

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

"If you will (eikev) listen to these judgments and guard and do them, then Hashem, your G-d will keep the covenant and the chesed which He promised to your fathers. (Devarim 7:12)

This is an unusual way to state this verse, by using the word eikev, which means "heel." Thus *Rashi* comments:

"If, even the lighter commandments which a person usually treads upon with his heels you will listen to ..." (Rashi)

The *Ba'al HaTurim* finds another purpose for the word "eikev":

"There were eikev [(ayin=70) + (kuf=20) + (bais=2) = 172] words in the first set of Ten Commandments ..."

As if to say, *"If you will listen to the 172 words of the Ten Commandments ..."*

However, comments the *Pri Tzaddik*, if that were true, then why not allude instead to the second set of Ten Commandments? After all, the first set was broken when Moshe came down from the mountain and saw the golden calf being worshipped below. Those who survived that incident were given a second, less-holy set of Tablets with the same Ten Commandments, but with seventeen extra letters.

Answers the *Pri Tzaddik*:

"The gematria of the word "tov" or "good" is 17, which refers to the light of creation (which was called "tov"), the light that was hidden away for those who toil in the Oral Law." (Pri Tzaddik, Aikev 2)

What this means is that the first set of tablets, by definition, contained the exact same mitzvos and concepts as the second set of tablets. However, the seventeen extra words and the light they represent were implicit in the first set of commandments, and did not need to be "spelled out" to the nation. However, due to the sin of the golden calf, the Jewish people sank down some spiritual levels, and could no longer relate to the same level of holiness imbued in the first set of tablets, which is why Moshe broke the first set and created the need for the second set.

This is the meaning of the Talmud when it states:

"Had not the Jewish nation sinned, they would only have received the Five Books of the Torah and the Book of Yehoshua which sets up [the boundaries of the tribal portions of] Eretz Yisroel..." (Nedarim 22b)

This lower level of spirituality was apparent immediately after the golden calf episode:

Come and see the power of sin! For, before they had sinned, what does the Torah say? "The sight of the glory of the L-rd was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the children of Israel ..." (Shemos 24:17) ... And yet, they were not afraid and did not tremble. However, after they made the golden calf they recoiled and trembled even at the sight of the rays of glory of Moshe! (Rashi, Shemos 34:30).

When people behave morally, they feel good about themselves, and are not intimidated in the presence of righteous people. Indeed, they are even spiritually and emotionally lifted by such people. However, when a person's conscience "smites" him, then the appearance of a righteous person serves to remind him of his failing (sometimes on a conscious level, sometimes subconsciously), and leads to negative emotions such as fear, intimidation, or even anger toward the righteous person!

Hence, "eikev" is not merely a warning; it is a hope! The Torah is telling us that although it is true that we were given a second set of tablets that was not on par with the first set, they can yet be brought up to that level, through toil in the Oral Law and by developing fear of G-d. It is fear of G-d that acts as a portal to the higher, more sublime level of the first set of tablets Moshe broke. This is what Dovid HaMelech meant when he wrote:

The beginning of wisdom is the fear of G-d. (Tehillim 111:10)

Shabbos Day:

Now, Yisroel, what does Hashem your G-d, ask of you, but to fear Hashem your G-d and to walk in His ways ... (Devarim 10:12)

This was Moshe's parting message to the Jewish nation. On the surface, this statement sounds simple; indeed, too good to be true! However, even the G-d-fearing Jew has to ask the obvious question: Isn't fear of G-d but one of the 613 mitzvos incumbent upon the Jewish nation; and one, it might be added, that is very difficult to do? Even the Talmud saw fit to ask:

"Is fear of G-d a small matter? Rebi Chanina said in the name of Rebi Shimon bar Yochai: Nothing is in G-d's storehouse except the treasure of fear of heaven, as it says, 'Now, Yisroel, what does Hashem your G-d, ask of you, but to fear Hashem your G-d ...' For Moshe, it was a small matter ..." (Brochos 33b)

However, is the Talmud's answer sufficient? Wasn't Moshe the greatest leader and educator the

Jewish people have ever known; wasn't he the Great Communicator? Just because fear of G-d came easy to him, does that mean that he had to reduce it in the eyes of the nation?

Of course not. Moshe was giving them a different message, telling them that the difference between viewing the Torah as a burden weighing 613 mitzvos, or in seeing it all as one mitzvah that is "easy" to perform is dependent upon one's perspective. It is perspective on life, precisely the "*seeing of G-d*" as deeply as one can (fear and seeing are the same Hebrew word: *yireh*) that transforms fear of G-d into love of G-d, and all the mitzvos into "labors of love."

On this level, every mitzvah is not a "favor" we perform for G-d, but an act of love, a longed-for expression of our desire to prove our love and loyalty to our Creator. It is to this that the Rambam alludes when he writes:

"What is the process for coming to love and fear G-d? When one contemplates His actions and His wondrous and great creations and sees in them His wisdom, that it has no limit and no end, immediately he will love and praise Him, and desire tremendously to know His great Name." (Yad Chazakah, Yesodei HaTorah, 2:2)

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

"Only your fathers did Hashem desire to love them, and He has chosen their descendants after them through you from all the peoples this day. He will circumcise the foreskin of your hearts and you will no longer be stiff-necked." (Devarim 10:16-17)

The entire Torah is dramatic, but the above posukim are very dramatic. It is a promise of better times, when exile will give way to redemption--forever! Most important of all, it speaks of a future time when Jews will no longer resist what is most "natural" to them, in spite of evidence to the contrary: belief in G-d and national unity.

