YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT BECHUKOTAI**

**"And Keep My Commandments, and Do Them"**

**I. "And keep My commandments, and do them"**

The *Or Ha-Chaim's* comments at the beginning of *Parashat Bechukotai* are among his most famous. He offers 42 interpretations of the first verse in the *parasha*:[[1]](#footnote-1)

If you walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments, and do them. (*Vayikra* 26:3)

This verse is difficult, for it seems to contain a certain redundancy: "walk in My statutes” and “keep My commandments (and do them)" both relate to observance of the *mitzvot;* why is it necessary to say the same thing twice? Rashi noted this difficulty and offered a resolution:

"If you walk in My statutes" – One might think that this denotes the fulfillment of the commandments; but when Scripture states: "and keep my commandments, and do them," it is plain that in this passage there is mentioned the fulfillment of the commandments. How then must I explain "If you walk in My statutes"? As an admonition that *you should study the Torah laboriously*.(Rashi, ad loc.)

Rashi emphasizes toil in the study of the Torah as an underlying focus in this verse, and the *Or Ha-Chaim* goes in a similar direction in many of his interpretations. In this *shiur*,we will focus on one of his interpretations that highlights a slightly different aspect of Torah study. As we will see, we can gain much practical insight from this verse.

**II. Keeping and Looking Forward**

In his fourteenth interpretation, the *Or Ha-Chaim* emphasizes the difference between the different verbs used in the verse. At the beginning of the verse, the verb that expresses observance of the *mitzvot* is "walk" (*halikha*), whereas in the second part of the verse, it is "keep" (*shemira*). The phrase "keeping *mitzvot*" is very common, and one who is scrupulous in his observance of Torah and *mitzvot* is known as a "*shomer mitzvot*." The simple meaning is one who observes the *mitzvot*, but the *Or Ha-Chaim* suggests a novel and interesting understanding of the term.

This understanding begins with noting a slightly different meaning attached to the verb "*shomer*" in other places in Tanakh. The most famous relates to Yaakov’s reaction to Yosef’s dreams. After Yosef tells his dreams to his brothers, and then to his father as well, his father dismisses the possibility that he and Rachel, Yosef's deceased mother, will come to bow down before Yosef. At the conclusion of the incident, the Torah states:

And his brothers envied him; and his father kept the matter [*shamar et ha-davar*]. (*Bereishit* 37:11)

What exactly does Yaakov "keep" in this verse? Rashi explains:

"Kept the matter" – He awaited and looked forward to the time when this would come to pass. (Rashi, ad loc.)

Rashi explains that the word *shemira* here denotes looking forward to something: keeping the matter in mind and waiting to see when it will happen. He also cites additional examples of this usage in Tanakh:

In the same sense we have (*Yeshayahu* 26:2) "that watch [*shomer*] for faithfulness" (i.e., for the performance of a promise) and (*Iyov* 14:16) "You do not keep [*tishmor*] my sin," i.e., you do not wait for it. (Rashi, ibid.)

In his comment on the verse in *Yeshayahu*: "Open the gates, that the righteous nation that keeps faithfulness may enter in" (*Yeshayahu* 26:2), Rashi explains:

"Keeps" – [the righteous nation] that waited [*shamar*]and looked forward during its exile, many days, to the faithfulness of the Holy One, blessed be He, that He would fulfill His promise, that He promised through His prophets to redeem them. (Rashi, ad. loc.)

A person who awaits and longs for salvation will merit to have the gates opened for him to see it.

So too in his commentary on *Iyov*, Rashi explains that the idea is that God does not wait for a person to sin in order to punish him, and relates his explanation of “*tishmor*” to the verse about Yaakov.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains the root "*shemira*" in our verse in the same way – in the sense of waiting for and anticipating observance of *mitzvot*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**III. Commandments that a Person Cannot Do**

According to tradition, there are 613 *mitzvot* in the Torah (see *Makkot* 24a). Many of these *mitzvot* are not practiced today, such as the mitzva to build a Temple, the mitzva to wipe out Amalek, and the *mitzvot* of judicial execution. In the Gemara in *Menachot*, Rabbi Yitzchak proposes a solution for overcoming the gap created by the *mitzvot* that we lack:

