**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BECHUKOTAI**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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**This week's SALT shiurim are dedicated in memory of  
David Moshe ben Harav Yehuda Leib Silverberg z"l,   
whose yahrzeit is Thursday 18 Iyar, May 23**.

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Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Bechukotai includes the section known as the *tokhecha*, which describe the calamities that God threatens to bring upon *Benei Yisrael* should they reject His laws. He warns that they would be exiled from the Land of Israel and dispersed throughout other countries, and that those who survive will live in constant fear: “Those of you who remain – I shall bring dread into their hearts in the lands of their enemies, and the sound of a driven leaf will pursue them, and they will flee as though fleeing from the sword; they will fall without any pursuer” (26:36). The simple meaning of this verse is that the people will live under the constant threat of persecution, such that innocent noises – such as “the sound of a driven leaf” – will lead them to panic and cause them to flee and stumble.

*Keli Yakar*, however, creatively suggests that the Torah also alludes to a secondary tragedy of *Benei Yisrael*’s exile – the internecine fighting that will ensue. Though it could have been expected that the people’s shared suffering would tighten their bonds of loyalty and friendship and bring them closer together, the Torah, according to *Keli Yakar*, warns here that we are prone to turn against each other even more bitterly while enduring exile and persecution. *Keli Yakar* suggests that the rustling of the leaves mentioned in this verse alludes to the “rustling” of gossip and talebearing. Even as the people suffer the hostility of enemy nations, the Torah foresees, they will also endure the hostility of their fellow Jews, who will spread rumors about them and seek to harm their reputation. They will be “pursued” not only by external foes, but also by the “sound of a driven leaf” – the incessant gossip spoken about them. As *Keli Yakar* describes, “Everyone rejoices in his fellow’s misfortune, and it would be sweet for his mouth like honey if he finds an opportunity to speak derogatorily about his fellow.” *Keli Yakar* concludes: “In our generation, this characteristic alone suffices to prolong our exile.”

While *Keli Yakar*’s comments are clearly intended to draw attention to the gravity of gossip, they also convey an important lesson for those about whom the gossip is spoken. The Torah here speaks of a perfectly innocent, harmless noise – “the sound of a driven leaf” – which will cause undue panic and make people flee despite there being no pursuer. According to *Keli Yakar*’s reading, then, the verse teaches us to put the “noise” of offensive speech about us in proper perspective. When somebody knows he is the subject of rumors, that people are speaking disparagingly about him behind his back, it might appear as though he is being “pursued,” and he might, understandably, “panic” and feel so ashamed that he wants to “flee.” However, *Keli Yakar*’s reading of this verse perhaps instructs that this reaction is, very often, unnecessary, that the “noise” of gossip should not be taken quite as seriously as it might at first seem. Of course, when we speak, we must recognize the harm that our inappropriate speech about other people could potentially cause, and avoid such speech. However, when we are the subject of other people’s inappropriate speech, we are advised to approach it, to the best of our ability, as “the sound of a driven leaf,” to remember that even when we might feel that we are “pursued,” this is not always the case. By putting people’s “rustling” about us into perspective, we can, in many instances, spare ourselves pain and humiliation, and not allow the words spoken to disturb us more than they need to.

Sunday

Parashat Bechukotai begins with the description of the blessings God promises to bestow upon *Benei Yisrael* in reward for their observance of His laws. God proclaims in this section, “I shall grant peace in the land, and you shall lie without dread” (26:6).

*Or Ha-chayim* raises the question of why this promise was necessary, considering that just prior to this verse, God promises, “You shall dwell securely in your land.” Once God has granted us security, *Or Ha-chayim* asks, why do we then need an additional promise of “peace” and the ability to sleep at night without fear?

*Or Ha-chayim*’s first explanation (which was already suggested by Ibn Ezra) is that the promise of “peace” refers to peace within the nation. We are promised that besides enjoying security from external threats, we will also enjoy peaceful relations among ourselves, and not find ourselves embroiled in internecine conflicts.

