**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT KI-TAVO**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

"א-ל נא, רפא נא לה";  בתוך שאר חולי ישראל.

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Ki-Tavo of the rewards Moshe promises God would bestow upon us in reward for our observance of the Torah’s laws, blessings of material prosperity and security. He begins, “All these blessings shall come to you and catch you, for your will heed the voice of the Lord your God” (28:2).

Many commentators noted the unusual word “*hisigukha*” (“will catch you”) in this verse. Normally, this term is used in reference to a pursuit, when somebody succeeds in catching somebody trying to flee from him. Thus, for example, the Torah describes Pharaoh’s army reaching *Benei Yisrael* at the shores of the sea after *Benei Yisrael* fled – “***va-yasigu*** *otam*” (Shemot 14:9). The question thus arises as to what the Torah means when it speaks of blessings “catching” us, as though we try to flee from them.

Netziv, in *Ha’ameik Davar*, offers a creative explanation of the word “*hisigukha*,” observing that generally, those whose minds are focused on exalted matters are not overly concerned with material blessings. When a person devotes his attention to acquiring knowledge and living piously, he is not likely to feel excited by additional material possessions or comforts. As his priority is knowledge, wisdom and piety, money and luxuries do not normally bring him special feelings of joy. However, Netziv writes, an exceptionally large acquisition will bring joy even to such an individual. Even one whose mind is focused upon sublime, exalted pursuits, and is not preoccupied with the pursuit of material luxury, is bound to experience joy and celebrate an especially large profit. Netziv thus explains that this verse, which concludes, “for your will heed the voice of the Lord your God,” refers to the time when we are passionately devoted to the study of Torah, to hearing “the voice of the Lord your God,” thirstily pursuing knowledge and understanding. At such times, we are, in a way, “fleeing” from material benefits, in the sense that spiritual achievement is our highest priority, and our material concerns are secondary. The Torah promises that the joy of material blessings will “catch” us even at such times, that our rewards will be so significant that despite our general disinterest in material blessings, we will experience great joy and exhilaration from the bounty that will be bestowed upon us.

Netziv’s comments remind us of the need to ensure that our priorities are properly in place, that our legitimate efforts to secure a respectable livelihood do not result in our material pursuits becoming our primary objective in life. Even if, by necessity, we devote the majority of our day to earning a livelihood, our primary goal and ambition must be the acquisition of wisdom and piety, and not the acquisition of wealth.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Ki-Tavo presents the *mitzva* of *vidui ma’aser*, the proclamation that must be made every three years avowing compliance with the various tithing obligations that apply to produce. After making this proclamation, the farmer offers a prayer for continued prosperity, asking God, “Look down from Your sacred abode, from the heavens, and bless Your nation, Israel, and the land which You have given us…” (26:15).

This prayer begins with the word “*hashkifa*,” a rare term used to mean “look” or “see.” Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, commenting on this verse in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*, discusses this word in the broader context of exploring the specific denotations of the different words used by the Torah to mean “look” – the verbs *r.a.h*, *h.b.t.*, and *sh.k.f.* The root *r.a.h.*, Rav Mecklenberg posits, refers simply to sight, to the physiological experience of seeing something. *H.b.t.*, by contrast, denotes turning one’s attention to see something; making a point to look, as opposed to happening to see something. Rav Mecklenberg cites several examples, including the Torah’s description of Lot’s wife turning around to look at the destruction of her city, Sedom – “*Va-tabeit ishto mei-acharav*” (Bereishit 19:26), and the description of *Benei Yisrael* turning to look at Moshe when he left the camp to go to his tent – “*ve-hibitu acharei Moshe*” (Shemot 33:8). *Sh.k.f*, however, has the specific connotation of careful examination. When this term is used in reference to a person who looks at something, Rav Mecklenberg explains, it means that the person looks very carefully to analyze that which he sees. As an example, he notes the story of Avimelekh looking through the window of Yitzchak and Rivka’s home, and noticing that they were a married couple, and not siblings – “*va-yashkeif Avimelekh…be’ad ha-chalon*” (Bereishit 26:8). Rav Mecklenberg explains that Avimelekh was suspicious of Yitzchak and Rivka, and kept them under close surveillance. For this reason, Rav Mecklenberg writes, the verb *sh.k.f.* is generally used in reference to viewing something from up high, as in Avraham’s view from Chevron, in the Judean hills, of the destruction of Sedom down below in the Jordan River Valley (“*Va-yashkeif al penei Sedom va-Amora*” – Bereishit 19:28). As this verb denotes careful examination, it is used when somebody assesses something from above, with the ability to carefully analyze the full picture.