Rabbi Yitzchak said: What is the significance of the verses: "This is the law of the sin-offering" (*Vayikra* 6:18), and: "This is the law of the guilt-offering" (*Vayikra* 7:1)? They teach that whoever occupies himself with the study of the laws of the sin-offering is as though he were offering a sin-offering, and whoever occupies himself with the study of the laws of the guilt-offering is as though he were offering a guilt-offering. (*Menachot* 110a)

When we study the Torah passages dealing with the sacrifices, it is considered as if we sacrificed them. This is the basis of the customary practice to recite the verses describing the sacrifices before prayer (see *Shulchan Arukh Orach Chaim* 1). The *Or Ha-Chaim* uses this principle to explain the opening verse of our *parasha*:

A fourteenth reason for the Torah's terminology in our verse is linked to *Vayikra* 7:37: "This is the law for the burnt-offering, and the meal-offering." *Chazal* (*Menachot* 110a) expounded: Whoever occupies himself with the study of the laws of the burnt-offering is as though he were offering a burnt-offering, etc. This is based on *Hoshea* 14:3: "Let us pay with our lips [instead of with] bulls." This is not the only instance in which Torah study compensates for the performance of a specific commandment. Whenever a commandment cannot be fulfilled by a person, study of the relevant portion in the Torah is accounted for the person studying it as if he had personally fulfilled that commandment. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Vayikra* 26:3)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* expands on the principle established in *Menachot* and explains that it is not limited to the world of sacrifices, but is true for any mitzva whatsoever: studying the laws of any mitzva one is unable to perform is considered as if one fulfilled the mitzva. He furtherproposes that this is the novelty the Torah teaches us with its seemingly redundant terms to describe performance of *mitzvot*:

This is the meaning of the verse: "If you walk in My statutes, *and keep My commandments*" – those that are impossible for you to do. The word "keep" means you are anxiously awaiting an opportunity to physically fulfil such commandments. Then you will be considered as if you have fulfilled them as well. This is what is meant by "and do them," that is, I will reward you not only for your thoughts. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* reads the second half of the verse in an innovative way: "And keep My commandments" – if you look forward to and want to keep the commandments, then, "and do them": I will credit you as if you had actually done them. The great novelty here is that one who hopes to do a mitzva is rewarded not merely for the thought, but for actual performance of the mitzva.

This principle appears again in the *Or Ha-Chaim*,in a comment to another verse that is very similar to the comment to our verse. That verse states:

Keep and hear all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you, and with your children after you forever, when you do that which is good and right in the eyes of the Lord your God. (*Devarim* 12:28)

Here too, the *Or Ha-Chaim* asks: Why are two verbs necessary – "keep" [*shemor*] and "hear" [*shema*]? His explanation there is similar to the explanation that he offers on our verse:

Another way of explaining the verse is based on the verse: "Let us pay with our lips [instead of with] bulls" (*Hoshea* 14:3). Since it is stated: "Keep… all these words," and it is impossible for a person to fulfill all of the commandments, therefore it is stated: "Keep," which refers to the negative commandments, all of which are in a person's power to keep. And in reference to the positive commandments, it is stated: "Hear" – that is to say, one should fulfill the *mitzvot* through study, by way of hearing, and in that way it will be considered as if the opportunity presented itself and he observed it. In this way he can keep and do all the commandments. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ad loc.)

**IV. How does studying a mitzva transform into keeping it?**

Although we have found a source in the Gemara in *Menachot* for the wonderful principle according to which studying a mitzva can countas performing it, we must still try to understand how this principle works. *Why* is studying the Torah passage about a particular mitzva considered like doing that mitzva? After all, the person sat in his house and did nothing!

In order to answer this question, we will examine the teachings of other sages who adopted the principle presented here by the *Or Ha-Chaim* and see their different ways of understanding it.

**1. *Reishit Chokhma –* As if it were observed**

Rabbi Eliyahu di Vidas,[[3]](#footnote-3) in the introduction to his book *Reishit Chokhma*, expands upon the principle under discussion:

With this we can understand the *beraita* of Rabbi Meir (*Avot* 6:1): "Whoever occupies himself with the Torah merits many things," for when one occupies himself with the Torah, it is considered as if he fulfilled all the 613 *mitzvot*. Since he studies it in order to fulfill whatever is in his power to fulfill, the Holy One, blessed be He, credits him as if he had fulfilled them, **since he lacks nothing on his part, as the Holy One, blessed be He, knows his good intention, that when he will have the opportunity, he will observe it**. As it is written about Rabbi Akiva, who said: All my days I was troubled about this verse; now that I have the opportunity, shall I not fulfill it? (*Reishit Chokhma*, Introduction)

