

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

### Taking a Closer Look

There are many more verses that describe the consequences of not following G-d's commandments than those describing what will happen if we do (see [www.aishdas.org/ta/5764/kiTavo.pdf](http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5764/kiTavo.pdf)). Nevertheless, there are some that are direct parallels, and we would expect that they would mean the same thing in both instances. Therefore, when the Torah tells us that if we do the right thing "the land will give its produce and the tree of the field will give its fruit" (Vayikra 26:4) and then that if we don't "your land will not give its produce and the tree of the field will not give its fruit" (26:20), whatever is being "given" when we listen should be the exact same thing that will "not be given" if we don't. Since Rashi explains the first verse to be telling us that even non-fruit trees will start bearing fruit when we keep the Torah, it would follow that the parallel verse should mean that these same trees will continue not bearing any fruit. Since this isn't really a "curse," it is understandable that Rashi explains this verse to mean that trees that normally do bear fruit will not if we abandon G-d. This begs the question, though, of how Rashi could understand the first verse as being non-fruit trees if the second verse is clearly referring to trees that normally bear fruit.

Some commentators suggest that Rashi (and the Sifra he is quoting) is picking up on the difference between the term "tree of the field" in the first verse and "tree of the land" in the second, or the inclusion of the words "field" and "land" at all. However, when the Torah tells us that the plague of hail destroyed all the "trees of the field" (Shemos 9:25, see also 10:5/15), it is safe to assume that this refers to fruit trees (or, at the very least, includes fruit trees). Similarly, when the Torah warns us against cutting down fruit-bearing trees when we lay siege on a city (Devarim 20:19-20), it refers to them as "trees of the field." It would seem that, if anything, "trees of the field" refers more to fruit trees than non-fruit trees, making it very difficult for Rashi or the Sifra to have relied on the Torah using the term "trees of the field" as their source that even trees that normally do not bear fruit now will. Additionally, Rashi understands "the land not giving its produce" as not even giving back the seeds that were planted, even though his silence on the "the land giving its produce" indicates that it is to be taken at face value (not growing

grain or vegetables). How can two such similar terms mean such different things? What caused Rashi to deviate from the plain understanding of trees bearing fruit (when we listen) and the land not giving its produce (when we don't) despite the Torah meaning something else in its parallel descriptions?

The Chasam Sofer asked this question (framed slightly differently) in 5589, and suggested that Rashi understood the land's "produce" similar to the way the Ramban did, referring not just to things that grow from the ground, but to everything on the entire earth—including animals. Therefore, since everything is included in this expression, when the Torah continues by promising that the trees will give fruit, it must refer to something other than the fruit that normally grows on trees. Consequently, the trees that bear fruit in this verse must be those that otherwise wouldn't. In the second verse, however, the land's "produce" can't be referring to everything, as animals are still around to attack the sinning nation (Vayikra 26:22). Rashi must therefore retranslate "produce" as something else, allowing the fruit that won't grow (or that grows but won't be on the tree long enough to ripen) to be from regular fruit trees.

With all due respect, I find it hard to accept that Rashi understood both verses to differ from the norm. Just as he explained the "produce" of the second verse to be the seeds planted (as opposed to what normally grows), had he (Rashi) understood the "produce" of the first verse differently he would have told us so. Additionally, I find it incongruous for the first "produce" to specifically include animals (in order to necessitate the trees being those normally barren), while its parallel verse must be excluding the animals. It's one thing to say that "produce" means what normally grows, but because there's no need to teach us that it must also mean something else; it's quite another for the same word to mean two mutually exclusive things in parallel verses.

The Chasam Sofer's approach can be modified to explain the first verse, with all normal growth included in "produce" and barren trees bearing fruit taking it a step beyond. However, it is not as simple to extend this to the second verse as well. True, there's no real curse in telling us that barren trees won't bear fruit, so it must be fruit trees that won't give their fruit when we sin, which means that this can't be included in the "produce" that the land won't give. Nevertheless,

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there is no need to retranslate "produce" as planted seeds; it would be simpler, and more consistent, to translate "produce" as only grain and vegetables, allowing the trees that either will or won't give their fruit (depending on whether or not we listen) to be regular fruit trees. What forced Rashi to explain the "trees" in the first verse to be barren trees and the "produce" in the second verse to be the seeds that were planted?

