**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**midrash on the Parasha:**

**Dr. Tziporah Lifshitz**

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Jeffrey Paul Friedman

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לע"נ

 יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

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**Parashat Re’eh:**

**The Blessing and the Curse**

**The Framework for the Mitzva Speech**

Rav Yitzchak Abarbanel divides the Book of *Devarim* into three parts:

1. The rebuke (1:1-11:25)
2. The mitzva speech (11:26-26:19)
3. The covenant (27:1-34:12)

At his commentary on the beginning of *Parashat Re'eh* (*Devarim* 11:26), Abarbanel explains the breakdown of this division.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I have already written many times that the intention of the Master of All Prophets [Moshe Rabbeinu] in this Book of *Mishneh Torah* is to explain to Israel those commandments which require explication and expansion among those which were mentioned briefly and alluded to in the first [four] books [of the Torah], as it says (*Devarim* 1:5), “Moshe began to explain this Torah, saying.”

Now, it is necessary to precede this with the narratives recounted in *Parashat Devarim, Parashat Va’etchanan* and *Parashat Ekev* for the reasons I mentioned in my comments ad loc. After this introduction was complete, it now comes to explain the commandments which is referred to, and they are all brought in this portion, in *Parashat Shoftim,* in *Parashat Ki Teitzei,* and in [the first] part of *Parashat Ki Tavo*. These portions in their entirety present the commandments, without any digressions into narrative or rebuke. After them, we find the elements of the covenant to strengthen their observance, the blessings and the curses, in [the latter] part of *Parashat Ki Tavo,* in *Parashat Nitzavim,* and in *Parashat Vayelekh* and *Parashat Ha’azinu*, as we shall explain. This is why it says here, at the beginning of the commandments, “See, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse.”

He sees the explanation of the *mitzvot* as the heart and essence of the book, and the other two parts as the preface to and summation of it, respectively. In addition, he points to the framework of the verses that mark this oration, at its beginning and at its end:[[2]](#footnote-2)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Opening of the mitzva speech  (*Devarim* 11:26-32) | Closing of the mitzva speech  (*Devarim* 30:15-20) |
| See, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse:   the blessing, if you shall hearken to the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day;   and the curse, if you shall not hearken to the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which you have not known. | See, before you I have set this day life and good, and death and evil,   in that I command you this day to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances; then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God shall bless you in the land where you go in to possess it…  I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that before you I have set life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your seed;  to love the Lord your God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave to Him; for that is your life, and the length of your days; that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya’akov, to give them. |

The comparison between the two units shows that in contrast to the opening verses, in which we find only the terms “blessing” and “curse,” in the closing verses we find the terms “blessing” and “curse,” “life” and “death,” and “good” and “evil.” Abarbanel, in his commentary on the verse that opens the concluding unit (*Devarim* 30:15), distinguishes between the blessing and the curse mentioned at the beginning of the mitzva speechin *Parashat Re'eh*, which denotes the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of the Torah's commandments; and that which is mentioned in the concluding verses, which deals with reward:

The subject matter of this sectionis like the subject matter of the section, "See, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse." For there above he explicates the commandments, explaining to them that the blessing depends on heeding and accepting these very commandments; and the curse also depends on not heeding them and on not keeping them, as I explained there.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Here he concludes and completes the explanation of thecommandments and the establishment of the covenant upon them. For this reason he says also: "See, before you I have set this day life and good, and death and evil," as if he said: You have seen with your own eyes how by way of these commandmentsand through the covenant that is based upon them, I set before you the life and the good that is promised as reward for doing them and the death that is set aside as punishment. For the commandmentsthemselves are for attaining life and good by keeping them, or death and evil if you do not obey and perform them. These two paths are before you.

Later, in his remarks on *Devarim* 30, Abarbanel distinguishes between the conceptual pairs of life-death and good-evil:

Regarding life and good, the commentators explained that life is length of days, while good is wealth, honor and health; death and evil are the opposites of these. But in my eyes, this is not correct; in my opinion, this means physical life and spiritual goodness.

Abarbanel comes out against a materialist conception, which sees human existence as a combination of the quantity and the quality of the time given to a person to live. Life or death, according to him, relate to the material plane, whereas good and evil relate to the eternal element in him, to the human spirit. Abarbanel's interpretation echoes the wording of the verse in *Devarim* 6:24: "And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is at this day." This wording connects "life" to man's immediate existence, and "good" to a broader concept. So too, his words echo a statement of *Chazal:*

“For our good always” — this is life in the World to Come, which is entirely good.

