

ASHREI!

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Reeh

Ashrei!

King Shlomo writes in Mishlei (8:34-36), "Ashrei / Praiseworthy is the person who listens to me [i.e., the Torah], to hasten to my doors every day, to the doorposts of my entranceways. For one who finds me finds life and elicits favor from Hashem. But he who sins against me despoils his soul; all who hate me love death." Rabbeinu Yonah Gerondi z"l (Spain; died 1263) explains: "Ashrei" refers to the highest form of praise that can be given. For this reason, King David opened the book of Tehilim with Ashrei. Likewise, the chapter in Tehilim known as the "eight-faceted praise" [because it repeats the aleph-bet eight times] begins with Ashrei. The word "Ashrei" is in the plural form because it can never be applied to a person who has only one good trait, only to someone who is well-rounded with good character traits.

R' Yonah continues: King Shlomo writes, "Ashrei is the person who listens to me," because one's willingness to hear what the Torah has to say is the source of all life [i.e., it is the basis for proper mitzvah observance and character improvement]. "Me" can mean not only the Torah in general, but the book of Mishlei (Proverbs) in particular. On the simplest level, the lessons in Mishlei are the key to a happy, successful life in this world, while on a deeper level, they bring a person to Olam Ha'ba.

King Shlomo continues: "All who hate me love death." R' Yonah explains: The goal of Torah study is to inherit life in this world and the next. This is a choice that man has, as the opening verses of our parashah tell us, "See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing--that you listen to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, that I command you today . . ." (Drushei U'perushei Rabbeinu Yonah Al Ha'Torah)

"If there should arise in your midst a prophet or a dreamer of a dream, and he will produce to you an ot / sign or a mofeit / wonder." (13:2)

R' Yosef Gikatilla z"l (1248-1310; Spain; author of Sha'arei Orah) writes: An "ot" is a change in the

natural order which causes no harm, while a "mofeit" is a change that does cause harm.

We read in the Pesach Haggadah, "With otot [plural of ot]--this refers to the staff [of Moshe]." R' Gikatilla explains that this refers specifically to the staff turning into a snake, which harmed no one. We also read, "With moftim [plural of mofeit]--this is the [plague of] blood." This, writes R' Gikatilla, is shorthand for all of the plagues, which did cause harm. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Tzofnat Paneach p.69)

"If there should arise in your midst a prophet . . ." (13:2)

The Gemara (Bava Batra 12a) teaches: "A wise man is greater than a prophet." R' Avraham son of the Rambam (1186-1237) explains: The prophet referred to by this statement is not one of the prophets of the 24 books of Tanach, for they were all wise men and women in addition to being prophets, and they were certainly greater than someone who is only wise, but not a prophet. Rather, this statement refers to the many people mentioned in Tanach who experienced prophecy briefly, although they were not necessarily wise (see Shmuel I 19:20-21). Why is a wise man superior to them? Because he does not need them, but they do need him; without the wise man's wisdom and Torah knowledge, these "part-time" prophets would have no inkling of what is expected of them in this world. Such a prophet is even required to stand in the presence of a wise man, for there is no level higher than that of a Torah scholar. Knowledge of Torah is the ultimate purpose of creation, as Hashem told the prophet (Yirmiyahu 33:25), "If not for My covenant [being kept] day and night, I would not have created heaven and earth." For the same reason, even a king is required to have a Sefer Torah with him at all times. (Igrot R' Avraham ben Ha'Rambam, No. 7)

"Aser t'aser / You shall surely tithe the entire crop of your planting, the produce of the field, year by year." (14:22)

The Gemara (Shabbat 119a) comments on the opening words of our verse: "Aser bishvil she'titasher" / "Give tithes [charity] so that you will become rich."

R' Yitzchak Shmelkes z"l (rabbi of Lvov, Galicia: died 1905) asks: How can this be reconciled with the mishnah in Pirkei Avot (ch.1), "Do not be like servants who serve their master in order to receive a reward"?

He answers: The verse is teaching that one should give charity in the hope that he will thereby be given more money so that he can give more charity. (Bet Yitzchak)

"You shall surely give him, and let your heart not feel bad when you give him, for in return for this matter, Hashem, your Elokim, will bless you in all your deeds and in your every undertaking." (15:10)

R' Aharon Lewin z"l Hy"d (the Reisher Rav; killed in the Holocaust) writes: This verse is teaching that the degree to which one's giving tzedakah is considered a complete mitzvah depends on his attitude when he gives. Do not act haughtily toward the beggar and do not make him feel like you are giving begrudgingly. Rather, as we learn in Pirkei Avot (ch.1), "Let your house be open wide and let the poor be members of your household."