As is often the case, context provides the perspective that can explain what was bothering Rashi. If we listen, G-d promises to give us the rain necessary for the crops to grow. Although we need rain for them to grow, just because it rains doesn't guarantee that they will, so we are also promised that the land will in fact give us its produce. This includes the fruit from the trees (as there's no reason for the grain and vegetables to grow but not the fruits), so the trees that will also give its fruits (besides the land giving us its produce) must be trees that normally do not bear fruits, which are not included in the land's (normal) produce.

What happens if we won't listen? "The sky will be like iron" (i.e. no rain) "and the land like copper" (i.e. no produce, see Targum on 26:19). As a result, "you will expend all of your energy for naught" (26:20). If there's no rain, and the land is unable to grow anything, and all of our work will be wasted, obviously nothing is growing. Therefore, "the land not giving its produce" can't be understood in just its usual sense, as we already know that there will be no crops. What does it add? As Rashi explains, it means that we will not get back even the amount that we planted. What about fruit? We don't need to replant fruit trees every year, and the ground being like copper may not prevent fruit from growing on already existing trees. Rashi therefore explains that they won't blossom when they normally would, and any fruit that does start to grow will fall off before it becomes edible. This approach is borne out by the Midrash Hagadol (Devarim 11:17, quoted by Yalkut Shimoni 869), which, when explaining a similar verse, reads as follows: "And the ground will not give it's produce,' [i.e.] not even what you bring to her. Perhaps the tree[s] will make fruits? The Torah therefore says (referring to our second verse) 'and the tree of the (field) [land] will not give it's fruit.'" In other words, even after telling us that the seeds planted will not be recovered we might have thought that the trees would

still give their fruit, necessitating the Torah to add that they won't.

When the expression used by the Torah is to be understood in its usual sense, Rashi does not need to explain it. In those instances, however, where the Torah must have meant something else (above and beyond the simple understanding, while remaining true to it), Rashi uses our traditional sources (in this case, the Sifra) to explain what the Torah really meant.

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**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

One of the great mysteries of the Jewish calendar is Lag B'Omer, a day universally celebrated with all-night bonfires, weddings and bar/ bat mitzvah celebrations-but whose origins are shrouded in doubt and speculation.

Lag B'Omer literally means the thirty-third day of the Omer, the one day of festivities in the midst of the forty-nine days of semi-mourning between Passover and Shavuot. Although in Biblical times this bridge period between our Exodus from Egypt and the Divine revelation at Sinai were joyous days of the omer grain offering and a daily countdown of anxious expectation- "And you shall count for yourselves from the morrow after the Festival (of Passover), the day that you bring the grain (omer) of the wave offering, seven complete Sabbaths shall there be. To the morrow after the seventh Sabbath week shall you number 50 days." (Lev. 23:15-16).

Nevertheless, the ironies of history cast a tragic cloud over this seven-week period when 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva one of the greatest Sages of the Mishnah, were felled by a plague. The Talmudic sage Rav Nahman gives the cause of this scourge as askara, which most commentaries explain as a plague of diphtheria or croup, but which others suggest comes from the Greek sikarii, or sword, referring to the tragic defeat of the Bar Kochba rebellion against Rome-a rebellion which was supported by Rabbi Akiva and his disciples. Whatever the physical reason for their death may have been, the Talmud definitively provides the moral cause of their downfall: "They did not accord each other proper respect" (B.T. Tractate Yevamot 62b).

It may be difficult to conceive that a mere lack of mutual respect should make the best and the brightest deserve such an extreme punishment, but the halachic reality of our daily lives has turned a Biblical and climatic period, bursting with new beginnings and new crops, into a period of devastation - no weddings, no social gatherings, no proper grooming. But there is one day when all this changes, Lag B'Omer. On that day, on the hill near Montefiore's Windmill in the heart of Jerusalem, streams of couples spend the day posing for the videographers and their cameras.

And if a couple made their momentous decision too close to Lag b'Omer to find a hall, they had better have a cousin with a large garden. It's not just the caterers and musicians and photographers who throw themselves into the charged atmosphere of the day; it's the barbers, the entertainers and the myriad youngsters of all ages who are enchanted by bonfires replete with snacks, songs and stories. But when all is said and done, what exactly is the nation celebrating?

Rav Menachem Meiri (1249-1316), in his comprehensive Talmudic commentary, cites a Geonic tradition that only on Lag B'Omer did the disciples of Rabbi Akiva not die. Big deal?! What an anti-climax. Such universal celebration because the plague of death was given a temporary respite of 24 hours. Even with this brief recess, the next day 500 more sages lost their lives, and every day thereafter until Shavuot.

Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, z"l, of London, one of the most erudite and fearless voices of the post-war modern rabbinate, records a conversation between two great Torah luminaries which sheds light on the significance of the Geonic comment. Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, one of the leaders of Lithuanian Jewry, and the Ostrovtzer Rebbe, Rabbi Mayer Yechiel Ha-Levi (1851-1928), one of the leaders of Polish Jewry, were discussing Torah. After hearing an interpretation of his colleagues which pleased him, the Rav said to the Rebbe, "Atah gavra rabah, you are indeed a great man." The Rebbe countered, "I appreciate your endorsement of my scholarship, but a gavra rabah isn't simply a talmid chacham (an expert in Talmudic law), a great man (gavra rabbah) is someone who lessens Jewish suffering, someone who loves Jews so much that he will do whatever necessary to lessen their pain."

And he proved his claim from a famous passage in the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Makkot. The great sage Rava decries the common practice of observant Jews to rise up before a Torah Scroll, but who remain seated in the presence of a Torah Sage—a gavra rabah. After all, argues Rava, the literal Biblical verse ordains that the individual who transgresses a Biblical negative command "must be punished with forty lashes, and not any more" (Deut. 25:3). The Sages, those who qualify for the appellation gavra rabah interpret this to mean one less than forty-thirty-nine. How foolish it is to rise before the Torah scroll, and not before the "great men" who interpret it—and even seem to change hereby its literal meaning, argues Rava.

The Rebbe then asked his Lithuanian counterpart: "Why did Rava choose for his example the Sages' lessening of lashes from 40 to 39 (against the literal text), rather than the Sages' lessening of the counting of each day between Passover and Shavuot from 50 to 49? After all, the Bible reads, "You shall count 50 days" (Lev. 23:16), and the rabbis interpret this to mean 49 days. Remember also that the book of

Leviticus precedes the verse in Deuteronomy. Explained the Rebbe of Ostrovtze: Obviously, we must conclude that a gavra rabah is not merely a sage who explores, expands and changes the literal meaning of the Torah, but is rather someone who, in so doing, also reduces Jewish suffering, even the suffering of a transgressor.

A cynic can always ask: What is the difference between 40 lashes and 39 lashes? What is the significance of five hundred less dead bodies when 24,000 corpses had to be buried? The answer is that every human life is of inestimable value; saving an individual from even a small amount of suffering is of critical importance. Apparently, the disciples of R. Akiva didn't understand this fundamental Jewish truth, and therefore did not sufficiently respect each other, causing their colleagues pain and embarrassment. Subsequent generations had to learn to venerate and celebrate even a momentary lessening of Jewish suffering and death—and that only someone that saves another from pain is worthy of being called "great".

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#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**T**his week's parsha which concludes the book of Vayikra deals with the realities of Jewish national and personal life. On one hand it describes in rapturous terms the blessings of happiness, security and serenity that can happen to the Jewish people and to the individual Jew. But on the other hand it vividly and graphically describes death, exile, troubles and tragedy.

Jewish history bears out the accuracy of both visions. We have lived through both experiences. Jewish history seems to have contained much longer periods of darkness than of light, of more tragedy than of joy and serenity. Though the Torah assigns observance of the commandments as the prime cause of security in Jewish life and non-observance of the same as the cause of tragedy, history and the great commentators to Torah seem to modify this cut and dried axiom.

G-d's wisdom and judgments are inscrutable and are beyond even elementary comprehension by us mortals. As such we are left wondering as to the tragedies that descended upon the Jewish people and that continue to plague us today. Though there are those amongst us that are prepared to give and accept glib answers to the causes of tragedy, the wise men of Israel warned us against such an approach. Observance of commandments is enormously difficult to fulfill completely and accurately.

As such it is difficult to measure the "why" part of this week's parsha. It is sufficient to note the "how it happened" part to realize that its message of contrasting periods of serenity and tragedy has been

painstakingly accurate and contains not one word of hyperbole. The destruction of the Temples, the Crusades and pogroms, the Inquisition and the Holocaust are all graphically described in this week's parsha. Such is the prophetic power of the Torah.

In personal life, the longer one lives the more likely tragedy will somehow visit them. The Torah makes provision for this eventuality in its laws of mourning. We all hope for lives of goodness, pleasantness and secure serenity. Yet almost inexorably problems, disappointments and even tragedy intrudes on our condition.

