

פ' בהר-בחוקותי תשפ"ה

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BITOCHON AND HISHTADLUS

Both *Shabbos* and *shmita* are signs reminding us that Hashem created the world and continues to rule it with *hashgocho protis*.

Just after the Second World War, Rav Sternbuch met a Holocaust survivor who told him that when he was in a concentration camp, they were starved, yet still expected to work like slaves in the constant fear of imminent death should their state of health fail to satisfy their taskmasters. They had no beards or *payos*, and this particular survivor had no access to *tefilin*, but still made a point of *davening* before starting work every day. Once he overheard one fellow inmate tell another that he was incapable of saying the *brocho* "Who has taken care of all my needs", because he felt that this did not reflect the reality of his situation. However, the other *yid*, who was apparently a *talmid chochom*, did not accept this, reasoning that everything Hashem does is for the good. Hashem is merely testing our fortitude, said the *talmid chochom*, and eventually He will award us a high position with the ministering angels. He then proceeded to make the *brocho*, and the other *yid* answered *omen*.

The survivor whom Rav Sternbuch met noted how awe-inspired he had been to witness such a faithful soldier of Hashem's army. The *Alshich Hakodosh* comments on the *possuk* "And those who seek Hashem will lack no good", that it does not say that they will possess everything good, but only that they will be not be lacking anything, because the righteous do not desire material possessions, which have no substance, and do not feel a lack of them. That *talmid chochom* in the concentration camp shows that it is possible to feel this even in the most extreme circumstances.

Most of us are not on the level of the *talmid chochom* in the camps. How much *hishtadlus*, then, are we expected to make?

Rav Sternbuch's mother asked Rav Elchonon Wasserman this question when she was a young widow faced with bringing up nine children. He told her that she must make at least minimal *hishtadlus* in accordance with her circumstances, which also required her to educate her children. He added that the main aspect of *bitochon* is to realize that there is no "*chapping*" (grabbing). Whatever is set aside for us will reach us irrespective of our actions. If we spend a lot of time and effort making a living, we may see returns in the short term, but this might come at the expense of our health, long life, *nachas* from our children and so on in the longer term. If we do no more than absolutely necessary, we will not gain one cent less than we would by making more *hishtadlus*.

For this reason the prohibition against dishonest business dealings appears in the middle of the *parasha* of *shmita*. The person who has observed *shmita* has seen with his own eyes that Hashem is perfectly capable of seeing to all his needs without any effort on his part at all. Such a person knows that success does not depend on his talents, business acumen, or slyness. Even when required to make *hishtadlus* from the eighth year onwards, he will be scrupulous in his business dealings, knowing that his earnings are predetermined and bear no relation to the extent of his efforts.

SANCTITY OF ERETZ YISROEL

Speak to Bnei Yisroel and say to them, "When you come to the land which I give to you." (25:2)

Other nations acquire a right to territories by conquering them. By contrast, *Eretz Yisroel* was given to us by Hashem as a conditional - not absolute - gift. By using the present tense - "which I give to you," instead of the past tense, the *possuk* is emphasizing that our right to *Eretz Yisroel* is not dependent on any past conquest, but was rather given to us as a continuous, ongoing gift, whose validity depends on our performance of Torah and *mitzvos* at any given moment, as it says, "that they might keep His statutes, and observe His laws" (*Tehillim* 105:45).

For the inhabitants of *Eretz Yisroel* who are on an appropriate spiritual level, the sanctity of the land has a great impact on the quality of their Torah and *mitzvos*. However, the relationship between us and *Eretz Yisroel* is a mutual one: its sanctity is not static, but rather increases in proportion to the quantity and quality of *mitzvos* that we perform within it. By using the present tense instead of the future "when you will come to the land," the *possuk* is telling us that the sanctity of this land is in a constant state of flux. If we would not keep the *mitzvos* in *Eretz Yisroel*, *chas v'shalom*, we would lose our right to exist here.

Since in our times there are unfortunately many sinners in *Eretz Yisroel*, we could, G-d forbid, lose the right to exist in this country, and this poses a grave danger during a time when we are surrounded by bloodthirsty enemies. We therefore have to arouse Divine mercy all the time.