'That He might preserve us alive, as it is this day” — this is life in this world." (*Midrash Tannaim* to *Devarim*, end of chap. 6)[[4]](#footnote-4)

According to this, the Torah opens the mitzva speechby pointing out the essence of the *mitzvot* as a blessing, and it closes by pointing out their meaning and the result that emerges from their observance and the covenant based upon them. This accompanies the presentation of the system of the Torah and the *mitzvot* from the perspective of man — as an option which one may choose, but which one may decline as well.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**The *Derasha* of the *Sifrei*:**

**The Question**

After having seen Abarbanel's interpretation of these passages, let us examine the first *derasha* brought by the *Sifrei* on the opening verse:

"See, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse" (*Devarim* 11:26).

Why is this stated?

Because it is written: "That before you I have set life and death, the blessing and the curse" (*Devarim* 30:19).

Israel might say:

Since the Holy One, blessed be He, has set before us two ways, the way of life and the way of death,

We may choose whichever we wish.

Thus it is written: "Therefore, choose life" (*Devarim* 30:19).

This may be likened to a man sitting at the crossroads, with two paths stretching before him:

One, whose beginning is clear and whose end is thorny; and one whose beginning is thorny and whose end is clear.

He informs the passersby and says to them:

This path whose beginning you see to be clear —

For two or three steps you will walk on clear ground, but, in the end, on thorny.

And this path whose beginning you see to be thorny —

For two or three steps you will walk in thorns, but in the end you will walk on clear ground.

Thus did Moshe speak to Israel:

You see the wicked prospering —

for two or three days they will prosper in this world, but in the end, they will be cast away,

As it is written: "For there is no [good] end for the wicked one" (*Mishlei* 24:20);

And it is stated: "See the tears of such as were oppressed" (*Kohelet* 4:1);

And it is stated: "The fool folds his hands together, and eats his own flesh" (*Kohelet* 4:5);

And it is stated: "The way of the wicked is as darkness" (*Mishlei* 4:19).

You see righteous men suffering in this world —

For two or three days they suffer, and in the end they will rejoice.

And similarly it is stated: "To do you good at your end" (*Devarim* 8:16);

And it is stated: "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof" (*Kohelet* 7:8);

And it is stated: "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you" (*Yirmeyahu* 29:11);

And it is stated: "But the path of the righteous is as the light of dawn" (*Mishlei* 4:18).

(*Sifrei Re'eh* 53)

The *derasha* opens with an anonymous question and answer regarding the verse "See, before you I have set this day a blessing and a curse," but the content of the question ("Why is this stated?") is not clear. Is the *Sifrei's* question: Why does the Torah present the blessing and the curse two times, once at the beginning of *Parashat Re'eh* and once again at the end of *Parashat Nitzavim*? Or does the question relate to the very presentation of the possibility of two ways, when it is clear that from the perspective of the truth and of the Torah that there is only one path down which one is supposed to go? Or is it perhaps something else?

In light of the continuation of the *derasha*: "Because it is written: 'That before you I have set life and death, the blessing and the curse,'” it seems that the question being asked is the first one. In other words, there is a parallel verse in *Parashat Nitzavim*:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that before you I have set life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your seed.

Since this verse includes even more than what is found in the verse in *Parashat Re'eh*, why then does the Torah bother to write the verse in *Parashat Re'eh* beforehand?

The editor of the *Sifrei* on *Devarim*, Louis Finkelstein, sees in the continuation of the *derasha*: “Israel might say: Since the Holy One, blessed be He, has set before us two ways, the way of life and the way of death, we may choose whichever we wish. Thus it is written: ‘Therefore, choose life,’” a *derasha* on the verse that is cited: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that before you I have set life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your seed," which is written here as a matter of rote. That is to say, the compiler of the *Sifrei* uses this verse for the purpose of the *derasha*, citing the *derasha* that would ordinarily be expounded in relation to it, without any connection to the course of the *derasha* here.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In his opinion, this statement does not constitute an answer to the *Sifrei's* question, and the answer to that question should be sought in the parable that is brought after it.

**Two Ways**

The parable brought in the *Sifrei* notes the lack of clarity in reality. What a person sees may be deceptive, for one can only see what is in front at this point in time, and not beyond. A traveler depends on some external factor that will reveal to him or her what is found down the road, and it may turn out that what is found there is the opposite of what is observable at the beginning of the road. A traveler who trusts a guide will be able to make an informed decision regarding which way to go.

