

A TASTE FOR LEARNING TORAH

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

In the Midrash our Sages say, "If you walk in My statutes [Vayikra 26:3]. This bears on the text, 'I considered my ways and I returned my feet to Your testimonies' [Tehillim 119:59]. David said: 'Sovereign of the universe, every day I used to plan and decide that I would go to a certain place or to a certain dwelling, but my feet always brought me to houses of prayer and houses of study.' Hence it is written, 'I returned my feet to Your testimonies' " (Vayikra Rabba 35:1).

I find it difficult to understand the connection between King David's thoughts and the verse in this week's parsha: "If you walk in My statutes." Let us begin by citing the explanation of our Sages on the verse, "Man is born to toil" (Job 5:7). They begin by recalling the verse, "The toiling soul toils for him, for his mouth urges him on" (Mishlei 16:26), and note that as he works in one place, the Torah works for him in another. The Sages then cite Rabbi Elazar as teaching, "Every man is born for toil, as it is written: 'Man is born for toil.' I still do not know, however, if he was created for the toil of the mouth or for the toil of work. When the verse says, 'his mouth urges him on,' this tells me that he was created for the toil of the mouth. Yet I still do not know if he was created for the toil of Torah or for the toil of [mundane] speech. Yet when it is said, 'This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth' [Joshua 1:8], this tells me that he was created for the toil of Torah" (Sanhedrin 99b).

From here we learn that the more one studies Torah, the more pleasure he finds in it. Likewise the more one immerses himself in the frivolous pursuits of this world, the more pleasure he finds in that as well. Hence we find the fulfillment of all Torah mitzvot only with one who studies Torah, for that is the fruit of his work. The Sages teach that study leads to practice (Kiddushin 40b), and there is no practice that is not preceded by study. Commenting on the phrase, "and observe My commandments" (Vayikra 26:3), Rashi writes: "You shall toil in the study of Torah in order to observe and fulfill," meaning that because we study Torah, this work will lead to the fulfillment of all mitzvot.

Regularity

We can now understand what the Midrash is saying. King David studied with tremendous intensity, to the point that he was one with Torah and mitzvot. In fact when he wanted to go elsewhere, to a place devoid of Torah, his feet automatically brought him to places of prayer and study because he had studied so much. This is not a reference to his raglav ("feet"), but to his regilut ("regularity"). The Midrash therefore begins with this verse in order to tell us that

the study of Torah leads to the regular performance of mitzvot, for only one who studies regularly can perform them all.

Furthermore, the Holy One, blessed be He, rewards a person who studies Torah measure for measure, meaning a definite reward in the material realm. In this context, the Sages have said that "the Torah toils for him in another [place]." Since he has given up toiling in this fleeting world in order to devote himself to learning Torah, he succeeds in fulfilling all mitzvot, something that can only be achieved by a person with enough to live on.

The Effort to Invest in Torah

The Sages tell us that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son Rabbi Elazar lived in a cave for 12 years, and when they emerged they saw a man tilling and sowing. Upon seeing this, they exclaimed: "They forsake eternal life and engage in temporary life!" Whatever they cast their eyes upon was immediately burned. On the eve of Shabbat, before sunset, they saw an elderly man holding two bundles of myrtle. "What are these for?" they asked. "They are in honor of Shabbat," he replied. "But shouldn't one be enough?" they asked. "One is for Zachor and the other for Shamor," he answered. Rabbi Shimon said to his son, "See how precious the mitzvot are to Israel!" At that point, their minds were put at ease (Shabbat 33b).

This presents a difficulty. Why was Rabbi Elazar's mind not at ease prior to seeing this elderly man? He apparently was afraid of his father's reaction, who once said: "If a man tills in the tilling season, sows in the sowing season, reaps in the reaping season, threshes in the threshing season, winnows in the season of wind, what will become of the Torah?" (Berachot 35b). Hence when they emerged from a cave and Rabbi Elazar saw people abandoning eternal life for temporary life, he felt resentment and burned them.

