



May the Year End along with Its Curses

The Ramban Instructs the One Who Raises the Sefer Torah to Show Its Script to the Entire Congregation so that He Will Be Blessed

This auspiciously approaching Shabbas Kodesh, we will read parshas Ki Savo. As an introduction to this parsha, we customarily refer to the “takanah” of Ezra in the Gemara (Megillah 31b). He instituted that Yisrael read the “klalos”—curses—in parshas Bechukosai prior to Chag HaShavuos and the “klalos” in parshas Ki Savo prior to Rosh HaShanah. The rationale for this practice is so that the year will end along with all of its curses.

The Tiferes Shlomo (Ki Savo) explains the rationale for this institution: Even if it has been decreed, chas v’shalom, that we deserve a harsh punishment for our wrongdoings; nevertheless, by reading the punishments—curses—enumerated in the Torah, it will be considered as if we actually received all of them. Thus, the plea that **“the year end along with its curses”** will be fulfilled.

This teaches us a vital lesson! During the reading of the Torah on this Shabbas Kodesh, it is imperative for every one of us to adopt an attitude of fear and reverence of Hashem; we should have in mind that by reading the “klalos” in the “tochachah,” it should be considered as if we were actually punished for all of our wrongdoings. Having been punished appropriately, we can then begin the new year and merit a blessed year with a “kesivah va’chasimah tovah”!

Blessed Is the One Who Fulfills the Precepts of This Torah

With this important message in mind, it behooves us to emphasize the following: The final curse heard on Har Eival in this “tochachah” is (Devarim 27, 26):

“ארור אשר לא יקים את דברי התורה הזאת לעשות אותם ואמר כל העם אמן”—**accursed is one who will not uphold the words of this Torah, to perform them. And the entire nation shall say, “Amen.”** Rashi comments on this passuk: **Here he included the entire Torah, and they accepted it upon themselves with a curse and with an oath.** The Ramban, however, presents the interpretation of the Yerushalmi (Sotah 7, 4): **“One who will not uphold (the Torah),” but is there a falling Torah? Rabbi Shimon ben Yakim says: This refers to the “chazan” . . . And by the way of homily, they (the sages of the Yerushalmi) taught: “This refers to the ‘chazan,’ who does not stand the sefer-Torah up properly, so that it does not fall.”**

The Ramban goes on to clarify the meaning of the Yerushalmi’s statement: **It appears to me that it is referring to a “chazan” who does not hold up the sefer-Torah before the congregation, so that they can all see its written script. As it is explained in Maseches Sofrim (14, 14), they should lift it (the Torah) and show its written surface to the people standing to its right and to its left and turns it to face in front of him and in back of him. For, it is incumbent upon all men and women to see the written words and bend at the knee and proclaim (ibid. 4, 44): “This is the Torah that Moshe placed before Bnei Yisrael.” And this is the custom.** Rabeinu Bachayei also presents this exposition of Chazal that the words **אשר לא יקים** refer to a **“chazan” who does not lift the sefer-Torah high enough (and in such a way) to show the congregation the written words.**

It is worthwhile pointing out that the source for this sacred minhag is found in the Beis Yosef (O.C. 134, 2). He cites the aforementioned ruling in *Maseches Sofrim* and rules accordingly in the *Shulchan Aruch* (ibid.): **He shows the written surface of the sefer-Torah to all of the people standing to his right and to his left, and he turns to his front and to his back; for it is a mitzvah for all men and women to see the written word, to bow and proclaim, "This is the Torah . . ."** According to the "michaber"—the author of the *Shulchan Aruch*—this is done prior to the reading of the Torah. This, indeed, is the minhag of our Sephardi brothers; the minhag of the Ashkenazim, however, is to do so after the reading of the Torah, as per the Rama (ibid.).

Gazing upon the Letters of the Torah Imbues a Person with an Incredible Light

With regards to gazing at the letters of the Torah, the Magen Avraham (ibid. 3) writes in the name of the Arizal (Sha'ar HaKavanos): **When one sees the letters such that he can read them, a tremendous light reaches him.** He is referring to the "segulah"—good omen—described by Rabeinu Chaim Vital in Sha'ar HaKavanos in the name of his mentor, the Arizal:

"מנהג מורי ז"ל שהיה נוהג לנשק הספר תורה, וללוותו לילך אחריו כשמוליכין אותו מן ההיכל אל התיבה לקרות בו, ואחר כך היה נשאר שם סמוך אל התיבה, עד שהיו פותחין הספר תורה ומראין אותו לקהל כנודע, ואז היה מסתכל באותיות הספר תורה ממש, והיה אומר שעל ידי הסתכלות האדם מקרוב כל כך שיוכל לקרוא האותיות היטב, על ידי זה נמשך אור גדול אל האדם."

