**Parsha Potpourri**

**Parshas Behar – Vol. 12, Issue 29**

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**אם בחקתי תלכו (26:3)**

Parshas Bechukosai begins by promising tremendous blessings for those who obey Hashem’s commandments (26:3-12). What must one do to warrant these rewards? Rashi explains that the expression אם בחוקתי תלכו – if you will walk in My laws – cannot refer to observing the mitzvos, as this is explicitly mentioned elsewhere in the verse – ואת מצותי תשמרו. Rather, it refers to diligently studying the Torah.

Rav Yitzchok Zilberstein recounts a powerful and inspiring story about diligence in Torah study and the impact it can have. A young married man who lives in the Ramat Elchanan section of B'nei B'rak, where Rav Zilberstein is the Rav, once had to travel with his wife to take their young baby to the emergency room in Beilinson Hospital in Petach Tikva. Nearby was another young child, who was in critical condition and whose secular parents were not coping well with his life-threatening condition.

Desperate for hope and encouragement, the secular couple turned to the religious couple and a lengthy conversation ensued, in which the observant couple attempted to strengthen and soothe the other couple with messages of belief and trust in Hashem, Who would ultimately determine the fate of their son. After several hours of discussion that lasted late into the night, the secular man expressed an interest in being חוזר בתשובה - repenting for his previous actions and adopting a religious lifestyle. The discussion had turned to the subject of Torah study, and the observant man, whose name was Shmuel, attempted to describe the value and beauty of the in-depth Torah study in which yeshiva students engage at all hours of the day and night.

Suddenly, the secular man became silent, deep in pensive thought. After a few minutes, he turned and asked Shmuel whether there was a yeshiva where he could witness bochurim (young students) engaged in Torah study at that time. He added that if Shmuel could locate a yeshiva where there were ten students learning Gemora in the middle of the night, he would immediately be חוזר בתשובה.

Shmuel checked his watch and saw that it was two o'clock in the morning. He hesitated and was unsure how to respond to the offer, fearful that perhaps he would be unable to fulfill the request and all of his efforts would have been for naught. Upon further reflection, he decided that he would do as much as he was capable of doing, and he would leave the rest up to Hashem. The two men left the hospital and began to drive. Their destination was the illustrious Ponovezh yeshiva in B'nei B'rak, at which they arrived at 2:10 am.

Shmuel, who had studied in the Ponovezh yeshiva in his younger years, ascended the steps slowly, as his heart palpitated in anxiety about the scene that awaited them on the other side of the door to the beis medrash (study hall). When they reached the door and swung it open, both men were astonished to see more than 50 dedicated bochurim enthusiastically engaged in their Talmudic studies, completely oblivious to the time.

The secular man stood in dumbfounded disbelief for several minutes as he watched the students passionately arguing with their chavrusos (study partners) as they attempted to properly understand the Talmudic passage and commentaries in which they were engrossed. Eventually, he pulled himself together and uttered three words: אני חוזר בתשובה.

The two men returned to the hospital to tend to their children, but the once-secular man was a changed individual due to the sight that he had witnessed that night. He kept his promise and began to observe the mitzvos at once. A short while later the doctors came to check on his child, and they were astounded to see that the boy, whose initial prognosis was that he was unlikely to live more than a day, had shown a remarkable improvement. He continued to progress and get better until, a mere 48 hours after his father's visit to the Ponovezh yeshiva, he was deemed fully recovered and sent home with his loving and appreciative parents.

**ואתכם אזרה בגוים והריקתי אחריכם חרב והיתה ארצכם שממה ועריכם יהיו חרבה (26:33)**

Parshas Bechukosai is commonly referred to as a parsha of “tochacha” – rebuke. After discussing the abundant blessings we will merit if we study Torah diligently and fulfill the mitzvos, the Torah continues to say that if we fail to observe the commandments and behave casually with Hashem, He will punish us with unspeakable suffering and numerous curses. One of these curses is that we will be scattered amongst the nations, while Eretz Yisroel becomes desolate and our cities turn into ruins. Similarly, in Parshas Nitzavim (Devorim 29:27), the Torah threatens that if we worship idols and forsake our covenant with Hashem, He will respond by removing us from our land with anger, wrath, and great fury. From this perspective, it seems clear that galus (exile) is considered a punishment.

On the other hand, Rav Yisroel Reisman points out that the Gemora (Pesachim 87b) does not seem to view exile in such gloomy terms, teaching that the only reason we were sent into galus was for the purpose of enabling holy souls from the nations of the world to convert to Judaism. From this point of view, the concept of exile does not seem harsh and punitive, but rather constructive and purposeful.

In his sefer Iyun Tefillah (pg. 169-170), Rav Shimon Schwab explains that the Written Torah embodies Hashem’s מדת הדין (Attribute of Justice), while the Oral Torah represents His מדת הרחמים (Attribute of Mercy), and for this reason the Gemora often refers to Hashem as רחמנא – the Merciful One. To illustrate this distinction, he notes that the Torah – the Written Law – stipulates (Shemos 21:24) that if somebody injures another person, the appropriate punishment is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, and a foot for a foot. However, although the strict letter of the law warrants such exacting retribution, the Gemora – the Oral Law – balances this approach with considerations of mercy and compassion and teaches (Bava Kamma 84a) that instead of losing an actual limb, it is sufficient for the person who caused the damage to reimburse the victim for the value of the harm that he caused.