However Rabbi Shimon was not of the same opinion. He knew that it is impossible for everyone to study Torah all day long. Yet by sowing and reaping, grain is produced and it becomes possible to say a blessing over it. In fact we fulfill many mitzvot in the field, such as leket, shikcha, and pe'ah (obligatory gleanings), and the mitzvot of terumot and ma'aserot only result from toiling in the field. When the Children of Israel occupy themselves with the life of this world, they accomplish many mitzvot, and they do not forget what is essential.

Rabbi Elazar said, "Father! Before, you used to say: 'If a man tills in the tilling season, sows in the sowing season, reaps in the reaping season, threshes in the threshing season, winnows in the season of wind, what will become of the Torah?'



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HEVRAT PINTO

Under the Direction of
**Rabbi David Hanania
Pinto Shlita**

CHEVRAT PINTO

207 West 78th Street
New York - NY 10024

Tel: 1 212 721 0230

www.hevratpinto.org
hevratpinto@aol.com

Editor-in-Chief:
Hanania Soussan

Why have you changed your mind, such that you're saying that all this not only concerns tilling and sowing, but is the cause that allows us to fulfill mitzvot?" When they met the elderly man carrying bundles of myrtle in honor of Shabbat, Rabbi Shimon said to his son Rabbi Elazar: "My son, if they happily breathe in the scent of myrtle without being commanded to, and if they take two bundles instead of

one in honor of Shabbat, then how much more will they fulfill all the other mitzvot that they have been commanded to observe with joy, and not out of habit! You must admit that everything they do in this world is only done in order to fulfill mitzvot, and they will certainly not forget G-d!"

When Rabbi Elazar heard this, his mind was put at ease.

Concerning the Parsha

Who Goes Up to the Torah for the Tochacha?

At the center of this week's parsha we find the passage of the tochacha ("admonition"), which contains the curses given by Moshe on Sinai against the enemies of Israel.

Contrary to every other Torah aliyah – over which many people quarrel, and for which they are prepared to pay dearly – everyone avoids the aliyah for the tochacha, as if nobody wants to receive admonishments, which seems to imply that we do not deserve them.

This is a problem that has existed for a long time, and men of flesh and blood tend to avoid severe admonishments as much as possible.

He Will Merit a Blessing

In his book *Sefer HaChaim*, Rabbi Chaim Falagi Zatzal mentions the doubts of the faithful in this regard. He writes that people usually avoid going up to the Torah for the tochacha "because they are afraid that the evil written in the Sefer Torah will cling to them, and that it will become an elixir of death for them if they do not possess sufficient merit. They say that if the person who reads it is a talmid chacham, it is liable to be fulfilled even if the condition upon which it was said has not occurred. And people avoid the admonition found in Parsha Ki Tavo even more, which is addressed solely to the one who goes up to the Torah, contrary to the admonition in Parsha Bechukotai, which is written in the plural."

The Rav Zatzal demonstrates a certain sensitivity and understanding for those who avoid going up to the Torah for the tochacha:

"I have already written that the Torah of life has never been, G-d forbid, an elixir of death, and that evil cannot emerge from good. As a result, how can the Torah, which is our life and the length of our days, bring a curse upon a man who says a blessing on it? Yet here there exists a slight suspicion that Heaven examines the man with the aliyah to see if he fulfills all the words of the Torah or not. Because of this slight suspicion, people in every community have the custom of selecting the same person to go up, in which case no disrespect is shown for the Torah. However if nobody agrees to go up, we must certainly not abandon the Torah so disrespectfully. Whoever presents himself to read it is worthy of praise and will be blessed by the One to Whom blessings belong."

A tragic incident is recounted in the book *Derech HaChaim*, one heard from an elderly man who witnessed it one Shabbat. As the tochacha was about to be read, the Sefer Torah remained open and was neglected for several hours because nobody wanted to read it. There was an old rav there, and he got up and said: "It will surprise me if this community isn't destroyed."