Returning to the prayer of “*Hashkifa*,” Rav Mecklenberg cites Rashi’s remark (Bereishit 18:16) that the verb *sh.k.f.* always refers to looking with hostility, for evil purposes, except in the “*Hashkifa*” prayer. The explanation, Rav Mecklenberg writes, is that when we carefully study and scrutinize somebody, we are bound to find fault, to identify reasons to dislike or criticize that individual. But in the “*Hashkifa*” prayer, the farmer asks the Almighty to do just the opposite – to look carefully at His beloved nation to identify all their many positive qualities, all the many reasons why they deserve His compassion and His blessings. Scrutiny normally yields negativity and criticism, but we are able to approach God and ask that He scrutinize us in the opposite direction, to see all the good in *Am Yisrael*.

Later in Parashat Ki-Tavo (28:9), we read the verse, “*ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*,” which the Rambam famously cites (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, *asei* 8; *Hilkhot Dei’ot* 1:6) as a source of the Biblical command to follow God’s example, to emulate His qualities. And one such quality, as Rav Mecklenberg has shown, is positive scrutiny, closely examining and analyzing people to find not their faults, but their strengths and the admirable aspects of their character. As Rav Elimelech of Lizhensk wrote in the famous prayer he composed, we are to strive “that each of us sees our peers’ qualities, and not their faults.” We should be studying people to find what we can admire and learn from, not what we can criticize and dislike – just as we beseech God to find all our virtues and achievements, and overlook our failures and mistakes.

Monday

Parashat Ki-Tavo includes the section commonly known as the *tokhecha* – Moshe’s description of the horrific tragedies that would befall the nation should they abandon Torah observance. We find in this section two words which are read differently than the way they are written. Whereas the phenomenon of *keri* and *ketiv* – a word in the Torah which tradition requires pronouncing somewhat differently than the way it is spelled – is not unique to this *parasha*, these two words mark rare instances where we read an entirely different word than that which is written. The first word is “*apolim*” (28:27), a reference to a plague of hemorrhoids, one of the ailments Moshe warns would strike the nation, which is read as “*techorim*.” Similarly, several verses later (28:30), Moshe warns of foreign nations defiling the women of *Benei Yisrael*, using the term “*yishgalena*,” but the word is read “*yishkavena*.” The Gemara in Masekhet Megilla (25b) explains that the words which we read are more refined and elegant than the words which are written, and the Gemara cites some other examples where less refined words are read as a different, more refined, word.

The origin of the discrepancy between the *keri* (pronunciation) and *ketiv* (spelling) of certain words in *Tanakh* is a point of great controversy. The Radak, in several contexts, including his introduction to the *Nevi’im*, asserts that this discrepancy was borne out of uncertainty. The Babylonian exile, the Radak writes, resulted in the loss of all available texts of the Bible, and when Ezra and the scholars of the *Anshei Kenesset Ha-gedola* restored the text, they were uncertain of how certain words should be spelled. They accounted for both possibilities by having the word written one way and pronounced a different way. This view was taken also by the philosopher Rav Yitzchak ben Moshe Afudi, in his *Ma’aseh Efod* (p. 40), and by Meiri, in the introduction to his *Kiryat Sefer*, and in his commentary to Masekhet Nedarim (37b).

Abarbanel mentions this theory in his introduction to Sefer Yirmiyahu, and strongly objects to such a notion. He exclaims, “How can I allow myself to believe, and how can I utter with my lips” that there was some question as to the correct spelling of certain words in the text of the Torah and the prophets. Abarbanel adds, “And behold, this is our consolation in our torment – that God’s Torah is with us in our exile!” He adds also that one of the thirteen principles of faith, as famously articulated by the Rambam, is that “the Torah that we have today is that which was given to Moshe at Mount Sinai, without any substitutions or changes at all.”