Someone once told Rav Sternbuch that before he came to live in *Eretz Yisroel*, he went to ask the Rogatchover Gaon, Rav Yosef Rosen, for a *brocho*. The Rogatchover told him: "The sanctity of *Eretz Yisroel* is eternal, but its intensity is not identical in all periods. When people observe the Torah in *Eretz Yisroel*, its sanctity is great, but when sinners reside there, they desecrate its sanctity. When the Zionists started coming to *Eretz Yisroel*, they damaged its sanctity to a great extent. But on the other hand, those who learn Torah with *kedushah* in *Eretz Yisroel* and keep the *mitzvos* there sanctify the country, and happy is their lot. Make sure to be part of those who sanctify *Eretz Yisroel*, and do not defile it, *chas vesholom*."

Previous generations lived with the awareness of the power of a *mitzvah* performed in *Eretz Yisroel*, and of the potential destructive force of *aveiros* committed here. We, however, have become so accustomed to living here, that we no longer feel the sanctity of the land.

ETERNAL INVESTMENTS

You shall count for yourself seven sabbatical years, seven years seven times, and it shall be for you the days (period) of the seven sabbatical years, forty-nine years. (25:8)

The Dubna Maggid relates a parable about a person who is presented with ten-thousand cents. At first, he is overjoyed at the amount of coins in his possession, but then someone points out to him that he has been blinded by the sight of all those coins, and that in reality his "fortune" amounts to no more than one hundred dollars.

Similarly, some people imagine that the world belongs to them and that they will live forever. Even a middle-aged person who thinks about his parents who lived into their eighties and nineties, or considers the current average life expectancy, and then calculates how many days, months, or even years he is likely to have left in this world, may not feel that concentrating his energies on things of eternal value is something of immediate importance. However, if he

starts thinking in terms of seven-year *shemittah* units, he will realize that even in the far-from-certain event that all his statistical predictions will materialize, he still does not have that many time units left, and it is indeed high time to think of making suitable investments to enhance the quality of his eternal abode.

BEWARE OF INTEREST

You shall not take from him interest or increase, and you shall fear your G-d (25:36)

Rashi notes that a person's desire is naturally attracted to taking interest, and it is difficult to stay away from it, because he rationalizes that his money is lying idle in his debtor's hands. Therefore, the *possuk* says, "and you shall fear your G-d".

This serves as a warning for future generations to beware of this prohibition. In recent generations, in particular, there has been a tendency to rely on doubtful *heterim*. Each *heter* and *hechsher* has to be investigated to ascertain whether it is satisfactory *lechatchila*.

The prohibition against taking interest is so severe that someone who breaches it does not merit *techiyas hameisim*, nor does he have a defending angel to argue his case in Heaven. Moreover, the Vilna Gaon points out that someone guilty of *ribbis* is considered to be committing a sin constantly, day and night, because at every moment his money is growing due to the interest being accrued. The person may be crying in *shul* on Yom Kippur, but the Heavenly gates are locked to his prayers because he is committing a sin at that very moment.

Why is this sin so severe? After all, the borrower pays interest of his own volition. The lender who charges interest may think he is doing a big *mitzvah* because he is helping out the borrower. Hence, the Torah has to prescribe the severest punishment to deter him. Usually when a person sins there is a chance he will regret it and repent, but the worst type of sin is when the sinner thinks he is committing a good deed, because then he will not repent.

Questions on *ribbis* issues must be addressed specifically to *rabbonim* who specialize in these matters, because not everybody who is competent in other areas of *issur veheter* is necessarily capable of ruling on the laws of *ribbis*, which are complex.

The Tchebiner Rov told Rav Sternbuch that in his youth, before starting to become involved in business, he first learnt *hilchos ribbis* in-depth, and he noted that it is almost impossible not to stumble in prohibitions relating to *ribbis* if one does not learn these *halochos* in-depth.

THE RICH NEED THE POOR

"... and let your brother live with you" (25:36)

We are not supposed to look at the needy person condescendingly, he is supposed to live "with you", and to be honored and appreciated for the fact that he enables us to merit eternal life through the *mitzvah* of *tzedoko*.

