

# PARSHAS BECHUKOSAI

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

*Sfas Emes, Bechukosai, 5632*

The parsha begins: "Im be'chuko'sai tei'leichu" (ArtScroll: "If you will follow my decrees.") Translated literally, the parsha's initial phrase is: "If you will walk with my decrees" -- an unusual turn of phrase. As just noted, ArtScroll deals with the problem that this unusual phrasing poses by translating "walk" as "follow". But the phrase cries out for other interpretations.

The Sfas Emes cites the first Medrash Rabba on the parsha, which tells us one way (out of several) with which Chazal reacted to the unusual turn of phrase: "If you will walk ...". The Medrash handles this problem by referring us to another pasuk in the Torah in which "walking" is involved. That pasuk is: Tehilim, (119, 59). The pasuk there says: "Chishavti dera'chai, ve'ahshiva raglai el eidoseh'cha". (ArtScroll: "Chishaviti -- I thought long and hard -- dera'chai -- my ways, in the sense of which way to go -- and I returned my feet to Your testimonies". So much for the pshat pashut -- the literal meaning -- of this pasuk.

Now comes the Medrash: "Ahmahr David. Ribono shel olam! Bechol yohm vayohm, hah'yisi mechashev ve'omeir: le'makohm peloni ul'bais dira pelonis ahni ho'laych. Ve'hayu rag'lai moh'lichos osi le'batei ke'neisiyos u'lebatei medrashos." That is, Dovid Hamelech said: "Master of the Universe! Every day, I would think things over, and decide to go to such and such place ... But my feet led me to Shuls and to Bahtay Medrash."

Now comes the Sfas Emes, who presents his understanding of the Medrash. The Sfas Emes sees the text of the Medrash as coming in the following context. Dovid Hamelech is telling us what was going on in his life. Every day, he would decide to go to business; but his feet took him instead to Shuls or to Bahtey Medrash.

Next, the Sfas Emes presents his reading of Dovid Hamelech's experience. He sees Dovid saying the following. HaShem's chiyus (life-giving power) is present in every thing and in every place. The chiyus is there in different ways and in different forms; but the inner reality is the same all over. Thus Dovid Hamelech could say: Wherever I go, I encounter HaShem's Presence. For in fact, the world's inner reality is identical everywhere.

As you see, the Sfas Emes is reading the Medrash in a radically innovative way. Most (Almost all? All?) people would understand this Medrash as saying: "I decided I was going to Wall Street. But my feet took me to Lakewood instead". By contrast, the Sfas Emes is reading the Medrash as saying: "I

decided to go to Wall Street, and I went to Wall Street. And there I encountered the exact same Presence of HaShem -- albeit in different guise -- that I would experience in Lakewood!"

(Parenthetically, note that the Sfas Emes views his way of understanding the Medrash as so self-evident that he does not think it necessary even to mention the conventional way of reading the Medrash. Also, note that with this incredible intellectual boldness and subtlety, the Sfas Emes attracted -- and retained -- thousands of Chassidim. The success of the Sfas Emes as Gerrer Rebbe indicates how thirsty people were -- and are -- for the "Hashkofa for adults" that he provides.)

Moving on, the Sfas Emes works with the pasuk quoted earlier from Tehilim (119, 59). "Chishavti derachai" ("I considered my ways ... ") The Sfas Emes uses the perspective gained from this pasuk to comment on Chazal's dictum that danger lurks on the roads. He notes that the pasuk tells us how to avoid such danger. How? By thinking things through (i.e., "Chishavti") beforehand. (Note that the verb "chishavti" is not in binyan kahl -- the simple construction -- but rather, is in binyan pi'eil, -- the intensive construction. In this context, binyan pi'eil implies: thinking things through thoroughly.)

Thus the Sfas Emes is telling us that to travel safely along life's highways requires intellectual activity. By thinking ahead and anticipating the problems he/she is likely to encounter, a person can indeed find HaShem's Presence everywhere and in every thing. The Sfas Emes's advice -- "chishavti" -- is relevant to all of us; for we are all travelers on the highway of life.

The Sfas Emes continues to work with the pasuk in Tehilim. He reads the words "... el eidosecha" as coming from the word "eid" -- "witness". Hence, the Sfas Emes tells us that that we have an obligation to bear testimony that the entire cosmos draws its existence from HaShem.

The Sfas Emes concludes this paragraph of his notes by presenting his perspective on Learning. The Sfas Emes's view here is complex. On the one hand, he feels very strongly that we should subordinate our intelligence and knowledge totally to the service of HaShem; that is, to His will. On the other hand, the Sfas Emes recognizes that to reach that state, one must start with intellectual activity. Thus, the pasuk in Tehilim begins with "Chishavti".

The Sfas Emes attempts to resolve this inconsistency by saying that, at any rate, the goal of our cogitation should be non-intellectual, but rather to subordinate our intelligence to HaShem. But true to his intellect, the Sfas Emes recognizes that reaching that objective requires "da'as ve'cheshbon" (knowledge and analysis); i.e., intellectual activity.

The Sfas Emes leaves us with the picture of a person constantly seeking -- and attaining -- higher intellectual levels in order to achieve ever greater degrees of intellectual subordination to HaShem. In fact, this is how the Sfas Emes understands the famous phrase (quoted in the parsha's first Rashi): "Sheh'tiheyu a'meilim baTorah". That is, we are enjoined to "toil" in learning Torah. As the Sfas Emes reads it, that statement is telling us to view Learning as a religious activity -- a form of serving HaShem -- rather than an intellectual activity.

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