**PARASHAT BECHUKOTAI**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Bechukotai begins with a description of the material blessings God promises to bestow upon *Benei Yisrael* in reward for their faithful observance of His laws. The first promise is “*ve-natati gishmeikhem be-itam*” – His providing adequate rainfall (26:4), which will result in agricultural bounty, as the Torah proceeds to describe.

A Chassidic reading of this verse is suggested by Rav Avraham Dov of Ovruch, in his *Bat Ayin*, taking note of the fact that God here promises to provide not just “rain,” but “*gishmeikhem*” – “**your** rain.” Rav Avraham Dov finds in this term an allusion to the “rain” which each of us is to provide, the contributions we should be striving to make. Just as the Almighty sends rain from the heavens to produce food for us here on earth, so are we expected to give of ourselves to the people around us, showering them with blessings. One of the greatest rewards we could ever receive for our devotion to God, Rav Avraham Dov teaches, is the ability to give, to assist, to impact, to contribute, to help improve the world. And thus the Torah promises that if we devotedly observe the *mitzvot*, God will provide us with “*gishmeikhem*” – the means, the ability and the opportunities to shower the world with our own blessings, to partner with Him in the process of sustaining and helping mankind.

Rav Avraham Dov of Ovruch’s reading of the word “*gishmeikhem*” reminds us that the blessings we receive are not only for us to enjoy, but also for us to use to help improve the world. We are all showered with many blessings, and we are expected to transfer these blessings onto other people. Everyone has his or her unique type of “rain” that could be showered down upon others – different resources, talents, skills, capabilities, experience and circumstances that allow for many different ways of making an impact. God gives us all “*gishmeikhem*,” filling each person’s “reservoir” with a unique collection of opportunities to contribute. We must commit ourselves to use all we are given for meaningful and important purposes, recognizing that our “rain” has fallen not only for our personal benefit, but for the benefit of the world at large.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Bechukotai (27:10) introduces the prohibition of *temura*, which forbids declaring the transfer of sanctity from a consecrated animal to another animal. If an animal was consecrated as a sacrifice, it is forbidden to declare the transfer of its hallowed status onto a different animal, even if the second animal is superior to the first. One who makes such a declaration is in violation of this command, and both animals are deemed consecrated and must be offered as sacrifices.

The Rambam, in the beginning of Hilkhot Temura (1:1), based on the Tosefta (1:1), makes a seemingly peculiar remark about the *temura* prohibition, stating that one violates it even if he pronounces the transfer on Shabbat. Apparently, there would have been reason to believe that declaring *temura* violates this prohibition only on weekdays. The obvious question, as posed by the *Minchat Chinukh* (352:12) and others, is why we would have entertained such a notion. While it is true that *Halakha* forbids consecrating an animal or other object on Shabbat (*Shulchan Arukh*, O.CX. 339:4), this prohibition was enacted by *Chazal*, and it is clear that if one consecrates an animal on Shabbat in violation of this enactment, the consecration is binding. Seemingly, then, declaring *temura* on Shabbat should be no different than declaring *temura* on any other day of the week. Why, then, did the Rambam (and the Tosefta) find it necessary to emphasize that one transgresses this prohibition by declaring *temura* even on Shabbat?

One reason, as suggested by numerous writers, is because sacrifices may not be offered on Shabbat (except, of course, those which the Torah specifically requires offering on Shabbat). The background to this answer is the Rambam’s ruling later in Hilkhot Temura (3:4) concerning the case of one who declares the transfer of the sanctity of an animal consecrated as a *korban pesach* onto a different animal. The Rambam writes that if this proclamation was made before the time of the offering of the *korban pesach* (midday on the 14th of Nissan), it is not completely effectual. Although the second animal is deemed consecrated, it may not be offered as a *korban pesach*, since the transfer was done before the time when the *korban pesach* may be offered. Therefore, the second animal must be treated as a consecrated animal, but cannot be offered as a sacrifice. (In such a case, we wait until the animal develops a disqualifying blemish, at which point it is redeemed, and thus divested of its sacred status.) The Rambam’s ruling is discussed by the *Tzelach* (Pesachim 96b), who explains that when one attempts *temura* at a time which is unsuitable for offering the sacrifice in question, the effect of the *temura* proclamation is limited. The second animal becomes sacred, but the full status of the first animal cannot be transferred to the second.

