

# DON'T JUST SCRATCH THE SURFACE

*by Shlomo Katz*

## **Hamaayan / The Torah Spring Edited by Shlomo Katz**

### **Devarim**

**Volume XVI, No. 38**

**4 Av 5762**

**June 13, 2002**

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Today's Learning:

Avot 5:14-16

Orach Chaim 688:5-7

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Batra 115

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Bikkurim 4

(Note: There is no Yerushalmi Daf for Tishah B'Av)

In the language of our Sages, the book of Devarim is called "Mishneh Torah." Some commentaries translate this appellation as "the repetition of the Torah" (i.e., "mishneh" from the root "shnei" / "two"). They suggest that every halachah found in Devarim is stated, or at least alluded to, somewhere in the other books of the Torah. R' Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin z"l (1817-1893; known as the "Netziv"; rabbi and rosh yeshiva of Volozhin) offers a different explanation:

"Mishneh" means "review," i.e., the main purpose of Sefer Devarim is to encourage us to delve deeply into, and review, the laws of the Torah. All of the mussar / rebuke found in this Book also boils down to this message: Accept upon yourselves the yoke of studying Torah in depth so that you do not deviate from its laws. True, many laws found in other Books are repeated in Devarim. The purpose of this repetition is to teach us to look beneath the surface of the verse. The peshat / "surface

message" of the repeated pasuk or halachah was already learned elsewhere. Therefore, if you find a verse or law repeated, look deeper.

R' Berlin continues: The Midrash records that when Hashem appeared to Yehoshua, he found that prophet studying Mishneh Torah. This shows the importance of this Book. Similarly, when the Torah commands the king to write a Torah scroll for himself, the language it chooses is (Devarim 17:18), "He shall write for himself this Mishneh Torah." In fact, he is required to write the entire Torah, but the verse emphasizes writing this Book because of its important message. Indeed, our Sages teach that it is only this delving into the Torah, the essence of the Talmud, that serves as the covenant between Hashem and the Jewish People. (He'emek Davar, Intro. to Devarim)

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*"I said to you at that time, saying, 'I cannot carry you alone. Hashem, your G-d, has multiplied you and behold! you are like the stars of heaven in abundance. May Hashem, the G-d of your forefathers, add to you a thousand times yourselves, and bless you as He has spoken of you. How can I alone carry your contentiousness, your burdens, and your quarrels?'" (1:9-12)*

R' Yitzchak Karo z"l (1458-1535; uncle of R' Yosef Karo z"l) writes: Why did Moshe say this "at that time"? In the two preceding verses, Moshe said, "Turn yourselves around and journey, and come to the Amorite mountain and all its neighbors . . . See! I have given the Land before you; come and possess the Land that Hashem swore to your forefathers . . ." However, said Moshe, a people that is going to war must be united as one. Therefore, at this particular time, I cannot tolerate your contentiousness and your quarrels.

Another interpretation: At that time, when you were a smaller nation, I said that I could not carry you alone. Now that G-d has multiplied you, I certainly cannot carry your contentiousness, your burdens, and your quarrels. (Toldot Yitzchak)

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*"You [Bnei Yisrael] answered me [Moshe] and said, 'The thing that you have proposed to do li.e., to appoint judges to assist you] is good'." (1:14)*

Rashi comments: "You at once decided the matter to your benefit. You should really have replied -- our teacher, Moshe! From whom is it more fitting to learn, from you or from your disciple?" In other words, Bnei Yisrael should have rejected, or at least resisted, Moshe's proposal to appoint judges to assist him. By agreeing readily to the appointment of judges, they showed a lack of appreciation of Moshe.

R' Yisrael Yitzchak Halevi z"l (rabbi in Warsaw in the 1880's) asks: We read in verse 9, "I said to you at that time, saying, "I cannot carry you alone." Rashi comments there, "What is the significance of the word 'saying' li.e., being bidden to say, implying that Moshe was repeating another's words]? Moshe, in effect, said to them: 'Not of myself do I tell you that I am not able to bear you, but by the bidding

of the Holy One, blessed is He'." If so, asks R' Yisrael Yitzchak, how could Moshe criticize Bnei Yisrael for accepting the appointment of judges?

He answers: Even though it was G-d's will, Bnei Yisrael did not have to express their approval. They could have remained silent. Or, they could have responded, "What can we say? If that is the Will of G-d, we accept it." [This is analogous to Chazal's teaching that one should not say, "I dislike non-kosher food." He should say, "I'm sure it's delicious, but G-d has told me not to eat it."] By saying that they approved of appointing judges, they indicated that they did not appreciate Moshe enough. (Gerres Karmel)

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*"Rabbi Yochanan said, 'the humility of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkolas destroyed our house, burned our hall, and exiled us from the our land'." (Gittin 56a)*

This statement is found at the end of the well-known story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. Briefly, the Gemara relates that a certain man sent his servant to invite his (the master's) friend Kamtza to a party. Instead, the servant invited his master's enemy Bar Kamtza. After the host humiliated Bar Kamtza and evicted him from the party, and the Torah scholars who were present did not protest, Bar Kamtza decided to take revenge. He reported to the Roman governor that the Jews were planning a rebellion. As proof, he said that if the governor would send a sacrificial offering to Yerushalayim, the Temple authorities would not accept it.