My master of blessed memory had the custom of kissing the sefer Torah and accompanying it as it was transported from the sanctuary to the ark to be read from. He would then linger near the ark until they opened the sefer Torah and showed it to the congregation, as is customary. Then he would actually gaze at the letters of the sefer-Torah, and he would claim that by a person gazing from such close proximity that he is able to read the letters clearly, the person draws an exquisite (extraordinary) light to himself.

Based on what we have just learned, it is essential to instruct anyone who is honored with "הגבה"—**raising**

the sefer-Torah—how to do it properly. After lifting the sefer from the podium, he should not merely turn slightly from side to side; he should turn a full 360 degrees (to face every direction) and should not do so hurriedly. For, if he fails to follow this protocol, and the entire congregation is not able to see the letters inscribed on the parchment, then the "klalah" of אשר "לא יקים" will apply to him, chas v'shalom. Conversely, if he does the "hagbah" properly, so that everyone present can see the letters of the Torah, he will merit the berachah of: "ברוך אשר יקים את דברי התורה הזאת"—**blessed is the one who holds up this Torah.**

So, now, it is with great pleasure and delight that we will explore the meaning and deeper significance of this practice taught in *Maseches Sofrim* and brought down in the *Shulchan Aruch*—**that it is a mitzvah for all men and women to see the script** (the written text). As our mentor, the Arizal, asserts: Seeing the letters up close enough to read them imbues a person with an extraordinary light.

Transforming "Garments of Skin" to "Garments of Light"

We will begin to shed some light on the matter by examining the mitzvah of writing a sefer-Torah. The source for this obligation is the passuk (ibid. 31, 19): "ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת ולמדוה את בני ישראל שימיה בפייהם"—**so now, write this song for yourselves and teach it to Bnei Yisrael, place it in their mouth . . .** To better understand this mitzvah, we will first refer to what is described in the Torah in the aftermath of the "cheit Eitz HaDa'as" (Bereishis 3, 21): "ויעש ה' אלקים—**Hashem Elokim made for Adam and his wife garments of skin, and he clothed them.**

In Sha'ar HaLikutim (Bereishis), the Arizal explains that before Adam committed this tragic, momentous sin, his entire body was extremely pure and unsullied; it was radiant and is described as "כתנות"—**a garment of light.** The Midrash describes this phenomenon as follows (V.R. 20, 2): **The fleshy part of Adam HaRishon's heel outshone the orb of the sun; how much more so, the radiance of his countenance.** There was a radical transformation,

however, after the “cheit Eitz HaDa’as”; his entire body became corporeal and was then better described as “כתנות עור”—**a garment of skin**. (Translator’s note: The “aleph” became an “ayin.”)

Let us elaborate. Man was created with a body and a neshamah. The neshamah was intended to be man’s essential component, whereas the body was intended to merely house the neshamah. As such, to perform its function properly, to be a proper garment for the neshamah, it was designed to assist the neshamah to serve Hashem by performing the mitzvos with actual deeds using its 248 bodily limbs. Clearly, the neshamah is a purely spiritual entity and is incapable of performing any mitzvah without the assistance of functional, physical limbs. So, before Adam HaRishon sinned, his body was completely pure; it was entirely good without any inclination toward evil. As such, it was able to fulfill its intended function faithfully—to help the neshamah serve Hashem.

Unfortunately, as a consequence of partaking of the Eitz HaDa’as, the yetzer hara became a part of Adam’s being. In the words of Rashi (Bereishis 2, 25): **The yetzer hara was not placed in him (Adam HaRishon) until he ate from the tree; and then it entered his being**. As a result, the body mutinied and betrayed the neshamah. Instead of functioning as a loyal, subservient garment for the neshamah, it became a separate entity with its own desires and aspirations. From then on, the body and the neshamah have been at odds with each other. There is an internal struggle between good and evil; the neshamah is a positive influence on man with a predilection for good, while the body has a predilection for evil.