In Vayikra, the death of the sons of Aharon remains the prime example of tragedy suddenly destroying a scene of pride, satisfaction and seeming accomplishment. In this week's parsha the description of the punishment of Israel for its backsliding comes after a background of blessings and security. The past century presented the Jewish people with horrors of unimaginable intensity and of millennial accomplishments. The situation of extreme flux in our national life has continued throughout the sixty years of the existence of the State of Israel.

The unexpected and sudden, but apparently regular change of circumstances in national Jewish life mirrors the same situation so recognizable to us from our personal lives. We are constantly blindsided by untoward and tragic events. So, the jarring contrast that the two main subjects of the parsha present to us are really a candid description of life and its omnipresent contradictions, surprises and difficulties. Though we pray regularly for health and serenity, we must always be cognizant of how precarious situations truly are. Thus, as we rise to hear the conclusion of the book of Vayikra we recite the mantra of "chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek" - let us be doubly strong and strengthen others! So may it be. © 2008 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory](http://www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory).

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**T**he blessings in the portion of Behukotai reach toward their crescendo with the words "and I will walk among you and will be your G-d, and you shall be My people." (Leviticus 26:13) This penultimate gift that is promised is not a material one, it is rather a spiritual one that has extraordinary benefits.

Having G-d among us is a necessary prerequisite for the world to be ethical. After all, in bringing G-d back into the world, one makes a commitment to the ethical laws - the seven Noahide laws and their offshoots. (See Nachmanides, Genesis 34: 13) No doubt, even without G-d, there can be

individuals who live very ethical lives. Yet, for the world at large to be ethical, G-d's presence is critical. Without G-d, ethics would be based on human reason which can be relative. Philosophies borne out of human reason can often emerge that declare ethical, what we certainly know to be unethical. But an ethical system based on G-d's laws is inviolate and can never be altered.

G-d's presence is also a crucial antidote to personal suffering. The price of living is that all of us, at one time or another, must suffer. The question is not, why do we hurt; rather the question is, when feeling pain, do we sense the presence of G-d, a presence which makes even the difficult moments livable.

As we all know, sickness is part of the fabric of life. This world is not made up of the sick and the well, but of the sick and the not yet sick. The worst part of sickness is being alone in sickness. How I remember being wheeled into the hospital room for bypass surgery. At a particular moment, my loving family had no choice but to leave my side. As I was placed on the surgical table, I felt alone, so deeply alone. But right then I sensed the closeness of G-d. If you feel G-d, then even in difficult times, when it might seem that G-d is acting kindly, you still sense the closeness of the Divine.

From a mystical perspective, connecting with G-d makes G-d fully one. The masters of Kabbalah argue that G-d above is separated from the part of G-d which is in each of us. In this approach, the inner G-dliness we all possess intrinsically yearns to reunite with G-d above, like a lover seeking out the beloved. The Kabbalists argue that only when the image of G-d in all of humankind fuses with the G-d above, does G-d, as He is manifest in this world, become one. In the words of the prophet Zachariah, "on that day, the Lord will be one and his name will be one." (14:9) The implication is that until that point, G-d, as He is present in the world, is not yet one.

Too often it is the case that we measure blessings by material benefits. What the Torah suggests is that the highest blessing is Divine accompaniment, an accompaniment that guides us with a sense of our ethical mission and a feeling of love and spiritual comfort. © 2008 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

#### **MACHON ZOMET**

## **Shabbat B'Shabbato**

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

**T**he book of Vayikra ends with a description of two types of maaser-tithe- one to be taken from agricultural produce and the other from cattle. The two passages begin in a similar way. "All the maaser of the land, from the seeds of the earth, from the fruits of

the trees, belongs to G-d, it is holy for G-d" [Vayikra 27:30]. "With respect to all the maaser of cattle and sheep, from among all that passes under the staff, the tenth one shall be holy for G-d" [27:32]. But even at this initial stage there is a clear difference between the two types of maaser. Agricultural produce has no restrictions about the method of selection. Every person has free choice about which part of the crop he will separate for maaser. Cattle is different, in that it is chosen by a process where the flock passes under a staff, and every tenth animal is picked, without any direct human intervention in the choice.