Abarbanel proceeds to present a different – and, seemingly, no less controversial – position, claiming that Ezra and the *Anshei Kenesset Ha-gedola* instituted that certain words should be pronounced differently than the way they are written. The spelling of all words, according to Abarbanel, is authentic and not subject to any doubt, but there were certain words whose spelling, in Abarbanel’s words, appeared “strange” in the language of the Jews of his time. Ezra would not dare alter the text, Abarbanel writes, but he felt it necessary to have the words read differently, to make the text more readily accessible and understandable. He was certain that the spelling was correct and had profound meaning, but he instituted different pronunciation of these words as a sort of commentary to terms which seemed difficult.

The Radbaz, in [one of his responsa](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=1952&st=&pgnum=427), stridently rejects both theories. He asserts unequivocally that both the *keri* and *ketiv* originated from *halakha le-Moshe mi-Sinai* – the tradition given at Mount Sinai. The Radbaz vehemently rejects the possibility that these discrepancies are owed to doubts or a sort of commentary, and says of those who propose such views, “It would have better for their tongues to lick earth than to write their opinions,” lamenting the fact that “some mindless people accepted their view as though this was simple, without any disagreement.” The Radbaz notes a responsum of the Rashba concerning the discprenacies in Parashat Ki-Tavo, where the Rashba writes very succinctly that both the spelling and the pronunciation are part of the tradition received at Sinai.

(See Menachem Ben-Yitzchak’s thorough [article on the topic](http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/kitveyet/hamaayan/kri-2.htm) in *Ha-ma’ayan*, Nissan, 5753)

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted the two words in Parashat Ki-Tavo which are substituted with other words when they are read. In the section known as the *tokhecha*, Moshe warns of several maladies that will befall the people should they abandon the Torah, including “*apolim*” (hemorrhoids), but according to tradition, this word is read as “*techorim*” (28:27). Three verses later, Moshe warns of the defilement of the nation’s women, with a word written as “*yishgalena*” but pronounced “*yishkavena*.”

The requirement to read the words of the Torah according to the “*keri*” – its traditional pronunciation – even when a word is spelled differently is mentioned by the *Shulchan Arukh* (O.C. 141:8). The *Magen Avraham* ambiguously comments on this law, “And although one reads from memory, this is permissible.”

One explanation of the *Magen Avraham*’s intent is that in his view, when one reads a word which is not pronounced the way it is written, he does not have to look at the Torah scroll. Normally, of course, the reader in the synagogue must read the text from the *Sefer Torah*, as reading the text from memory does not fulfill the obligation. But in instances such as “*techorim*” and “*yishkavena*,” when in any event the reader does not articulate the words he reads, and instead says the word from memory, perhaps there is no need to look at the text while reading, and this might be the meaning of the *Magen Avraham*’s remark that the reading of these words is acceptable “although one reads from memory.” If this is the *Magen Avraham*’s intent, then his ruling is disputed by a later authority – Rav Efrayim Zalman Margoliyot, who writes explicitly in his *Sha’arei Efrayim* (3:13) that the reader must look at the word he reads if the word is not pronounced the way it is written.

The other possibility is that the *Magen Avraham* here is not issuing a halakhic ruling, but rather making a simple observation – that we read according to the “*keri*” even though this in effect results in reading from memory. According to this explanation of the *Magen Avraham*’s comment, he does not permit looking away from the text from reading these words. Rather, simply clarifies that since these words are written one way but meant to be pronounced another, they are read according to the pronunciation even though we normally we do not allow reading from memory.