The *Tzelach* then proceeds to clarify that this is not the case when declaring *temura* on Shabbat. Even though sacrifices are not offered on Shabbat, he writes, a basic distinction exists between *temura* on Shabbat and *temura* of a *korban pesach* before the time for the sacrifice. In the latter case, the time period is inherently unsuitable for the *korban pesach*, which is offered only in a specific period of time. The occasion of Shabbat, by contrast, is, in and of itself, suitable for sacrifices, but the prohibition against slaughtering on Shabbat prevents us from offering sacrifices as a practical matter. As such, the *Tzelach* writes, pronouncing *temura* on Shabbat is fully effective, just like pronouncing *temura* on a weekday.

In light of the *Tzelach*’s analysis, many writers noted, we can understand why the Rambam found it necessary to clarify that one violates the *temura* prohibition even on Shabbat. One might have thought that since Shabbat is unfit for the offering of the sacrifice, an animal’s sanctity cannot be fully transferred to another animal on this day, and thus the prohibition is not violated if one declares such a transfer. The Rambam therefore makes a point of stating that the *temura* prohibition indeed applies on Shabbat, because, as the *Tzelach* explained, Shabbat is intrinsically suitable for sacrifices, and it is only the incidental prohibition against slaughtering that prevents us from offering sacrifices on Shabbat.

Monday

Yesterday, we noted the perplexing comment by the Rambam (Hilkhot Temura 1:1), based on the Tosefta, that one violates the prohibition of *temura* even on Shabbat. The prohibition of *temura* forbids declaring the transfer of an animal’s status as a sacrifice to another animal, and the Rambam found it necessary to emphasize this prohibition applies even on Shabbat. As many writers observed, there seems to be no reason to have considered the possibility of distinguishing Shabbat from other days of the week with regard to this prohibition. Why would the Rambam have found it necessary to clarify that this prohibition can be violated on Shabbat? What would have led someone to think that proclaiming the transfer of sanctity from a sacrificial animal is permissible on Shabbat?

As we saw, some answered this question on the basis of the fact that personal sacrifices may not be offered on Shabbat. The only sacrifices that are brought on Shabbat are the daily *tamid* sacrifice, which is brought each day of the week, and the special *musaf* offering for Shabbat. Personal sacrifices, however, are forbidden. Hence, one might have thought that proclaiming the transfer of a personal sacrifice’s sanctity to another animal is ineffectual on Shabbat. Since this day is not a time when personal sacrifices can be offered, sacrificial sanctity cannot be transferred in this day, and thus declaring such a transfer is not forbidden.

The question remains, however, as to why this should be the case. After all, although the Sages enacted a provision forbidding the consecration of an animal on Shabbat (Mishna, Beitza 5:2), as it resembles a transaction, nevertheless, the consecration is binding if one did consecrate an animal on Shabbat. Despite the fact that personal sacrifices may not be offered on Shabbat, an animal is capable of being consecrated on Shabbat, notwithstanding the law enacted by the Sages prohibiting consecration. Why, then, would one have considered excluding Shabbat from the *temura* prohibition, which is merely the declaration of the transfer of sanctity from one animal to another?

One simple possibility, suggested by Rav Yechezkel Abramsky, in his *Chazon Yechezkel*, is that this passage in the Tosefta instructs this very point – that after the fact, consecration declared on Shabbat is binding. Lest one mistakenly think that consecrating an animal is not only forbidden on Shabbat, but also ineffective, the Tosefta teaches that consecration is effective on Shabbat despite the prohibition, and thus *temura*, too, can be violated on Shabbat.

