

CURSE OF FREEDOM

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Hamaayan / The Torah Spring
Edited by Shlomo Katz

Re'eh

Volume XII, Number 43
30 Av 5758
August 22, 1998

Sponsored by The Lando family in honor of Rabbi Chayim Shlomo Lando on his completion of Shas

The parashah opens: "See, I place before you today, a blessing and a curse." R' Eliyahu Schlesinger shlita writes: Many people believe that the only consequences of observing Torah and mitzvot are in the World-to-Come. It is true that Chazal have said, "There is no reward for mitzvot in this world." Nevertheless, our verse teaches that "the blessing and the curse" exist "today" as well. How so?

Keeping the Torah is itself a blessing, while living a life of hefker (loosely translated: "unbridled freedom") is a curse. Living a true Torah life gives a person a special grace and gentility. It causes a person to be careful and deliberate, not only in his relationship with G-d, but in his relationships and interactions with men. This is not true of a person who sees himself as free to do whatever he wishes.

We read in this parashah that Hashem divided Bnei Yisrael into two groups, each of which would stand on one mountain (Har Gerizim or Har Eval). The Levi'im were to stand in between the two mountains and recite certain blessings while facing Har Gerizim and curses while facing Har Eval. What was the purpose of placing the two groups on two mountains? It was to demonstrate the vast gulf which exists between one whose life is a "blessing" and one whose life is a "curse." These two people cannot stand in the same place.

The midrash on our parashah says: "Not only have I shown you that there are two ways before you, I have done you a favor and told you, 'Choose life'." What is the favor that Hashem did us? It is that he revealed to us that the path we choose affects not only our place in the World-to-Come, it is a choice which can give us life in this world as well. (Eleh Ha'davarim)

"You may slaughter from your cattle and your flocks that Hashem has give you, ka'asher tziviticha/as I have commanded you . . ." (12:21)

The gemara (Chullin 28a) states: "This verse teaches that Moshe was commanded regarding the windpipe and the esophagus, and regarding cutting the majority of one of these organs in a bird and the majority of both in a four-legged animal." [When slaughtering a four-legged animal, a shochet must cut through the majority of both the esophagus and the windpipe. When slaughtering a bird, cutting the majority of one or the other is sufficient.]

Rashi writes that these laws are not alluded to in the verse itself; the gemara only means that Hashem taught Moshe the laws of shechitah as part of the Oral Law.

Tosfot writes that the above laws are alluded to in the quoted verse, as follows: The Hebrew word "asher" (the root of "ka'asher" in the verse) can be seen as an acronym for: "echad" - one [organ]; "shenayim" - two [organs]; "rov" - the majority. Logically, the smaller requirement ("one") would apply to the smaller creature (the bird), and the larger requirement ("two") to the larger creature (the four-legged animal).

Also, the word "ka'asher" is the acronym (backwards) of "Rov shel echad ka'mohu"/"The majority of one [organ] is like [the organ] itself."

Finally, R' Yaakov of Corbeil z"l observes: The gematria of "ka'asher tziviticha/as I have commanded you" equals the gematria of "Rov echad be'ohf, ve'rov shenayim be'behemah"/"The majority of one for a bird and the majority of two for an animal." (Based on Da'at Zekeinim Mi'Baalei Hatosfot, Devarim 12:21, and Tosfot, Chullin 28a)

"If there shall be a destitute person among you . . . you shall not close your hand . . . Rather, you shall open your hand to him." (15:7-8)

The Torah recognizes that some people and causes that seek tzedakah are deserving of larger donations than others. This is alluded to in the above verses.

"You shall not close your hand" - when one makes a fist, all of his fingers appear to be of equal length. "Rather, you shall open your hand to him" - when the fingers are extended, it is obvious that

some are longer than others. (Heard from R' Yosef Braver z"l)

Mishlei (3:9) states: "Honor Hashem from your treasure." Making a play on rhyming words, Rashi comments, "Not only from your treasure, but from your throat."

R' Akiva Eiger z"l commented in a letter: It is obvious that one must give tzedakah when he has a "treasure." However, one must give tzedakah even if he is so poor that he would be have to give away the very food that is in his throat. (Quoted in Mi'drushei Ve'chiddushei Rabbi Akiva Eiger)

In context, Rashi's comment means that a person who has been blessed with a pleasant voice is obligated to serve Hashem with that voice, for example, by leading the services.

We read in Melachim I (Ch. 21) that King Achav had a neighbor by the name of Navot Ha'yizraeli whose land he coveted. Eventually, Achav found a false pretense to kill Navot and take his land.