This difference comes into sharper focus as the two passages continue. Agricultural produce can be redeemed by replacing it with money, as long as the owner adds an extra fifth of the value. "If a man redeems his maaser, he must add one-fifth to it" [27:31]. This law is similar to other cases in the same chapter. When a person wants to redeem something that is holy for his own use, he must add an amount equal to one-fifth of the value (see 27:15, 19, and 27). This is the opposite of the law with respect to maaser of cattle. "He shall not choose between good or bad, and he shall not replace it with another one. And if he does try to replace it, than both the original and the substitute will be holy, and it cannot be redeemed." [27:33]. The ability to make a choice is explicitly taken away from man, and along with it any possibility of redemption or replacement. The tenth animal is the holy one, for good or bad.

Evidently the two types of maaser represent two different approaches to the concept of dedicating something to G-d. While the principle of giving maaser is a mitzva in the Torah, man is left with the ability to choose exactly what to give, and there is even a possibility to change his mind about the gift. Thus, the inner meaning of maaser is that a person gives something that belongs to him to G-d who gave the earth to mankind, and he thereby acknowledges that man must thank G-d and recognize that He is the source of all wealth. With respect to maaser of cattle, on the other hand, man has no choice. This shows that the tenth animal is holy in essence and does not belong to man at all. Man is not "giving" this animal to G-d, rather the maaser belongs innately to G-d. This aspect of the maaser is a symbol of the fact that the earth and all its material wealth primarily belongs to G-d, who gave nine-tenths of everything to man as a reward for his labors.

We can add that it is no accident that these specific possessions correspond to the two types of maaser. Agricultural maaser is related to crops which belong to mankind, and it therefore entails an element of giving to G-d. On the other hand, maaser of cattle is related to animals, which are only partially possessed by man, since they have their own lives. Thus, the second type of maaser shows that man's control over

animals is limited, and that some of his possessions really belong wholly to G-d.

**RABBI BORUCH LEFF**

## Kol Yaakov

There's an old expression, "Time is Money." We all know as well that life is the sum total of all of our moments in time. Hence, "Time is Life." (It's not called the Time/Life magazine and corporation for nothing.) Through the transitive property, we conclude that Life is Money. This may very well be true among certain segments of American society who live solely for the fulfillment of the American dream, that is materialism.

But we know better. We understand that in order to live lives with meaning, we need to engage in daily spiritual activities. But how can we avoid getting caught up in the 'rat race' of the accumulation of wealth and greater dollar amounts in our bank accounts? The opening Rashi in this week's Parsha, Bechukotai, tells us the key: "If you will walk with My laws and observe My commandments and keep them, then I will provide your rains in their proper times, and the land will give its produce, and the trees of the fields will bear their fruit." (Vayikra 26:3-4)

Rashi explains the phrase, "walk with My laws": "This means 'amelut baTorah', that we must toil and labor in the Torah."

Why is toiling in Torah so important? The Parsha describes all of the many rewards and benefits that we can receive if we follow G-d's Instructions for Living, His Torah. The very first phrase in the first verse is the initial step necessary in fulfilling the entirety of the Torah and receiving G-d's blessings. And that phrase instructs us to labor in Torah.

In addition, what happens if we do not toil in Torah? Rashi (26:14, loose translation) later explains: "If you do not toil and do not study, you will not observe the laws. Then, you will regress to despise others who perform the commandments, then you will hate Torah scholars, then you will prevent others from fulfilling, then you will deny that I commanded them, until you eventually reject belief in G-d."

This tragic downward spiral towards heresy begins innocently with a simple lack of toiling in Torah. Mind you, a person may be very dedicated to consistent Torah study, but may not be laboring in Torah. Labor and toil require one to care deeply about Torah study and to work hard at delving into its profundity.

If I really want to make money in the stock market, I won't settle for a basic and simple understanding of trading and investing techniques. I need to know everything there is to know about stocks. All the more so concerning Torah. Superficial study may be a beautiful beginning, but it does not suffice. One must try to understand Torah at the deepest levels

according to one's abilities. If one studies without plumbing the depths, one shows a certain lack of concern for what the Torah really has to say. This is why we must not merely study but we must work hard and toil. We must have 'amelut baTorah.'

Are we getting depressed? How is it possible to really toil in Torah? It's one thing if you are a Yeshiva student and can spend 10 hours a day learning Torah. But what about all of us who need to work to support ourselves? Is there a way in which we can still toil in Torah, having limited time?

There is indeed. The truth is we only ask that question because we misunderstand what 'amelut', laboring in Torah, really means.

