

IT WILL BE GOOD FOR YOU

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Yisro

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Yitro
Volume 21, No. 17
22 Shevat 5767
February 10, 2007

Sponsored by
David Dahan
on the yahrzeit of his father
Yeiche ben Friha a"h (25 Shevat)

Today's Learning:
Nazir 6:10-11
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Megillah 3
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Eruvin 8

We read in this week's parashah (Shmot 20:12), "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days will be lengthened upon the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you." This implies, writes R' Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin z"l (1817-1893; rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Volozhin, Russia; known as the Netziv), that long life as a reward for honoring parents is given only in Eretz Yisrael. Can this be true? There is another mitzvah for which the reward is long life -- shiluach ha'kain / sending away a mother bird before taking her offspring. Regarding that mitzvah, the Torah says (Devarim 22:7), "It will be good for you and will prolong your days." Shiluach ha'kain is a far easier mitzvah than honoring parents, and the reward for that mitzvah is not limited to those living in Eretz Yisrael!

In fact, Netziv explains, those who honor their parents are rewarded in the diaspora no differently than in Eretz Yisrael. The reference in our verse to "the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you" is teaching a different lesson. R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194-1270) writes that although there is a special category of mitzvot that apply only in Eretz Yisrael, primarily agricultural mitzvot, all mitzvot have a different spiritual quality when performed in the Holy Land. Our verse, writes Netziv,

is teaching that this is true as well of the mitzvah of honoring one's parents. We might have thought that Ramban's principle applies only to mitzvot bain adam la'Makom / man's obligations to G-d, but not to mitzvot bain adam la'chavero / man's obligations to other people, such as one's parents. Therefore, our verse teaches that even the latter type of mitzvah is more special if performed in Eretz Yisrael. (Ha'emek Davar)

"Yisrael encamped there, opposite the mountain." (19:2)

Rashi z"l comments on the fact that the word "encamped" is in the singular form: "As one man with one heart; but all their other encampments were made in a murmuring spirit and in a spirit of dissension."

According to some authorities, one is obligated to recall the events at Har Sinai on a daily basis by reciting these verses from Devarim (4:9-10):

Only beware for yourself and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld and lest you remove them from your heart all the days of your life, and make them known to your children and your children's children -- the day that you stood before Hashem, your G-d, at Horev, when Hashem said to me, "Gather the people to Me and I shall let them hear My words, so that they shall learn to fear Me all the days that they live on the earth, and they shall teach their children."

R' Chaim Yosef David Azulai z"l (Chida; 1724-1806) composed the following prayer -- based in large part on the quoted verse from our parashah and on Rashi's comment -- to be recited after reading the above verses:

May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our fathers, that You be filled with mercy toward us, and that You implant within us and all of Yisrael love, brotherhood, peace and friendship that we may be as one -- just as there was peace between us at Har Sinai, as it is written: "Yisrael encamped there, opposite the mountain" -- as one man in perfect unity. Likewise, in Your great mercy, may You cause us to merit to remove from among us hatred, jealousy and competition, so that we may love each other, and may You make peace between us. Also, just as at Har Sinai the zuhamah / the specific impurity that resulted from the sin of Adam and Chava ceased, and You refined us and purified us from all forms of impurity, sickness and zuhamah, and sanctified us in Your holiness, likewise, in Your great mercy, purify us from our impurity and zuhamah, sanctify us through Your mitzvot, and purify our thoughts and hearts to serve and fear You. Plant Your Torah in our hearts, and may fear of You be before us so that we do not sin. Awaken our hearts to Your Torah, and may we view every day as if we are then receiving the Torah with attachment, longing and desire. Enlighten our eyes to Your Torah and cause our hearts to cling to Your mitzvot; make our hearts single-minded to love and fear Your great, powerful and awesome Name, and redeem us for the sake of Your mercy. Cause us to merit to receive and hear the Torah from Your mouth, as it is written (Yeshayah 54:13), "And all your children will be students of Hashem, and Your children will have

peace -- soon in our days. Amen. May this be Your will.

From the Haftarah . . .

