

NOT JUST FOR STUDYING

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Near the end of Parashat Acharei Mot--the first of the two parashot we read this week--in the middle of listing various abominable practices that are forbidden to us, the Torah states (18:4), "You shall observe My decrees and My laws, which man shall carry out and by which he shall live -- I am Hashem." The Midrash Torat Kohanim interprets this verse as an exhortation regarding Torah study. "Make it primary, not secondary," says the Midrash. "Occupy yourself with it and do not mix foreign things into it. Do not say, 'I have finished learning the wisdom of the Jews; now I will learn the wisdom of other nations.' There is no end to one's obligation to study Torah." [Until here from the Midrash]

R' Avraham Yoffen z"l (1887-1970; rosh yeshiva of the Novardok Yeshiva in Bialystok, Poland; New York and Israel) writes: Certainly this Midrash is teaching an important lesson regarding Torah study, but what does it have to do with our Parashah?

He explains: The Midrash is teaching that Torah is not just something to be studied; it is something to be lived, a way of life. The Midrash is not disparaging other areas of study. They, too, contain wisdom, but it is not wisdom that touches a person's soul. Nor is the Midrash prohibiting a person from studying the wonders of nature, so long as that study is secondary to one's Torah study. When one makes Torah study primary and views the Torah as a guide for life itself, he will never be at risk of committing the abominations described in our parashah. (Ha'mussar Ve'ha'da'at)

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not complete your reaping to the pe'ah / corner of your field, and the lekhet / gleanings of your harvest you shall not take. You shall not pick the undeveloped twigs of your vineyard; and the fallen fruit of your vineyard you shall not gather; for the poor and the proselyte shall you leave them -- I am Hashem, your Elokim." (19:9-10)

These verses require a farmer to leave part of every harvest for the poor. These gifts for the poor are known as "Pe'ah" and "Lekhet," and they are discussed in Tractate Pe'ah. The last Mishnah in that tractate teaches: "If someone does not need charity, but takes it, he will not die without having

needed the support of other people!"

R' Naftali Katz z"l (1649-1718; rabbi of Posen and Frankfurt, Germany) asks: Is his sin that terrible? The strong language of the Mishnah suggests that even repentance is not possible for one who takes charity but does not need it!

He explains: We read (Malachi 3:10), "Bring the entire tithe to the storehouse . . . and test Me thereby, says Hashem, Master of Legions, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour down for you blessing beyond your capacity." Our Sages derive from this verse that a person is permitted to test Hashem by giving tzedakah for an ulterior motive. However, writes R' Katz, if one gives tzedakah to a person who doesn't need it, it is not tzedakah (see Bava Kamma 16b), and the donor's test will fail. It turns out, therefore, that a person who takes tzedakah though he does not need it may be causing a chillul Hashem / desecration of G-d's Name, for the donor may have been testing G-d, and now that test will fail.

Ordinary repentance cannot atone for a chillul Hashem. However, writes R' Katz, if the undeserving person who took tzedakah ends up needing it, then the donor's test ultimately will succeed, and the chillul Hashem will be undone. (Semichat Chachamim: Introduction)

In light of the above, writes R' Daniel Prostitz-Steinschneider z"l (late 19th century Maggid / preacher in Pressburg, Hungary; grandson of the well-known Pressburg rabbi of the same name), we can understand the juxtaposition of the next two verses to the above verses. They state:

"You shall not steal, you shall not deny falsely, and you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear falsely by My Name, thereby desecrating the Name of your Elokim -- I am Hashem. You shall not cheat your fellow and you shall not rob." (19:9-13)

R' Steinschneider explains: A person who takes charity when he does not need it is stealing from the donor and is lying. He may even swear falsely. Ultimately, he will cause a desecration of Hashem's name. Also, he is stealing from people who actually need the charity. (Divrei Daniel)

"You shall not withhold a hired worker's pe'ulah [literally, 'work'] with you until morning." (19:13)

Would it not have been more appropriate to say, "You shall not withhold a hired worker's wages with you . . ."?

R' Naftali Herz Wesel z"l (1725-1805; Hamburg, Germany) explains: There are multiple verbs in Hebrew that connote performing a creative action. These include: "ayin-sin-heh" ("asah"), "bet-resh-aleph" ("bara"), "yud-tzadi-resh" ("yatzar") and "peh-ayin-lamed" ("pa'al")--the last one being the root of "pe'ulah" in our verse. The root used in our verse connotes doing something for a reason, while the other three roots all refer to actions that are performed aimlessly and for no purpose. [See further below.]

