

BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER!

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Naso

Behold Your Teacher!

It is customary to study one chapter of Pirkei Avot on each Shabbat between Pesach and Shavuot. This week's chapter, the sixth and final one, begins: "Our Sages taught in the style of the mishnah; blessed is He who has chosen them and their mishnah."

Rashi z"l writes that the first phrase teaches that this chapter was not originally part of Pirkei Avot. (Some explain that it was added later so that the number of chapters would equal the number of weeks between the two holidays.) But what does the second phrase mean? R' Amram Zvi Gruenwald z"l (dayan / rabbinical court judge in Oyber-Visheve, Hungary) explains:

We read (Yeshayah 30:20), "Your eyes shall behold your teacher." We also are taught that hearing words of mussar / character improvement is more effective than merely seeing (reading) them. Therefore, one who studies Pirkei Avot should picture each of the Sages speaking to him and imagine that he is hearing the words from that Sage. That is why, in Pirkei Avot, unlike in any other tractate, every single mishnah is attributed by name to one of the Sages. That is also why nearly every mishnah in Pirkei Avot is in present tense: "Rabbi So-and-so says," rather than "Rabbi So-and-so said." And, that is the meaning of the phrase, "Blessed is He who has chosen them and their mishnah." These mishnayot were not taught by just anybody, and one who learns them needs to appreciate from whom he is learning them. (Zichron Amram Zvi)

"Take a census of the sons of Gershon . . ." (4:22)

Midrash Rabbah comments on this verse: Thus it is written (Mishlei 3:15), "It is more precious than peninim / pearls"--"It [the Torah] is more precious than the Kohen Gadol who enters the inner sanctum / lifnei v'lifnim [i.e., the Holy of Holies]." [Until here from the midrash]

How is this midrash relevant to our verse? R' Eliezer Dovid Gruenwald z"l (1867-1928; rabbi and rosh

yeshiva of Oyber-Visheve, Hungary) explains:

R' Moshe Sofer z"l (the Chatam Sofer; 1762-1839) writes that the names of Levi's three sons, Gershon, Kehat and Merari, allude to three states in which the Jewish People find themselves:

"Kehat" shares a root with the word "yikhat" in the verse (Bereishit 49:10), "To him yikhat / will be an assemblage of nations." Thus, it alludes to a time when the Jewish People are gathered together and reside on their own land.

"Gershon" refers to a state of exile, as in (Shmuel I 26:19), "Gershuni / they have driven me away this day from attaching myself to the heritage of Hashem."

Finally, "Merari," from the root meaning "bitter," refers to the most difficult periods of oppression.

In each of these states, the Chatam Sofer writes, a Jew must be a "ben Levi" / "son of Levi," meaning he must seek to "accompany," to cling to, Hashem (see Bereishit 29:34, regarding the meaning of the name Levi). [Until here from the Chatam Sofer]

R' Gruenwald continues: How is it possible to cling to Hashem in the darkest times? Not through the service of the Kohen Gadol, for there is no Temple; rather, only through Torah study. This is what the midrash is teaching: When you reach the state symbolized by Gershon, i.e., exile, remember that the Torah is more precious than the Kohen Gadol who enters the inner sanctum, for the Torah allows us to cling to Hashem even now. (Keren L'Dovid He'chadash)

"Speak to Bnei Yisrael, 'A man or woman who commits any of mankind's sins, by committing treachery toward Hashem, and that person shall become guilty. They shall confess the sin that they committed; he shall make restitution for his guilt . . ." (5:6-7)

R' Menachem Mendel Hager z"l (1886-1941; rabbi, rosh yeshiva and chassidic rebbe of Oyber-Visheve, Hungary) asks: Why is the mitzvah of vidui / confession taught here, in connection with the sin of stealing? He answers: In reality, every sin involves an element of theft, for one misappropriates the powers that Hashem gave him to use for holy purposes and uses them instead for impure purposes. In this light, our verse can be read: "If a man or woman who commits any of mankind's sins, he should know that he is committing treachery toward Hashem." (She'eirit Menachem)

"They shall place My Name upon Bnei Yisrael, and I shall bless them." (6:27)

The Gemara (Sotah 38a) asks: How do we know that Hashem desires the blessing recited by the kohanim? The Gemara answers by quoting our verse.

R' Shmuel Shmelke Guntzler z"l (1834-1911; rabbi of Oyber-Visheve, Hungary for 45 years) explains: The Gemara (Shabbat 12b) teaches that one should not pray in Aramaic because the angels who examine whether our prayers are worthy of reaching G-d's throne don't understand that language. But, one may pray in Aramaic in the presence of a sick person because the Shechinah is present at the head of the patient's bed.