"There will be asiriyah in it, then it shall regress and be destroyed . . ." (Yeshayahu 6:13)

Numerous explanations have been offered as to the pshat / plain meaning of this verse. For example, Rashi z"l writes that Hashem will cleanse the Jewish People until only the most righteous - one in eser / ten -- will remain. The commentary Metzudat David writes that it is a prophecy that ten more kings would rule over Yehuda before the Bet Hamikdash would be destroyed.

R' Yosef Chaim z"l (rabbi of Baghdad; died 1909) offers the following homiletical explanation:

The word "asiriyah" may be read "ashiriyah," a reference to a person's spiritual wealth. (An "ashir" is a wealthy person.) This verse is a warning that even the person who is spiritually wealthy is at risk of regressing spiritually and being destroyed.

How so? R' Yosef Chaim explains: Imagine a person who awakens early, goes to shul to learn Zohar [Ed. note: or Daf Yomi, or any other Torah subject], prays with intense concentration, recites Tehilim, and then studies Torah again before going home for breakfast. What will the yetzer hara do to entrap such a person, who seems so spiritually strong? It will cause him to enter his house and find something about which to lose his temper. Or, the yetzer hara will cause this person to go to work and cheat, lie or steal. When this happens, writes R' Yosef Chaim, the person has not merely accumulated bad deeds alongside his good deeds. Such a person is considered to be a servant of the yetzer hara and his good deeds are considered a form of idol worship.

Can any person withstand such a challenge? What can a person do to avoid the loss of his good deeds when he is confronted by anger or by financial temptation, as every person is at one time or another? The answer, writes R' Yosef Chaim, is that Hashem, in His great kindness, has given us the gift of repentance. Immediately upon stumbling, a person must repent. When a person does sincere teshuvah, all of the spiritual accomplishments that he forfeited through his anger or other grave sin are returned to him.

(Birkat Chaim)

Forgotten Holy Days

Introduction: One of the earliest written halachic works - long before the Mishnah was set down in writing - was Megillat Ta'anit / The Scroll of Fasts. Notwithstanding its name, Megillat Ta'anit is not a list of fast days, but of days on which fasting and/ or eulogizing were prohibited because of miracles that occurred to our ancestors. The Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 18 & 19) discusses whether these prohibitions remain in effect today, and concludes that, for the most part, they do not. As a result,

most of the holy days mentioned in Megillat Ta'anit have long since been forgotten.

The anniversary of one holy day described in Megillat Ta'anit is today. We read:

On the 22nd [of Shevat] the enemy's plan to place an idol in the Temple was foiled; therefore, eulogies are prohibited.

There was a day when Gascalculus [Rashi: a Greek king] sent idols to place in the Temple. When the word arrived in Yerushalayim, it was Erev Sukkot. Shimon Ha'tzaddik [the Kohen Gadol] told the people, "Go celebrate the holiday joyously, for none of the things you have heard will come to pass. The One who has rested His Shechinah in this house - just as He did miracles for our ancestors in every generation, so He will do miracles for us in this time." Immediately, a voice was heard emanating from the Holy of Holies [in the Temple], saying, "The enemy's plan to place an idol in the Temple has been foiled. Gascalculus has been killed and his decrees annulled." [Hearing this,] the people took note and wrote down the time.

When he [Shimon Ha'tzaddik?] saw that the enemies were approaching, he told the people, "Go out and meet them." [His intention was to show Gascalculus' messengers honor in every town they passed through, thus slowing down their advance until they would hear that their king had died. (Eishel Avraham)] When this became known to the other leaders of Israel, they objected: "Let us all die rather than do this [i.e., show honor to idol worshipers]." Instead, they cried and pleaded before the [king's] messenger [hoping to persuade him that they felt unbearably oppressed]. He replied, "Rather than crying to a messenger, cry to your G-d to save you."

When the messenger approached the cities, he saw people coming toward him from each city, and he wondered, "How many of them are there?" Certain traitors told him, "These are the Jews who have come from each city [to support you (Eishel Avraham)]." However, when he entered each city, he saw people sitting in the marketplaces wearing sackcloth and ashes.

Even before he reached Antipras [Alexandria, Egypt (Peirush Mahari Halevi)], he received a letter informing him that Gascalculus had died and his decrees had been annulled. Immediately, they [the Jews?] took the idols and dragged them through the streets, and that day [the 22nd of Shevat] was made a yom tov.

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