Rav Chaim Kanievsky, in his *Ta’ama De-kra* (Parashat Bechukotai), suggests a different approach. He cites Rashi’s comment in Masekhet Temura (27a) indicating that the prohibition of *temura* does not apply when one seeks to transfer the sanctity of a consecrated *ba’al mum* – an animal with a physical defect – onto another *ba’al mum*. In formulating the *temura* prohibition, the Torah writes that it is forbidden to exchange “*tov be-ra o ra be-tov*” – a “good” animal with a “bad” one, or even a “bad” one with a “good” one (27:10). Rashi takes note of the fact that the Torah does not mention here the case of one who has a *ba’al mum* – a “bad” animal – and seeks to transfer its sanctity onto another *ba’al mum* – which is a case of exchanging “*ra be-ra*” – a “bad” animal with another “bad” animal. As the Torah makes no mention of this case, Rashi suggests, such a transfer does not fall under the *temura* prohibition. (It should be noted, however, that in his Torah commentary, Rashi writes explicitly that such an exchange indeed falls under the *temura* prohibition.) If so, Rav Kanievsky writes, then we can perhaps understand why one might have assumed that *temura* cannot be performed on Shabbat, when personal sacrifices are not offered. Given that neither animal can be offered on this day, one could have argued that they are considered “bad” in the sense that they cannot be offered as sacrifices at the present moment – just like a *ba’al mum*, which is disqualified as a sacrifice. To dispel this misconception, the Tosefta found it necessary to clarify that even though personal sacrifices cannot be offered on Shabbat, animals on Shabbat are not considered “bad” with respect to the *temura* prohibition as physically blemished animals are, and thus the prohibition applies even on Shabbat.

Tuesday

Parashat Bechukotai begins with God’s promise to reward *Benei Yisrael* for their observance of His commands. The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 35:1), commenting on the opening verse of this *parasha* – “If you follow My statutes and observe My commands” – cites King David’s proclamation in Sefer Tehillim (119:59), “I calculated my ways, and then returned my legs toward Your testimonies.” The Midrash explains the intent of this proclamation as follows: “Master of the world! Each and every day I would make plans and say, ‘I will go to such-and-such place and such-and-such residence,’ but my legs would bring me to the synagogues and study halls.” According to the Midrash, David’s legs carried him on their own, against his will, to the synagogue and study hall, even when he planned to go elsewhere.

What exactly does the Midrash intend to teach us through this peculiar image, of King David’s feet “overruling” his decisions of where to go, and how does this relate to the opening verse of Parashat Bechukotai, in the context of which this remark was made?

A novel reading of the Midrash was suggested by Rav Dov Weinberger, in his *Shemen Ha-tov* (vol. 1). He explains that the Midrash does not actually refer to King David being taken by his legs against his will to houses of study and prayer. Rather, King David avows that no matter where he went, he brought with him the sanctity, the values, the ideals and the principles embodied by the synagogue and study hall. Even when conducting his ordinary affairs, it was as though he was in the synagogue or study hall, because he infused every activity, every experience and every setting with meaning and holiness. By applying the Torah’s laws and ideals in all areas of life, it was as though he ended up in a synagogue or yeshiva wherever he went and with whatever he involved himself.

The Midrash makes this remark in reference to the opening words of Parashat Bechukotai – “*Im be-chukotai teileikhu*,” which literally mean, “If you walk with My statutes.” The deeper meaning of these words, according to the Midrash, is that it speaks not simply of meticulous observance, but of carrying and applying the Torah’s laws wherever we “walk,” wherever we end up, in any situation or circumstance in which we find ourselves. To illustrate this idea of “*im be-chukotai teileikhu*,” the concept of carrying the Torah wherever one goes and wherever one happens to be, the Midrash points to King David who describes himself as having transformed everything he did into a religious experience.

According to this reading, then, the Midrash does describe David as instinctively taking time away from his ordinary, mundane affairs for the sake of engagement in prayer and study. To the contrary, it describes David as infusing all his ordinary, mundane affairs with meaning, purpose and significance, transforming everything he did into a religious experience by applying the Torah’s values and ideals to every situation and every area of life.