The Gemara (Sotah 33a) says similarly that one may pray in Aramaic with a tzibbur / congregation. R' Avraham ben David z"l (Ra'avad; died 1198) observes that the reason is the same: because the Shechinah is present there.

R' Guntzler continues: The Gemara (Mo'ed Katan 9b) relates that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai sent his son to two other sages to receive their blessing. When the son returned, he reported that they had cursed him, saying, in Aramaic, "May you sow and not reap, etc." Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai explained to his son that they had, in fact, blessed him: "May you have children who won't die young, etc." But why did they bless him in such a roundabout way? And, why doesn't the Gemara ask, as it does in other places, why they were permitted to pray/bless in Aramaic?

R' Guntzler answers: The Gemara (Berachot 8a) teaches that, since the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash, the Shechinah is to be found in the midst of those who study halachah. It was obvious to the Gemara that the sages to whom Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai sent his son were engaged in such study; thus, the Shechinah was with them and it's not necessary to ask why they could pray in Aramaic. (As for why they gave Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's son a roundabout blessing, commentaries explain that they wanted Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai to have to interpret the blessing so that it would be as if he had blessed his son also.)

We learn from the above Gemarot that one's prayers don't always merit reaching G-d's throne. This answers another question as well: Why do we seek the prayers or blessings of tzaddikim? R' Guntzler explains that one who needs something--for example, good health--can pray in two different ways: (1) that he be given good health for his own needs, or (2) that Hashem's desire to do good for people be fulfilled. The latter prayer is more likely to be accepted, and we therefore seek the blessing of tzaddikim who know how to pray in that way.

Similarly, when the kohanim bless the nation, they should have that intention in mind: "They shall place My Name upon Bnei Yisrael"--i.e., they should have in mind the best interests of My Name, so-to-speak--then, "I shall bless them," for no angel would block such a prayer from reaching G-d's throne! This is the meaning of the midrash with which we began: How do we know that Hashem desires that Bnei Yisrael be blessed by the kohanim? From the fact that He promises to answer that prayer. (We could not have answered simply that we know Hashem desires that the kohanim recite a blessing from the fact that He gave such a mitzvah, for that would apply equally to all mitzvot, yet we don't find this question asked about any other mitzvah.) (Meishiv Nefesh)

Memoirs

In 1629, while serving as rabbi of Prague, R' Yom Tov Lipman Heller z"l (1578-1654), author of the Mishnah commentary Tosafot Yom Tov, was imprisoned on a charge of insulting Christianity in his writings. That experience is the subject of his memoir "Megillat Eivah"--literally, "The Scroll of Hatred." In last week's excerpt, R' Heller related that he was interviewed by a royal commission "investigating" his case; then he was sent back to house arrest to await the verdict. He continues:

On Wednesday, the 27th of Tammuz, the Emperor's verdict was given to me, as follows: "Based on the commission's report, the verdict should be death. However, because the Emperor and his ancestors are merciful kings, he has done kindness with me to permit me to redeem my life for 12,000 Reichsthaler in cash [the equivalent of approximately 685 pounds of silver], to be paid immediately. Also, the offending books should be destroyed. But, if I refuse to pay that amount, then there is no possibility of mercy and I will have to accept my sentence--death." I humbly prepared a petition, saying: "I prostrate myself before you to thank you for the kindness you have done for me, your royal majesty, to give me my life. However, know, your majesty, that you may as well have told me that I can have my life if I climb to the heavens or swallow a rod 100 cubits long." However, he did not believe me because those who had informed against me had exaggerated my supposed wealth.

On Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh Menachem Av, the Chancellor told the [Jewish] activist in the name of the Emperor, as follows: "If he [the writer, R' Heller] is not willing to pay the money, I will return him to the first prison he was in [with common criminals], and from there they will take him to three public squares in Vienna, undress him, and whip him. From there, they will take him to Prague; there, too, they will undress him and whip him in three public places, so that he will be humiliated and degraded such as has never happened from the time the Jews were exiled from their land." The activists fell down before the Chancellor and said, "Truthfully, we cannot fulfill the Emperor's decree to come up with so large a ransom." He answered, "But your co-religionists say that he [R' Heller] is very wealthy and that this ransom is not even one-fifth of his wealth." They pleaded before him and said that they know for certain this is not true, and those who say otherwise are lying. The Chancellor responded, "Return to me tomorrow. I will speak to the Emperor and ask for further mercy."

-To be continued-

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://www.torah.org) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](https://www.torah.org/torah-portion/hamaayan) page.

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