**S.A.L.T. – PARASHT KI TAVO**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Ki-Tavo contains the section famously known as the “*tokheicha*,” which describes the tragedies which God threatens to bring upon *Benei Yisrael* if they breach the covenant. In one verse of this section, the Torah warns, “In the morning you will say, ‘If only it were evening,’ and in the evening you will say, ‘If only it were morning,’ due to the fear of your heart which you will experience, and the sights of your eyes which you will behold” (28:67).

Rashi, based on the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Sota (49a), explains this to mean that the conditions will steadily worsen, to the point where the people will fondly reminisce about the previous day’s or evening’s travails. With each new day, the people will yearn for the harsh conditions of the previous evening, which will pale in comparison to their present suffering, and then, that night, as the crisis intensifies, they will yearn for that day’s condition. The Rashbam explains that to the contrary, the verse speaks of the people’s constant yearning and anticipation for a brighter future. They will live with unending anxiety and distress, constantly looking forward to the end of the current day or night in the hope that the next will be better. They will endure incessant grief and sorrow, and will thus always look ahead to the coming day when they could finally escape the current day.

As many have noted, the curses presented here in this section reveal to us the Torah’s conception of a blessed life. The converse of every curse in the *tokheicha* is a blessing which we should strive for. Thus, if the Torah warns of a time when people pine for the previous day, or eagerly anticipate the following day, then we may conclude that it is a great blessing to cherish, enjoy and appreciate the present day. It is a curse to long for the past or to impatiently wait for the future; it is a blessing to feel content and fortunate in the present.

Rav Eliezer Zev of Kretshnif (in *Raza De-Shabbat*) suggested that we might explain along these lines the blessing found in the converse of the verse’s conclusion: “due to the fear of your heart which you will experience, and the sights of your eyes which you will behold.” The curse is when one cannot bear the present because of his feelings of fear and the horrors he sees before him. Conversely, the Rebbe of Kretshnif writes, we are blessed when we do not want the current day to end, out of our fear of God and our determination to serve Him to the best of our ability. The opposite of wanting to escape the current day because of the fears it presents is wanting the current day not to day because of the fear of not achieving all that we are capable of achieving today.

If we view each day as a precious opportunity for meaningful achievement, then we will enjoy what is perhaps the greatest blessing of all – cherishing each and every day of life we are given and utilizing it in the best possible way.

Sunday

In the beginning of Parashat Ki-Tavo, Moshe concludes his lengthy presentation of *mitzvot*, which began back in Parashat Re’ei, by discussing two agricultural commands: *bikkurim* (bringing one’s first fruits to the Temple), and *vidui ma’aser* (avowing one’s compliance with his tithing obligations every three years). Moshe then concludes, “This day, the Lord your God commands you to perform these statutes and laws, and you shall observe and perform them with all your heart and your soul.”

The simple interpretation of this verse is that Moshe calls upon the people to affirm their commitment to all of God’s laws. Rashi, however, cites a Midrashic interpretation from the *Midrash Tanchuma*, explaining the phrase “This day, the Lord your God commands…” to mean, “Each day, they shall be new in your eyes, as though you were commanded them that very day.” Moshe speaks here of the joy and excitement of *mitzva* observance, how we are to approach each *mitzva* each day with the enthusiasm and energy of doing something new, for the very first time.

Commenting on the next phrase – “you shall observe and perform them” – Rashi writes, again citing from the *Tanchuma*, “A heavenly voice blesses him: If you brought *bikkurim* today, then you shall do so again next year.” According to this reading, “you shall observe and perform them” is not a command, but rather a promise, that if the people faithfully observe the annual *mitzvot* (such as *bikkurim*)one year, then they will do so the following year, as well.

A number of writers, including the *Chatam Sofer*, raised the question of how the Midrash could interpret the verse as making such a promise. Is it really possible that anyone who fulfilled the *mitzva* of *bikkurim* (or any *mitzva*, for that matter) is guaranteed to live another year? Are we to believe that nobody who properly fulfilled this *mitzva* ever died before having the opportunity to fulfill it again the following year?