Wednesday

The opening verses of Parashat Bechukotai describe the material blessings that God promises to grant *Benei Yisrael* in reward for their observance of His laws, including the promise that “*eitz ha-sadeh yitein piryo*” – “the tree of the field shall give forth its fruit” (26:4). Rashi explains this verse as referring to *ilanei serak* – trees that do not produce fruit – and it foresees the time in the Messianic Era when even *ilanei serak* in the Land of Israel will produce fruit.

This concept, that all trees will produce fruit at the time of the final redemption, is mentioned by the Gemara at the end of Masekhet Ketubot (112b), which cites as its source a verse from Sefer Yoel (2:22) foreseeing the idyllic conditions of the Messianic Era: “…for the tree has borne its fruit; the pomegranate and vine have given forth their wealth.”

On a symbolic level, this might be teaching us that in a redeemed world, nobody is “fruitless” – unproductive and idle. Redemption is achieved when nobody lives as a “fruitless” tree, which draws moisture and nutrients from the ground without giving anything back to the world. The reality towards which we must strive is one where everybody produces to their maximum potential, without wasting any skills, talents, energy or capabilities. When we all find our mission and cultivate our skills and talents so we can produce and achieve to the very best of our ability, then we move the world closer to the redeemed state that we all desire and long for.

Interestingly, the Gemara makes this remark immediately after a different comment about the Messianic Era, describing the state of affairs in the generation just prior to the final redemption – namely, that many people will deride and criticize Torah scholars. Rather than receive the respect and admiration they deserve, righteous Torah scholars of that time will instead endure scorn and derision. The connection between these two statements, perhaps, is that the quintessential “fruitless tree” is the person who spends his or her time mocking and criticizing. Very often, cynicism and mockery are the way people avoid the need to invest work and effort in order to feel accomplished. By knocking people who devote their lives to growth and achievement, the cynics clear their conscience so they can allow themselves to take the easy route, going through life without putting in effort to contribute to the world. Deriding accomplished people is a pastime of the “*ilanei serak*,” those who prefer to complain and jeer rather than try to make the world better.

The Gemara thus warns against living a life of “fruitlessness,” against allowing our time, our potential, and our capabilities to go to waste. Rather than spend our time protesting, criticizing, complaining and poking fun at the many problems that we see all around us, we are to instead invest hard work and effort to produce the most and the best “fruit” we possibly can, in order to bring our troubled world just one step closer to redemption.

Thursday

Parashat Bechukotai includes the section commonly called the “*tokheicha*,” which describes the harsh punishments that God warns will befall *Benei Yisrael* should they breach their covenant with Him. Included in these warnings is the verse, “*Va-hashimoti et mikdesheikhem*” – that God will destroy the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, making it “desolate.” The word “*va-hashimoti*” is the verb form of the noun “*shemama*” – “desolation,” referring to making an inhabited area desolate and empty.

A mysterious story is told of one the early Chassidic masters, the Maggid of Kozhnitz, who once read this verse and then proclaimed, “I wish that we all live to see the fulfillment of this verse!” The Maggid somehow saw in this verse not just a warning of the Temple’s destruction, but also an allusion to some exalted achievement to which we ought to aspire.

A later Chassidic figure, Rav Yehoshua of Dzikov, in *Ateret Yehoshua*, speculates as to the possible meaning of the Maggid’s enigmatic remark. He suggests that the desolation of the site of the Temple can be seen as a metaphor for a person’s feeling of “desolation” regarding his own, inner “*Mikdash*.” The exalted level of which the Maggid spoke, the *Ateret Yehoshua* writes, is the level where a person recognizes his own “desolation,” that this “*Beit Ha-mikdash*” is not fully built. Most people tend to feel content with their level of religious devotion, and do not strive for higher standards of achievement. The Maggid of Kozhnitz subtly bemoaned this tendency, teaching that we should ideally feel a sense of “*shemama*,” that our “Temples” are still “desolate,” as we have much more to achieve.