*Or Ha-chayim* then suggests a second possibility, noting that whereas the first verse speaks of security “*be-artzekhem*” – “in **your** land,” the second promises peace “*ba-aretz*” – “in **the** land.” In light of this distinction, *Or Ha-chayim* proposes that the second verse refers to a blessing of peace not only in *Eretz Yisrael*, but throughout the world. Meaning, the word “*ba-aretz*” in this verse should be understood as referring to the entire world, and not just to the Land of Israel. *Or Ha-chayim* explains that besides the inherent value of universal peace, which is something we should be wishing and praying for, conditions in other parts of the world affect us wherever we are. Even if we live in peace, hearing about violent conflicts elsewhere causes us anxiety and uneasiness, as we wonder whether the unrest could spread to our region. And thus God promises not only security in our land, but also peace throughout the world so that “you shall lie without dread” – the peaceful state of the world will bring us peace of mind and a sense of true security.

*Or Ha-chayim*’s comments perhaps teach that the conditions we create within our own small circle have an effect far beyond that circle. Fighting and discord within a family or community negatively impact upon not only that family and community, but also many others, generating tension and negativity that could easily spread far and wide. Conversely, maintaining peaceful and amicable relations within our own circle can have the effect of spreading positive energy and harmony well beyond our circle of direct influence. We must therefore work towards creating a peaceful, joyous environment not only for our own sake and the sake of the people around us, but also as part of our responsibility for the world at large.

Monday

In the opening verses of Parashat Bechukotai, God promises *Benei Yisrael* great rewards “if you follow My statutes and observe My commands.” Rashi, citing *Torat Kohanim*, famously notes that these two clauses – “if you follow My statutes” and “observe My commands” – appear redundant. To explain these seemingly repetitive phrases, Rashi writes that the first refers not to the performance of *mitzvot*, but rather “*she-tiheyu ameilim ba-Torah*” – “that you toil in Torah.” The rewards described in the subsequent verses are earned by not only meticulously observing God’s commands, but also “toiling” in the study of Torah.

Many have noted that Rashi here does not speak simply of learning, but of “toiling.” The emphasis here is on the investment of hard work and effort in the pursuit of Torah knowledge and understanding, as opposed to simply learning.

Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro of Piacezna, in *Derekh Ha-melekh* (Parashat Vaera), posits that the “toil” mentioned by Rashi refers to applying ourselves to study even when we feel disinterested and disinclined. There are, invariably, going to be times when we are not naturally driven to learn, either because the material does not interest us or because we fee fatigued and or uninspired. *Chazal* here teach us of the importance of *ameilut* – exerting effort to study when we don’t feel interested in studying, to motivate ourselves to learn when we don’t feel naturally motivated, to overcome our resistance and lethargy and apply ourselves to Torah despite our lack of enthusiasm.

The Rebbe of Piacezna suggests explaining on this basis why the phrase understood as speaking of “*ameilut*” mentions “*chukotai*” – the term normally used in reference to commands whose reasoning eludes our comprehension. The word “*chok*” – as opposed to other words used in reference to God’s commands – is commonly associated specifically with those *mitzvot* which might strike us peculiar, which do not appear to help advance any ethical or religious value. Delving into the details of these commands is oftentimes more difficult than rigorously studying *mitzvot* whose value is self-evident and intuitive. And thus *Chazal* draw our attention to the importance of “*ameilut*” specifically in regard to “*chukotai*,” those laws whose rationale lies beyond our grasp, and thus do not pique our interest. Although we are not naturally driven to study this material, we are bidden to make the effort to study.

Later in Parashat Bechukotai, in the *tokhecha* section, we read of the calamities that God threatens to bring upon *Benei Yisrael* should they disobey His laws, and the Torah warns several times that these punishments will befall the people “*im teilkhu imi keri*.” Rashi (26:21) cites *Torat Kohanim* as explaining this phrase to mean that the people observe the *mitzvot* on a “temporary” (“*ara’i*”) basis. The contrast to “*ameilut*,” to dedication to study even when we feel disinterested, is “*keri*” – observance only when it is convenient and when we feel so inclined. The Torah here emphasizes that our commitment must be consistent and unconditional, and not depend on our mood or our emotions. We are to study and observe even when it is not convenient, enjoyable or emotionally gratifying, viewing ourselves as God’s loyal servants who are devoted to fulfilling His will even when this demands hard work and self-sacrifice.

