**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT KI TAVO**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Ki-Tavo presents the command known as *vidui ma’aser*, which requires one to make a formal declaration after the third and sixth years of the seven-year *shemitta* cycle, avowing compliance with his agricultural tithing obligations. The individual proclaims that he has fulfilled his requirements to the poor (26:13) – referring to the *ma’aser ani* tithe, which is given on the third and sixth years – and avows his complying with the strict laws governing *mas’ser sheni*, the tithe which is brought on other years to Jerusalem and eaten there (26:14). The *vidui ma’aser* proclamation makes specific mention of several halakhic restrictions that apply to *ma’aser sheni* and which the farmer avows to having obeyed, including the prohibition against eating it immediately after a loved one’s death, and in a state of *tum’a*. The farmer then declares, “*Shamati be-kol Hashem Elokai*” – “I have obeyed the Lord my God” – which would appear to serve as simply a generic concluding proclamation. (This is, indeed, how the *Sefer Ha-chinukh* (609) seems to have understood this phrase.) *Chazal*, however, both in the *Sifrei* and the Mishna (Ma’aser Sheni 5:12), as cited by Rashi, explain this to mean, “*Heiveiti le-veit ha-bechira*” – “I brought it to the Temple.” In this proclamation – “I have obeyed the Lord my God” – the farmer professes to having fulfilled the requirement to bring the hallowed food to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

Many commentators noted the difficulty with this explanation, given that this entire verse (26:14) is speaking about *ma’aser sheni*, which must be brought to and eaten anywhere in Jerusalem, not specifically in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Why would the farmer profess to having obeyed the requirement to bring the food to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, if the requirement is only to bring it to Jerusalem?

Several different explanations have been offered for *Chazal*’s interpretation of this phrase.

Rav David Pardo, in his *Shoshanim Le-David* commentary to the Mishna, suggests that the Mishna may have mentioned the *Beit Ha-mikdash* in order to allude to the fact that *ma’aser sheni* is eaten only when the *Beit Ha-mikdash* stands. Although the requirement is to bring the tithe to Jerusalem, and there is no need to bring it specifically to the Temple, nevertheless, it is eaten only if there is a *Beit Ha-mikdash* (Rambam, Hilkhot Ma’aser Sheni 2:1; see *Kessef Mishneh*, who notes that others disagree). Rav Pardo thus proposes that when *Chazal* speak of the farmer professing to having brought his tithe to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, they actually refer to Jerusalem generally, but they mentioned the *Beit Ha-mikdash* to allude to the fact that this tithe cannot be eaten in the Temple’s absence.

In his *Maskil Le-David*, Rav Pardo offers a different theory, one which is presented also by Malbim. They note the Torah’s discussion of *ma’aser sheni* earlier in Sefer Devarim (14:24-25), where it provides the option of transferring the produce’s sanctity onto money, which is then brought to Jerusalem and used to purchase food that one eats there. The Mishna in Masekhet Shekalim (7:2), as Malbim cites, teaches that money which is found in the area of the cattle merchants in Jerusalem must be presumed to be *ma’aser sheni* money (to which various halakhic restrictions apply), as it was customary to use *ma’aser sheni* money to purchase animals for sacrifices. These commentators suggest that although there is no strict requirement to use *ma’aser sheni* money for this purpose, it appears that it was deemed appropriate to do so. Thus, the farmer proclaims his having brought the *ma’aser sheni* money to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, and having then used this money to purchase animals which he brought to the Temple as sacrifices.

Others (*Tiferet Yisrael*, *Mishna Rishona*) offer a different explanation, proposing that *Chazal* understood this phrase in the verse as referring not to *ma’aser sheni*, but to the obligation of *bikkurim* – bringing the first fruits that ripen to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. An earlier Mishna in Masekhet Ma’aser Sheni (5:10) states that the *vidui ma’aser* proclamation refers not only to tithes, but also to other agricultural obligations. Although the Mishna does not specify *bikkurim*, it stands to reason that this requirement is included in the *vidui ma’aser* proclamation, along with the other obligations that apply to agricultural produce. As such, it is possible that the affirmation “*heiveiti le-veit ha-bechira*,” which speaks of bringing produce to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, refers to *bikkurim*, the first fruits which one must bring to the Temple and give to a *kohen*.