Rav Moshe Pollack of Bonyhad, in his *Va-yedaber Moshe*, explains that, quite obviously, the Midrash does not intend to guarantee continued life to anyone who fulfills this *mitzva*. Rather, he suggests, the Midrash conveys her an educational message. As mentioned, the Midrash understands the first clause in this verse as speaking of the importance of excitement and enthusiasm in the performance of *mitzvot*. The Midrash here teaches that if we approach *mitzvot* with joy and zeal, then we are more likely to ensure that our children will choose to embrace a Torah lifestyle. If one “brings *bikkurim*,” sacrificing his time, energy and assets for God joyfully, then he is assured that this legacy will continue through his progeny. The *mitzvot* will be fulfilled again the following year by him, either literally, or in the sense of the perpetuation of the Torah values he succeeded in instilling within his offspring. The more joy and enthusiasm we incorporate into our *mitzva* observance, the more attractive Torah life becomes to our children and to everyone around us, thus enhancing our ability to positively influence them to follow our example and embrace the Torah’s timeless laws and values.

Monday

Yesterday, we noted Moshe’s exhortation to *Benei Yisrael* in Parashat Ki-Tavo (26:16), “This day, the Lord your God commands you to perform these statutes and laws, and you shall observe and perform them with all your heart and your soul.” As we saw, Rashi cites a surprising interpretation to this verse from the *Midrash Tanchuma*, explaining it to mean, “Each day, they shall be new in your eyes, as though you were commanded them that very day.” According to the Midrash, when Moshe told the people that God was commanding them “this day” to observe His laws, this means that each and every day of one’s life, he should feel as though he or she received the laws that day for the first time.

The Midrash’s comment is commonly understood as referring to the importance of excitement and enthusiasm in *mitzva* observance. We should perform the *mitzvot* not by mindless rote and by force of habit, but rather with vigor and energy, with the same fervor with we approach something which we do for the very first time.

There may, however, be a different way of understanding the Midrash. Perhaps, the Midrash here is impressing upon us the point that the *mitzvot* are relevant, binding and applicable each day, regardless of the circumstances, that we are to see the Torah as having been given to us to observe today, in the situation we find ourselves in at this very moment. Sometimes we might feel that the Torah is meant to be practiced only under idyllic conditions which are now unattainable. We might feel that the Torah was given to be observed only in bygone eras, in simpler, more innocent times. On some occasions, we might feel that our lives are too difficult or complicated for us to be mindful of our Torah obligations. On other occasions, we might look back upon our mistakes and failures and conclude in shame that we are no longer worthy of leading a religiously devoted life, that any *mitzvot* we perform have no value in light of our past wrongs, or that it is simply too late to do anything of spiritual significance. The Midrash therefore teaches that the Torah is given to us anew each day. No matter what has happened in the past, and no matter what circumstances we face in the present, the Torah is meant to be observed right now. Certainly, the Torah’s practical requirements depend on the given circumstances. But the basic fact of the Torah’s general relevance and applicability does not. Each day, God presents us the Torah anew, for us to apply it to that day’s realities.

If so, then we might perhaps gain new insight into the Midrash’s explanation of the second clause of this verse – “and you shall observe and perform them with all your heart and your soul.” As we cited yesterday, the *Midrash Tanchuma* comments that this phrase relates to the *mitzva* of *bikkurim* (bringing one’s first fruits to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*) which the Torah presents earlier. According to the Midrash, this verse means, “A heavenly voice blesses him: If you brought *bikkurim* today, then you shall do so again next year.” We might suggest that if a person views the Torah as having been given to him each day, regardless of the circumstances, then this perspective guarantees that he will remain committed year in, and year out. Once we understand that the Torah is meant to be observed each day, under whatever conditions we happen to find ourselves in, we will fulfill *mitzvot* each day, and not only when we feel that the circumstances are “right.” We achieve consistency in our *mitzva* commitment when we realize that “This day, the Lord your God commands you to perform these statutes and laws” – that the Torah is given to us to observe “this day,” irrespective of what we’ve done in the past or of what is transpiring in the present.