In fact that year, the community was destroyed on account of our numerous sins. Whoever honors the Torah, he will be honored by men.

A Precise Calculation

Here we come to a doubt: Who will take such a heavy responsibility upon himself, given that he may be examined by Heaven to see whether he fulfills all the words of the Torah?

The Sefer Chassidim states that the Rishonim would summon an uneducated person to read this passage, so that an eminent man would

not read it and its words would therefore not be liable to be fulfilled. The Arizal stated that he was not satisfied by this, and on the contrary, it was the greatest man of the generation who should read it for the community, with bitterness in his voice. In this way, he would infuse fear into the hearts of the people so they would examine their deeds and repent.

In the same spirit, the gaon Rabbi Chaim Benvenisti Zatzal writes in *Knesset HaGedola*: "We have the custom that on the Shabbat containing the shira, the Ten Commandments, the tochacha, or the curses in Devarim, that it is the rav who teaches Torah to the community who goes up to read. If there is no rav in the community, we summon the greatest among those present. The custom is that the rav or an eminent man reads it."

The Acharonim have pointed out that now, the custom is that the ba'al koreh himself goes up to the Torah for this aliyah (*Kaf HaChaim* 282:8). If the ba'al koreh is a kohen, the Mishnah Berurah (428:17) states that he can read from the beginning of Parsha Bechukotai until immediately after the tochacha. During years in which Parshiot Behar and Bechukotai are read together, the aliyahs are arranged in such a way that the ba'al koreh goes up for the aliyah of maftir, and during this aliyah he reads from the tochacha until the end of the parsha.

Be that as it may, the custom among the Sephardim is that the kohen goes up starting from the fourth aliyah, by adding the introduction "although he is a kohen." Then the kohen who is the ba'al koreh may go up for the fifth aliyah, and everything takes place in the proper order.

What do we do in situations where no custom has been established? In *Responsa HaElef Lecha Shlomo*, it is stated that we must draw lots. The person upon whom the lot falls must go up, and he will not experience any misfortune.

Mi Sheberach

It was the custom among Jewish communities to bless the person reading the tochacha with a Mi Sheberach, even if there is no custom in that place to recite this blessing for others with a Torah aliyah (*Responsa Vayitzaber Yosef*).

The gaon Rabbi Yosef ben Moshe Zatzal, the main disciple of Rabbi Israel Isserlein Zatzal (the author of *Terumat HaDeshen*), recounts in his writings how one yeshiva student wanted to go up for the tochacha, but the gaon did not allow him. Instead, the gaon sent someone to look for an old man from the synagogue in the community, a man who had read the Torah, and he said to him: "The one who blessed So-and-so, the son of so-and-so, because he took upon himself the tochacha of the Torah for the honor of Torah, by this merit the Holy One, blessed be He, will grant him success in all his endeavors."

Rabbi Yosef continued his account: "In the following year, for Parsha Ki Tavo the chazan summoned 'whoever wishes to come up.' He then said to me. 'Arise, go up to the Sefer Torah.' For it is said at the end of perek Bnei HaIr [in tractate Megillah] that Rabbi Chiya bar Gamda cited the verse, 'The admonition of Hashem,' and at the end of the verse: 'Do not despise Hashem's discipline' [Mishlei 3:11]. And he said Mi Sheberach to me, as before."

At the Source

In Their Time and Place

It is written, “And I will give your rains in their time” (Vayikra 26:4).

In his book *Patach Eliyahu*, Rabbi Eliyahu Yelluz Zatzal explains why the verse uses the term *ve'natati* (literally, “and I gave”) in the past tense, rather than *ve'eten* (“and I will give”) in the future:

We know that “on the festival [of Sukkot], we are judged through water” [Taanith 2a], which is impossible to change. Yet when the Children of Israel fail to do G-d's will, rain will fall either at a time when people do not need it, or in a deserted region where nobody can use it.