The Ponevezher Rov, Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman would note sadly that wealthy people may feel regret in the afterlife that they could have received greater eternal reward by giving away more money, instead of leaving it unused in this world. He met one person from Lithuania who had survived the war and moved to America. After the war that person met the Ponevezher Rov and told him that he had a grievance against the *rov* because when the *rov* had asked him for donations in Lithuania before the war, he had given something, but not enough,

and afterwards when the Russians took over Lithuania they took over all his property. Had the *rov* urged him with greater force, he would have made larger donations, and thereby obtained greater merits for the eternal afterlife, instead of all that money going over to the hands of the wicked Russians.

STAINED SOUL

“And I will place My dwelling in your midst, and My soul will not abhor you” (26:11)

It seems superfluous to promise that Hashem will not abhor us when we are performing the Will of Hashem by following His statutes and observing His commandments (26:3).

The commentators explain that “My soul” refers to the holy *neshomo* implanted inside every one of us, and the *possuk* is conveying the message that only if a Jew keeps the *mitzvos* will the soul remain inside the body, but if he commits *aveiros* the *neshomo* will abhor the body and flee, because the holy *neshomo* finds it abhorrent to remain within a body contaminated by sin. In such a situation a person has to pray to Hashem to cleanse the stain of sin. After repenting and becoming a different person, the stain is removed and the soul returns to dwell inside him.

TOCHACHO ADDRESSING EVERYBODY

And if you treat Me as happenstance (keri), and you do not wish to listen to Me (26:21).

Rashi: Chazal said that keri means temporary, by chance, something that happens only sometimes

Rav Moshe Schneider would cry when reading this *possuk*, noting that we assume that the curses in the *parsha* are addressing wicked people, whereas in reality they refer to observant Jews who study Torah but do not subject themselves to Torah and *mitzvos* at all times. They only learn at certain times, and spend the rest of the time on newspapers and so on, thereby treating the Torah as “temporary”, as noted by the Rashi above, and leaving themselves liable to the punishments outlined in the *parshah*.

He called on *bochurim* to intensify their *omol haTorah* and feel joy at being Hashem’s sons and servants and know that Hashem is always willing to accept us as His servants.

Rav Schneider said that those who - like himself - had been privileged to spend a lot of time with the Chofetz Chaim did not need to learn *musar* because the Chofetz Chaim was himself a “living *musar* sefer” whom one simply had to emulate. For example, he lived every moment with an account, no second was wasted.

CHILUL SHABBOS IN ERETZ YISROEL

Rav Sternbuch notes that Rav Schneider himself was a “living *musar* sefer” suffused with *yiras shomayim*. One time Rav Schneider came into the *beis hamedrash* very early one morning and told Rav Sternbuch that he had been up all night crying because a Jew from *Eretz Yisroel* had told him that in the Old City in Yerushalayim there were people walking around without a yarmulke. “Can you imagine this, Moshe?” he told his *talmid* tearfully. Another time he burst out crying when he heard about how Shabbos was being publicly desecrated in Yerushalayim. “The King’s Palace is being denigrated” he said. “If I had the strength I would go to *Eretz Yisroel* and shout ‘Shabbos’ in the streets!”

In *Eretz Yisroel* Shabbos is being desecrated on an unprecedented scale to the point that it is being treated like a complete weekday. In former times this situation would have pained the observant public terribly, and both Jews here and overseas should be protesting for the sake of Hashem's honor. Hashem is likely to hold each and every one of us, both in *Eretz Yisroel* and overseas, responsible for not protesting public *chilul Shabbos* and the horrifying breach of our covenant with Him.

BACKGROUND NO OBSTACLE

"And they will then confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, in their treachery which they committed against Me" (26:40)

We would have thought that a confession of one's own iniquity and the iniquity of one's fathers is a worthy thing. Why does it appear in the middle of a list of sins?

Some *baalei teshuva*, or potential ones, are under the mistaken impression that they cannot rid themselves of the shackles of their background. They reason that since their parents are not believing or observant Jews, they cannot be better than them. This is totally incorrect. Avrohom *Ovinu's* father served idols, but this did not prevent him from recognizing Hashem using his own intellect.