Tuesday

The opening verses of Parashat Bechukotai describe the blessings promised to *Benei Yisrael* in reward for their compliance with God’s laws. God assures the people that their obedience would be rewarded with material prosperity, an abundance of produce that would result in the harvest season extending into the new planting season. The Torah then adds, “*va-akhaltem lachmekhem la-sova*” –“and you shall eat your bread to satiation” (26:5). The plain meaning of the verse, of course, is that the people would be blessed with such prosperity that they would have enough food to eat to satiation, and not just enough to survive.

Rashi, however, citing *Torat Kohanim*, explains, “One eats a morsel and it is blessed in his stomach.” According to this reading, the phrase “*va-akhaltem lachmekhem la-sova*” blesses the people that they will feel satisfied with just a small amount of food, as even a small morsel would bring them satiation.

What is the meaning of this Midrashic reading of God’s blessing? If there is an abundance of food available, then why do we also need a blessing that we feel satisfied with a “morsel”?

An increase in material prosperity generally results in an increase in material expectations. The more we’re accustomed to having, the more we expect to always have – and so we are easily embittered and prone to feel deprived when our high expectations are not met. Indeed, modern life has brought us standards of comfort, convenience, health and nourishment that previous generations could not even imagine – and yet, so many people today are unhappy and dissatisfied, because the great blessings we enjoy are not perceived as blessings, and so we constantly seek more and feel discontented with what we have. We too often fail to acknowledge and appreciate the “morsels,” the small blessings of life, because we have come to expect large amounts and high standards – and we therefore feel dissatisfied, without appreciating how much we have. The Midrash teaches that economic prosperity is not a blessing unless we can feel satisfaction with just a “morsel,” unless we can appreciate and enjoy each and every bit of goodness in our lives. It is the satisfaction received by the “morsels” which allow us to truly enjoy the great bounty and blessings granted to us, as this ensures our ability to appreciate and celebrate our blessings without always desiring more. Once we recognize the blessing of every morsel, we will always feel blessed, and material prosperity will not cause us continued dissatisfaction, and will instead truly be a blessing.

Wednesday

One of the rewards which God promises in the beginning of Parashat Bechukotai for obeying His commands is “*u-faniti aleikhem*” (26:9), which literally means, “I shall turn My attention to you.” Rav Saadia Gaon explains this blessing as referring to God’s assuring the success of all of our endeavors. Seforno suggests that this phrase should be read as the contrast to the previous verse, which tells of God’s elimination of the enemies who rise against *Benei Yisrael*. As opposed to those nations, whom will be dealt with harshly, God will treat *Benei Yisrael* with love and kindness in reward for their faithful obedience to Hid commands.

Rashi, however, citing *Torat Kohanim*, explains, “I will turn away from all My affairs to pay your reward.” As many writers have noted, it seems difficult to understand what *Chazal* mean when they depict the Almighty as “turning away” from His “affairs.” Quite obviously, God is unlimited and can perform innumerable tasks at once. Undoubtedly, then, *Chazal* here speak of God in anthropomorphic terms as leaving behind His other “activities” and focusing His “attention” solely on rewarding *Benei Yisrael* for their obedience. But what might be the meaning of this depiction?

Rav Chaim Efraim Zeitchik, in his *Or Chadash* (Parashat Bechukotai), suggests that *Chazal*’s intent in this passage is to note how God deems our *mitzva* performance here on earth as far more precious than what happens in the upper worlds. The heavenly angels give praise to the Almighty, but our efforts to serve Him are far more valuable and significant. We human beings need to struggle and work hard to overcome our sinful tendencies and subdue our natural instincts and inclinations in order to serve God, and so He cherishes our service far more than He cherishes the service of the heavenly beings, who do not have to struggle. And thus *Chazal* depict God as turning His attention away from the heavenly beings in order to focus His attention on us – conveying the message that our struggles to serve Him are more important to Him than anything that goes on in the heavens.