This is why the verse uses *ve'natati*. In other words: I will give you what has already been decreed, but if “you walk in My statutes,” then your rains will come in their time and in place, not elsewhere, and they will come when people need them.

A Logical Inference

It is written, “I will place My Sanctuary among you, and My soul will not reject you” (Vayikra 26:11).

The book *Perach Levanon* explains why the expression “I will place My Sanctuary among you” is juxtaposed to “My soul will not reject you” in this verse. The commentators have said that the soul, which is a Divine spark, emanates from a very lofty place. In fact it cannot dwell in the body, and every day it asks to leave. Yet when it perceives that the Holy One, blessed be He – Who is the source of holiness – agrees to dwell among inferior beings, it logically infers that it should do the same, and so it returns to its place in the human body.

Hence this is the meaning of the verse, “I will place My Sanctuary among you” – I Myself will personally live among you, and as such “My soul will not reject you.” That is, the soul which I placed in you will not reject you, for it will logically infer that it should remain in the body, and it will not want to leave.

You Cannot be the Pursued

It is written, “You will flee with no one pursuing you” (Vayikra 26:17).

This is surprising: How is it a curse to flee when no one is pursuing you?

The Vilna Gaon answers this question by noting what the Midrash says on the verse, “G-d seeks the pursued” (Kohelet 3:15). Here the Midrash states, “You find that when the righteous pursues the righteous, G-d seeks the pursued. When the wicked pursues the righteous, G-d seeks the pursued. When the wicked pursues the wicked, G-d seeks the pursued” (Kohelet Rabba 3:18).

The curse contained in this verse teaches us that fleeing will take place “with no one pursuing you.” If there were a pursuer, the Holy One, blessed be He, would be obligated to save you, since “G-d seeks the pursued.” However since no one will be pursuing you, you cannot be called “the pursued,” and so He will not be obligated to save you.

By Chance

It is written, “If you treat Me as happenstance” (Vayikra 26:21).

The Turei Zahav comments on a statement in the Shulchan Aruch: “It is forbidden to work while reciting Birkat Hamazon” (Orach Chaim 191:3). He notes that it is during Birkat Hamazon only that the Sages have forbidden us from working, not during other blessings or prayer. However it is clear that during every mitzvah, we should not be speaking about other things at the same time, for this demonstrates that we are fulfilling the mitzvah without concentration, as if by chance.

This idea appears in the verse, “If you treat Me as happenstance.” In other words: Even if you are fulfilling a mitzvah, in any case it will be as if you were doing it by chance.

The Incense

It is written, “I will make your holy places desolate, and I will not savor your pleasing aromas” (Vayikra 26:31).

This verse seems impossible to understand, for there can be no sacrifices without the Temple. Hence it is obvious that there can be no more “pleasing aromas”!

Rav Diskin notes what the Sages have said in the Talmud (Yoma 39b), namely that several years after the destruction of the Temple, the odor of the incense could still be perceived despite a great deal of time having elapsed.

Hence this verse from the *tochacha* (admonition) states: “I will not savor your pleasing aromas” – even the aroma of the incense will no longer arise.

In the Light of the Parsha

Every Blessing Above and Below Depends on Shabbat

It is written, “If you walk in My statutes and observe My commandments and perform them, then I will give your rains in their time, and the land will yield its produce and the tree of the field will yield its fruit” (Vayikra 26:3-4).

The Gemara explains that “in their time” refers to the night of Shabbat (Taanith 23a).

It is difficult to understand how the night of Shabbat differs from the other nights of the week. Furthermore, how is it possible that G-d rewards, in this world, those who do His will? After all, “There is no reward for mitzvot in this world” (Kiddushin 39b)!