Tuesday

Parashat Ki-Tavo begins with the command of *bikkurim* – the requirement to bring one’s first ripened fruits to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and present them to a *kohen*. Upon presenting his fruits, the farmer would make a declaration – called “*mikra bikkurim*” – briefly reviewing the story of the Egyptian bondage and the Exodus, expressing gratitude to God for bringing the nation from such humble beginnings to the point where it can produce fruit in its own land. The text of *mikra bikkurim* is cited and explained in the *Haggadah* on the night of Pesach as we fulfill the *mitzva* of *sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim* – telling the story of the Exodus.

In this text, the farmer recalls how *Benei Yisrael* cried to God during the period of slavery, and “the Lord heard our voice, and He saw our torment, our labor and our distress” (26:7). Netziv finds it significant that the verse first speaks of God “hearing,” and then transitions to His “seeing.” God heard the people’s cries of anguish, Netziv explains, and He “saw” their pain which was not expressed in prayer. Specifically, He saw “our torment, our hard work and our distress.” The *Haggadah* interprets the term “*onyeinu*” (“our torment”) as referring to the fact that the Egyptians separated the men and women of *Benei Yisrael*, such that they could not cohabit. Netziv explains that God “saw” – but did not “hear” – this particular aspect of the people’s torment because they felt it inappropriate to pray for the ability to resume marital relations. Therefore, God “saw” this “torment,” but He did not “hear” it, because the people did not actually pray for the end of this crisis.

The second of these three terms – “*amaleinu*” (“our labor”) – is understood by the *Haggadah* as a reference to the Egyptians’ decree to murder all newborn boys among *Benei Yisrael*. Netziv suggests that tragically, *Benei Yisrael* despaired in the face of this cruel edict, and stopped praying for its annulment. And thus, God “saw” the people’s pain, but did not hear their prayers – because in despair, they had stopped praying.

Finally, God saw “*lachatzeinu*” (“our distress”), which the *Haggadah* interprets to mean “*ha-dechak*” (“pressure”). Netziv explains that this refers to the degrading physical conditions to which the Egyptians confined *Benei Yisrael*, as part of their effort to humiliate and dehumanize them. The Egyptians crowded *Benei Yisrael* in cramped quarters, like cattle, Netziv writes, and this is the meaning of “*ha-dechak*.” Netziv adds that *Benei Yisrael* did not pray for the end of this humiliation because, in Netziv’s words, “one who has grown in this manner” – as part of an inferior class – “does not understand the evil done to him, and he thinks that he is naturally of a weak and limited mind.” *Benei Yisrael* were accustomed to their state of degradation to the point where it did not trouble them. They just assumed that they were, in truth, inferior, and so they did not pray to be lifted from their lowly condition. Hence, God “saw” their degradation, but did not hear them cry about it.

Netziv’s comments should perhaps serve as a warning to us not to resign ourselves to a perceived state of “inferiority.” Just as *Benei Yisrael* mistakenly regarded their condition as a function of their natural limitations, we, too, sometimes grow accustomed to certain habits, and wrongly assume that this is our nature, that these represent our ingrained limits. We’ve all established certain patterns of behavior which we come to view as unchangeable, as part of our essence and our being. These patterns become so entrenched that we do not even consider the possibility that we can be something bigger and greater.

The period of Elul and the High Holidays is granted to us as an opportunity to challenge our perceived limits, to revisit our patterns of behavior to determine whether we’ve needlessly resigned ourselves to an imagined state of “inferiority.” We are to honestly ask ourselves whether our current state is the best we can be, or if perhaps we can grow higher. We must assess whether we, like *Benei Yisrael* in Egypt, have blindly accepted our condition of mediocrity, without realizing that we are capable of so much more. This time of year is designated for honest, unbiased introspection to identify ways in which we are capable of growing beyond the limits to which we have heretofore assumed we are confined.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Ki-Tavo presents the command of *bikkurim* – bringing one’s first fruits to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and giving them to a *kohen* – and it concludes this section by stating, “You shall rejoice in all the goodness which God has granted you and your household – you, the Levite, and the foreigner in your midst” (26:11).