Rav Chaim Hirschensohn, in his *Nimukei Rashi*, suggests that this anthropomorphic depiction is intended to instruct us in regard to our dealings with other people. Just as God is described as “turning away” from all His “affairs” and devoting His “attention” solely to granting us reward, similarly, we should be giving our full attention to the people we are speaking to or dealing with in any capacity. *Torat Kohanim* here presents this depiction of God as a depiction of the way we should be conducting ourselves in all our interpersonal dealings – namely, with our full attention. Rav Hirschensohn notes in this context the Mishna’s famous exhortation in *Pirkei Avot* (1:1), “*Hevu metunim ba-din*,” which instructs judges to be patient when reaching a decision. Judges are required to give their full attention to the case presented to them, rather than rushing through it halfheartedly to tend to what they perceive as a more pressing case. Litigants coming before a court deserve the judges’ full attention and focus, even if the judges have many other important cases to preside over. Likewise, *Torat Kohanim* here teaches us to that whenever we are dealing with people, we should “turn away” from our other “affairs,” and give the person the attention he or she deserves, even if we have many other important matters to attend to.

Thursday

The harsh *tokhecha* section of Parashat Bechukotai, which tells of the calamities that God threatened to bring upon *Benei Yisrael* should they abandon His laws, ends on a conciliatory note, assuring the people that even if God punishes them and drives them into exile, He will never breach His covenant with them. God proclaims that even if *Benei Yisrael* need to be punished, “I shall remember My covenant with Yaakov, and I shall remember also My covenant with Yitzchak and also My covenant with Avraham…” (26:42).

The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 36:1) references this verse in the context of a seemingly peculiar debate between *Beit Hillel* and *Beit Shammai* as to whether the heavens were created before the earth, or vice versa. *Beit Shammai* maintained that God brought the heavens into existence first, before the earth, whereas *Beit Hillel* argued that the creation of the earth preceded the creation of the heavenly spheres. The Midrash then cites Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai as challenging both opinions: “I am startled how the patriarchs of the world [the disciples of Hillel and Shammai] disagreed about the creation of the heaven and earth! For I maintain that heaven and earth were created like a pot and its cover” – meaning, at the same time. Rabbi Shimon contended that the heavens and earth were created simultaneously, and thus he objects to both the position of *Beit Shammai* and that of *Beit Hillel*. The Midrash proceeds to cite Rabbi Shimon’s son, Rabbi Elazar, as drawing proof to his father’s contention from the fact that whereas the Torah usually mentions the heavens before earth (“*shamayim va-aretz*”), in one instance it states, “*eretz ve-shamayim*” – mentioning the earth before the heavens (Bereishit 2:4). This was done, Rabbi Elazar asserted, to demonstrate that heaven and earth are equal, as neither preceded the other. Rabbi Elazar brings several examples of instances where the Torah presents a list in an unusual sequence on one occasion to emphasize that all items on the list are equal in stature. One example brought by Rabbi Elazar is the aforementioned verse in Parashat Bechukotai, which lists the three patriarchs in reverse chronological order (Yaakov, Yitzchak and Avraham). Rabbi Elazar explains that the Torah intentionally reversed the sequence in order to indicate that all three are equal in stature. By the same token, the Torah in one context places the heavens before earth to inform us that they are both equal and were created together.

How might we understand this debate between *Beit Hillel*, *Beit Shammai* and Rabbi Shimon? Of what interest is it to us whether the heavens were created first, the earth was created first, or they were created simultaneously?

The Slonimer Rebbe, in *Netivot Shalom*, suggests that this argument in truth revolves around the practical question of how to approach spiritual growth. The issue being addressed is whether we should focus first on the “earth” – on fixing our flaws, or reach straight for the “heavens” – for spiritual greatness. Should we first ensure to cleanse our beings of our faults, and then pursue lofty goals? Or, should we first reach for the “heavens,” as this quest will necessarily lead us to correct our faults? *Beit Shammai* taught that we should strive for high standards, because it is through the process of working to achieve these standards that we will correct our character flaws. *Beit Hillel*, however, felt that we should first concern ourselves with the basics, and work to identify and correct our faults, before setting ambitious goals and reaching for the “heavens.”