I use the term "natural," because, according to Kabbalah, the Jewish soul is a "piece" of G-d, literally (or at least as literally as creation can allow). As the *Nefesh HaChaim* quotes and explains (Sha'ar 2, Chapter 11), when the Jews go into exile, G-d goes with them; and when they are redeemed, it is His redemption as well. The "*pintelah Neshamah*" within every Jew is none other than the Shechinah itself--the Divine Presence!

If so, this begs the question: How can Jews resist at all, and so violently sometimes? The posuk itself answers this question. Apparently, at certain points in history and especially just before the arrival of Moshiach, an orlah (foreskin) forms around the hearts of many Jews (perhaps to test us and increase our free-will); one, it seems, that also requires some form of "circumcision."

Obviously we're not talking about something physical here. The concept of an orlah, in general, is the idea of a spiritual interposition, the removal of which allows for a holier connection to G-d. It is a

barrier of sorts; with regard to the heart, it can be contrary emotions that interfere with one's drive to be intellectually and spiritually close to G-d.

For many, the heresy that has emerged from the mouths of some modern-day scientists or spiritual leaders (which are often taken to be the "word of G-d"), is the most impenetrable and obstructing orlah one can imagine. I have witnessed Jews stand up and, quoting such leaders, angrily yell against Torah and its followers ... even having never read the entire Torah, or the Mishnah, or the Talmud, or the myriad of commentaries that make up our treasured Oral Law.

Once a person asked, "Why is it that when you start talking about Torah, non-Jews stand at attention and with respect, and want to hear every word, humbly acknowledging their ignorance. However, when I talk to unaffiliated Jews, many of whom know little or nothing of traditional Judaism, they argue as if they are experts? How can people condemn and disbelieve what they know so little about? Such attitudes in the business world, or at university would be considered absurd, if not outright chutzpadik!"

The answer to this troubling question is in this week's parshah: the orlah that encases the Jewish heart, and which, according to the posuk, results in our stiff-necked positions.

However, the wonderful thing about knowing this is, just like the other orlah can be removed on the eighth day after birth to reveal *Bris* (an eternal covenant with the A-lmighty), so too can this orlah be removed to reveal the glory of the Jewish soul. And as one who has watched the remarkable transformation of the outreach world over the last year with the help of the Internet and other technology, it would not be out of place to say that THE "eighth day" may be arriving after all these millennia in exile, and the long-awaited *Bris* of the Jewish heart may be at hand, indeed. And, says the prophet:

On that day, G-d will be One and His Name One. (Zechariah 14:9)

Melave Malkah:

... And you will gather in your wheat, your wine, and your oil. (Devarim 11:14)

This is the second paragraph of the Shema said daily, and for those who may not have noticed (in the Hebrew), the actual paragraph, "*And if you will listen ...*" begins speaking in the plural, whereas the above verse is in the singular. This difference between the two verses is actually the way the *Nefesh HaChaim* (Section 1, Chapter 8) resolves a disagreement in the Talmud between Rebi Shimon bar Yochai (Rashb"i) and Rebi Yishmael.

The rabbis taught: The Torah says, "You will gather in your wheat ..." (Devarim 11:14), whereas elsewhere

it states, "This Sefer Torah shall never leave your mouth ..." (Yehoshua 1:8). You might think that the latter verse is literal, yet the verse says, "You will gather in your wheat ..." According to Rebi Yishmael, this indicates the need to be involved with mundane activities somewhat. Rebi Shimon bar Yochai says: If so, then what will happen to the Torah if a man has to plow, sow, reap, etc.? Rather, when B'nei Yisroel do the will of G-d, their work is done for them; when they don't, then they have to do their own work. (Bava Basra 99a)

According to the Rashb"i, a Jew is supposed to sit and learn Torah all day. Involvement in the physical world is unnecessary and required by G-d only when we stop trusting in Him and get involved in physically earning a living. Rebi Yishmael disagrees with this, and says that the Shema itself proves the point: gathering in the wheat is described as a blessing, not a curse.

However, says the Rashb"i, if you are indeed correct, then when will a person learn Torah? An agrarian way of life is a year-long profession, requiring different processes at different times of the year. Such work denies one the time to learn Torah, and therefore it is a curse, not a blessing!

The Talmud states that many tried the Rashb"i's approach and failed, though a few did succeed. However, many also tried Rebi Yishmael's approach (working a minimal amount of time for the most basic of needs, and then using the balance of the day to learn Torah), and were successful.

This, says the Nefesh HaChaim, may be why the Torah begins speaking in the plural, and then reverts to the singular. It is as if to say that, for the few individuals who can work it out and survive while avoiding being involved in the business world, either because their needs are few or because they have alternative sources of income, they should sit and learn a full day. However, for the majority of people who just can't seem to make it work out for whatever the reason (and after a very serious effort), they should learn as much as their day permits, and then devote whatever (minimal) time they must to taking care of their (most basic) physical needs.

However, adds Rebi Yishmael: even when one is "forced" to leave the Bais Medrash and his learning of Torah, still he must remain conscious of Torah at all times, and act befitting a Torah-Jew no matter where he is, not matter he is doing, and no matter when he is doing it. It is the workplace that, potentially, can be one of the greatest places to sanctify the Name of G-d, or, G-d forbid, profane it (see Strive for Truth, "Trust in G-d").

Have a wonderful Shabbos,

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