We might add that just prior to this warning of the destruction of the Temple, the Torah warns of the destruction of *Benei Yisrael*’s cities: “*Ve-natati et areikhem chorba*.” This first warning speaks of the loss of the people’s personal property, their homes and other material possessions, whereas the second speaks of the loss of their spiritual center, the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. With this in mind, we might perhaps understand more clearly the Maggid’s intent. We naturally tend to feel pain and anguish upon losing material possessions, but less so when we lose our “*Mikdash*,” our opportunities for spiritual growth and service of God, or when we decline in our level of observance. The exalted level mysteriously mentioned by the Maggid might be the level at which we feel as pained and forlorn upon experiencing spiritual loss as we feel after suffering material loss. If a person feels as “desolate” – broken and anguished – after losing his “*Mikdash*,” his spiritual standing, as he does after losing his “cities” – his material blessings – then this is truly something to admire.

If so, then the Maggid here is teaching is of the need for proper prioritization, to feel as concerned about our religious needs as we are about our material needs, and to afford the former at least the same level of importance and urgency as we afford the latter.

Friday

Parashat Bechukotai begins with God’s promise of reward “*im be-chukotai teileikhu*” – if *Benei Yisrael* faithfully follow His laws. Many writers and *darshanim* took note of the verb “*teileikhu*” in this verse, which literally means “walk.” This phrase speaks of *Benei Yisrael* not simply observing the Torah’s commands (which is mentioned in the next clause – “*ve-et mitzvotai tishmeru*”), but rather “walking” in accordance with God’s laws.

One creative and meaningful interpretation of this phrase is suggested by Chida, in his *Penei David*. He cites a theory from Rav Shlomo Alkabetz’s *Shoresh Yishai* commentary to Megilat Rut, that the verb *h.l.kh.* can sometimes be used in reference to a carefully calculated decision. Rav Alkabetz explained on this basis the opening verse of Megilat Rut which says about Elimelekh, “A man from Beit Lechem Yehuda went to reside in the field of Moav.” The word “*va-yeilekh*” (“went”) in this verse, according to Rav Alkabetz, means not simply “went,” but that Elimelekh made the difficult, controversial decision to leave his homeland after a lengthy process of thought and deliberation. Rav Alkabetz draws proof to this theory from the verse towards the beginning of Sefer Shemot (2:1) which says about Amram, “A man from the family of Levi went and married Levi’s daughter.” The word “*va-yeilekh*” here seems superfluous, as the verse’s intent, seemingly, is simply to tell us that Amram married Levi’s daughter. Rav Alkabetz thus explained that this word refers to careful, patient deliberation and consultation. In the case of Amram, *Chazal* famously teach (Sota 12a) that this verse refers to Amram’s remarriage to his wife whom he had divorced, ultimately being convinced by his daughter to remarry. The Torah thus speaks of his marriage with the term “*va-yeilekh*,” which denotes the reaching of a difficult decision after careful, comprehensive thought and consideration.

On this basis, Chida suggests a novel interpretation of the phrase “*im be-chukotai teileikhu*,” explaining that it refers to careful thought and planning in religious observance. The Torah speaks here not merely of compliance with the Torah’s laws, but of patient and careful thought about what exactly the Torah demands in any given situation, and how one needs to conduct himself.

Chida here reminds us that Torah observance cannot be approached in a rash, impulsive, thoughtless manner. It requires patience and discipline, carefully thinking through all our actions before we perform them, and, if need be, consulting with knowledgeable scholars, to ensure we conduct ourselves properly. We cannot adequately satisfy our religious requirements and achieve to the best of our ability without a process of “*teileikhu*,” patiently weighing our decisions to ensure we are acting as we should. As we chart our course in life, we need to carefully explore our options and think them through so that we fulfill God’s expectations of us to the very best of our ability.

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