

PARSHAT KI TAVO

by Shlomo Katz

Parshat Ki Tavo

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Today's Learning:
Tvul Yom 2:6-7
O.C. 271:17-272:2
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Arachin 24
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Gittin 5

This week's parashah tells us (28:9), "You shall walk in His ways," teaching that a person, through his good deeds, actually can walk in Hashem's footsteps. R' Eliezer Zvi of Komarno z"l (died 1898) observes, though, that most of us don't believe this teaching. Specifically, we do not believe in our own spiritual potential.

For example, how often do we pray, and, when we see that we are not answered, we assume that our prayers cannot really make a difference? The Ba'al Shem Tov z"l (died 1760) taught that this is the result of excessive self-deprecation. A person must believe that his prayers have untold consequences in the heavens, even if he does not see those effects. If a person did believe this, R' Eliezer Zvi adds, how joyfully would he pray?! How carefully would he pronounce every letter, every syllable?!

If a person believed that he is (in the words of Bereishit 28:12) "a ladder standing on the ground with its head in the heavens," if he believed that every movement, every word, every step and every

business deal makes a spiritual impact on the world, he would do all of those things for the sake of Heaven. Also, the Zohar comments, "If people knew the love with which Hashem loves the Jewish people, they would roar like lions in their eagerness to follow Him."

On the other hand, if a person thinks that he cannot make a difference, he should know that he is on the road to heresy. If a person thinks that way, it is a sign that the yetzer hara has succeeded with him and will soon deprive him of life in this world and in the next.

Rather than despair, one can learn from Yaakov, who said (Bereishit 35:5), "I lived with Lavan and I delayed until now." The letters of "Lavan" are the reverse of the letters of "Naval"/"degenerate one," a reference to the yetzer hara. Why was Yaakov successful in turning around the "naval" and "whitening" (from "lavan"/"white") it? Because "I delayed until now," i.e., because he did not expect immediate results from his prayers and mitzvot, but rather had faith that the results would come with time. (Zekan Beto, p.216)

"I did not eat of it in my intense mourning, I did not consume it in a state of impurity, I did not give of it for the needs of the dead ..." (26:14)

Literally, this verse is a statement that a Jew is required to make upon completing the three year tithing cycle attesting that he has complied with all the laws of ma'aser. However, in the spirit of the High Holidays, R' Moshe Avigdor Amiel z"l (1883-1945; Chief Rabbi of Antwerp and Tel Aviv) interpreted the verse as decrying the loss of proper focus in many people's service of Hashem. He writes in part:

In past generations, Yizkor was never a big deal. It has no source in the Torah or the books of the Prophets. Yet, it has become a major event, and people are very meticulous to observe it.

In contrast, many people forget to remember their own souls. We are supposed to recite every day (at the very beginning of the morning prayers), "Elokai / My G-d, the soul which You have placed in me is pure. You created it, You 'blew' it into me, You guard it within me, and You are destined to take it from me and return it to me in the World-to-Come." This "Yizkor" has the potential to save man from sin, but it has taken a back seat to a much less important Yizkor.

Likewise, Jews in our time take particular care to observe yahrzeits as if that is one of the Thirteen Foundations of our faith. This is another practice that seems to have received very little attention in earlier generations. In contrast, man forgets to observe his own yahrzeit. What does it mean to observe ones own yahrzeit? Our Sages teach: "Repent one day before you die." But, does a person

know when he will die? they ask. Indeed not! Therefore, say Chazal, one should repent every day.

(Derashot El Ami)

"Haskait / Be attentive and hear, O Yisrael - This day you have become a people to Hashem, your G-d."
(27:9)

The Midrash attributes several meanings to the word "Haskait," one of them being related to the root, "katat" / "crush" or "trample." According to this interpretation, says the Midrash, Moshe is instructing Bnei Yisrael to humble themselves in order to listen to the words of the Torah.

What is humility's role in Torah study? asks R' Mordechai Rogow z'l (rosh yeshiva in Chicago). He explains: It is essential that the aim of Torah study be to perceive Hashem's word as it was given at Sinai and transmitted through our traditions. One who formulates interpretations of the Torah must toil to determine whether his conclusions are consistent with the understanding of the Rishonim / Medieval authorities [e.g., Rashi and Rambam].

When our Sages direct us to humble our hearts to study Torah, this is what they mean. When the situation calls for it, a person must abandon his personal approach and recognize that his conclusions are in error.

