

EVEN TODAY!

by Shlomo Katz

BS"D
Volume 30, No. 49
21 Elul 5776
September 24, 2016

Today's Learning:
Nach: Divrei Ha'yamim I 7-8
Mishnah: Terumot 2:2-3
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Kamma 116
Daf Yomi begins Bava Metzia on Wednesday

The Midrash Tanchuma comments on the verse in our parashah (26:16), "This day, Hashem, your Elokim, commands you to perform these decrees and the statutes, and you shall observe and perform them with all your heart and with all your soul," as follows: Thus it is written (Tehilim 95:6), "Come! Let us prostrate ourselves and bow, let us kneel before G-d, our Maker." Says the midrash: "Prostrating" is "bowing," and "bowing" is "prostrating"! Why then does the verse list [three forms of essentially the same act] "prostrating," "bowing" and "kneeling"? Because Moshe saw through ruach hakodesh that the Bet Hamikdash would be destroyed and Bikkurim / the first fruits [the subject of the preceding verses] would no longer be brought; therefore, he established that the Jewish People should pray three times a day. Why? Because prayer is more beloved to Hashem than all good deeds and all sacrificial offerings, as it is written (Tehilim 141:2), "Let my prayer stand as incense before You; the lifting of my hands as an afternoon offering." Therefore, although Moshe Rabbeinu had performed every possible good deed, when he was prohibited from entering the Land, he prayed. Hashem told him (Devarim 3:26), "Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter. Ascend to the top of the summit . . . and see with your eyes." [Until here from the midrash]

R' Avraham Meir Rosen z"l (Warsaw; 19th century) explains: The midrash is bothered by the phrase, "This day, Hashem, your Elokim, commands you . . ." Was that the first day that Hashem commanded regarding the mitzvot? Therefore, the midrash understands the Torah to be teaching that even "this day"--i.e., whenever one reads the verse, even after the Temple was destroyed--there is a way to draw Hashem's blessings into the world, a function once served by the mitzvah of Bikkurim. Just as one who brought Bikkurim would bow before Hashem (see 26:10), so bowing in prayer three times a day can accomplish this goal. (Beur Ha'amarim)

"Then you shall call out and say before Hashem, your Elokim, 'Arami oveid avi. He descended to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation--great, strong, and numerous'." (26:5)

Rashi z"l (1040-1105) writes: This verse instructs [the person bringing Bikkurim] to mention G-d's kindness. "Arami oveid avi" is Lavan, who intended to uproot the entire Jewish People when he pursued Yaakov. Because he thought of doing this, the Torah counts it as if he did it. [Until here from Rashi]

R' Avraham ibn Ezra z"l (1089-1167) disagrees. He writes: If the verse referred to Lavan, the grammatically correct form would have been, "Arami me'abeid avi." Moreover, what connection is there between Lavan and Yaakov's descent to Egypt? Rather, the verse refers to Yaakov, and it means, "My father was wasting away from poverty when he came to Aram, and he likewise was a stranger in the land of Egypt." [Until here from ibn Ezra]

R' Zvi Hirsch ben Tanchum z"l (Grodno, Belarus; died 1830) responds to ibn Ezra's questions. He writes: The word "oveid" is not a verb, as ibn Ezra assumed; it is a noun. Just as "ohev" means "one who loves," so "oveid" means "one who destroys." As for ibn Ezra's assertion that Lavan had no part in Yaakov's descending to Egypt, the verse means that just as Hashem saved Yaakov and his family from Lavan, so He saved Yaakov and his family from the Egyptians.

However, continues R' Zvi Hirsch, there is a different objection to interpreting "Arami oveid avi" as a reference to Lavan. We say in the Pesach Haggadah that this "Arami oveid avi" wanted to "uproot everything," i.e., the entire Jewish People. Where do we find that Lavan wanted to uproot the entire Jewish People? Yaakov accuses Lavan (Bereishit 31:42), "Had not the Elokim of my father--the Elokim of Avraham and the Dread of Yitzchak-- been with me, you would surely have now sent me away empty handed." If Lavan had been planning genocide, surely Yaakov's complaints would not have focused on Lavan's greed and stinginess!

If we had to explain only our verse, R' Zvi Hirsch continues, we could indeed understand "Arami oveid avi" as referring to Lavan's plan to cheat Yaakov out of all his money. After all, a person who has been cheated out of all of his money also has been "destroyed." However, the Pesach Haggadah says that this Arami wanted to uproot everything, which does not seem to apply to Lavan, as noted above.