The simple meaning of this verse, as Ibn Ezra explains, is that one must rejoice with his material blessings by sharing them with those in need. The *Leviyim* were not given agricultural lands, as they were assigned the role of serving in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, and so they depended on charitable gifts from the rest of the nation, and foreigners generally found themselves on the lower socioeconomic rungs. The Torah therefore commands the people to enjoy their prosperity together with “the Levite and the foreigner” – those who require financial assistance.

Rashi understands this verse differently, explaining that the Torah here establishes that even *Leviyim* and converts are included in the obligation of *bikkurim*. Although *Leviyim* did not receive agricultural lands, and so they did not normally grow produce, nevertheless, a Levi who did plant trees and harvest fruit must bring the first fruits as *bikkurim*. And a convert, Rashi writes, brings *bikkurim* despite being unable to recite the “*mikra bikkurim*” proclamation which was normally made when a farmer brought his *bikkurim*. This proclamation speaks of God granting the Land of Israel to “our forefathers,” and thus a convert, who was born into a different nation and then joined *Am Yisrael*, cannot make this proclamation. The Torah here establishes that a convert nevertheless brings *bikkurim*, even though he does not declare *mikra bikkurim*. (This follows the view taken by the Mishna in Masekhet Bikkurim (1:4), that a convert does not recite *mikra bikkurim*. The Rambam, in *Hilkhot Bikkurim* (4:3), famously rules that a convert does, in fact, recite *mikra bikkurim*, following the view of Rabbi Yehuda, cited in the Yerushalmi.)

*Chatam Sofer*, in one of his published *derashot*, creatively suggested that the command to enjoy one’s material blessings together with the Levi and foreigner may also allude to the proper way to enjoy our spiritual blessings. We should rejoice over the privilege we have been given to learn, observe, and grow. We should feel fortunate and proud of our religious achievements. However, *Chatam Sofer* explained, as we experience these feelings, we must look to the “Levi” – to the spiritual elite, to the outstanding, righteous individuals whose level we are very far from having reached. Only after looking with humility upon the “Levi,” recognizing how much we have yet to accomplish, can we also look at the “*ger*” (“foreigner”), those who are distant from Torah, and feel fortunate that we have been able to achieve more. While it is acceptable, and important, to take pride in and celebrate our achievements, this must be done with a humble recognition of what we have yet to achieve, of how much more we are capable of accomplishing, notwithstanding the feelings of joy that we ought to experience over all that we have already been privileged to accomplish.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Ki-Tavo of the blessings which God promises to bestow upon *Benei Yisrael* if they obey His commands. Among the blessings promised is, “*Ve-hotirekha Hashem le-tova…*” The word “*ve-hotirekha*” in this verse is difficult to translate, as this word normally means, “will leave you over.” It is thus very unclear to what this refers in this context. The verse continues by promising blessing in regard to reproduction and economic prosperity, but it is difficult to understand what is meant by the word “*ve-hotirekha*.”

Rav Saadia Gaon explains, “*yosif lekha Hashem tova*” – “God will add goodness to you.” It appears that he understood the word “*ve-hotirekha*” to mean not “leave over,” but rather “add,” or “increase” (as in the word “*yoteir*” – “more”). According to this interpretation, the verse here simply promises an abundance of blessing of fertility and prosperity.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary, suggests that this word refers to a blessing of exceptionalism, a blessing that makes the nation stand out from all others. In Rav Hirsch’s words, “God makes you appear in all that is good, compared to the other nations, as superior, ranking above.” According to Rav Hirsch, the word “*ve-hotirekha*” means “extra,” referring to the fact that God would bless *Benei Yisrael* with prosperity that exceeds that of other nations. This explains the connection between this verse and the next verse, which foresees *Benei Yisrael* granting financial assistance to others nations without requiring financial assistance from them (“*ve-hilvita goyim rabim ve-ata lo tilveh*”). And then, in the subsequent verse, the Torah promises, “The Lord will make you the head and not the tail,” referring to *Benei Yisrael*’s superiority by virtue of the extraordinary material blessings with which they will be rewarded.