Sunday

The *mitzva* of *vidui ma’aser*, which the Torah introduces in Parashat Ki-Tavo, requires farmers to make a proclamation after the third and sixth years of the halakhic agricultural cycle, avowing their compliance with the various obligations that apply to their produce. These include the special requirements relevant to *ma’aser sheni* – the tithe of produce that would be brought to Jerusalem and eaten there. One of the requirements of *ma’aser sheni* which the farmer must profess to have observed is “*lo natati mimenu le-meit*” – that he did not “give from it for a deceased person” (26:14).

Different views exist as to the meaning of this proclamation. Rashi, based on the interpretation cited by the *Sifrei* in the name of Rabbi Eliezer, explains this to mean that *ma’aser sheni* produce may not be used for the purpose of burial needs. If one transferred the sanctity of *ma’aser sheni* onto money, he may not use that money to purchase a coffin or shrouds for a deceased person.

The Ramban, in his Torah commentary, questions this interpretation, noting that the Torah makes it quite clear earlier in Sefer Devarim (14:25-26) that *ma’aser sheni* money may be used only to purchase food. This restriction, quite obviously, bars the use of *ma’aser sheni* for burial needs, such that a special prohibition against using these funds for a coffin and shrouds is entirely unnecessary.

The Rambam, in Hilchot Ma’aser Sheni (3:10), offers a creative reading of the phrase “*lo natati mimenu le-meit*.” He explains this declaration to mean, quite simply, that one used *ma’aser sheni* exclusively for food and drink – products which sustain human life. By declaring that one has not used these funds “*le-meit*,” one affirms that he did not use them for any purpose which is not linked to eating, the sustenance of life. Indeed, in his *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (*lo ta’aseh* 152), the Rambam cites the phrase “*lo natati mimenu le-meit*” as the source of the Biblical prohibition against using *ma’aser sheni* money for purposes other than food and drink.The Ramban cites this explanation, too, and caustically dismisses it as “*divrei havai*” (“nonsense”).

After expressing his disapproval of Rashi and the Rambam’s interpretations, the Ramban cites unnamed commentators who explain that this phrase refers to the unfortunate case of a *meit mitzva* – a deceased person with no family members available to bury him or her. According to this approach, the farmer proclaims that he did not use his *ma’aser sheni* for any unsuitable purpose, and not even for an inherently worthy cause. The costs of a coffin and shrouds are mentioned as an example of a very important and noble expenditure, and in declaring *vidui ma’aser*, the farmer affirms that he did not desecrate the sanctity of *ma’aser sheni* even for noble purposes.

The Ramban then proceeds to mention and explain the view of Rabbi Akiva, as cited by the *Sifrei*. Rabbi Akiva comments that the words “*lo natati*” – without the word “*le-meit*” – means that one did not exchange *ma’aser sheni* produce for other food. As the opening Mishna in Masekhet Ma’aser Sheni teaches, although one may transfer the hallowed status of his *ma’aser sheni* onto money and then use the money to purchase food, one may not exchange the *ma’aser sheni*produce directly for other food. According to Rabbi Akiva, this is the meaning of the phrase “*lo natati*” in this verse – that the farmer affirms not having given his *ma’aser sheni* produce to somebody in exchange for that person’s food. Rabbi Akiva does not explain how he understands the word “*le-meit*,” but the Ramban claims that Rabbi Akiva viewed this word as linked to the opening clause of this verse. – “*lo akhalti ve-oni mimenu*,” in which one professes not having eaten *ma’aser sheni* in a state of bereavement, immediately after a family member’s passing. According to Rabbi Akiva, the full phrase is “*lo akhalti ve-oni le-meit mimenu*,” specifying a condition of grief over a loved one’s death, but the word “*le-meit*” for some reason appears later in the verse. And thus there really is no phrase “*lo natati mimenu le-meit*,” as the word “*le-meit*” is in truth the conclusion of the earlier segment of the verse, which speaks of a state of bereavement after a family member’s passing.

