

ON A PERSONAL NOTE

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"...write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the Children of Israel, place it in their mouth..." (31:19)

The Talmud interprets "the song" as referring to the entire Torah.[1] Rashi and the Ramban comment that Moshe is referring to Parshas Haazinu, the next parsha, which is written in poetic verse.[2] The Talmud teaches that a person who recites verses of Shir Hashirim in song form brings evil to the world.[3] How do we reconcile this teaching with the verse which defines the entire Torah or a portion of it as a "song"? Song can be used in two ways. Song can be the means by which an individual focuses upon himself in order to either raise his spirits or lament his condition, or song can be the forum a person uses to connect to another person or to Hashem.

The term used for "song" when the Talmud prohibits transforming verses into song form is "zemer". This word also denotes the pruning of a tree. The act of pruning requires cutting away excess foliage in order to improve the remaining tree. Similarly, singing a zemer is a self-absorbed act, focusing only upon the individual. This form of song is denounced when used with verses for personal enjoyment since it constitutes a misuse of Torah.[4] There are times when a zemer can be used positively, such as the portion of Tefilla which requires a person to elevate himself to a level where he is ready to present himself before Hashem known as "Pesukei Dezimra". These verses are described as zemiros, for the focus is upon the individual elevating himself, rather than connecting to Hashem.

"Shir", the other term for "song" also means a "chain". This is the type of song which links us to one another or to Hashem. It is this form of song which defines Torah, for it truly reflects what Torah should be, a forum through which to connect to Hashem.

1..See Eruvin 54b

2.31:19

3.Sanhedrin 101a

4. See Yad Ramah ibid.

A Verbal Benefit

"For the matter is very near to you - in your mouth and your heart - to perform it" (30:14)

Rashi interprets the verse as referring to the study of Torah. He explains the verse to mean that the goal of knowing the entire Torah is within our reach. This includes "beficha" - "in your mouth", i.e. the Written Torah, and "bilvavcha" - "in your heart", i.e. the Oral Torah.^[1] Why is Rashi defining "in your mouth" as the Written Torah? Would it not be more appropriate to translate "in your mouth" as Torah Sheba'al Peh, the Oral Torah? Rashi is teaching us the difference in nature between the Written and Oral Torah. The text itself of the Written Torah is imbued with intrinsic holiness, and therefore, the reading alone of the verses, even without comprehension, has a benefit. This is what is meant by the word "beficha"; there is a benefit to merely having it in your mouth. "Bilvavcha" denotes that there must be understanding. The Oral Law's intrinsic value is the message that it offers. Saying the words, without comprehension is of no value; it must be "bilvavcha" - "in your heart".

1.30:14

A Present Definition

"For this matter is very near to you...to perform it"(30:14)

The Ramban interprets the matter under discussion as the mitzva of Teshuva, repentance. The Torah is attesting to the accessibility of repentance.^[1] The expression "karov eilecha" - "close to you" implies a certain degree of ease. How can repentance be described as easy? The Rambam teaches that repentance occurs when the penitent has the conviction never to return to his wicked ways, and is confident that even Hashem can attest to the fact that he will never again revert to the ways of his past.^[2] How can a person guarantee that he will never repeat a sin of the past?

Teshuva in its perfection, according to the Rambam, is when a person is faced with the opportunity to commit a sin which he has previously transgressed, but due to his repentance, he does not succumb. The Rambam gives the following scenario as an example: If a man who has had an illicit relationship finds himself secluded with the same woman, in the same location where he once transgressed, having the same passion for her, his physical prowess just as strong as in the past, yet he is still able to extricate himself from the situation, this is the perfect penitence.^[3] Since it is forbidden for a person to place himself in a compromising situation, the Rambam must be setting a theoretical standard for a person to achieve. Why is it necessary to replicate the situation with the same woman and location? Would it not suffice to abstain from the sin, regardless of the person or locale involved?

The Talmud teaches that a person who repeatedly transgresses a certain sin views the sin as a permissible act..^[4] The Talmud is giving us an insight into why a person sins. Generally, we define

ourselves as a composite of our past actions. If a person has repeatedly transgressed a certain sin, and is now faced with the very same sin, he may reason that the sin cannot possibly impact upon him any more than it has already. The feeling that the sin has become part of his essence prevents the person's extracting himself from it. The person is convinced that he will commit the sin again in the future, and therefore, not committing it at present only serves as a temporary frustration.

The Rambam is teaching us that the mindset which is required for Teshuva is one in which a person divorces himself from his actions of the past. A person must feel that his past actions do not reflect his true nature, and furthermore, that under the same exact circumstances he would not repeat them. Teshuva can only occur when a person divorces himself from the negative behaviors of his past and realizes that they are not part of his true essence. Perhaps he may sin again in the future, but that is not because the behavior is ingrained in him from the past.

We cannot guarantee that we will never sin again. However, the knowledge that the sinful acts of the past are not part of our present will ensure that they are not motivating factors for committing the same sin in the future.. A person must feel that his past does not control him. The ability to come to this realization is not a difficult task. If a person is truly interested in changing his way of life, this mindset will be natural and accessible to him. It is this notion to which the Torah attests that Teshuva is "karov eilecha" - "close to you".

1.30:14

2.Yad Hilchos Teshuva 2:2

3.Ibid 2:1

4.Yuma 86b