This explains the depictions of “כתנות אור” and “כתנות עור”. The body acts as a housing and **garment** for the neshamah. Prior to the cheit, it was a **“garment of light,”** illuminated by a heavenly light assisting the neshamah to fulfill Hashem’s mitzvos. After the cheit, however, the body became corporeal and was transformed into a **“garment of skin.”** Instead of being a trustworthy assistant to the neshamah, helping it serve Hashem, it began to combat and impede the neshamah. Thus, it should be apparent

that the tikun for this negative transformation of the body is to refine it, so that it once again functions as a **“garment of light.”** In fact, according to a Midrash, in the Torah of Rabbi Meir, it says “כתנות אור” with an “aleph,” indicating that Rabbi Meir succeeded in purifying his body; it radiated a heavenly light assisting his neshamah to serve Hashem just like Adam HaRishon prior to the cheit.

This was also the case with Moshe Rabeinu (Shemos 34, 29): **“ויהי ברדת משה מהר סיני ושני לוחות העדות ביד משה ברדתו מן ההר, ומשה לא ידע כי קרן עור פניו בדברו אתו, וירא אהרן וכל בני ישראל את משה והנה קרן עור פניו ויראו מגשת אליו.”** **And it was when Moshe descended from Har Sinai—with the two luchos of the Testimony in the hand of Moshe as he descended from the mountain—Moshe did not know that the skin of his face had become radiant when He had spoken to him. Aharon and all Bnei Yisrael saw Moshe and behold!—the skin of his face had become radiant; and they feared to approach him.** Apropos this phenomenon, the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh writes (ibid. 35): **With respect to his countenance, it was restored to its original glory, in keeping with Chazal’s statement that in the sefer of Rabbi Meir, כתנות אור is written. In similar fashion, the skin of Moshe’s face became radiant.**

The Tikun for “כתנות אור” Is Torah-Study

I would also like to introduce what the great Rabbi Avraham Simchah of Barniv, zy”a, writes in Chamra Tava (Vayikra). The mitzvah of writing a sefer-Torah is a tikun for transforming man’s body from a **“garment of skin”** back into a refined **“garment of light.”** By writing the text of the Torah on the **“skin”** of an animal, that animal hide is sanctified and transformed into an object of **“light.”** As it is written (Mishlei 6, 23): **“כי נר מצוה ותורה אור”—for a mitzvah is a lamp (candle) and the Torah is light.**

Let us embellish this sacred idea. How does this provide a tikun for man’s body that has deteriorated dramatically from being a **“garment of light”** to being a lowly **“garment of skin”**? Let us refer to the Gemara (Gittin 60b): **אמר רבי יוחנן, לא כרת הקב”ה ברית עם**

ישראל אלא בשביל דברים שבעל פה, שנאמר כי על פי הדברים האלה כרתי אתך
 "ברית ואת ישראל"—**Rabbi Yochanan said: HKB”H only entered into a covenant with Yisrael on account of the Oral Law, as it states (Shemos 34, 27): “For on account of these words have I entered a covenant with you and with Yisrael.”**

In Tiferes Yisrael (Chapter 68), the Maharal of Prague explains—as understood by the brilliant author of the KetZos HaChoshen in Shev Shematita—that just like the written Torah requires a parchment to be written on, so, too, the oral Torah requires a sort of parchment—namely, the mouth the scholar that engages in the study of Torah she'b'al peh.

Now, from a sefer-Torah inscribed on a parchment prepared from an animal's hide, the covenant and bond between Yisrael and their Heavenly Father is not that apparent. However, from the Torah that was given to Yisrael to be studied and transmitted orally, this relationship is ever so apparent. When a Jew's mouth becomes so pure and refined that it functions as a parchment for Torah she'b'al peh, the reason for Rabbi Yochanan's statement becomes apparent: **“HKB”H only entered into a covenant with Yisrael on account of the Oral Law.”**

A Man's Body Is Transformed into a Torah Parchment

With this in mind, the Shev Shematita goes on to explain the statement of Rashbi in the Yerushalmi (Berachos 1, 2): **“אילו הוינא על טורא דסיני בשעתא דאתיהיבת תורה לישראל, הוינא מתבעי קומי דרחמנא דיתברי לבר נש תרין פומין, חד דהוה לעי Had I been on Har Sinai when the Torah was given to Yisrael, I would have pleaded with HKB”H to create man with two mouths—one to engage in the study of Torah and one to perform all of his personal needs.**

