



Based on droshos by Maran HaGaon
HaRav Moshe Sternbuch shlita, Gaavad of Yerushalayim.

To receive these weekly Divrei Torah email ravsternbuchtorah@gmail.com

פרשת עקב תשפ"ו

BELITTLING SIN

And it will be because you will heed these ordinances ... (7:12). Rashi: "If you will hearken to even the 'light' commandments that a person tramples on with his heel."

One of the prerequisites of genuine repentance is the realization that any sin constitutes a rebellion against the Creator. This realization is more difficult to come by in the case of sins, which appear to be comparatively insignificant, since a person tends to belittle the consequences of such sins. The Torah is telling us here that, in reality, there is no "scale of severity" when it comes to sins, and that if we relate to the *Ribono Shel Olam* as a son does to his father, we will want to perform His Will through His *mitzvos* in all areas of life, irrespective of our perception of the severity of specific commandments. As Rabbeinu Yona said, "Do not look at the insignificance of the sin, but rather at the greatness of He who commanded us to refrain from it".

Rav Yisroel Salanter would say that many people think that the main *avodah* of *teshuva* in Elul relates to the major sins, and they forget to repent for "insignificant" *aveiros*. This is a mistake, because a person is held responsible just as much for those, and they too require *teshuva* on our part.

Three common examples of "insignificant" commandments, which people tend to trample on, are the following:

Shnayim Mikra V'Echad Targum is a complete obligation *miderabanan*, and someone who observes it is promised a long life (*Berachos* 8b). Nevertheless, this *mitzvah* is disparaged. People either ignore it altogether, or read the *p'sukim* perfunctorily, without attempting to concentrate on and delve into the meaning of the words.

By answering *Yehei Shmei Rabba* with concentration we can overturn evil decrees (*Shabbos* 119b), and yet many people belittle this opportunity too. He who says *Yehei Shmei Rabba* with great concentration both causes a sanctification of the Divine name in this world and the upper worlds, and simultaneously also demonstrates that the core of his soul genuinely yearns for that sanctification. Such a person deserves to have evil decrees which may be looming over him due to certain personal misdeeds annulled, because since his soul has attained such a high level, he is no longer in need of any punishments or purifications of his soul.

Finally, saying a hundred *brachos* every day is a complete obligation (according to some *poskim* an obligation *mide'oraisa*), which has the power to stop plagues and other misfortunes, and yet people are not careful about observing this *mitzvah*. On Shabbos when 13 *brachos* are missing from the usual 100 count, we compensate for that by eating fruit or delicacies (*Menachos* 13b), and yet many people are not careful about that either.

REWARDS FOR MITZVOS

And it will be, because you (plural) will heed these ordinances and keep them and perform them, that Hashem, your G-d, will keep for you (singular) the covenant (ibid).

Why does the *pasuk* start off in the plural and end up in the singular?

When the Jewish nation is united (plural) in its fight against sinners, with each of its members doing what they can to ensure that all members of the nation keep the Torah, each individual (singular) will merit the reward promised in this section. However, when individuals only care about

their own righteousness, neglecting the needs of their fellow Jews, the nation will not merit the blessings stated here.

Alternatively, the performance of *mitzvos* is addressed to the public as a whole, since everybody is equally obligated to perform *mitzvos*, whereas the reward for *mitzvos* is written in the singular, because that differs from person to person, depending on a person's specific situation and abilities, the extent to which he has had to overcome obstacles, and the extent to which he has performed *mitzvos* with joy and enthusiasm and with *hiddurim*.

CHIDDUSHEI TORAH

There will be no sterile male or barren female among you or among your livestock (7:14).

The Ba'al HaTurim writes that "*There will be no sterile male or barren female*" has the same *gematria* as "*divrei Torah*".

The Vilna Gaon says said that *chiddushei Torah* are not necessarily completely original ideas that have never been expressed before, but rather explanations of the *chiddushim* of previous generations. The Gaon explains that after the redaction of the Talmud, we are not able to produce new *chiddushim*, but only to elucidate the statements of the Mishna and the *Gemara*.

Rav Chaim Brisker also emphasized that it is not our task to come up with "new" *chiddushim*, but only to explain the words of our predecessors. He was once asked what the difference was between his method of learning and that of other *gedolim*. He answered by noting that just like most people enjoy the taste of a *kugel* but do not know how to prepare it unless they make a point of observing how it is prepared, so too with respect to Torah study, many people only taste the *sevoros* of the *Rishonim* without delving into the origins and foundations of their theories, and what compelled them to argue as they did, whereas his method of learning does involve analyses as to how they "prepared" their words, and is not limited to "tasting" their conclusions.