This approach is reminiscent of several cases in which *halakha* relates to something that is about to happen as if it already happened. For instance, there is a question of whether grapes that are still attached to the ground are treated like landed property or like movables (with halakhic implications regarding, for example, oaths, which are not taken for claims relating to landed property). On the one hand, they can be seen as landed property, since they are in fact still connected to the ground; on the other hand, the fact that they are about to be picked might bring us to see them as a separate entity even now. The Gemara in *Shavuot* (42a) thus states: "Whatever is about to be picked is considered as if it were picked." The same can be said regarding our topic: if a person has learned the details of a mitzva and truly desires to do it, then when the opportunity presents itself, he will immediately do it. If so, the mitzvalacks a small physical action, but its essence already exists in the world.

The best example of this is found in the story about Rabbi Akiva that the *Reishit Chokhma* mentions:

Rabbi Akiva says: "With all your soul" – even if he takes away your soul….

When Rabbi Akiva was taken out for execution, it was the hour for the recitation of the *Shema*, and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the kingship of heaven. His disciples said to him: Our teacher, even to this point? He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by this verse, "with all your soul," [which I interpret to mean,] even if He takes your soul. I said: When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this? Now that I have the opportunity, shall I not fulfil it? (*Berakhot* 61b)

Certainly the Torah's commandment to love God "with all your soul" does not see such martyrdom as an ideal. The purpose of the commandment "with all your soul" is to keep the Torah faithfully and joyfully throughout our lives, because it is the most precious thing for which we would be willing to give even our lives. Certainly a reality in which our lives are taken for the sake of the Torah is not a desirable one.

According to this understanding, a person is rewarded for the mitzvabecause it is clear that he will do it if he has the opportunity to do so, and thus it is considered already now as if he had actually done it.

**2. Rabbeinu Yona – Desire as an action**

A different understanding emerges from the words of Rabbeinu Yona in his book *Sha'arei Teshuva*. In the second part of the book, Rabbeinu Yona suggests ways one can stir himself to repentance in the service of God. His third suggestion is to listen to talks of moral rebuke. Such talks bring a person to want to advance in his service of God, and thus they also bring him to real action. Rabbeinu Yona writes:

And from the time that he accepted this in his heart, he acquired merit and reward for his soul for all of the commandments and ethical acts. And happy is he for correcting his soul in a short time. And so did our Rabbis say (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael Bo* 12, 28): "'And the children of Israel went and did' – did they do it right away? Did they not only do it on the fourteenth of the month? Rather, since they accepted upon themselves to do it, [the verse] counts it for them as if they did it immediately." And they said (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 22): "Anyone whose actions are greater than his wisdom – his wisdom will endure, as it is stated (*Shemot* 24:7): 'We shall do and we shall listen.'" What this means is that when a man accepts upon himself with a faithful heart to keep and do according to the Torah that he was taught and according to the law which those responsible for the law told him – **from that day, he has a reward for all of the commandments: those words of Torah that his ear heard and that he understood, [as well as] for all of the things which his ear has not yet heard about.** So he donned righteousness and acquired merit for all that was revealed to him and for all that was hidden from his eyes. (*Sha'arei Teshuva*, part 2)

It seems that according to Rabbeinu Yona, the desire to do a mitzva is already considered as the mitzva itself. This is evident from the proof he brings from the *korban Pesach*, which the Israelites are described as having fulfilled even before the time of the mitzva had arrived.

Why? It may be suggested that this is because *Rachamana liba ba'i*, “God desires the heart.” The essence of a mitzva is the decision to observe it, not necessarily its actual observance; the observance itself is important as an indicator of the desire and willingness to observe. Therefore, in a case where it is impossible to actually fulfill the mitzva, studying it and wishing to perform it are considered as fulfilling the mitzva itself. This principle appears in *midrashim* of *Chazal* that see a mitzvamerely as a way to reveal a person's inner desire, and not as an independent need. For example, a *midrash* on *Parashat* *Lekh-Lekha* (*Bereishit Rabba* 44, 1) states that the *mitzvot* were given to Israel only to "refine" them, that is to say, to ascertain that the people of Israel were truly ready to cancel their own will for the sake of doing God's will.