Monday

Yesterday we noted the *vidui ma’aser* proclamation which the Torah requires a farmer to make avowing his compliance with the various obligations that apply to agricultural produce. This declaration includes the difficult phrase, “*lo natati mimenu le-meit*” – “I did not give some of it for a dead person” (26:14). As we saw yesterday, various different interpretations have been offered by the commentators for this phrase.

This verse was discussed already by *Chazal*, in several contexts. In Masekhet Yevamot (74a), the Gemara understands this phrase as linked to the immediately preceding phrase, in which the farmer avows, “*lo vi’arti mimenu be-tamei*” – that he did not partake of hallowed *ma’aser sheni* food which became *tamei* (ritually impure). The Gemara comments that although it is forbidden to eat *ma’aser sheni* that became *tamei*, it is permissible to use it for other purposes, such as smearing *ma’aser sheni* oil on one’s skin. However, it is forbidden to use this oil to treat a cadaver; *ma’aser sheni* oil may be smeared on the skin of a living person, but not as part of the treatment of a corpse. According to the Gemara, this is the meaning of the phrase “*lo natati mimenu le-meit*.” After avowing that he did not eat impure *ma’aser sheni*, the farmer proceeds to avow that he did not use such *ma’aser sheni* for another forbidden purpose – namely, to treat the skin of a dead body.

A different explanation appears in the Mishna, in Masekhet Ma’aser Sheni (5:12). The Mishna there follows the interpretation given by Rabbi Eliezer in the *Sifrei*, which (as we saw yesterday) explains that this phrase refers to the use of *ma’aser sheni* funds to purchase a coffin and shrouds for a funeral. However, the Mishna adds a phrase which does not appear in the *Sifrei*, writing, “I did not purchase with it [*ma’aser sheni* money] a coffin or shrouds; **I did not give it to other mourners**.” As the Ramban explains in his Torah commentary, this interpretation appears to link the phrase “*lo natati mimenu le-meit*” to the first phrase in the verse, in which the farmer avows to not having eaten his *ma’aser sheni* during *aninut* – after the death of a family member, before the burial. According to the Mishna, it seems, the farmer professes not only that he avoided eating his *ma’aser sheni* in a state of *aninut*, but also that he did not offer his *ma’aser sheni* to other people in this state. And once the farmer is speaking about not using *ma’aser sheni* funds for the needs of mourning, he adds also that he did not use it for a deceased person directly, to pay for the burial needs. In other words, according to this reading, “*lo natati mimenu le-meit*” should be read as a parenthetical addition to *vidui ma’aser*. Once the farmer notes his compliance with the prohibition against feeding *ma’aser sheni* to a person in a state of *aninut*, preparing his family member’s burial, he adds tangentially that he did not use *ma’aser sheni* funds for burial needs.

Tuesday

Parashat Ki-Tavo begins by presenting the obligation of *bikkurim*, which requires a farmer to bring the first fruits of his orchard that ripen to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, where he must give the fruit to the *kohen* and make a special declaration acknowledging that God has given us the Land of Israel. The Mishnayot in Masekhet Bikkurim describe the unusual fanfare which accompanied the procession of people making their way to Jerusalem with their *bikkurim*. The farmers were given special honor and distinction, as various groups of dignitaries made a point of coming to greet them as they entered Jerusalem, and all the artisans in the city would stop their work when the procession passed by in order to extend a warm welcome (Bikkurim 3:3).

Rav Yerachmiel Yisrael Yitzchak of Alexander, in *Yismach Yisrael*, saw in this special greeting to the farmers an expression of the immense value and worth of each and every *mitzva* a person performs. The dignitaries and artisans of Jerusalem stopped what they were doing in order to show respect to simple farmers, who did nothing other than designate a small amount of their crop as *bikkurim*, and then bring them to Jerusalem. These were not learned scholars, distinguished leadership figures, or wealthy philanthropists making a generous contribution to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. They did something fairly simple and unexceptional – and this is precisely why, the Rebbe of Alexander explains, they were given such honor and distinction. This was done to show them, and all of us, that even a seemingly “simple” *mitzva* act is precious, that each small act of goodness is worthy of respect and honor.