Rav Sternbuch heard in the name of Rav Yosef Engel that someone who writes *chiddushei Torah* he heard from others, and elucidates them somewhat, is not guilty of plagiarism if he does not state the source of his *chiddushim*, because by committing them to writing and adding his own input, they become "his" *chiddushim*. Hence, even a Yeshiva *bachur* who is not capable of writing novel "*chiddushim*" but only sets into writing *shiurim* he has heard from his *rabbanim*, is still considered to be *mechadesh chiddushei Torah* if he explains the material well rather than merely repeating the words of the *shiur* verbatim without adding any explanations of his own.

However, although we have received a blessing from Hashem to be *mechadesh chiddushim*, we still have to ask Hashem that we should merit doing so, and therefore we pray every day, "Give us our portion in Your Torah".

The Zohar talks about the great joy in the Upper Worlds when a person has the merit of being *mechadesh chiddushei Torah*, with Hashem *kivvyochol* taking every word, kissing and crowning it and constructing a new world from it.

B'NEI RACHMANIM

And you shall consume all the peoples which Hashem your G-d shall deliver to you; your eye shall not pity them (7:16).

The Chazon Ish expressed amazement that even though the seven nations were immoral, cruel idol worshippers, and even though they would subsequently start a war against the Jews despite the fact that the latter had offered not to fight them, the *pasuk* still had to warn us not to have mercy on them. This is because since Jews are merciful by nature this makes them incapable of murdering people together with their children. Hence, the special admonition not to have pity on them.

After the conclusion of the Second World War, the opportunity arose to take revenge against the Nazis. Other nations who suffered under them, such as the Ukrainians, made the most of this opportunity with much cruelty, but most Jews, who suffered more than any other nation, did not retaliate against their tormentors, since they are *bayshanim*, *rachmanim* and *gomlei chasadim*.

By the *Ir HaNidachas* too, we are commanded to kill the entire population of the city, and Hashem promises us that He will “grant you compassion, and be compassionate with you”. This is a promise that we will not become cruel as a result of this act of murder. This act is in fact a *mitzvah*, not an act of cruelty at all, and the *pasuk* is promising the person performing the mitzvah that he will not lose his inherent trait of mercy by performing it.

ENEMIES

Should you say to yourself, "These nations are more numerous than I; how will I be able to drive them out". You shall not fear them. You shall surely remember what Hashem, your G-d, did to Pharaoh and to all of Egypt (7:17-18)

We do not fear the might of our enemies seeking to destroy us, but only the state of our faith.

After the War of Independence in *Eretz Yisroel* the Brisker Rav said that we were definitely saved from our enemies' attacks only in the merit of the Torah and the prayers of the nation. As to why people were killed on our side that is because our erring brethren were relying on the strength and their hand. In order to disprove this theory, Hashem demonstrated that we *are* in need of Divine mercy. If we would all have had complete faith in Hashem, not one person would have been killed.

Our continued miraculous existence in *Eretz Yisroel* despite being surrounded by bloodthirsty enemies seeking to destroy us, is entirely due to the Torah and prayers of *b'nei Torah* and those who fear Hashem.

RECEIVING HASHEM'S BOUNTY

And you shall eat and be satisfied and bless Hashem, your G-d (8:10).

Chazal (Brachos 35a) say, “Whoever derives pleasure from this world without making a *bracha* is deemed to have stolen from Hashem and from *Knesses Yisroel*.” It is clear why he is considered to be stealing from Hashem - because he has not fulfilled the Creator's condition for partaking of the pleasures of this world - but why is he also considered to be stealing from *Knesses Yisroel*?

Rav Akiva Eger explained that since the whole purpose of creation is for people to be grateful for and recognize Hashem's goodness, and to bless Him for the favors bestowed upon us, whoever blesses Hashem fulfills the purpose of creation, and, as a result, Hashem showers more abundance upon the whole nation. Hence, someone who does not bless Hashem for his food is not fulfilling the

purpose of the world, and causes damage to the whole nation by depriving it of the additional abundance that Hashem wants to shower upon His creatures.

Bentshing Birkas HaMazon with kavana is a tried and tested *segulah* for *parnassah*. The *Sefer HaChinuch* (Mitzvah 430) states in the name of his *rabbanim* that “whoever is careful about *Birkas HaMazon* will be provided with food honorably for his entire life,” because since he thanks Hashem, Hashem wants to shower him with more abundance so that he will continue to thank Hashem for it. But if he *bentches* perfunctorily and performs the *mitzvah* of *Birkas HaMazon* - which is *mide’oraisa* according to all opinions - without concentrating, how can he continue to merit Hashem’s continuous bounty?