(Ateret Mordechai)

Teshuvah

In conjunction with the month of Elul and the forthcoming Ten Days of Repentance, we offer the following:

R' Mordechai Golob shlita (Yerushalayim) writes: Our Sages teach that if a person is in the process of becoming a tzaddik, Hashem looks at the person's future and showers goodness on him even now. In contrast, if a person is headed towards becoming wicked, Hashem judges him based on his present condition, not based on his future. An even greater kindness that Hashem does is that, even if a person is destined to be neither a tzaddik nor a rasha, but just "average," Hashem does good to him now because of the good that he (the person) is destined to do, but He does not punish the person for the bad that he has not yet done.

Therefore, writes R' Golob, one would be well advised in preparing for the High Holidays to get on the right path, the path that leads in the direction of achieving completeness and perfection. How does one accomplish this? The following are some suggestions from sages of earlier generations:

(1) Study Torah. The Midrash notes that the study of Torah has the potential to bring back even those who are quite distant from Hashem. Certainly, then, it can bring closer those who are already close. The Gemara (Kiddushin 30a) quotes Hashem, "I created the yetzer hara, and I created the Torah as an antidote to it."

(2) Study mussar / works on character development. The Chafetz Chaim writes that he spoke to many great sages who were opponents of the mussar movement in its early years [the late 19th century], and even they agreed that the study of mussar is necessary in "our" time [i.e., the early 20th century, and certainly the 21st century]. Without the study of mussar, the Chafetz Chaim writes, we have no assurance that our Torah knowledge or our fear of G-d will be retained. R' Yaakov Lorberbaum (the "Nesivos"; early 19th century) likewise wrote to his children in his will, "I warn you to set aside time every day to study mussar, for because of our sins, our hearts are hardened like stones, but mussar has the power to soften the stone." Finally, the Chatam Sofer (also early 19th century) wrote, "Believe me! On a day when I do not study mussar, I feel that my fear of G-d is weakened noticeably."

(3) Choose a good environment and good friends. Rambam writes (Hil. De'ot 6:1), "It is only natural that a person's views and ideas are influenced by his friends and comrades . . . Therefore, a person must attach himself to tzaddikim . . ."

(4) Choose a rabbi or spiritual mentor who will guide you. The Gemara says that a person should always live near his mentor. The proof for this is that as long as King Shlomo's rebbe was alive, King Shlomo did not marry the daughter of Pharaoh.

(5) Pray regarding spiritual matters. If one prays for help in improving his Torah study or in some other spiritual undertaking, Hashem will certainly answer him.

(6) Study the laws of lashon hara. This will help a person improve in all areas of interpersonal relations, not just in the specific area of not speaking evil about others.

(Eitzot Le'dina p.28-29)

In his youth, R' Tzaddok Hakohen z"l (1823-1900) traveled throughout Russia visiting the greatest Torah scholars and chassidic rebbes of his day. [R' Tzaddok would later become renowned as one of

the greatest thinkers of the chassidic movement, but he did not come from a chassidic background and, at the time of this story, was not a yet chassid.] In Premishlan, he visited the rebbe R' Meir z"l (died approx. 1850). It so happened that, at that same time, a chassid of another rebbe, R' Yisrael of Ruzhin z"l, also was passing through Premishlan, and he also visited R' Meir. In fact, this chassid was so impressed with R' Meir that he decided that the 30 rubles that he had intended to give as a gift to R' Yisrael would be given to R' Meir instead.

For his part, though, R' Meir would not take the money. "This money is for your rebbe," he told the chassid.

But the chassid insisted, and it was finally decided that a bet din / rabbinical court would be convened to rule on whether R' Meir should accept the money. (R' Tzaddok, who was recognized by all as a brilliant scholar, was chosen as one of the three members of the bet din.) After due deliberations, the three judges decided that there was no reason why R' Meir should not accept the gift.

Triumphantly, the chassid laid the money on the table. Just then, however, R' Meir's wife walked in. Realizing what had happened, she said to her husband, "You do not eat meat about which there was a question, even if the rabbi rules that the meat is kosher. But you will take money about which there was a question?!"

Joyously, R' Meir arose and said to those around him, "Do you see how my rebbetzin saves me from every wrongdoing!"

(Hakohen p.87)

It is customary to show the etrog that one plans to buy to a rabbi to hear his opinion about its kashruth and beauty. R' Moshe Bick z"l (20th century posek / halachic authority in New York) once quipped, "Thousands of people ask me about their etrogim, yet I've never seen one that was not kosher. Nobody asks me about their dollars, yet I've never seen one that was kosher."

(Heard from R' Yisroel Reisman shlita)

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