Rav Reisman adds that we also find this difference between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah with respect to descriptions and interpretations of episodes that occurred. For example, the Torah (Bereishis 35:22) appears to say that Reuven committed a grave sin by consorting with Bilhah, who was one of his father’s wives, and in Nach Dovid is presented (Shmuel 2:11) as having relations with a married woman, Batsheva, and then arranging for the death of her husband, Uriah, so that he could marry her. In contrast to the strict viewpoint of the Written Torah, the Gemora (Shabbos 55b-56a) views these incidents through the additional lens of Divine mercy, and teaches that whomever says that Reuven and Dovid sinned is woefully mistaken.

Dovid writes (Tehillim 149:7-9) that Hashem will come against the nations of the world to execute vengeance with משפט כתוב – written judgment. What is the significance of the fact that the judgment will be written? Rav Schwab explains that written judgment represents מדת הדין, and therefore Dovid emphasizes that Hashem will specifically utilize this strict approach when judging and punishing them. For the same reason, Hashem instructed Moshe regarding Amalek (Shemos 17:14) כתב זאת זכרון בספר – write this as a remembrance in the Torah – because this ensures that Amalek will be erased and destroyed with harsh Divine judgment.

With this understanding of the dichotomy between the Written Law and the Oral Law, Rav Reisman suggests that we can now appreciate that all the references to galus functioning as a bitter punishment are found in Tanach – the Written Law – as the perspective of the מדת הדין is that when the Jewish people sin, they deserve to be punished and exiled from their land. The Talmudic approach to galus, on the other hand, mixes in an acknowledgment of Hashem’s מדת הרחמים, and when seen through this lens, there are indeed positive benefits to be gleaned even in such difficult and painful circumstances.

**Parsha Points to Ponder (and sources which discuss them):**

1. The Gemora in Bava Metzia (62a) discusses a case in which two people are lost in the nearest settlement, but if one of them drinks it, he will be able to survive. Rebbi Akiva derives from a verse in our parsha (25:36) that חייך קודמין – the one with the water should drink it all, as his life takes precedence over that of his friend. If three people are lost in the desert and one of them has sufficient water for himself and one other person, it is clear that he should drink one supply of water, but what should he do with the second? (Chiddushei HaRim)
2. On the blessing that the tree of the field will give its fruit (26:4), the Toras Kohanim explains that if the Jews perform Hashem’s will, trees won’t give forth fruits after years of growing as they currently do, but will immediately bear fruits on the day they are planted, just as they did in the times of Adam HaRishon. In what way will this blessing be beneficial, as the fruits produced during the first three years are considered orlah and forbidden not only to consume but to use for any benefit? (Har Tzvi, M’rafsin Igri, K’Motzei Shalal Rav Parshas Kedoshim)
3. The Torah specifies (27:3-7) the various values of males and females from one month to five years of age, from five to twenty years, from twenty to sixty years, and more than sixty years. How is it possible that a healthy Jewish adult has no value? (Rambam Hilchos Arachin 1:13)

**Answers to Points to Ponder:**

1) The **Chiddushei HaRim** points out that in this case, the arguments of Rebbi Akiva and Ben Petura, who disagrees with him, don’t apply. Rebbi Akiva’s focus on the individual’s life is irrelevant, for he has enough water to drink. Ben Petura argues that where there are only two people they should split it so that nobody has to witness the death of his friend, but in this case the person with the water will have to witness somebody’s death regardless. He therefore suggests that he should simply put the water down and allow the other two to sort it out. However, in a case where the other two are each locked in separate rooms and it must be given to one of them, he is at a loss as to what one should do.

2) **Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank** notes that Rashi writes that this blessing applies to previously-barren trees, which will begin to miraculously produce fruits. At the time of their planting, these trees were not planted for their fruits, as they were not considered fruit-bearing trees. As a result, even if they begin to produce fruits, these fruits will be exempt from the laws of orlah, in which case it will be a blessing that they do so immediately, since those fruits can indeed be eaten and used. **Rav Chaim Kanievsky** points out that the Medrash merely states that the trees will bear fruits immediately, but it makes no mention of the fruits being eaten. Therefore, he suggests that the blessing will be that the trees will return to their full strength, as evidenced by their ability to produce fruits so quickly, as opposed to their current states when they are weakened and unable to do so. In what way will it be beneficial to have fruits which may not be eaten or used? The very fact that the trees will produce such beautiful and enticing fruits just after they are planted, yet we will refrain from eating them in accordance with the Torah's prohibition against orlah, is the greatest blessing of all. It will demonstrate that we have returned to the pre-sin level of Adam HaRishon, who was cautioned not to eat from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge but succumbed to his desires. We, on the other hand, will manage to withstand the temptation and will wait the requisite three years before eating the fruits. The **M'rafsin Igri** suggests that although we will not be allowed to eat the fruits, the recognition that they will now be able to produce fruits on a daily basis will reassure people that after waiting three years they will enjoy an abundance of fruit which they can sell, and even though they cannot yet do so, this will give them immediate relief from their future financial worries.

3) The **Rambam** writes that if a Jewish court rules that a person should be put to death due to a sin that he committed, even though he is still alive and healthy, he is legally considered as if he is already dead, and a dead man has no value. Therefore, if prior to his execution, he or another person pledges to give his value to the Beis HaMikdash, they are not required to give anything.

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