Rav Elimelech Biderman suggests applying this concept to shape our perspective on the annual process of introspection and repentance which we undergo in the period of Elul through Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is easy to view this process cynically, in light of our previous experiences which do not seem to have yielded visibly significant results. Year in and year out, we recite the same special prayers and hear or read about the need for repentance and change, but many of us fail to see any change in ourselves. The Rebbe of Alexander here urges us to never underestimate the value and importance of even the slightest bit of effort invested in the service of God, and this includes effort invested in the lofty enterprise of self-improvement. If we are sincere in our attempt to grow and improve, then we have done something precious and valuable. While we must of course genuinely endeavor to make meaningful changes that endure for the rest of our lives, and never feel completely at ease with our current standing, we must also recognize the value of efforts which do not lead us directly to our goals. The process is in itself precious, even as it is rife with setbacks and disappointments. We must therefore not belittle any effort we’ve made in the past or are doing in the present, because every small step we take is immensely meaningful.

Wednesday

Parashat Ki-Tavo contains the section famously known as the “*tokhecha*,” a lengthy and detailed description of the horrific calamities which Moshe warns would befall *Benei Yisrael* should they breach their covenant with God. Included in this section is the warning of exile, that the nation would be dispersed “from the end of the earth until the end of the earth,” and be forced to live in the service of foreign peoples who follow foreign beliefs (28:64). In the next verse, Moshe warns, “And among those gentiles you shall know no calm, and there will be no rest for your foot…” Not only would *Benei Yisrael* be banished from their homeland and forced to live in exile, but even once in exile they would continue to endure hardship and anguish.

Rav Yekutiel Yehuda Teitelbaum of Sighet, in his *Yitav Leiv*, finds in this verse a possible allusion to the Torah’s guidance and instruction for times of distress and turmoil. The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (64a) teaches that Torah scholars “have no rest, neither in this world nor in the next world.” Meaning, spiritual greatness requires constant, unending work and struggle to achieve and grow. The Rebbe of Sighet thus suggests interpreting this verse in Parashat Ki-Tavo as referring to the lack of “calm” and “rest” that characterizes the lives of those who ambitiously pursue spiritual excellence. The Torah foresees that even in the bitterly harsh conditions of exile, and even as the people will, as the previous verse foresees, be forced to live among and serve adherents of other faiths, they will nevertheless continue to work tirelessly to elevate themselves and serve the Almighty. Rather than absolve themselves of the burden of spiritual struggle due to their difficult circumstances, they will allow themselves no rest, and will determinedly persist in their passionate quest for spiritual greatness.

The Rebbe of Sighet here teaches us to avoid the tendency we often have to flippantly dismiss our religious ambitions during trying times. While we must of course be realistic in setting our goals, and take into account the limits imposed by our circumstances, we should not simply resign ourselves to mediocrity in the face of hardship. Our drive for excellence should not restricted to the calm, peaceful, uncomplicated periods of life – of which, as we all know, we experience very few. Life will almost always pose challenges of one kind or another, and we are expected to ambitiously strive to achieve the most we can under whichever circumstances we currently face, rather than use our challenges as an excuse for mediocrity and underachievement. Our expectations and demands of ourselves must certainly be realistic, but honestly so, taking into account the realities of our circumstances without excusing ourselves from the struggle to achieve to the very utmost of our capabilities.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Ki-Tavo of the formal ceremony *Benei Yisrael* were to conduct on Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival after crossing the Jordan River into the Land of Israel. The *Leviyim* were to stand in between the two mountains, and then pronounce a series of blessings upon those people who avoid certain transgressions, followed by a corresponding series of curses upon those who violate those transgressions (Rashi to 27:12, based on Sota 32a).

One of these curses was, “Cursed is he who strikes his fellow in secret” (27:24), which appears to refer to physical assault. Rashi, however, based on *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel* and *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (53), interprets this verse as referring to *lashon ha-ra* – spreading negative information about one’s fellow.

At first glance, this explanation of the verse interprets the word “*makeh*” (“strikes”) figuratively, as referring not to actual assault, but rather to the indirect infliction of harm through the dissemination of unflattering information about a person. One harms his fellow “in secret” by speaking in private about that person to other people, thus spreading hostility towards that individual.

Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, however, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha’kabbala*, explains this interpretation differently, suggesting that it is based upon an alternative meaning of the word “*makeh*.” This word, Rav Mecklenberg demonstrates, can mean not only “strike,” but also “wither” or “decline.” He cites as an example the verse in Sefer Tehillim (106:43) which tells of how *Benei Yisrael* “withered” in iniquity: “*va-yamoku ba-avonam*.” We might also point to the several instances in the end of Sefer Vayikra (e.g. 25:35) where the root *m.kh.* is used in reference to financial ruin. In any event, according to Rav Mecklenberg, the verse here in Parashat Ki-Tavo that speaks of “*makei rei’eihu*” refers to one who causes his friend embarrassment and social ruin by spreading negative information about him.

Rav Mecklenberg then proceeds to propose several intriguing explanations for the word “*ba-sater*” (“in secret”) in this verse. One explanation he suggests is that this verse serves as the Biblical source for what *Chazal* famously termed “*avak lashon ha-ra*” – quasi, or indirect, *lashon ha-ra*. This expression refers to speech which does not directly reveal negative information about an individual, but is clearly intended to cast that person, or something about that person’s character or conduct, in a negative light. Rav Mecklenberg suggests that *Chazal* derived this prohibition from the curse pronounced against one who maligns his fellow “in secret,” which could be understood to mean “inexplicitly.” This verse condemns somebody who sows scorn and hostility towards another person “in secret,” without directly speaking about his negative character or improper conduct. Anytime we cause people to dislike or look down on somebody, even through vague innuendos, we are guilty of “*makei rei’eihu*,” of crushing and ruining that individual. *Chazal* thus determined that we must avoid not only *lashon ha-ra* – explicit, negative speech about others – but even *avak lashon ha-ra* – “secret” and subtle negativity, speaking about people in a way that clearly encourages the listener to dislike or disrespect them.

Friday

We read in Parashat Ki-Tavo Moshe’s description of the blessings which God promises to bestow upon *Am Yisrael* if they comply with His commands. Moshe introduces this description by proclaiming that if the people obey the Torah’s laws, then “all these blessings with come upon you and catch up to you” (28:2). A number of commentators addressed the question of how to explain the word “*ve-hisigukha*” (“and will catch up to you”) in this verse, which implies that these blessings need to “pursue” the nation as though the people seek to avoid them.

Seforno explains that God promises that the people will receive the blessings described in this section without even trying to obtain them. If the nation faithfully commits itself to Torah study and observance, then they will enjoy prosperity even without exerting effort to achieve it. This, Seforno suggests, is the meaning of “*ve-hisigukha*” – that the blessings will reach the people despite their not making any effort to receive them.

Along somewhat similar lines, Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains this term as referring to *Benei Yisrael*’s observing God’s commands out of a sincere desire to serve Him, and not as a means of earning material prosperity. Rav Hirsch writes:

The blessings of thriving and prosperity come by themselves, they come to you without your having sought for them, they overtake you, you do not overtake them, they do not form the goal which your doings and abstaining from doing were aimed at. And just because that was not what you were aiming at, because all you wanted to do and accomplish was to fulfill the Will of your God on earth, had no other object in view than to do your duty towards God, the blessings of God pursue you to help and further your endeavors which are nothing but to accomplish the purposes of God on earth.

The term “*ve-hisigukha*,” according to Rav Hirsch, gives the reason why *Benei Yisrael* will be worthy of these blessings – because they did not make material wealth and comfort their end goal, as their sole objective was to live in the devoted service of God.

An insightful interpretation of the word “*ve-hisigukha*” is offered by Rav Moshe Chaim Efrayim of Sidlikov, in *Degel Machaneh Efrayim*. He explains that at times we indeed “flee” from blessings, because we do not recognize them as blessings. It occasionally happens that precious opportunities present themselves to us, but we either ignore them or even reject them, as we mistakenly view them as threats rather than opportunities. Many of the possibilities before us appear to us as curses, rather than blessings, and so we turn away from them in fear or disinterest, and fail to seize these opportunities. The ultimate blessing, the Rebbe of Sidlikov teaches, is when we receive even the blessings which we do not at first recognize as blessings, that they “catch up to us” and overtake us despite our misguided fears and rejection of these blessings.

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