The Midrash Pesikta Rabati (Ch. 26) elaborates on this story: Navot had a beautiful voice and many people would gather in Yerushalayim every yom tov to hear his prayers. One year, Navot decided not to come to Yerushalayim, thus disappointing many people. Shortly afterwards he was killed and his land confiscated.

The midrash explains further: The Torah says (Shmot 34:24), "No man shall covet your land when you go up to appear before Hashem, your G-d, three times a year." Had Navot gone to Yerushalayim, Achav would not have coveted and taken his land.

How was Navot's punishment measure-for-measure? R' Chaim Friedlander z"l explains that Navot thought that his voice was his property to use, or not use, as he saw fit. He did not recognize that it was given to him by Hashem to use in serving Hashem. Since Navot failed to use his "possessions" for the public good as Hashem intended, he lost all of his possessions. (Siftei Chaim III, p.342)

From the verse in Mishlei quoted above, one Talmudic sage attempts to prove that a person must spend his own money to honor his parents. "Just as one must 'Honor Hashem with [his] treasure,' so one must honor his parents with his treasure." Another sage disagrees, saying that one can learn from this verse only that a person must take time from work if it is necessary in order to honor his parents (i.e., he must lose income), but not that he must actually spend money to honor them. (See Kiddusin 32a)

Of course, the latter sage does not exempt one from honoring his parents. The story is told of a man who asked R' Chaim "Brisker" Soloveitchik z"l (1853-1918), "Is it true that I do not need to spend my own money to honor my parents? My father wants me to visit him, but the train is too expensive," he explained. "So walk!" R' Chaim replied.

An Astonishing Midrash

*"Aser t'aser"/"You shall tithe the entire crop" (Devarim 14:22) - thus it is written (Bereishit 13:9),
"If you will go left then I will go right, and if you will go right then I will go left."*

The difference in spelling between the Hebrew words "aser"/"you shall tithe" and "osher"/"wealth" is only the small dot which distinguishes the letter "sin" from the letter "shin." The former has the dot on the left and the latter has the dot on the right.

Hashem promises: If you place the dot on the left, i.e., you give tithes faithfully, I will make you rich. If you place the dot on the right, i.e., you hoard your wealth, I will see that you are left with only one-tenth of what you had. (Binat Nevonim)

R' Yehonatan of Lunel z"l

born approx. 4910/1150 - died approx. 4975/1215

R' Yehonatan ben David Hakohen was a leading Talmudist during the golden age of Torah in Provence (the Mediterranean coast of France). He greatly revered Rambam, and after studying Rambam's code, Mishneh Torah, addressed 24 questions to its author in the name of the Chachmei Lunel/Sages of Lunel. (These questions appear in the work She'eilot Uteshuvot HaRambam, beginning with chapter 286.) Rambam replied to R' Yehonatan's inquiries, pleased that his work was being studied in such an erudite manner, and referring to R' Yehonatan as "my chosen one, may he see descendants and live long, and may Hashem cause him to succeed." Rambam ends his letter by stating that Torah scholarship is dying out throughout the world and that the scholars in R' Yehonatan's region are the last hope to save it.

At the request of R' Yehonatan, Rambam sent him a copy of Moreh Nevochim/Guide to the Perplexed, written in Arabic. In response to R' Yehonatan's request that Rambam translate it, Rambam wrote that he was too busy to do so, although, "It would have given me great pleasure to extract the holy [Torah] from the debased [i.e., Arabic]." Instead, Rambam suggested that R' Yehonatan ask R' Shmuel ibn Tibbon to translate the work.

R' Yehonatan is perhaps best known for his running commentary on R' Yitzchak Alfasi's Sefer Ha'halachot dealing with Tractate Eruvin. That work by R' Yehonatan appears in the standard edition of the Talmud. His work on Tractate Chulin was published in 1871 and his works on other tractates have been published more recently. Some say that R' Yehonatan composed a work refuting all of Ravad's criticisms of Mishneh Torah. R' Yehonatan's halachic decisions are cited frequently in the works of later generations, in the overwhelming majority of cases in connection with the laws of eruv. In one 16th century responsum dealing with yibum, R' Yehonatan is listed together with the better known Rif, Ra'avad, Rambam, Ramban, Rashba, Ritva and others as one of history's leading "geonei olam" (loosely translated: "giants of scholarship"). (Sources: The ArtScroll Rishonim, p.168; She'eilot Uteshuvot HaRambam; Igrot HaRambam, Iggeret HaRambam Le'Chachmei Lunel;

She'eilot Uteshuvot Radvaz Vol. IV, No. 108)

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