According to what the commentators have said, it would seem that a person who studies Torah on Shabbat obtains a reward that is greater than studying it during the week. According to the Midrash, the Torah said to the Holy One, blessed be He: “Sovereign of the universe, when the Children of Israel enter their land, one will run to his vineyard, another to his field, but what will become of me?” He replied, “I have a partner for you, and it is called Shabbat.”

In regards to Shabbat, the Torah states: “G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it” (Bereshith 2:3). Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, blessed and sanctified the whole world on Shabbat, He also blessed and sanctified the Torah that is studied on Shabbat. The reward given by Hashem is *geshem* (rains) – a term that evokes *gashmiut* (materiality) – on the night of Shabbat. This reward is granted without anything being deducted from the merit of the person studying Torah on Shabbat, for the Holy One, blessed be He, gives him but one one-hundredth of the great reward reserved for him in the World to Come.

This is why the Torah speaks of materiality in regards to Shabbat: Every blessing depends on the observance of Shabbat, as the Zohar states, meaning that blessings below and above depend on it. The reward of Shabbat, namely that the rains fall in their time, is compared to the study of Torah, of which it is said: “For I have given you a good teaching; do not forsake My Torah” (Mishlei 4:2).

Guidelines for Toiling in Torah

Rashi interprets the verse, “If you walk in My statutes (Vayikra 26:3) as: “You must toil in the study of Torah!” To toil means to tire yourself, to make an effort in learning, as we find in the Passover Haggadah: “Our toil [Devarim 26:7] – this is our children.” For the education of our children, we are ready to go well beyond our natural abilities, depriving ourselves of sleep and even staying awake all night to ensure our children’s well-being. We must do the same when it comes to the study of Torah, this being described as “toil.” As long as we feel capable of studying, we should do so without concerning ourselves with sleep. If the need for sleep is real, fatigue will gain the upper hand and we will fall asleep in any case. Nevertheless, we must act sensibly and be aware of our limitations so as not to diminish the quality of our learning on the following day. All the same, we must not perform below our abilities! We are dealing with a delicate balance here, for everyone is naturally concerned by his own well-being and is attentive to his own needs.

The work necessary to acquire Torah is a difficult path at first, but one that we grow accustomed to over time. We all have the ability to change our nature. In fact youngsters sometimes grow accustomed, because they are young, to sleeping very little and physically exhausting themselves (long walks, etc.). Likewise we must accustom ourselves to making an effort for Torah, and whoever sticks to this from his youth will be able to continue in his old age.

This task clearly seems easier when we consider the benefit that we will derive from our efforts. Imagine telling someone to sail on a fishing boat that is filled with fish for an entire week, a boat that reeks of a nauseating odor. If you promise to reward him with a house, he will certainly agree to do it. Yet why would he not be willing to make such an effort in order to acquire Torah? Personally, I would agree to travel in such a boat for 20 years if it would allow me to know the entire Torah. It’s clearly worth the effort! In fact a home, or even millions of dollars, is worthless compared to the reward acquired by toiling in Torah!

The essence of toiling in the study of Torah lies in extreme concentration. We must be so completely absorbed in learning that we no longer perceive what is around us. We have a Torah, it is unique, and it constitutes our life and the object of our desires. It must be deeply embedded in us. In fact during Arvit we say, “For they [mitzvot and laws] are our life and the length of our days.” We must also strive not to study superficially, but to deepen our understanding of difficult subjects in order to internalize them, as well as to think deeply about subjects that few people are interested in.

Nevertheless, studying at such a pace is liable to exhaust a person in the long run. I therefore recommend diversifying the subjects being studied, meaning that a person should devote a certain time to the Rambam, another to the quick study of Gemara, a third to Tanach, and so on. As will be explained further on, the combination of quick study and in-depth learning will allow us to accumulate knowledge and become giants in Torah.

“Toiling in Torah” also consists of studying with discipline. In fact a lack of effort is caused by laziness. Although the evil inclination can easily find excuses for all kinds of idle pursuits, it wouldn’t need to find any if they didn’t already exist in some form.