R' Wesel continues: When a worker hires himself out as a laborer--which may be demeaning to him--he does so for a reason: to support his family. His work is a "pe'ulah," not a purposeless activity, but a purposeful one, and the wages the employer owes are the reason for his "pe'ulah." The Torah states this expressly (Devarim 24:15): "On that day you shall pay his hire; the sun shall not set upon him, for he is poor, and his life depends on it." Keep this in mind, our verse instructs, so that you will be more likely to pay promptly.

One might ask: In light of the above explanation of the difference between the roots "asah," "bara," and "yatzar," on the one hand, and "pa'al," on the other hand, why does the Torah use the first three verbs to describe Hashem's creation of the world, as in the first verse of the Torah? (See also Bereishit 2:4.) It goes without saying that Hashem does not engage in purposeless acts!

R' Wesel explains: We are taught that Hashem created the world in order to share His goodness with His creations. All of His deeds are "pe'ulot," actions taken to further His reason for creating the world. However, we do not understand most of Hashem's actions; we recognize them as amazing, but we have no comprehension. They seem to us to be actions taken for no reason--hence the use of the verbs "asah," "bara," and "yatzar" to describe His handiwork. We nevertheless acknowledge, "The Rock! His pa'al / work is perfect, for all His paths are justice; a Kel of faith without iniquity, He is righteous and fair." (Migdal Ha'levanon Part III, chapters 4:1-2 & 5:1)

"You shall sanctify yourselves and you will be sanctified . . ." (20:7)

R' Mordechai Rokeach z"l (1902-1949; the "Bilgoraj Rav"; father of the current Belzer Rebbe) explains: One would expect that, after a tzaddik sanctifies himself ("You shall sanctify yourselves"), serving Hashem would become automatic, with no challenges. However, it is not so. The reason is that Hashem values a person's toil, so He "takes away" the holiness that would diminish that toil. Later, of course, He returns the holiness ("and you will be sanctified"). (Quoted in Lekket Imrei Kodesh)

A Torah Tour of the Holy Land

Rabbi Elazar, a man from Bartota, says: Give Him from His own, for you and your possessions are His. So [King] David said (Divrei Ha'yamim I 29:14), "For everything is from You, and from Your Own we have given You." (Pirkei Avot ch.3)

When charity collectors would see Elazar, a man from Birata, they would conceal themselves from him, because he would give away everything he had with him. (Ta'anit 24a)

R' Yitzchak Magriso z"l (18th century) identifies the people in the above two passages as being the same person. He adds: Perhaps Rabbi Elazar did not agree with the rabbinic enactment that a person may not give more than twenty percent of his wealth to tzedakah. (Me'am Lo'ez: Avot p.122)

Regarding Bartota, R' Yehosef Schwartz z"l (1805-1865; Germany and Eretz Yisrael; Torah scholar and geographer) writes: South of Jebel Sheikh, which is Mount Hermon, there is a district called Al'Hasfiyah. There is located the city of Hasfiyah mentioned in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Tractate Demai, ch.2). . . . West of there is Kfar Abil, near which is Abil Al'Kemach . . . North of Abil Al'Kemach and south of Abil is the village of Tzreidah. There is buried Yose ben Yo'ezer, a man of Tzreidah [see Avot 1:4]. This village also is called Kfar Hamam [an identifiable place in modern-day Lebanon, just north of the Golan Heights]. Nearby is the village of Kfar Bartota, which today [in the mid-1800s] is in ruins, and there is located the grave of Rabbi Elazar, a man of Bartota. Perhaps this is the city of Baruti [not to be confused with Beirut] mentioned by Josephus.

South of Kfar Hamam is Banias, the source of the Jordan River. There is the burial place of the prophet Ido; of Shevuel, a grandson of Moshe Rabbeinu; and of the Talmudic Sages Abaye and Rava.

One hour north of Banias, on a mountain, there is a building with domes. It is said that this is where Avraham Avinu experienced the Brit Bein Ha'betarim / Covenant Between the Parts (Bereishit ch.15). The Arabs call the place, "The Testimony with the Bird" (see Bereishit 15:11). (Tevuot Ha'aretz p.79 & 239-40)