings promised to the Jewish people if they will "walk" in Hashem's statutes. Rashi tells us this means to toil in Torah study. This is the source of all the berachot, and conversely, when the section dealing with the curses begins, Rashi tells us it is because there was no toil in Torah study.

The question is asked: Why is this command called a chok-statute-which means something with no understandable reason? Isn't Torah study something which is logical, and yet the Torah calls this chukosai-My statute? The answer is, to learn Torah just to know what to do is not sufficient. There is a misvah to toil in Torah study, to involve ourselves in the wisdom and beauty of Torah, regardless of whether it is relevant at this moment or not. This may not seem comprehensible to some and therefore it is called a chok. Yet here we see that this is the basis for all of the blessings and vice versa.

We have to ask ourselves truthfully, are we involved in Torah study? Do we have a set time to toil in the understanding of the Torah? Especially now, when the holiday of Shabuot, which reenacts the giving of the Torah to our generation, is right around the corner, we should be prepared to have an answer to this question. As we read the perashah and see how many blessings and, G-d forbid, curses are involved due to toiling in Torah study or the lack of it, we should commit ourselves to a set time of Torah learning, with toil and

effort, so that we should merit all these blessings for ourselves and our families.

Right at Home

"A person who sanctifies his house" (Vayikra 27:14)

The Kotzker Rebbe commented on this verse: When a person is involved in spiritual matters, it is relatively easy for him to do so in a sanctified state. But true holiness is when a person sanctifies the seemingly mundane daily activities of running his house. When one behaves in an elevated manner in his own house, he is truly a holy person.

Torah ideals and principles are not only for when one is in a yeshivah or synagogue. Rather, Torah principles and values apply to all areas of our lives. At home, one has many opportunities for acts of kindness to one's own family. Also, behaving properly towards members of one's own family at home is frequently more difficult than behaving properly towards strangers. But the more difficult it is to apply Torah principles, the greater the reward. The more sanctified your behavior at home, the greater you become. (Growth through Torah)

Going Forward

"The tenth one shall be holy to Hashem" (Vayikra 27:32)

There is a misvah to give ma'aser (a tenth) from one's animals to the kohen. To select which animals would be given, all the animals are led through a gate, one by one. Every tenth animal to pass through the gate is designated for ma'aser. The halachah is that even if the one who makes the count does not proclaim the tenth animal holy, it is sanctified anyway. Nevertheless, one is required to express that kedushah orally (Bechorot 58b).

The lesson here is that even if something is already holy, its kedushah must be maintained; if not, it will lose its sanctity. Consequently, although a human being is born with a unique capacity for kedushah, the father and mother cannot assume that their child will automatically remain so, and if one does not educate his children, their innate holiness will dissipate. Even one who has matured and possesses unique aspects of kedushah must scrutinize his deeds, character traits and thoughts carefully to ensure that he does not weaken in his level of spiritual purity. Such deterioration can be worse than not having reached any level at all. Hazal say (Pesachim 49b): One who learned and then abandoned the Torah is worst of all. (Darash Moshe on the Torah) © 2003 Rabbi S. Choueka & Torah Center of Deal

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