A chassidic reading of this verse is offered by Rav Yitzchak Yaakov of Biala, in *Divrei Bina*, one which maintains the common meaning of the verb “*hotir*” – “leave over.” He suggests that the Torah here alludes to the enduring effects of the good deeds we perform, which remain long after we depart this world. The verse speaks of blessings “with the fruit of your belly, the fruit of your animals and the fruit of your land,” and the Rebbe of Biala explains this to mean that God will ensure that we “leave over” blessing in everything we involve ourselves in over the course of our lifetime. If we live the way He commands us to live, then our *mitzva* acts will yield a profound, everlasting effect. They will leave an indelible imprint upon our offspring (“the fruit of your belly”), and even on our material assets (“the fruit of your animals and the fruit of your land”).

The Rebbe of Biala here teaches us that everything we do, every action, has a long-lasting effect. Every kind word spoken to another person can impact that person’s life, yielding a far-reaching ripple effect that then impacts so many other people. Every small deed is consequential, and profoundly so. We must therefore ensure to carefully consider every deed and every word so that we will leave the world having made the most positive impact that we were capable of making.

Friday

Towards the beginning of the “*tokheicha*” section in Parashat Ki-Tavo, in which Moshe warns of the calamities that will befall *Benei Yisrael* if they breach their covenant with God, he foresees the time when God will send “*me’eira*,” “*mehuma*” and “*mig’eret*” in all the people’s undertakings (28:20). Rav Saadia Gaon explains the word “*me’eira*” to mean failure; “*mehuma*” as anxiety; and “*mig’eret*” as unsurmountable obstacles that stand in the way of success. In short, the Torah here warns of perennial failure which will cause unending anxiety.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch offers a unique interpretation of this verse, noting the construction of the verb “*yeshalach*” (“send”). Normally, the form used for “send” is “*yishlach*” (in the “*kal*” construction), but here, the Torah employs the “*pi’el*” form – “*yeshalach*.” Rav Hirsch elsewhere in his Torah commentary (Bamidbar 21:6) explains that this form of the verb *sh.l.ch.* means not “send,” but allowing a natural process to occur. For example, when the Torah speaks of God “sending” (“*va-yeshalach*”) snakes to bite *Benei Yisrael* in punishment for their complaints, this means, according to Rav Hirsch, that God removed the supernatural barriers which had protected the people, so that the snakes naturally came and caused harm. Similarly, Rav Hirsch suggests, the Torah here speaks of “*me’eira*,” “*mehuma*” and “*mig’eret*” as occurring naturally as a consequence of sin. He explains that “*me’eira*” means simply “curse,” and the next two terms identify the nature of the “curse” that will result from sin. “*Mehuma*,” Rav Hirsch writes, denotes “disquietude,” a sense of uneasiness and discomfiture. When we fail, when we act in a way which we know is wrong, we experience inner unrest, a loss of serenity and peace of mind. Similarly, the word “*mig’eret*,” according to Rav Hirsch, means “a constant feeling of reproach.” Rav Hirsch associates the word “*mig’eret*” with the root *g.a.r.* which means to reprimand (as in Yaakov’s reaction to Yosef telling about his dreams: “*Va-****yig’ar*** *bo aviv*” – Bereishit 37:10.) The curse of “*mig’eret*” is the curse of an overburdened conscience, the incessant criticism we hear spoken by ourselves in our own minds for the wrongs we’ve committed.

The verse warns that these curses will affect “*kol mishlach yadekha asher ta’aseh*” – all our undertakings, everything we set out to do. Rav Hirsch explains, “This inner feeling of restlessness and constant self-reproach disturbs the success of all that you do.” When we feel uncomfortable with ourselves, and we constantly criticize ourselves, we lose our ambition and our confidence, making it very difficult for us to achieve any sort of success.

The institution of *teshuva* allows us to reverse this devastating “curse,” by enabling us to feel confident despite our failings. Our internal, emotional responses to sin could indeed be debilitating, thus sending us along a vicious cycle of failure. *Teshuva* is the mechanism given to us to break this cycle, guaranteeing us that genuine remorse and a sincere commitment to improve has the effect of erasing our shameful past and clearing the path ahead to a brighter future. Through honest and sincere repentance, we overcome the “curse” of “*mehuma*” and “*mig’eret*,” and are able to feel proud and confident in our ability to achieve and build ourselves into the people we are meant to be.

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