In Pirkei Avot, it says, "Minimize your work and involve yourself in Torah" (4:12) and "Make the study of Torah primary"(1:15). What do these words of our Sages mean? We can understand these statements in reference to Yeshiva students who can afford to study all day. They most certainly can and do make Torah primary and they are not involved with work. Surely though, the Sages were also directing their words to all Jews. But how can working people accomplish the task of minimizing their work?

It's all in the attitude. It is not a matter of length of time but of focus. A Yeshiva student could be learning Torah for 10 hours a day but still might not make Torah primary. If after a long day of study he comes home and watches a baseball game with great passion and excitement; with much more enthusiasm than the way in which he studies Torah, baseball is primary to him and not Torah. He is not 'amel' and does not toil in Torah. His real profound concerns do not involve Torah.

On the other hand, if a businessman works very hard all day and comes home and studies excitedly at night for 2-3 hours, and/or he gets up at 5 am to start his day with a passionate zest for learning Torah, he is a laborer for Torah. Even if a person were so involved in his business and literally only had five minutes a day in which to study, but he yearns the entire day for those five minutes because the Torah is so important to him, he is an 'amel' and a toiler.

The issue is one of quality study time and outlook rather than the amount of time spent. With the proper attitude, one can even be 'amel baTorah' without actually studying. We see this fact in analyzing the first verse and Rashi in the Parsha, cited above.

The phrase, "If you will walk with My laws" refers to toiling in Torah. This is talking to the entire Jewish people. Whether you are a Yeshiva student or a Torah scholar, you must toil in Torah. Therefore, toiling must not be defined by a matter of the hours spent but rather the quality of time engaged in studying.

In addition, there is no indication that the verse is specifically talking to men but it seemingly directs itself to women as well. Yet we know that women are

not technically obligated to study Torah beyond what practically applies to them. (Of course women receive great reward if they choose to study Torah. A full discussion of women and Torah study is beyond the scope of this essay.) So how can they be expected to fulfill the commandment of toiling in Torah if they are not required to study? It is obvious then that what we have surmised is true. Toiling in Torah means to have the outlook that Torah is the most important aspect of your life. This includes those who study as well as those who support and encourage the ones who study.

Even if a woman is not studying herself, she toils in Torah by revolving her life around the Torah and helping those who do study Torah. This concept would apply as well to men who do not have time to study in great depth but financially support those who toil in Torah. The financially supporting businessmen are deemed to have labored in Torah also.

Toil in Torah. Get involved in serious Torah study. Don't learn superficially. Support Torah students and scholars emotionally and financially. By being a worker and laborer for Torah, leaving the 'rat race' behind, we live a meaningful life.

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**RABBI ABBA WAGENSBERG**

## Between the Lines

**P**arshat Bechukotai contains a series of blessings and curses. Surprisingly, only 11 verses are dedicated to blessings (Leviticus 26:3-13), while a full 36 verses are dedicated to curses (Leviticus 26:14-46). The contrast is striking. Why are there so many more curses than blessings? It almost seems as though someone is out to get us!

Furthermore, King David writes in Psalms, "Your staff and Your rod have comforted me" (Psalms 23:4). It seems strange that he would use this imagery to depict comfort, since staffs and rods are instruments of pain. If King David wanted to use soothing symbolism, why didn't he write something like, "Pillows and cushions have comforted me"?

The Chafetz Chaim cites the Talmud (Brachot 5a), in which Rava explains that G-d smites His desired ones with pains and difficulties, as the verse says, "The one whom G-d desires is smitten with illness" (Isaiah 53:10). We also find a support to this idea in the verses, "G-d chastises the one He loves, like a parent who desires the child" (Proverbs 3:12) and "Fortunate is the one whom G-d afflicts with pains and suffering" (Psalms 94:10).

Based on these verses, we can understand why King David used staffs and rods as examples of comfort. Staffs and rods are instruments of pain- and this is precisely the idea that King David found so comforting! The pain itself is a sign that G-d loves us. But how? Let us explore this idea with a concrete example.

