

# TORAH - ONE GOOD YOKE REMOVES ANOTHER

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

There are three ways in which the Torah delineates and divides between its sections. With a space (a minimum of nine-letters width) followed by text on the same line (this is denoted in the Chumash with the letter samech); with a new line (similar to a new paragraph, denoted by a peh); and with a multi-line space (reserved for division between the 5 Books of the Torah).

Rashi begins his commentary on this week's sidrah by asking why there is no division at all between the end of last week's parsha (Vayigash) and the start of this week's. Normally, we would expect the weekly reading to begin at a section break, yet here there is none. Also, it seems that Chazal (our Sages) had a tradition that there was indeed a section break between the end of Vayigash and the beginning of Vayechi, yet this break is not indicated by any of the standard denotations, making it invisible. Why - asks Rashi - is this parsha (section) closed off?

One of Rashi's answers is that, with the death of Yaakov, which is largely the topic of this week's parsha, the eyes and the hearts of B'nei Yisrael were blocked shut from their subjugation, which began after he died. The Torah "shuts in" the parsha as a sign of this.

Why does Rashi refer specifically to their eyes and hearts as being closed off?

The Mishnah (Avos 2:2) notes that there are two main occupations that keep man focused on purposeful activities and out of harm's way: Torah and work. "Torah with labour are nice - for their exertion makes one forget to sin." This is, by the way, a novel approach to dealing with sin: Keep yourself occupied with good things, and you'll have no time and energy for the destructive. The Gemara says that even if one is wealthy enough that all his household chores can be performed by hired help, freeing up his wife from the need to work (earn), or to keep house, he can still demand that she perform certain chores, for the emptiness of nothing- to-do leads to sin and perversity (Kesubos 5:5).

The Talmud (Yerushalmi, Berachos 1) says that the eyes and the heart are the gates of sin. "The eye sees, and the heart desires, and then the body does its deed." This is why, in the final section of Shema, we gaze at our tzitzis (fringes), stating, "That you may see them, and you will remember Hashem, your G-d, so that you will not explore after your hearts and after your eyes - after which you stray. (Bamidbar/Numbers 15:39)"

Returning to the Mishnah: Working keeps the body (symbolized by the eyes) focused. Studying

Torah fills up the mind (heart) with pure thoughts and positive qualities, so that one is not enticed by the empty facade of material bliss and pleasure-seeking. Thus, it is the combination of Torah and a profession that really keeps us out of trouble.

There are those special individuals, however, for whom Torah study is not simply a hobby or even an enjoyable or uplifting experience. It consumes them. Their hearts burn with the fire of the Torah; they invest every waking hour and every drop of their energy and resources in its understanding and analysis. It is said about the Chazon Ish zt"l that one would often find him learning in bed, not because he liked to learn reclining, but because, "just because I don't have enough energy to stay on my feet doesn't mean I can't squeeze out another few drops for the Torah!" He would only sleep when he simply collapsed from exhaustion.

The Netziv (R' Naftali Zvi Berlin zt"l, Rosh Yeshiva of the famous Yeshiva of Velozhin) was once told that one of his students was studying Torah for close to twenty hours a day! He called the student in and warned him about the dangers of burn-out and over exertion. "But Rebbe," he said respectfully, "it is said that when you were a Yeshiva bachur you too studied for close to twenty hours a day!"

"Not true!" he implied emphatically. "It is true that I studied for 16 hours a day, seven days a week, for twenty-five years. But twenty hours - never!" (We should merit that, when our time comes, we may have invested at least a few days of our lives with this type of Torah study!)

The Mishnah further says (Avos 3:5), "Whoever accepts upon himself the yoke of the Torah - the yoke of subjugation and the yoke of labour will be removed from him." Note that the Mishnah doesn't refer to one who learns, studies, or even toils in the Torah. It is the one for whom the Torah is a yoke - who feels he has been entrusted with an invaluable cargo that he dare not let go of for even a moment - that can afford to be relieved of the other worldly yokes of work and labour. His Torah study, at the level of seriousness with which he treats it, exhausts both body and soul to the point that sin becomes a distant distraction not worthy of consideration.

"There are three pillars which form the foundation of the world - Torah, prayer, and kindness to others. (Avos 1:2)" The three forefathers were these pillars. Avraham was the pillar of kindness, Yitzchak of prayer, and Yaakov was the pillar of the Torah. ("And Yaakov was a pure man, sitting in the tents [Bereishis/Genesis 25:27]" - He sat in the tents of study and learned Torah [Rashi ibid.] ) As long as Yaakov, the pillar of true Torah study, was alive, there was no need for subjugation. Jewish integrity was protected by the Torah they studied and taught. Indeed, the first thing Yaakov did, even before entering Egypt, was to send Yehudah to establish a Yeshiva!

But when Yaakov died - taking with him a bit of the dedication and "yoke" with which he approached Torah study, at that point there was a need for external reinforcements to ensure our national integrity. Thus, the subjugation began. Because after Yaakov died, the "eyes" and "hearts" of B'nei Yisrael - those two gates to sin, needed to be shut off - and reined in, through the labour of subjugation, so the slavery began. [Based on Pardes Yosef]

While we may never study Torah sixteen hours a day, it is interesting to think that by staying an extra hour to study after ma'ariv, or getting up earlier in the morning to learn another amud of Gemara, we may actually be saving ourselves time and energy in other areas of our lives. To the extent that we demonstrate dedication to Torah study, the yoke of worldly issues is removed from us. Hashem has a funny way of arranging things that, when one deserves it, things just fall into place, so that one can spend one's time doing what really matters.

Have a good Shabbos.

*Sponsored by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Dohany in honour of the wedding of their daughter, Leah, to David Handelsman. May the families see much Yiddishe Nachas from the new couple.*

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