SUFFERING

You shall know in your heart, that just as a man chastises his son, so does Hashem, your G-d, chastise you (8:5).

If a son generally obeys his father, then the father chastises him to educate him, but if the father sees that his son has thrown off every yoke, he does not bother to even reprove him. Similarly, says the Chofetz Chaim, Hashem only reproves the righteous as a wake-up call for them to improve their ways and so that they should merit the afterlife, but not the wicked, whom He leaves to their own devices.

The late *Rav* of Komemiyus, *Rav* Binyamin Mendelssohn, told *Rav* Sternbuch about a *Rebbe* who suffered tremendously during a prolonged illness. When he recovered, he said, “Before my torments started, I would have given a million dollars to be spared them, but now that I have endured them, I would not give them up even for a billion dollars, since they have afforded me atonement for my sins.”

We do not desire suffering, and in fact pray to be spared from it (especially the type that affects our ability to learn Torah), but if it is decreed upon us, we have to endeavor to accept it lovingly because of the benefits associated with it.

CONSTRUCTIVE DESTRUCTION

So I grasped the two tablets, cast them out of my two hands, and shattered them before your eyes (9:17).

Why did Moshe break the *Luchos*? Just because the nation sinned with the golden calf, did that mean that they should remain without the Torah? Would it not have been more appropriate to leave the tablets aside for now and wait to teach them until they repented? Moreover, why did Moshe not worry about treating the holy *Luchos*, the handiwork of Hashem, with disrespect?

The *Gemara* (*Eiruv* 54a) says that if the first *Luchos* had not been broken, the Torah would not have been forgotten, meaning that no one would have forgotten anything they learnt. *Rav* Shimon Shkop (in the introduction to *Sha’arei Yosh*) explains that when Moshe saw that the nation had sinned with the *Chet Ha’Egel* he realized that *Matan Torah* had not sufficiently refined them, and they were likely to sin in the future too. He therefore feared that this could result in a terrible *chilul Hashem* whereby a person was utterly corrupt, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, completely proficient in the whole of the Torah. In order to prevent such a possibility, he felt that the tablets had to be destroyed, and he would then endeavor to obtain different *Luchos* so that the Torah would only reside amongst God-fearing people. Thus, this seeming act of destruction on the part of Moshe did not disgrace the Torah, but was rather a means of preserving its honor, ensuring as it did that the Torah would only take up residence amongst people worthy of it.

ELUL

"What does Hashem your G-d require of you but to fear Hashem your G-d" (10:12)?

The *Gemara* (*Brachos* 33b) expresses surprise that the Torah designates the attainment of fear of Heaven as a small matter, and replies that for Moshe it was indeed a small matter. The *m'forshim* raise the obvious question that this *pasuk* is addressed to the whole nation and not only to Moshe.

The Dubna Maggid explains in the name of the Vilna Gaon that someone who is privileged to cleave to *talmidei chachamim* and spends much time in their presence will easily emulate their deeds and have no difficulty acquiring their fear of Heaven. A *tzaddik* suffuses his environment with his *yiras Shamayim* like a vessel bursting at the seams. Moshe Rabbeinu, too, as the leader of the nation, recognized the greatness of its members and realized that, due to their lofty levels, he was able to convey his own superior level of *yiras Shamayim* to them. Thus, he told them that they did not have to toil much, because they were close to him, and therefore in a position to attain the required level of *yiras Shamayim*.

Rav Sternbuch heard from a *gadol* that the word "what" in this *pasuk* ("*mah*") has the *gematria* of 45 and hints at the 45 days between *Tu B'Av* and *Rosh Hashanah* during which Hashem expects us to increase our *yiras Shamayim* and return to Him.

Fear of Heaven is the key to the whole of Judaism and Torah observance, because if a person lives with the knowledge that everything is revealed before Hashem, and realizes that he will be required to present an account of his actions and that Hashem punishes every misdeed, he will automatically avoid sinning.

Rav Elchonon Wasserman explained that *yiras Shamayim* is not merely a superior quality to strive for, but is in fact the whole essence of a person, and without it a person is no more than a living creature in the form of a person.

Rav Sternbuch recalls how when one was in the presence of Rav Elchonon himself one could palpably sense his *yiras Shamayim*. He would always assess what Hashem wanted from him at any given moment and act accordingly. His *yiras Shamayim* was evident on his face.

MITZVAH BRIBES

"The great mighty and awesome G-d, who will show no favor, nor will He take a bribe" (10:17)?

The Ramban (on 10:16) explains that this is not referring to a monetary bribe, but a bribe of *mitzvos*. Even if a person performs many *mitzvos* and good deeds or learns a lot of Torah, Hashem will not overlook sins, which he commits just because he is a righteous man or *talmid chacham*, or performs acts of kindness. This is a sign of Hashem's greatness, indicating as it does, that He is not a mortal being who does favors for his close associates.