In a similar fashion, Moshe informs Israel what is the "good," where there is blessing and life. However, this good is not appealing to "the passersby." Obeying the voice of God and His *mitzvot* involves difficulty, limitations, struggling with one's impulses and environment — especially at the beginning. Disobeying God is far easier, more natural and less demanding, but it leads ultimately to hopelessness and emptiness. In this way, Moshe saves each and every member of Israel from his or her ignorance and from the deceptive nature of visible reality.[[7]](#footnote-7) The parable focuses on the lack of clarity that exists in the world in light of the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous.

A second point to derive from the parable is the principle of free will. Moshe (in the parable, the person sitting at the crossroads) reveals the unknown to all; but the decision regarding what to do with that information remains in the hands of each and every individual.

A third point is the parable's focus on the course of the path, and not on the destination. The *derasha* does not inform the reader whether or not the two paths lead to the same place. So too the guide, the figure of Moshe, relates not at all to the end point. Does the difference between the two paths lie in the place that each reaches, or in the way, the means, the different experiences and tests that the traveler will have to undergo on each path?

It seem that the "two paths" in the parable of the Tannaim in the *Sifrei* constitute a visual description of what is stated in the verse with which *Parashat Re'eh* opens:

See, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse:

The blessing, if you shall hearken to the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day;

And the curse, if you shall not hearken to the commandments of the Lord your God.

The blessing and the curse are identified as the possibility of listening or not listening to the word of God. The *derasha* adds an explanation as to why each of the paths is either a blessing or a curse. A life of listening to the word of God is a life that is good to live in the long run, a full and happy human life. A life of not listening to the word of God is a conflicted and complicated life that the person who lives it curses.

The idea that emerges from the *Sifrei*'s *derasha*, according to the interpretation proposed here, is directly related to Rav Yitzchak Abravanel's explanation of these verses, cited above.

Now, let us now return to the *Sifrei's* question: Why is it necessary to say in *Parashat Re'eh*: "See, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse," the Torah not being satisfied with the detailed verses in *Parashat* *Nitzavim*? Abarbanel points to a structural element of the mitzva speechbased on an opening dealing with essence and a conclusion dealing with the reward for honoring the covenant of the *mitzvot*. In the wake of the *Sifrei*, a question arises even according to what he says: What is the value learned from the manner in which the Torah is written regarding this issue?

The *Sifrei* on *Parashat Nitzavim* does not expound the closing, and we do not know whether the explanation of Abarbanel, which sees these verses as relating to the reward for the observance of the *mitzvot*, would have been accepted by the Tannaim. However, based on our study, it seems that the words of Abarbanel accord well with the parable in the *Sifrei. “*See, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse” is written for itself, without reference to reward, in order to emphasize the idea of a life of walking in the way of God per se.

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We will discuss two more points in the parable and its moral. In the parable, as in the verse being expounded, reality is presented in a dichotomous manner — either righteous or wicked, either blessing or cursing, with no middle ground. The people who walk on the path are not dichotomous; each is a mixture of good and evil, good intentions, joy, weakness and cruelty. What distinguishes among them is the path: the route creates the quality and the experience of the trip. The path relates to the whole of a person's life, and the difference between the paths is the experience of life that the person chooses to live. We are not dealing here with reward, with what will come after, but with the very act of walking along the path.

The parable notes two aspects of Moshe's character: He is distinguished from all the others in that he sits while all the others pass by, and in the fact that he knows what they don't know. Still, all of them, Moshe included, are at the crossroads. He is about to leave them and move on to the afterlife, and they will cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land.

**Proof from *Tanakh***

The portion of the *derasha* containing the moral cites four verses that speak of the evil end of the wicked and four verses that speak of the good end of the righteous. The first verse relating to the wicked is: "For there will be no future to the evil man, the lamp of the wicked shall be put out" (*Mishlei* 24:20). From the context in which the verse is found, we may say that it deals with the evil end of the wicked in this world:

Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be you envious at the wicked;

For there will be no future to the evil man, the lamp of the wicked shall be put out.

My son, fear you the Lord and the king, and meddle not with them that are given to change.

For their calamity shall rise suddenly; and who knows the ruin from them both? (*Mishlei* 24:19-22)

This verse is understood by *Midrash Tanchuma* as relating to the descendants of Cham, son of Noach, in the framework of human history:

"For whatever man that curses his father or his mother [shall surely be put to death]" (*Vayikra* 20:9).

Shelomo said: "Whoever curses his father or his mother, his lamp shall be put out in the blackest darkness" (*Mishlei* 20:20).