This discussion touches upon the question addressed by a number of authorities as to whether a *Sefer Torah* may be used if the word “*apolim*” or “*yishgalena*” was covered by wax, and thus invisible. The *Peri Megadim* (O.C. 141) writes that since in any event this word is read from memory, as it is not pronounced the way it is written, the *Sefer Torah* may be used. Seemingly, this question hinges on the issue of whether the reader must look at the written word when reading it. It stands to reason that Rav Margoliyot would not permit the use of such a scroll, since the reader must see the text despite the fact that he reads the word differently. However, Rav Shmuel Wosner, in *Sheivet Ha-levi* (8:28), suggests that Rav Margoliyot meant only that the reader must *le-chatekhila* (optimally) look at the text, not that the reading is invalid if he does not. If so, then Rav Margoliyot might very well concede that if one of these words is covered by wax and thus invisible, it may be used, since the reading is valid even if the reader cannot see the word.

Rav Wosner further notes that this question would hinge on the separate question as to why a *Sefer Torah* is invalid if a word is covered and invisible. According to one view, the *Sefer Torah* in such a case is actually valid for use, and it is only the reading of that verse which is invalid, since the reader is compelled to read the word from memory. If so, then when a word such as “*apolim*” is covered, it could be argued that the *Sefer Torah* may be used, even for the reading of this *parasha*, since in any event the word must be read from memory. However, Rabbi Akiva Eiger, in one of his responsa (*Mahadura Tinyana*, 11), cites a view that an invisible word disqualifies the entire *Sefer Torah*, and does not invalidate only the reading of that word. If so, then even if the covered word is a word such as “*apolim*,” the *Sefer Torah* may not be used. This is, indeed, the ruling of Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Iggerot Moshe*, O.C. 1:32:6 and O.C. 3:41).

Wednesday

In describing the calamities that God threatens to bring if *Benei Yisrael* abandon His laws, Moshe warns that they will be exiled to a foreign land where they will be subject to foreign rule, adding, “and there you will serve other gods, wood and stone” (28:36).

*Targum Onkelos* translates this verse to mean not that *Benei Yisrael* would involve themselves in foreign worship, but rather that they would serve idolaters. Unwilling to interpret the verse as predicting the people’s idol worship, Onkelos understood this warning to mean that after being exiled, *Benei Yisrael* would become slaves of other nations. This is likely the intent also of Rav Saadia Gaon, who comments on the word “*ve-avadeta*” (“you will serve”) that this term refers to work – as opposed to religious worship.

Abarbanel (who, of course, lived through the Spanish Inquisition) rejects this reading, and insists that the verse be taken at face value, as foreseeing the time when Jews would be coerced to practice other religions. The Torah here warns that if we abandon the Torah, we will be forced by our enemies to take the next step of rejecting our faith altogether and embracing other religions.

A different approach to this verse seems to emerge from a brief comment of Ibn Ezra, who links this warning to the next verse. Continuing the description of *Benei Yisrael*’s conditions in exile, the next verse describes how other people will look in shock and horror at *Benei Yisrael*’s plight, and *Benei Yisrael*’s experiences will come to be seen as the model of human suffering. Ibn Ezra succinctly remarks, “…there you will serve [other gods] – but it will not help you, but rather you will become an object of shock…” As noted by Rav Shmuel Alter in his *Likutei Batar Likutei*, Ibn Ezra appears to have understood the prediction, “…there you will serve other gods” as foreseeing the time when the Jews, as a downtrodden minority of foreigners, would choose to embrace the religious practices of the societies in which they live. In their desperate attempt to earn dignity and the respect of their neighbors, they would adopt their neighbors’ norms, values and customs. The Torah warns that such attempts will ultimately be unsuccessful, and will only bring additional suffering. We are to remain true to our beliefs and adhere to our traditions and religious practices even when living as a minority among foreign nations, and even in the face of intimidation, trusting that uncompromising fealty to God’s laws is the way we must live under all and any conditions.

Thursday

In Parashat Ki-Tavo, Moshe concludes his presentation of a long series of *mitzvot* which he conveyed to *Benei Yisrael* before his death, a series which began in Parashat Re’ei (12:1). Upon concluding this presentation, Moshe proclaims to the people, “The Lord your God commands you this day to perform all these statutes and laws; and you shall observe and perform them with all your heart and with all your soul” (26:16). The plain meaning of this verse, seemingly, is that as *Benei Yisrael* have now finished hearing the laws that they must observe in the Land of Israel, they must make a formal and firm commitment to devote themselves to these laws.