R' Lewin writes further: We read in Vayikra (25:37), "Do not give him your money for neshech / interest, and do not give your food for marbit / increase." On the peshat level, this is a commandment not to charge interest. However, R' Lewin quotes R' Moshe Cheifetz z"l (Italy; 1664-1711) who writes that the word "neshech" can also be taken literally, meaning "a bite." Says R' Cheifetz: When you give tzedakah, do not accompany your gift with "biting" words. Similarly, R' Lewin writes, the word "marbit" is used in Shmuel I (2:33) to mean, "the greatest people in a household." Thus, the verse in Vayikra can be read, "Do not give him your money with biting words, and do not give your food making the recipient feel as if you are a far greater person than he." (Ha'drash Ve'ha'iyun)

The above-mentioned R' Cheifetz writes further: It is not uncommon that beggars knock on our doors with a sense of entitlement. After all, they say, you have a mitzvah to give me tzedakah! Rather than having the desired effect, however, this causes people to want to withhold charity. And, when an unusually generous person does invite a pauper into his house, the pauper soon acts like he is king of the manor. In the verses quoted above, the Torah exhorts us to pay no attention to any rudeness on the beggars' part. Rather, we are called upon to strengthen ourselves and give tzedakah with a good heart and a shining countenance, for that is Hashem's desire. (Melech Machshevet: Parashat Behar)

Letters from Our Sages

This letter was written by R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) in 1906, when he was rabbi of Yaffo (Jaffa). The letter was written in response to a dispute between leaders of Yerushalayim and Chevron over the distribution of charity from overseas, and it focuses on a topic alluded to in our parashah--the holiness of Yerushalayim.

Regarding the dispute between the leaders of Yisrael who stand at the heads of the charities - I was very saddened by the dispute involving the head of the charity, a very distinguished man in Yerushalayim who sought my advice. My opinion is that we must use all our powers to avoid new divisions. We have more than enough divisions among us due to our great sins. It would be better to give-in regarding the matter in dispute than to cause Chevron to stand on its own separately from Yerushalayim. It goes without saying that we should allow nothing to cause a part of our nation to have any resentment [against Yerushalayim] which might lead to a lessening of Yerushalayim's stature in their eyes as compared to other cities in our Holy Land. This [i.e., equating other cities with Yerushalayim] is precisely what the Torah prohibits when it outlaws bamot / private altars outside of the Temple in Yerushalayim [see 12:11 and Rashil]. . . One may not equate the holiness of any place, even in Eretz Yisrael, with the holiness of the place that Hashem chose and the city upon which Hashem's Name is called. Certainly one may not lessen its status. Only Yerushalayim's holiness encompasses a microcosm of the holiness of all of Eretz Yisrael; therefore, Chevron's holiness is a subset of Yerushalayim's holiness (see Zohar: Parashat Chayei Sarah 128b) . . . This is what R' Bezalel Ashkenazi z"l [16th century author of the Talmud commentary Shitah Mekubetzet] meant when he wrote: "If there is no Yerushalayim, there is no Chevron."

It is plain that the mitzvah of building Yerushalayim takes precedence over building any other city in Eretz Yisrael. Therefore the Gemara says: "If one brings joy to a bridegroom, it is as if he built one of the ruins *of Yerushalayim*." Not just any ruin in Eretz Yisrael, but a ruin of Yerushalayim . . .

R' Kook continues: Don't ask why some tzaddikim chose to live in other holy cities when they could have settled in Yerushalayim. There is no doubt that every city in Eretz Yisrael has its own unique aspect of holiness as written in the work Chessed L'Avraham. Even on a plain [i.e., not kabbalistic] level each city has its own religious attraction. For example, one can be attached to this city, Yaffo, because it is alluded to in the Torah as a border of Eretz Yisrael - "The border of the sea." Also, it is a place where the prophet Yonah walked. A person who was able to recognize that the root of his soul was connected to a specific place in Eretz Yisrael would settle in that place. (Igrot Ha're'iyah No. 39)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **[Torah.org](https://torah.org)** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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