Our Rabbis said: Because Cham saw his father's nakedness, even though he did not utter a curse at him, he and his descendants have been alienated until the end of the whole world.

How much more so for one who does curse his father!

And the verse states: "For there will be no future to the evil man, the lamp of the wicked shall be put out" (*Mishlei* 24:20).

Come and see how dear honoring one's father and mother is to the Holy One, blessed be He; for the Holy One, blessed be He, does not withhold reward, neither from the righteous nor from the wicked.

From where do we know this? From the wicked Eisav.

Because he honored his father, the Holy One, blessed be He, gave him all this honor. (*Tanchuma* [Buber] *Kedoshim* 15)

The second verse cited is the following:

But I returned and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun; and see the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter. (*Kohelet* 4:1)

Ostensibly the verse deals not with the wicked, but with those whom they oppress. However, it is expounded in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* regarding the disappointment which will be the lot of the wicked in the World to Come:

Just as one does not share his fellow's reward in this world,

So he does not share his fellow's reward in the World to Come.

As it is stated: "And see the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter;

And on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter" (*Kohelet* 4:1).

Why does it say "they had no comforter" twice?

This refers to people who eat and drink and are prosperous with sons and daughters in this world,

But in the World to Come have nothing.

(*Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, Version A, 12)[[8]](#footnote-8)

The third verse appearing in this *derasha* is: "The fool folds his hands together, and eats his own flesh" (*Kohelet* 4:5). In its context, it would seem that the issue discussed therein is the hopelessness of human effort.

In *Ruth Rabba* (ed. Lerner) we find an anonymous *derasha*, in which this verse, like the previous verse, is expounded in relation to the state of the wicked in the World to Come:

The world which you have come from is like Shabbat eve. If a man does not prepare on Shabbat eve, what will he eat on Shabbat?

And further this world is like the sea and the world which you have come from is like the dry land. If a man does not prepare on dry land, what will he eat at sea?

And further, this world is like the wilderness, and the world which you have come from is like the inhabited land. If a man does not prepare in the inhabited land, what will he eat in the wilderness?

Immediately, he folded his hands together and ate his flesh, as it is stated: "The fool folds his hands together, and eats his own flesh" (*Kohelet* 4:5).

(*Ruth Rabba* 3, 3)

The last verse referring to the way of the wicked is: "The way of the wicked is as darkness; they know not at what they stumble" (*Mishlei* 4:19). The context in which it is found in the Book of *Mishlei* is very similar to the parable in the *Sifrei*:

Hear, O my son, and receive my sayings; and the years of your life shall be many.  
I have taught you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in paths of uprightness.  
When you go, your step shall not be straitened; and if you run, you shall not stumble.  
Take fast hold of instruction, let her not go; keep her, for she is your life.  
Enter not into the path of the wicked, and walk not in the way of evil men.  
Avoid it, pass not by it; turn from it, and pass on.  
For they sleep not, except they have done evil; and their sleep is taken away, unless they cause some to fall.  
For they eat the bread of wickedness, and drink the wine of violence.  
But the path of the righteous is as the light of dawn, that shines more and more to the perfect day.  
The way of the wicked is as darkness; they know not at what they stumble. (*Mishlei* 4:10-19)

Two paths are presented in these verses, one alongside the other: the path of the righteous who hold fast to the words of God and the path of the wicked. The word *derekh* (way( is repeated three times. The paths are the lives of these two groups of people: the lives of the righteous that are filled with good, honesty and light, in contrast to the lives of the wicked that are filled with evil, schemes and obstacles. However, unlike the parable, the description in *Mishlei* does not include the element of deception that is found in both paths, the thorns at the beginning of the path of the righteous and the clear ground at the beginning of the path of the wicked.[[9]](#footnote-9)

From our remarks concerning the content of the *derasha*, it seems that the two paths in the parable relate to life in this world. However, an examination of the four verses reveals that the last verse refers to this world, and apparently the first verse as well. In contrast, the other two verses in the parable refer to the World to Come. What we have said is not unambiguous and self-evident, and there is no decisive resolution.

Now, let us consider the verses cited concerning the path of the righteous.

The first verse cited relates to God's concern for His people during the forty years that He provides them with manna: "Who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers knew not, that He might afflict you, and that He might prove you, to do you good at your end" (*Devarim* 8:16). The good at the end comes after the afflictions, and by virtue of them. Thus, this verse addresses a process relating to the entire nation, which takes place in historical time, in this world. The verse accords with the "way" in the parable, which begins with difficulties.