**3. The *Shela* – Desire expresses servitude**

Rabbi Yeshaya Ha-Levi Horowitz, the *Shela*, presents our principle in a third way. Hecites a well-known kabbalistic idea that the *mitzvot* complete the human body:

But the point is, that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave 613 *mitzvot*, and these 613 *mitzvot* complete the human form, by way of the mystery of the 248 organs and 365 sinews. (*Shela*, statement 6)

In the wake of this principle, the *Shela* raises a devastating objection:

It seems that a person should be terrified, for who is completed by way of all 613 *mitzvot*? *­*Surely, there are many *mitzvot* that are impossible to fulfill. Even Moshe Rabbeinu did not fulfill them; for example, the *mitzvot* that apply to priests and the entire Torah of the priests for one who is not a priest; the mitzvaof levirate marriage or *chalitza* for one to whom it does not apply; also the laws governing one who remarries his divorced wife, and the slanderer, and many like them. If so, his form and image will never be completed, God forbid! (Ibid.)

The *Shela's* solution for completing a person's spiritual "body" with *mitzvot* that he cannot fulfill is the same solution proposed by the *Or Ha-Chaim*, but attention should be paid to his formulation:

Rather, the idea is this: "Anyone who occupies himself with the Torah for its own sake," meaning: Like a king who decrees to his countrymen, what to do and what not to do, and they open the edict to do the king's will; that is, each person does what applies to him – this one goes out to fight, this one builds palaces, this one collects taxes. Each person does what he can do, and is called the king's servant, because he does what he can do. Were it possible for him to do more than that, he would do more. Therefore, he is credited as if he had done everything. Similarly, we are the servants of God; the Torah is the edict that the Holy One, blessed be He, wrote for His countrymen, that is, for us, the people of Israel. And we open the edict to fulfill all that is written in it, each person what he can do. Therefore, we are God's servants. If we occupy ourselves in Torah study for its own sake, that is, that we should know what the Holy One, blessed be He, warned us against and what He commanded us, and we study it in order to keep, to do, and to fulfill it, **then if one fulfills everything that he can possibly fulfill, the Holy One, blessed be He, credits him as if he had fulfilled everything,** because the Holy One, blessed be He joins good intention to deed (*Kiddushin* 40a). (ibid.)

The *Shela* considers the matter from a broader perspective – that the purpose of all the *mitzvot* is for the people of Israel to be God's servants. Perhaps this is also what is meant by the statement that the *mitzvot* correspond to man's parts, thus symbolizing that the whole person is subservient to God. No servant can fulfill all of his master's needs, but the fact that he does everything that he can, both learning and desiring, in order to fulfill his master's will, defines him as his "servant." In order to be God's servant, it is not necessary that one actually do all of the *mitzvot.* Study and diligence, together with the true desire and willingness to fulfill the mitzva, are what define a person as a servant of God – because he tries and wants with all his might.

**V. My Soul Thirsts for You**

The *Or Ha-Chaim's* remarks that we examined in this *shiur* teach us the great importance both of studying the Torah and especially of longing to do the *mitzvot.* The true desire and preparation for performing a mitzvais what transforms Torah study from a purely intellectual experience into part of the real service of God. The desire and the longing demonstrate our commitment to the Torah, and about such study it is stated: "If you walk in My statutes – that you should study the Torah laboriously." Toil not only in the study, but also in the desire and effort to succeed in fulfilling the Torah. As *Chazal* said (*Avot* 4:5): "He who learns in order to practice is afforded adequate means to learn and to teach, to keep and to practice!”

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. A beautiful story is told about these 42 interpretations and how they were revealed to the world when Rabbi Chaim ben Atar sentenced himself to exile. The reader is encouraged to seek it out. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also the *Or Ha-Chaim's* commentary on the mitzvaof keeping Shabbat:

"The meaning of the words, 'And they shall keep,' may also follow the meaning of the word in *Bereishit* (37:11), 'And his father kept the matter' – he awaited and looked forward to the time when this would come to pass. The intention is to command that Shabbat should not be experienced as a burden because of the activities that are prohibited on that day, but that it should be eagerly awaited and looked forward to. The words, 'to do Shabbat,' are designed to counter the prevailing perception that Shabbat is a day on which one is passive, rests up, and treats it as a day on which to indulge one's laziness. The basic purpose of Shabbat is not to provide physical rest for the body but to actively fulfil the various commandments associated with Shabbat" (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 31:16). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A student of the Ramak (Rabbi Moshe Cordovero) who lived in Tzefat in the 16th century. At the end of his life, he served as rabbi of Chevron, where he was buried. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)