The governor gave Bar Kamtza an animal to take to Yerushalayim, but, on the way, Bar Kamtza put a tiny blemish in the animal's eye that invalidated it for the altar. Many of the kohanim and sages argued for accepting the animal as is so that Jewish lives would not be put at risk. However, Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkolas protested that the sacrifice was technically invalid and could not be accepted, and he prevailed. Thus began the chain of events that led to the Romans destroying the Temple.

R' Nosson Wachtfogel z"l (1910-1999; the Lakewood Mashgiach) asks: Why is Rabbi Zechariah's reaction described as "humility"? He explains that Rabbi Zechariah's miscalculation stemmed from his failure to implement the teaching of the Mishnah (Avot Ch. 5), "Be bold as a leopard . . . and strong as a lion." At a time that called for bold action - offering an invalid sacrifice - Rabbi Zechariah acted meekly. [Ed. note: See Rashi's comment to Beitzah 2b, noting that only one who has self-confidence is able to rule leniently in halachic matters.]

R' Wachtfogel adds: R' Yerucham Levovitz z"l (the "Mirrer Mashgiach"; died 1936) used to say, "How many [potentially] great people have been lost to us because they did not heed the words of the verse (Yirmiyah 1:7), "Do not say, 'I am but a lad'." R' Moshe Chaim Luzzato z"l writes in Mesilat Yesharim (Ch. 19) that every person must pray for the Jewish people's redemption. One might wonder: "Can my prayer make a difference?" The answer, says R' Wachtfogel, is that every person is obligated to believe that his prayer can make a difference. Our Sages teach that one reason that G-d

created only one man is to encourage each of us to say, "The world was created for me."

The Gemara (Kiddushin 40b) states that a person must always imagine that the world's good and bad deeds are perfectly balanced and that his next deed will determine the world's fate. Is this plausible? Yes, explains R' Wachtfogel. If a person has confidence in his spiritual power and believes that he can make a difference, then he will eventually turn into a person who really does make a difference. (Lekket Reshimot B'inyanei Bet Hamikdash pp.13-15)

It is related that R' Wachtfogel never read the semichah / ordination certificate that he received from R' Baruch Ber Lebowitz z'l. When asked whether he wasn't curious what the elder sage had written about him, R' Wachtfogel replied, "Why should I look at it? I know who I really am!" (Torah Leaders p.234)

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### **R' Eliyahu Guttmacher z"l**

R' Eliyahu Guttmacher was born near Posen (Poznan) in eastern Germany (today, Poland) on Rosh Chodesh Av 5556 / 1796. After studying in the yeshiva of Rawicz, he became, at age 19, a student of R' Akiva Eger, rabbi of Posen. He remained in R' Eger's yeshiva for four years and was a favorite of the teacher.

Even as a youth, R' Guttmacher studied assiduously and remained awake late into the night writing down his Torah insights. A turning point in his life occurred when he discovered a copy of the Zohar with the marginal notes of his teacher, R' Eger. R' Guttmacher had previously believed, as did most people, that R' Eger was opposed to the study of Kabbalah. However, upon realizing that his teacher did, indeed, delve into that subject, the student began his own study of Kabbalah.

As an outgrowth of this study, R' Guttmacher began to reflect upon the causes of our exile and the steps that we can, and must, take to end it. He came to believe that the spiritual state of the Jewish people was declining rapidly and it was necessary to force the arrival of mashiach, something that could be achieved only if the Jewish people strengthened their attachment to Torah and returned to Eretz Yisrael. He strongly encouraged the establishment of both yeshivot and farming communities in the Holy Land, and when most leading rabbis either did not support his call (and many openly opposed it), he declared that the Sattan / the prosecuting angel had blinded them in order to delay the Redemption.

R' Guttmacher's study of Kabbalah also drew him close to the chassidic movement, and, in time, he was surrounded by chassidim of his own. He tried to discourage people from seeking his blessings, saying that he was merely an ordinary person. R' Guttmacher also said that just in case his prayers carried any weight in Heaven, he was already praying for all Jews; therefore, there was no need to visit him. However, all of his efforts to be left alone were futile.

R' Guttmacher published several pamphlets describing his ideas about the Redemption and the

return to Eretz Yisrael. He also left behind many manuscripts on "traditional" Torah subjects, and some of his commentaries are published in the back of the standard Vilna edition of the Talmud. (Some of his larger works were first published in the 1970's and 80's.) He also kept a diary, which he closed with the words: "I am leaving for my world [i.e., Olam Habal] comforted that the Shechinah pines for those who love it. I feel that the three part cord - the Torah, the Holy One, blessed is He, and Yisrael - is in the process of being tied again." (Source: Encyclopedia La'chassidut p.643).

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Project Genesis](#) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page. Text archives from 1990 through the present may be retrieved from <http://www.acoast.com/~sehc/hamaayan/>. Donations to HaMaayan are tax-deductible.

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