

DO TORAH!

by Shlomo Katz

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B'reishis

Today's Learning
Gittin 6:6-7
O.C. 266:4-6
Avodah Zarah 11
Yerushalmi Sotah 23

Siddur Avodat Yisrael writes that there is a chapter of Tehilim which corresponds to each parashah--this week Psalm 139. According to Midrash Shocher Tov, Adam himself wrote this psalm.

Ibn Ezra writes: "This psalm is very distinguished, and there is not one like it in the five books of Tehilim. Each person according to his understanding can find within it the ways of Hashem and of creation."

Among the verses which allude to our parashah are the following:

Pasuk 5: "Back and front You fashioned me, and laid Your hand upon me." This refers to the fact that male and female were created originally as one body, back-to-back (Shocher Tov). It also refers to the fact that Adam's original stature was from one end of the world to the other, i.e., from front to

back. Because of Adam's sin, Hashem laid His hand on Adam and compressed him (Chagigah 12a).

Pasuk 16: "Your eyes saw my unshaped form, and in Your book all are recorded"--even when Adam was but an unshaped form, Hashem knew what man's entire future held.

The verses and commentaries on this page relate to the Chapter of Tehilim associated with our parashah (see page 1).

"For there is no word on my tongue--You, Hashem, know it all." (139:4)

King David acknowledges: All of the praises of You which I have said, are not my own; my ability to speak comes from You. Moreover, I do not even understand all of the deep meanings of my words, only You, Hashem, know it all. (Rav Yosef Chaim of Baghdad zatz'l: Chaim Ve'hashalom)

"I will thank You for I am awesomely, wondrously [amazed]; wondrous are Your works, and my soul knows it well." (139:14)

Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin ("Netziv") zatz'l explains: Is it so noteworthy that a person would notice one of Hashem's obvious miracles? Rather, King David is thanking Hashem for giving him the ability to notice His hidden miracles, and to understand that they all are for his (David's) benefit.

(Devar Ha'emek)

"Your eyes saw my unshaped form, and in Your book all are recorded." (139:16)

Based on this pasuk, midrash Tanna D'vei Eliyahu (ch. 1) teaches that in the future, G-d will sit in His great bet hamidrash (study hall) with the tzaddikim of all generations sitting before Him, and He will say, "Such-and-such generation did so much Torah and I did so much charity with it. This-and-this person did so much Torah and I did so much charity with him."

Rav Akiva Yosef Schlesinger zatz'l explains the connection to our verse as follows: Just as man's unshaped form during his embryonic days is only a preparatory stage for what is to come, so too all of the past is merely preparation for the final Day of Judgment and reward described in the midrash.

Incidentally, observes Rav Schlesinger, the midrash does not say, "This-and-this person learned so much Torah," but rather "... did so much Torah." This is because learning is not enough--deeds count too. Also, those who are unable to learn can "do" Torah by supporting Torah scholars. (Tosfot Ben Yechiel)

"Let Us make man." (1:26)

Rashi explains that the plural is used even though no one helped G-d make man, and even though

the language could mislead heretics. Why? To teach humility and respect, i.e., G-d asked the "advice" of the angels to teach that a greater person should ask the advice and agreement of a lesser person even though he doesn't need that advice.

The midrash says similarly that Moshe was troubled by the language, "Let us make man," but Hashem told him, "Let whoever wants to err--err."

We must still understand, says Rav Chaim Friedlander zatz'l (died 1986), why it is preferable to teach good midot (ethical traits such as humility and respect) at the risk of suggesting heresy, and it is not better to forego the ethical lesson and be clear about Who created man. The answer is that it is bad midot which cause heresy. Man first decides to throw off the G-d's yoke, then he becomes a heretic in order to justify his "free" lifestyle; indeed, this is explicit in the words of the midrash, "Let whoever wants to err-- err." [Ed. note: We are not talking about those who hold heretical ideas because they never learned better.]

In particular, the trait taught by our verse, i.e., humility, aids one in accepting Hashem's rule. This is because humility makes one more willing to accept the fact that an infinitely greater Being holds control and dominion over man. (Siftei Chaim)

"But if you do not improve yourself, sin crouches at the door." (4:7)

[These words of Hashem to Kayin explain how man's spiritual level gradually declines.]

Chazal teach: "Sin leads to sin." Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlap zatz'l (1883-1951) explains that the Jewish people are inherently holy and would never sin, if not for the fact that previous sins have weakened their armor of holiness.

This raises an obvious question, however: How then does a person sin for the first time?

The answer is that the first chink in the armor of holiness is caused by laxity in positive commandments. If a person misses an opportunity to fulfill a positive commandment, or if he does not fulfill the mitzvah with the care or alacrity of which he is capable, he has not sinned per se, but he has weakened his armor nevertheless. And here we cannot ask the same question, how does one become lax in a mitzvah for the first time, for performing mitzvot properly requires special effort and does not come naturally. (Mei Marom VII, 4)

Rav Yitzchak of Dampierre zatz'l born circa 4880 (1120) - died 27 Tishrei circa 4961 (1200)

Rav Yitzchak, known as "Ri Hazaken," was a great-grandson of Rashi and a grandson of one of Rashi's leading students, Rav Simcha of Vitry (author of Machzor Vitry). Rav Yitzchak's uncle and

teacher was Rav Yaakov ben Meir, known as Rabbenu Tam. Among all of the Ba'alei Tosfot (authors of the commentary which appears opposite Rashi's commentary in most Talmud editions), only Rabbenu Tam appears by name more frequently than does Ri Hazaken.

Ri succeeded Rabbenu Tam as head of the academy in Ramerupt, France. It is related that Ri had sixty students, each of whom knew one tractate by heart. Thus, between them, they had the entire Talmud at their fingertips at any given time, and every halachah which Rav Yitzchak taught was immediately tested against the teachings of the entire Talmud.

Among Rav Yitzchak's students were Rav Shimshon of Sens (who edited many of our Tosfot, wrote important works in his own right, and led 300 families to settle in Eretz Yisrael in 1211), Rav Yitzchak ben Avraham ("Ritzba"), and Rav Baruch, author of Sefer Haterumot.

In spite of his own great stature, Ri generally did not deviate from his uncle's halachic decisions. Ri also was a kabbalist who lived an ascetic life and observed two days of Yom Kippur (presumably for the same reason that Jews in the diaspora observe two days of other holidays).

Ri had at least two sons, both of whom died in his lifetime: Rabbenu Elchanan, who was martyred in 4944 (1184), and Rabbenu Shlomo (died 4931/1171).