During the storm surrounding the issue of national service for girls in the 1950s, some people suggested a compromise whereby the religious girls would obtain an exemption and only the non-religious would be obligated to perform national service. Some *gedolim* agreed to this proposal, but the Brisker Rav would not hear of it. He argued that since national service for girls was prohibited according to *halacha*, we were not permitted to abet and assist a situation in which the non-religious were obligated to do national service, even though this was attached with the great profit of exemption for religious girls. In this context he cited the above *pasuk* and said that Hashem would not accept the bribe of our efforts to obtain exemptions for religious girls at the cost of our consent to the recruitment of non-religious ones.

BEIN HAZMANIM

This period is designed for taking a rest so that we can continue our studies with greater vigor in the next *zman*. However, if a *bachur* comes home all excited that *bein hazmanim* has finally arrived, that is very unfortunate. Although he is in need of rest, he should be upset that in the meantime he is losing out on his regular learning schedule in *yeshivah*.

Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer was asked why there are not as many people nowadays who are completely fluent in *Shas* as there were in previous generations. He replied that in his day in Volozhin, the concept of *bein hazmanim* was unknown. *Bachurim* learned throughout the year. For example, during Nissan, no one left the yeshivah until *Erev Pesach*. Moreover, the Netziv and Rav Chaim Volozhiner gave *shiurim* every day, including Fridays and *Shabbosos*. He added that in light of the relative decline in the amount of time spent learning, he was surprised that there were any *talmidei chachamim* of stature at all these days! As for *chasunos*, it was unheard of for *bachurim* to interrupt their learning to go to friends' weddings. Rav Isser Zalman testified about himself that he only went to two weddings, one of which was his own.

Rav Yechiel Schwimmer cited a *Gemara* in *Brachos* (16a) which says that *divrei Torah* may be compared to a stream that takes a person out of a state of *tumah* into a state of *taharah*. The *Kesef Mishnah* (*Avos HaTumah*, end of chap. 6) says that an impure person only becomes pure once he leaves the *mikvah*, but not as long as he is still immersed in it. Based on this *halacha*, he suggested that the *Gemara* in *Brachos* is telling us that with Torah too, as long as a person is still immersed in the purifying waters of Torah in *yeshivah*, his state of *taharah* is not yet discernible. Only once he leaves that state and learns to conduct himself the way he should during *bein hazmanim*, can we be sure that he is *tahor*.

Continuity and consistency are essential components for success in all areas of life. For example, during *bein hazmanim*, *yeshivah bachurim* must be very careful not to slacken their study schedules any more than necessary to rejuvenate themselves for the following *zman*. When the Chazon Ish was asked by a *bachur* how much he should learn during *bein hazmanim*, the response was that he should learn no less than eight hours a day, which is the amount of time a *ba'al habas* is supposed to dedicate to Torah each day according to the Rambam (*Hilchos Talmud Torah* 1:12). The Chazon Ish was shocked when the *bachur* admitted that he doubted whether he studied that much even during the regular *zman*.

Time is the most precious entity we have, and a *ben Torah's* hours of rest should be limited to the amount of time required for revitalizing himself for the next *seder* during the *zman*, or for the next *zman* during *bein hazmanim*. As a *gadol* once noted, "I am not interested in resting more than is absolutely necessary. There will come a time when I will be forced to rest more than I want, so for now I want to make the most of the time allotted to me."

Rav Moshe Schneider would say that there are thousands of *lamdei Torah*, but not that many *b'nei Torah*, who are completely connected to the Torah and cleave to it, learning as much outside the *yeshivah* as they do within its confines — on *Erev Shabbos*, *Shabbos*, *Motzei Shabbos*, *Yom Tov*, and *bein hazmanim*. Furthermore, a *ben Torah's* status is reflected in his prayers, his *brachos*, and his manner of speaking and eating. Rav Schneider always expressed the hope that his students would become and remain real *b'nei Torah*, and not mere "Talmudical students".

Rav Schneider also said that initially he was opposed to the concept of *bein hazmanim*. He felt that it was only necessary for individuals who learnt with such great diligence that they became weak and needed a period of rest, but subsequently he changed his mind and decided that, on the contrary, there was actually a need for such a break, because the reward of someone who learns during *bein hazmanim* is very great since there is no external factor compelling him to learn, whereas in the middle of *zman* the reward is less, since the compulsory schedule in *yeshiva* or *kollel* forces him to learn. He added that one should take special advantage of the *bein hazmanim* before *Elul* to increase one's merits in the period leading up to the *Yamim Nora'im*.