Imagine you're walking down the street, and a few yards ahead of you, a group of children is playing ball. At a certain point, the ball is kicked into the gutter, and a 5-year-old boy runs out to retrieve it. He is so focused on the ball that he doesn't look for oncoming traffic, and he dashes into the street directly in front of a car. The driver notices the boy at the last second, slams on the brakes, and the car comes to a screeching halt- missing the boy by an inch. Your reaction to this scene, as a pedestrian, would most likely be to hold your breath in horror, and then, when you see that the boy is unharmed, to continue on your way, perhaps shaking your head about the impulsiveness of children. If the boy's mother were witnessing the scene, on the other hand, she would react differently. Initially, she will also hold her breath in horror- but when she sees that her son is unharmed, she will run over to him, drag him off the street, and spank him soundly, all the while yelling that he should never, ever do that again!

What's the difference between you and the boy's mother? You don't care about the boy as much as his mother does. She loves him so much that she will temporarily inflict pain on him in order to teach him a lesson.

Let us quickly explore five additional points that support the idea that pain indicates G-d's love for us:

1. The Ramchal (Mesillat Yesharim 1) states that challenges and difficulties remind us of the transience of this world. When, due to our pain, we realize that life is really about the next world, we can realign our values and live in accordance with what is lasting and true.

2. Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that pain strengthens our moral fiber and molds us. Going through difficult experiences helps us to be sensitive to others' pain and helps us to appreciate good in our lives. Pain is therefore a gift from the One who loves us ("no pain, no gain"), and crises and problems can be seen as opportunities for growth.

3. Our pain can cause us to cry out to G-d, thus affording us the opportunity to develop a relationship with our Creator. This is not the same as prayer by rote; this is a much deeper level. Calling out from the depths of our heart and initiating a conversation with G-d in our own language is a powerful way to build a relationship with Him.

4. Maimonides (Hilchot Ta'aniyot 1:3) teaches that tragedies strike in order for us to repent and return to G-d.

5. Pain cleanses us from any mistakes we may have made in the past. Of course, despite all the benefits of pain, we must never ask for challenges in this area. But when troubles come on their own, ironically, our very suffering should bring us happiness and joy. The tractate of the Talmud devoted to the laws of mourning is called "Tractate of Happiness" (found at

the end of Tractate Avodah Zara). On a simple level, we can understand this as meaning that a mourner is not permitted to attend festivities and celebrations. On a deeper level, however, the title indicates that mourning is actually a happy occasion.

This explains why Parshat Bechukotai contains more curses than blessings. The curses themselves are a sign that G-d loves us and wants us to receive all the benefits that come from the difficulties. As the Midrash (Devarim Raba 1:4) points out, Bilam ultimately blesses the Jewish people, while Moses ultimately curses the nation. Why would our arch-enemy give us a blessing and our devoted leader give us a curse? Bilam doesn't want us to benefit from all the positive opportunities that come with pain. He simply wants to compliment us, to reassure us that everything is okay, so that we will not have the chance to grow beyond our current level. Moses, on the other hand, who loves us and really cares, doesn't let us off the hook. He chastises us harshly in order to make sure we become the best that we can be.

G-d loves us even more than Moses. Because of this, the curses in Parshat Bechukotai are even harsher than the curses that Moses gives in the Book of Deuteronomy (see Rashi on Leviticus 26:19 in contrast to Deut. 28:23). We see this in the most tragic month on the Jewish calendar, as well, the month in which both Temples were destroyed and numerous other national tragedies occurred. This month is called "Av," which is the Hebrew word for "father." The calamities of Av teach us that our Creator loves us deeply. If G-d didn't care about us, He wouldn't bother to send us the opportunities of pain.

We can each choose whether or not to implement these ideas in our own lives in order to help us cope, change our attitudes, and better manage our own challenges. We must remember, however, never to lecture other people when they are going through a period of suffering. When others are in pain, our job is simply to be there for them, cry with them, feel their pain, and do whatever we can to provide comfort.

May we all be blessed with the strength to face challenges and difficulties with a healthy frame of mind, so that we clarify the purpose of life, stretch ourselves to the maximum, and become as close as possible to G-d, Who is loving us every moment. © 2008 Rabbi A. Wagensberg and aish.com

#### **RABBI DOVID SIEGEL**

### **Haftorah**

**T**his week's haftorah teaches us a profound lesson in trust and faith in Hashem. The prophet Yirmiyahu introduces the haftorah by proclaiming, "Hashem is my strength, my stronghold, my refuge in the day of trouble." Yirmiyahu proceeds and admonishes the Jewish people for pursuing foreign avenues and engaging in strange practices for security.

He warns them that they are subject to forfeiting their wealth and possessions because of their public involvement in idolatry.