Therefore, R' Zvi Hirsch concludes, we must conclude that the p'shat of the verse and its use in the Pesach Haggadah are different. Indeed, the p'shat of our verse appears to be that offered by Rashbam z"l (1085-1158; R' Shmuel ben Meir, a grandson of Rashi). He writes: Avraham was an Aramean who was oveid / a wanderer, as in the verse (Tehilim 119:176), "I wandered aimlessly like a lamb that was oveid / lost"--referring to the fact that Hashem told Avraham to go from his land, but didn't tell him where to go. [Until here from Rashbam] In contrast, in the Haggadah, our verse indeed

refers on the level of drush to Yaakov's encounter with Lavan. In that context, the verse means: Not only did Hashem save us from Pharaoh, who conspired only to kill the males (see Shmot 1:22), He saved us from Lavan, who wanted to uproot everything. How do we know that Lavan wanted to uproot everything? Solely from the derashah made from the word "oveid" in our verse. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Zera Gad)

R' Aharon Ackerman z"l (late 19th century; rabbi of Otchkova, Russia; later in Yerushalayim) answers the ibn Ezra's question and explains the connection between Lavan, on the one hand, and Yaakov's descent to Egypt, on the other hand, as follows: Yaakov's family descended to Egypt as a result of the favoritism that Yaakov showed to Yosef, and the resulting jealousy of Yosef's brothers. But, if not for Lavan's deception decades earlier, Yaakov would have married Rachel (Yosef's mother) first, and Yosef would have been the firstborn, thus blunting any complaints by his brothers about Yaakov's favoritism of Yosef.

How did Lavan try to "uproot everything"? R' Ackerman explains based on the Zohar (Bereishit 165a): Yaakov's first eleven sons were born in Aram. If Lavan had succeeded in delaying Yaakov's departure from Aram, the twelfth son, Binyamin, also would have been born in Aram. Yaakov fled Aram to prevent this, because Yaakov knew that his twelfth son would complete his family, at which time the Shechinah would rest on all of them. However, the clarity with which the Shechinah would appear would be less if it appeared in the diaspora than if it appeared in Eretz Yisrael. Thus, by trying to delay Yaakov, Lavan tried to uproot the entire spiritual future of Yaakov's family, to which Yaakov referred when he said (Bereishit 33:11) "I have kol / everything." (Haggadah Shel Pesach Bet Aharon)

Teshuvah

R' Moshe Zvi Neriah z"l (1913-1995; rosh yeshiva in Kfar Ha'roeh, Israel, and one of the early leaders of the Bnei Akiva youth movement) writes:

The various thoughts of teshuvah that pass through a person's mind make him think that he has already repaired what needs to be repaired. In reality, however, we all know that there is a wide gulf between thought and deed.

How then can a person know where he stands? How can one know if any change has really occurred within him? If we were dealing with empirical facts, it would be easy enough, but we are not. Our relationship with G-d is necessarily abstract, for He has no body and no form of a body (paraphrasing one of Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith).

The answer, R' Neriah writes, is that the barometer of where one stands in his relationship with Hashem is where he stands in his relationship with his fellows. If one wants to know how he is doing with respect to "I have placed G-d before me always" (Tehilim 16:8), let him look at how he is doing with respect to "Love your fellow as yourself" (Vayikra 19:18).

Why is this so? R' Neriah explains that all sins come from one of two sources, either because one does not see Hashem, or because he does see himself, i.e., his selfish interests and desires control him. Instead of applying "Ain od milvado" / "There is nothing besides Him" to Hashem, one applies it to himself.

Seeing Hashem is very difficult, but not "seeing" oneself is somewhat easier. One does this by beginning to notice those around him, by thinking of the needs of others and giving in, by understanding, giving of oneself, and feeling love. When a person becomes accustomed to these practices, he gradually ceases to worship his personal avodah zarah / idolatry, i.e., himself. In turn, when he is faced with a sin against G-d, it is easier to overcome that temptation as well.

Perhaps, R' Neriah concludes, this is what Rabbi Akiva was referring to when he said, "'Love your fellow as yourself' is the major principle in the Torah." (Me'orot Neriah: Elul V'Tishrei p.23)