Rashi, however, based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, explains this verse to mean, “Every day, they [the *mitzvot*] shall be new in your eyes, as though you were commanded them on that very day.” According to this Midrashic reading, the proclamation, “The Lord your God commands you this day to perform all these statutes” means that we are to always feel that the *mitzvot* have been commanded “today.” We should never grow “bored” with the Torah’s laws or regard them as outdated or irrelevant; we should approach them with the resolve and enthusiasm as our ancestors did the day the commands were first given.

A different reading was offered by Rav Aharon of Karlin, who commented that we are to commit ourselves to the Torah’s laws “this day” – in whichever condition and mindset we happen to be in on any given day. There will inevitably be days when we feel less motivated, less inspired, less driven, or less focused than on other days. According to the Rebbe of Karlin’s reading of the verse, Moshe here instructs that we are to perform the *mitzvot* “this day,” even if we feel unenthusiastic or even disinterested, trusting that eventually, “you shall observe and perform them with all your heart and with all your soul” – we will feel more emphatic and driven. We should not despair of Torah study and *mitzva* observance when we experience lethargy, fatigue or apathy; we should do the best we can under the circumstances of “this day,” realizing that there will be a time when we will act “with all your heart and with all your soul” – with the fervor and emotion that ideally ought to characterize Torah life.

The Midrash’s reading of this verse and that of Rav Aharon Karliner essentially reflect two opposite sides of the same coin. The Midrash tells us that ideally, we are always to approach religious life with rigor and enthusiasm as though we had just received the commands today. But the Rebbe of Karlin reminds us that in reality, this is not likely to happen every day. There will be times when we feel less enthusiastic and invigorated than we should feel. And thus Moshe’s pronouncement of “*hayom ha-zeh*” – that we are commanded “this day” to commit ourselves to the Torah – teaches that our commitment must never hinge on our emotional state, that we are to do the best we can under the circumstances presented by each and every day, without waiting for our condition to become ideal for Torah devotion.

Friday

In describing the blessings God promises to shower upon *Benei Yisrael* in reward for their compliance with His laws, Moshe tells the people, “The Lord shall command blessing to be with you in your warehouses and in all your undertakings” (28:8). God promises that the people would be successful in all their pursuits (“*mishlach yadekha*”), and that their warehouses would be filled with fresh grain and produce.

Rav Kalonymus Kalman Epstein Shapiro, in his *Ma’or Va-shemesh*, suggests viewing this promise as a metaphor for the dual nature of the religious success to which we are to aspire. In this verse, God promises that the people would be outwardly successful in all their undertakings, but that also their storehouses, which are concealed from public view, would be filled to capacity. Not only will the people be visibly prosperous – but they would actually have far more than others could possibly know. The *Ma’or Va-shemesh* writes that this should characterize our religious achievement, as well. The Torah’s ideal of humility, he explains, does not mean that our religious devotion should never be displayed, and must always remain concealed. To the contrary, many of our religious responsibilities require public displays. We are obligated to participate in communal prayer; *talmud Torah de-rabbim* (public Torah study) is deemed more valuable and significant than private study; and more generally, the only way parents can influence and guide their children, and teachers can teach and motivate their students, is by communicating and modeling their religious beliefs and values. One cannot possibly hope to influence or inspire anybody if all his religiosity is kept hidden in his private quarters. What humility means, the *Ma’or Va-shemesh* explains, is that our “warehouses” must contain far more than what we outwardly display. Alongside our efforts to spiritually succeed in our public lives, we must focus on building our inner religious selves, our silent, concealed devotion to God, which must be far stronger and richer than what we display.

Just as God promises to bless both the work we do out in the open, as well as our hidden storehouses, so must we strive for spiritual success both in public and in private. We must endeavor to make a positive impression and be a source of positive influence, but also to ensure that these efforts accurately reflect our true selves, and are an authentic expression of our inner beings. And, just as the Torah promises *Benei Yisrael* outward success which pales in comparison to the full extent of their wealth, so must we work to ensure that the admirable religious persona that we are to project in public pales in comparison to the depth and quality of our religious commitment.

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