He then delivers a crushing blow in the name of Hashem and says, "And you will forsake your land which you are to blame for mistreating the inheritance I gave you and you will be enslaved to your enemies in a foreign land." (17:4) This is the dreadful prophecy about their pending exile from their precious homeland, Eretz Yisroel. Yet, Yirmiyahu devotes his attention to one specific detail as the cause of their exile. He immediately follows with serious reprimand about trust and says, "Cursed is the person who trusts in man...and turns his heart away from Hashem... Blessed is the person who trusts in Hashem." The juxtaposition of these words suggests that the Jewish exile was caused by lack of trust. Apparently, the previous criticism of mistreating the land related to this fault. Rashi develops this and explains that the admonition referred to their failure to properly observe Shmita laws. Yirmiyahu chastised them for mistreating their inheritance by refusing to return it to its true owner during Shmita.

This explanation requires serious reflection. Although the mitzvah of Shmita is undoubtedly significant, it seems to be treated with extreme severity. The prophet equates lack of Shmita observance with total lack of faith in Hashem. This suggests that one who does not properly adhere to Shmita laws has no trust and faith in Hashem!? This is difficult to digest after considering the severe demands of Shmita. During that year, one may not exert any effort towards his personal sustenance and livelihood. Hashem demands that one place his total faith and trust in Him. If one does not achieve this lofty level and fails to display total faith can he be compared to an agnostic possessing no faith?

We can raise similar concern regarding the repercussions of profiting from Shmita fruit. In addition to Shmita's agricultural prohibition one is prohibited from engaging in any profitable transaction with fruit grown during the Shmita year. The Talmud predicts the severe hardships one will endure for violating this prohibition. His first repercussion will be his sale of all his fields and possessions. This process could continue and include the sale of his home and eventually even result in the sale of his daughter as a maid servant. (see Kiddushin 20a) These punishments seem extremely severe relative to their offense. There are many grave sins whose consequences are trivial in comparison to those of Shmita violations. What establishes Shmita so significant as to warrant these responses?

We can shed light on this entire subject through the Malbim's classic commentary on this week's haftorah. He explains that the prophet discusses three approaches to one's faith in Hashem. Yirmiyahu showers

praise and blessing upon one who places his total trust in Hashem. Although this person undoubtedly involves himself in securing his sustenance he realizes that Hashem is ultimately his true provider. A second prevalent attitude comes from those of dual allegiance, who place their trust in Hashem and in their personal efforts. Although this is certainly not a supreme form of service and doesn't receive words of praise it is nonetheless acceptable. There exists yet a third attitude amongst some, one that is totally unacceptable and condemned by the prophet. Yirmiyahu curses one who places total trust in his personal involvement without even including Hashem as a factor in the equation. This person totally disregards Hashem's involvement and believes that he obtains success and fortune exclusively through personal efforts.

These insightful words place the mitzvah of Shmita in its proper perspective. Every seventh year Hashem reminds us that He is constantly involved in our lives and sustenance. Hashem facilitates this recognition by restricting us from personal involvement in our livelihood for an entire year. One who adheres to Shmita's restrictions clearly demonstrates his total faith in Hashem as his provider. However, one who violates Shmita's laws shows his total belief and trust in his personal efforts. Hashem absolutely banned these efforts during that year and will undoubtedly have no part in helping them bear fruits. Such activity reflects a defiant attitude that Hashem need not be involved for one to succeed. He expresses to all that irrespective of Hashem's approval or involvement these efforts will nevertheless produce as usual.

This totally unacceptable attitude inevitably engages Hashem in a clear demonstration that all sustenance and provisions are ultimately His doing. Hashem's response to such misguided individuals will be to gradually force them to sell their possessions in exchange for basic sustenance. This process helps them realize that all possessions come from Hashem and that He is their sole provider. A similar response will be given to the Jewish people when they display this defiant attitude. Hashem will remind them that He controls their lives and not themselves. Their failure to observe Shmita laws will cause them to forfeit their privilege of living in Eretz Yisroel, the land of Divine Providence. Conceivably whoever merits to live in Eretz Yisroel should sense Hashem's closeness and direct involvement in every step of their lives. If the entire nation fails to recognize this reality it truly has nothing to gain from dwelling in the king's palace. Hashem will therefore banish the people from His presence until they recognize and learn to appreciate His active role in their lives.

If we could only internalize this lesson our lives would be so much better. May we soon merit to return to our father's table with His full return to His people in the nearest future. © 2008 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org