Let us elaborate. According to the Gemara (Shabbas 28a): **“לא הוכשרו למלאכת שמים אלא עור בהמה טהורה בלבד”—the only hide fit for the service of Heaven is the hide of a kosher animal alone.** Additionally, the hide must be processed l'shma, as per the halachic ruling (O.C. 32, 8). Similarly, a Jew's mouth, which is the

parchment of Torah she'b'al peh, must be pure and unsullied for the sake of the kedushah of the Torah. For this reason, Rashbi requested that a person have a special mouth exclusively for the study of Torah; that way he would not have to use it for silly, meaningless things that would detract from its kedushah—the kedushah of the parchment of Torah she'b'al peh.

Undoubtedly, the organ most involved with the study of Torah is the mouth. In reality, however, all of the bodily limbs and organs are obliged to participate in the study of Torah. Here is a pertinent passage from the Gemara (Eiruvim 53b): **“ברוריה אשכחיה להווא תלמידא דהוה קא גריס בלחשה, בטשא ביה אמרה ליה, לא כך כתוב ערוכה בכל ושמורה, אם ערוכה ברמ”ח איברים שלך משתמרת, ואם לאו אינה משתמרת.” Beruriah (the wife of Rabbi Meir) came upon a certain student who was reviewing his studies quietly. She kicked him and said to him, “Is it not written (Shmuel II 23, 5): ‘Arranged in all and secure’? If it (your learning) is arranged in all your 248 limbs, then it is secure (and will not be forgotten); but if it is not, it will not be secure.”** The Maharsha provided the following clarification: **Speaking out loud elicits feeling and movement of all the limbs** (involving them in the learning process). This means that when a Jew studies Torah she'b'al peh, it is not only his mouth that becomes a parchment upon which the words of the Torah are imprinted, but his entire body is involved and is part of the parchment.

We can now appreciate the deeper significance of the mitzvah of writing a sefer-Torah on the hide of an animal. It teaches a person that through the study of Torah, he is able to heal himself by transforming his **“garment of skin”** into a **“garment of light.”** If a kosher animal, which is certainly on a lower level than a human being, is elevated to a **“garment of light”** through the process of having a sefer-Torah written on its **“skin”**; all the more so, if a Jew sanctifies his body through the study of Torah to become a parchment for the oral Torah, is he able to transform his **“garment of skin”** back into its original, intended form—a radiant **“garment of light.”**

This then is the meaning of the passuk: **“So now, write this song for yourselves.”** It is referring to Torah she'b'chsav, where writing it transforms the **“skin”** of the animal into a Torah of **“light.”** But that is not enough! The goal is to **“teach it to Bnei Yisrael and place it in their mouth.”** By having them place Torah she'b'al peh in their mouths, the mouth becomes a vessel ready to be the parchment of Torah she'b'al peh. In this manner, a person's own **“garment of skin”** is rectified and becomes a **“garment of light”** once more.

Now, this enlightens us as to why it is a mitzvah for everyone in attendance to carefully gaze upon the letters of the sefer-Torah when it is held up high. Thus, they will realize that if the **“skin”** of an animal can be elevated to a Torah of **“light”** via the letters of the Torah, all the more so that they can elevate their bodies from garments of **“skin”** to garments of **“light.”**

This also explains very nicely the claim of the Arizal: **“By gazing upon the letters from up close so that he can read them easily, a person is imbued with a potent light.”** For, when a person gazes upon the letters in a sefer-Torah that transformed and elevated the **“skin”** of an animal to the kedushah of a Torah of **“light,”** they have a tremendous impact on him. They enable him to elevate his animal self from a **“garment of skin”** to a **“garment of light.”**

The Entire Nation Saw the Sounds

Following this line of reasoning, we will now explain in greater depth the rationale for the mitzvah of gazing upon the letters of the sefer-Torah. In my humble opinion, this sacred practice is based on a passuk related to Matan Torah (Shemos 20, 15): **“וְכָל הָעָם רָאוּ אֶת הַקּוֹלוֹת—*and all the people could see the sounds.*** Rashi explains that **they were seeing that which is audible, which is impossible to see elsewhere.**

At Matan Torah, before they sinned with the **“eigel,”** the people of Yisrael were on an exalted level. They were able to attain Torah-insights with a type of intellectual vision that surpassed mere hearing, in keeping with the statement in the Gemara (R.H.