Making Discoveries

Concentration in learning is also crucial. More specifically, if a sugia is difficult to understand, we must not give ourselves any respite before having “decoded” it. Tremendous effort is required to invest the entire mind in understanding a subject, and learning without effort cannot be compared to learning with effort. It is said that our teacher the Arizal exhausted himself physically and actually sweated as he studied. He knew that this was a prerequisite for successful learning.

Even if we do not immediately understand a sugia, the effort that we put into trying to understand it will help us understand afterwards, as Rabbi Yitzhak said: “If one says, ‘I have toiled and found,’ you may believe him”

(Megillah 6b). This statement requires an explanation. We must make an effort in learning each day, at every instant. Nevertheless, the solution to a problem only comes when we don’t look for it! We will not intentionally make a “discovery”! In such a case, how can we assert that this results from the effort that we put into learning? It sometimes happens that we study a sugia without managing to understand it, for we encounter difficulties that we fail to approach from the right angle. We then put the subject aside and continue to learn. After some time, Hashem enlightens our mind and all our problems are resolved. Thus without the effort that we made at the outset, we would not have discovered the answer. Everything results from our initial effort.

This actually happened to me, for I once had difficulty understanding a passage from the Maharam. Finally, as I was walking, the explanation suddenly became clear to me. It was a true discovery! This is how things happen in the realm of Torah.

The second element is to become accustomed to learning without placing one’s hands on the table, and without leaning on a bench. We must devote ourselves to learning Torah with joy, investing both body and soul into it. Only then will we derive pleasure from it. Otherwise, it means that we have glossed over a portion of our studies. The more that a person makes an effort, the more he distances himself from temptations. For example, if someone has a close relative who is sick and his life is in danger, he will constantly be worried about him and forget his own wants. Likewise, whoever is completely immersed in Torah cannot be overtaken by temptation. The Rambam affirms, moreover, that the urge to commit adultery develops only in a heart that is devoid of wisdom.

Furthermore, whoever makes an effort for Torah is rewarded for it in this world, as the Tanna states: “Eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure, sleep on the ground, live a life of deprivation, and toil in Torah. If you do this, ‘You will be happy, and it will be well with you’ [Tehillim 128:2]. ‘You will be happy’ – in this world; ‘and it will be well with you’ – in the World to Come” (Pirkei Avoth 6:4).

At first glance, the following question arises: Is it possible to be happy in this world by living a life of deprivation?

In fact by making an effort, the study of Torah becomes our source of happiness. When we fail to study, we feel bitter and sad, but when we make an effort for Torah, we experience a degree of satisfaction greater than that of Gan Eden. True, I have never seen Gan Eden, but I suppose that this is true.

Very often, I exert a great effort before finally discovering a Halachah, but in the end I am happy. However it sometimes happens that I can easily understand an explanation, something which doesn’t give me as much satisfaction as when I make an effort. As it is said, “Man prefers to acquire the one part that belongs to him, rather than to freely receive the nine parts belonging to his neighbor.”

Finally, let us mention what Rabbi Nechunya ben Hakanah has already said: “Whoever takes upon himself the yoke of Torah – the yoke of government and the yoke of worldly cares are removed from him” [Pirkei Avoth 3:5]. Thus when our service of G-d is disrupted by our family members, or for any other reason, we are responsible for it. If we accept the yoke of Torah, we will be free from all other yokes.

– Ohr Letzion, Chochma U’Mussar, Amal HaTorah

Guard Your Tongue

With Respect

In regards to the prohibition against believing Lashon Harah, it makes no difference if we hear it from other people or from our father, mother, or other relatives. Furthermore, we find in Tanna D’vei Elyahu (ch. 21) that if someone see his father and mother saying futile things, such as Lashon Harah for example, then besides the fact that we must not believe them, we must also prevent them from speaking such things (ensuring that we caution them with respect). If a person says nothing to them, both he and they will be severely punished.