Rabbi Shimon, the *Netivot Shalom* writes, was baffled by this entire discussion, wondering why his esteemed predecessors assumed that these two endeavors are mutually exclusive. In his view, we must do both simultaneously – strive to fix our faults, and strive for greatness. Both are equally important. We should not sell ourselves short by focusing only, in the words of the *Netivot Shalom*, on “*sur mei-ra*” – avoiding wrongful conduct, without reaching higher, to the standard of “*asei tov*” – achieving greatness –but nor should our lofty aspirations lead us to neglect our more basic religious responsibilities.

The *Netivot Shalom* suggests explaining on this basis why Rabbi Elazar points to the verse in Parashat Bechukotai to support his father’s viewpoint. The three patriarchs are often viewed as representing different qualities, as each one excelled in, and embodied, a certain attribute. Rabbi Elazar understood that the Torah reversed the sequence to demonstrate that the various values and principles embodied by the three patriarchs are equally important and demand equal attention. And thus Rabbi Shimon felt that the question debated by *Beit Hillel* and *Beit Shammai* is one that we should not be asking. We should strive for both “heaven” and “earth” – to correct all our character flaws and also to strive for great achievements, because the Torah demands comprehensive commitment, that we work towards excellence in all areas, to the best of our ability.

Friday

One of the rewards which the Torah in the beginning of Parashat Bechukotai promises to grant *Benei Yisrael* for obeying His commands is the blessing of rainfall: “*Ve-natati gishmeikhem be-itam*” – “I shall grant your rains at their time” (26:4).

The Torah speaks here of rain falling “at their time,” meaning, at the time when rain is most beneficial. The simple meaning of this phrase is that God will send rain in the winter months, when it is needed to ensure a successful crop in the spring, and not in the spring and summer, during the harvest season, when moisture would ruin the produce. Indeed, Chizkuni explains, “I shall grant your rains in their time – but when it’s not their time, they cause the grain to rot.” If rain falls on harvested grain, the grain would not last throughout the winter, and thus as much as the people needed rain in the winter to ensure the growth of quality produce, they needed rain not to fall during the spring and summer, when the produce was harvested and prepared to be stored for the winter.

Rashi, however, citing *Torat Kohanim*, explains this verse differently, writing that the Torah refers to rainfall at times when people are in any event indoors. In particular, Rashi mentions Friday nights, when people would stay at home enjoying the Shabbat meal with their families. According to this interpretation, the Torah promises not only that God would send sufficient rainfall, but that He would do so in a manner that avoids the discomfort of being outdoors in the rain.

According to both interpretations of this verse, we might perhaps apply it to “rain” that we “shower” upon the people around us – meaning, the proper way to lend assistance to others.

From the first interpretation we might learn that just as rainfall is vitally important on some occasions but harmful and even destructive on others, similarly, actions that are beneficial for people at certain times can be detrimental to them at others. One common example might be unsolicited advice and criticism. As well-intentioned and wise as one’s remarks might be, they can be harmful if they are spoken at an inappropriate time. The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (4:18) advises not to request forgiveness from somebody when he is still angry and distressed over the incident, and we might extend this teaching also to advice and criticism – it is beneficial only if offered at a time and setting when the individual is receptive to it. If we try to inspire positive change in somebody at a time when the person is not yet ready to change, then the attempts are likely to be not just unsuccessful, but counterproductive. Thus, even if we feel we have “rain” – sound advice and guidance – that is capable of helping our fellow “produce” and maximize his or her full potential, we must ensure to grant this “rain” only “*be-itam*,” at an appropriate time, when it is likely to be helpful, and not harmful.

Rashi’s interpretation of this verse perhaps reminds us that even when we provide assistance that truly benefits our fellow, we must endeavor to avoid causing the individual discomfort in the process. For example, the Gemara in Masekhet Kiddushin (31a) states that it is possible for a person to feed his parent the finest delicacies and be severely punished for it – if he does so begrudgingly, while complaining about the expense entailed, thereby causing the father anguish. Just as God promises to bring us the rainfall we need in a comfortable manner – when we are indoors – likewise, we should seek to perform kindness in a warm and sensitive manner, so as to avoid causing the recipient unease. We are to not only try to provide assistance to others when needed, but to do so in the kindest and most respectful way possible, to ensure that people benefit from our “rain” without experiencing discomfort in the process.

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