25b): **“לא תהא שמיעה גדולה מראיה”—*hearing should not be greater than seeing*** (visualizing). This is similar to what Yisrael will be privileged to experience le'asid la'vo. As it is written (Yeshayah 30, 20): **“וְהָיוּ עֵינֶיךָ רוֹאוֹת: *את מורידך*—*and your eyes will behold your Teacher.*** In other words, le'asid la'vo, Yisrael will be privileged once again to see the teachings of the Torah revealed to them by HKB”H, a privilege and perception they forfeited as a consequence of the **“cheit ha'eigel.”**

Seen from this perspective, we can truly appreciate the magnificent opportunity of gazing upon the letters in a sefer-Torah. Clearly, after the **“cheit ha'eigel,”** we are no longer privileged to **“see the sounds”** as all of Yisrael did at Har Sinai. Instead, we must suffice to learn Torah with the sense of hearing. Nevertheless, when the Torah is being read in the synagogue, and the entire congregation is listening to the reader with their sense of hearing, there is also a mitzvah to look at the letters of the sefer-Torah. Doing so imparts a tremendous kedushah enabling a person to attain sublime Torah-insights akin to what Yisrael attained at Matan Torah, as it says: **“All the people could see the sounds.”**

It gives me great pleasure to expand on this notion by presenting what is written in the Responsa of the Radbaz. It behooves us to publicize his amazing comments concerning the kedushah of a sefer-Torah. Here is a translation of his sacred words:

You have asked me a question and I will offer you my opinion. Why do we not write vowels in a sefer Torah, seeing as everything was given to Moshe Rabeinu, a”h, at Sinai? In fact, even the cantillations deserve to be written; so that the reader will read the text properly without mistakes. After all, even the cantillations often clarify the meaning of the text.

Answer. Your question is related to what the malachim asked HKB”H (Shabbas 88b) when Moshe Rabeinu, a”h, ascended to receive the Torah. The ministering angels asked: **“What is a creature born to a woman doing amongst us?”** HKB”H replied to them: **“He has come to**

receive the Torah.” They responded to Him: **“Give it to us.”** That is reflected by that which is written (Tehillim 8, 2): **“Rather You should bestow Your glory upon the heavens.”** Moshe Rabeinu addressed them, **“What is written in the Torah? ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, etc.’ Is there murder among you? Is there adultery among you? What need have you for the Torah?”** They conceded to him and said (ibid. 10): **“Hashem, our Master, how grand is Your name throughout the land!”**

Now, we could ask: **Weren’t the malachim aware of this answer? However, we can suggest that they (the malachim) read the Torah differently, (more) spiritually, without the separation of words—as names of HKB”H.** In fact, our Rabbis of blessed memory said that the entire Torah is comprised of the names of HKB”H. So, HKB”H informed them that the Torah has an alternate reading, which is material, involving the separation into words related to issues pertinent to human beings—**tumah and taharah, that which is prohibited and that which is permissible, innocent and guilty, and all the rest of its laws.**

With this knowledge, you can understand the answer to your question. **The Almighty commanded that they write the Torah without vowels and cantillations, as it existed in its**

original form with Him, blessed is He. Thus, it would allow two possible readings, a spiritual one and a material one; so that someone who is capable of perceiving will perceive. Accordingly, they said (Berachos 55a): “Betzalel knew how to combine the letters with which the heavens and the earth were created.” He passed on the knowledge of the vowels and cantillations like the rest of Torah she’b’al peh—which is an explanation (clarification) of Torah she’b’chsav; similarly, the vowels and cantillations provide clarification of Torah she’b’chsav.

Thus, we learn from the Radbaz that the letters in a sefer-Torah, without the cantillations and vowels, correspond to the concealed, mystical Torah comprised of the names of HKB”H, which the malachim desperately wanted to receive. On the other hand, the reading with the vowels and cantillations correspond to the revealed portion of the Torah. We can now rejoice! We have achieved a better understanding of the claim of the Arizal—that gazing upon the letters of the Torah from up close, so that the letters can be read easily, imbues a person with a powerful illumination. Seeing as the letters in a sefer-Torah are inscribed without vowels and represent the mystical names of HKB”H, therefore gazing upon them in a sefer-Torah imparts an extraordinary illumination to a person from the concealed, mystical portion of the Torah.

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