The second verse, "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof; and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit" (*Kohelet* 7:8), is expounded by the Tannaim in various ways, all of which relate to this world. However, the verse does not deal directly with man's way in the world.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The third verse cited in the *Sifrei* in connection with the righteous is connected, like the first verse in this group, to the national dimension. Yirmeyahu prophesies to the people of Jerusalem who are being exiled to Babylon with King Yekhonya that they will return once again to Jerusalem, in seventy years’ time: "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope" (*Yirmeyahu* 29:11). Even though the people of Yehuda who are being exiled because of their sins do not fall into the category of the fully righteous, the Tanna's inclusion of the verse here teaches that they may be related to as righteous. Perhaps the *darshan* wishes to imply that the thorns at the beginning of the path of the righteous are the result of the few evil deeds committed by such a person, which require correction, and afterwards the righteous will come to peace and security. Alternatively, this verse is cited independent of its biblical context, and it should be interpreted only in accordance with the framework of the *derasha* in which it is included.

The fourth verse, "But the path of the righteous is as the light of dawn, that shines more and more to the perfect day" (*Mishlei* 4:18), is the verse that comes right before the fourth verse brought in connection with the wicked.

In contrast to the series of verses on the path of the wicked, the series of verses on the path of the righteous refers entirely to this world.

The fact that the two series of verses conclude with the same source in the Book of *Mishlei* which present the two paths, one alongside the other, attests to the centrality of this source in this *derasha*. This source may serve as the inspiration for the very creation of the parable in the *Sifrei.* As in *Parashat Re'eh*, the verses in *Mishlei* present the two contrasting pathways of blessing and curse, adding a description of each. The parable in the *Sifrei* describes the two ways from a different point of view: the point of view of the traveler who does not see everything and needs the other who is sitting at the crossroads to provide guidance.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See also his words at the beginning of *Parashat Devarim* and at the end of the first chapter of *Parashat Ki Tavo*, and in other places in his commentary to the Book of *Devarim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Based on an examination of Abarbanel’s commentary, it is clear that this closing comes not immediately at the end of the mitzva section per se, but within the unit dealing with the covenant, at the end of *Parashat Nitzavim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See his commentary to the beginning of *Parashat Re'eh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. According to this interpretation, see *Devarim* 4:1-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In the conclusion, the Torah shifts from a "symmetrical" presentation of the two options available to the person, "See, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse," to the statement, "therefore, choose life." [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This suggests that there are Tannaitic *derashot* of these verses that have not reached us. Compare *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* 14, 29:

   How do you explain: “See, the man is become as one of us” (*Bereishit* 3:22)?

   This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, set before him two paths, a path of life and a path of death, and he chose the path of death.

   See also the wording of this *derasha* in *Midrash Tanchuma,* *Re'eh* 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Compare this to the parable offered by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in *Bereishit Rabba* 12:1, which also relates to the falseness of observable reality:

   Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: This may be likened to a king of flesh and blood who built a palace. The people went in and said: if the pillars were taller, it would be beautiful; if the walls were taller, it would be beautiful; if the ceiling were higher, it would be beautiful. Now, would a person come and say: If only I had three eyes or three legs!

   Thus, it is not written here: “Even that which he has already done” but rather: “Even that which they have already done” (*Kohelet* 2:12). As it were, the King of kings’ kings and His court appoint over each and every organ and limb of yours and stand you up: “Has He not made you and established you” (*Devarim* 32:6).

   In light of the similarity between the two sources, as well as the rule (as stated by Rabbi Yochanan, BT *Sanhedrin* 86a) that “an anonymous statement in the Sifrei is to be attributed to Rabbi Shimon [bar Yochai],” it may be that is parable as well ought to be attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, Version B, we find a similar statement:

   Since the wicked eat and drink in this world, might it be that they will eat and drink in the World to Come? This comes to teach you that all the eating and drinking that they do in this world will turn into mourning in the life of the World to Come, as it is stated: “And see the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter.”

   In the Midrash of Eretz Israel this verse is expounded as relating to the distress of *mamzerim,* the products of adulterous or incestuous relationships, in this world, who have done nothing wrong but suffer due to their parents' sin. See *Vayikra Rabba* (Margaliot) 32, 8; *Kohelet Rabba* 4, 1. This *derasha* is reported in the name of Daniel the Tailor. See the version in the Margaliot edition, p. 754, and in the critical apparatus, line 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Midrash* *Tehillim* 119, 44, where this verse is expounded in the spirit of its biblical context, but it incorporates references to the challenge of the path, which is littered with obstacles. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See JT *Chagiga* 2:1, 77b. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)