A person cannot become a complete *baal teshuva* until he takes responsibility for his own actions. The *possuk* here calls a person to account for blaming his own way of life and outlook on the iniquities of his father.

TREATING SONS EQUALLY

"He shall not exchange it or offer a substitute for it, whether it be a good one for a bad one, or a bad one for a good one. But if he does substitute one animal for another animal, that one and its replacement shall be holy" (27:10)

This *possuk* may be interpreted as referring to the sanctity of the *neshomo*. Let a father not "exchange" the soul of one of his sons for another by deciding that he will put all its efforts into the son he deems to be destined for greatness in Torah, assuming that he is destined for a holy life, and the other one for a secular one. Irrespective of whether the son is "good" or "bad", a father must behave towards each one in the same manner, since they are all holy, and he cannot decide on his own that one of them is not destined for greatness. Even if a son is not talented at all, if that son will exert all the efforts he can in accordance with his own specific abilities, he will merit supernatural Divine assistance. Several *gedolim* were not able to absorb Torah easily in their youth, but by studying to the best of their abilities, they enjoyed special *siyata dishmaya*, so that the gates of the holy Torah were opened for them.

However, if the father does everything he can on his part to educate his son for Torah, and he sees that the son has already grown and is not willing to put in the effort to learn, if he has exhausted all his attempts, and there is no longer another alternative, he should educate him - after consulting with *gedolei Torah* - to be a working man with a connection to Torah through being *kovea itim* every day.

TZEDOKO CONSISTENCY

"Every valuation shall be made according to the holy shekel" (27:25)

Sometimes wealthy people excuse themselves from their *zedoko* obligations by claiming that their business is going through a difficult period. To determine whether such a claim is

legitimate and they are being consistent, they have to examine whether they have made cutbacks to their own private expenses, or whether they are still living a life of luxury. If the latter is the case, they have no reason to cut back on their charitable donations.

This *possuk* may be taken as hinting at this idea. If a person wants to cut back on the “holy shekel” (*tzedoko*) he should only do so if he simultaneously cuts back “every valuation”, meaning all his other needs.

TORAH DURING THE *OMER* PERIOD

A *godol* once told Rav Sternbuch that in Heaven someone who wastes his time on vanities is considered equivalent to someone who has lost his mind, since one of the signs of a *shoteh* (an insane person) is that he loses whatever he is given (*Chagiga* 4a). In this world, we are able at every moment to accumulate eternal merits, and anyone who does not avail himself of this opportunity, and wastes this gift, which is only available during his lifetime, is considered in Heaven to be insane.

The current *Omer* period is a very auspicious time for strengthening one’s Torah learning, and someone who does not exploit this opportunity is considered to be a fool, whereas someone who makes a special resolution to augment his Torah learning, will certainly merit a *brocho* in his learning.

This includes working on one’s fear of Heaven, which is an essential prerequisite for acquiring Torah.

Just like an animal cannot fathom what a human being is, a human being cannot fathom what an angel is, and an angel cannot fathom the Almighty, so too is it not possible to understand the holy Torah by natural means, since it is a divine wisdom, and only someone who learns Torah with fear of Heaven will merit *siyata dishmaya*, in which Hashem grants him the wisdom to fathom the Torah.

People are mistaken to attribute success in Torah to inborn talents and abilities, since even the greatest genius cannot absorb Torah without fear of Heaven. Rav Zelig Reuven Bengis told Rav Sternbuch that when Rav Dovid Friedman of Karlin learned Torah, he had a board in front of him containing the words “*Shivisi Hashem l’negdi somid* — I have set Hashem always before me” in large letters, because he was afraid that while concentrating on the intricacies of a *sugya* he might forget even for a moment the One Who gave us the Torah. Seeing those words in front of him served as a constant reminder that the purpose of our intellectual efforts is to understand what Hashem is telling us in His Torah.

Furthermore, every *bochur* must know that Hashem does not count how much material a person has covered, but how many hours he has invested toiling in Torah. In other words, a person is rewarded not for how much knowledge he has attained, but for how much time and effort he has invested in acquiring Torah.

We are currently faced with difficult material and spiritual challenges. May Hashem save us from all these dangers in the merit of Torah, and may we merit the coming of *moshiach* speedily.