

OHRNET

SHABBAT PARSHAT KI TAVO • 20 ELUL 5781 AUGUST 28 2021 • VOL 28 NO. 35

PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Fear of Elul

“But if you do not hearken to the voice of Hashem, your G-d, to observe, to perform all His commandments and all these decrees that I command you today, then all the curses will come upon you and overtake you.” (28:15)

There’s a well-known tradition that in Europe before the war, when the *chazan* would announce in shul that “Rosh Chodesh Elul will be on day(s) such as such...” – you could hear the dull thud of some people fainting to the floor. Such was the fear and trepidation that was caused by those words and the approach of Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment.

I must say I feel a similar trepidation when I hear those words in shul, but likely for a different reason. When confronted with the enormous prospect of having to turn my life and my emotions upside down, I go into a panic that results in total spiritual paralysis. Fear of Elul.

In 1907 Robert Yerkes and John Dodson conducted one of the first experiments that illuminated a link between anxiety and performance. They saw that mice became more motivated to complete mazes when given electric shocks of increasing intensity – but only up to a certain point. Above a certain threshold, they began to hide, rather than perform. Yerkes and Dodson applied this idea to the human mind, enunciating a core idea that our nervous system has a Goldilocks zone of arousal. Too little, and you remain in the comfort zone where boredom sets in. But, too much, and you enter the ‘panic’ zone, which also stalls progress.

I’m in the panic zone.

My esteemed rabbi and teacher once told me that, as a young boy in Chicago, his European grandmother gave him a short talk on the day of his Bar Mitzvah. She then admonished him to keep the Torah, warning him in Yiddish with words that loosely translate as “In the next world, they hit you with iron bars.” I’m not sure too many grandmothers give that kind of encouragement to a Bar Mitzvah boy nowadays.

In 1600 Samuel Butler wrote, “Spare the rod and spoil the child.” Meaning: “If you do not punish a child when they do something wrong, they will not learn what is right.” Times have changed. We get stressed by the mere thought that our WhatsApp is not working.

Rabbi Noach Orlowek once said that the best kind of education is to “catch your children doing something right.” Positive reinforcement works miracles – and for our generation is possibly the only road to improvement.

So, this Elul, I thought, rather than thinking about all the things that I'm doing wrong and had promised G-d last Yom Kippur that I'd never do again, I would think about all the things I am doing right – and how great it feels! When I do that, it makes me feel close to Hashem, and when I feel that, I want to feel even better and closer.

So, last thing at night, I go through a catalogue of things I did right during the day. For example, the first thing I did after opening my eyes this morning was to say "*Modeh Ani*." I thanked Hashem for giving me back my soul. I acknowledged that my life is a gift – not a right.

And I went to *daven*. True, my mind wandered all over the place. But I *went*.

I try to go through much of the day in this way, thinking like this, until sleep overcomes me.

It may not be the classic approach to Elul, but at least I may have achieved some *ahavat Hashem* – love for Hashem – instead of just Fear of Elul.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

When the Jewish People dwell in the Land of Israel, the first fruits are to be taken to the Temple and given to the *kohen*. This is done in a ceremony that expresses recognition that it is Hashem Who guides the history of the Jewish People throughout the ages. This passage forms one of the central parts of the Pesach Haggadah that we read at the Seder.

On the last day of Pesach of the fourth and seventh years of the seven-year *shemitta* cycle, a person must recite a disclosure stating that he has indeed distributed the tithes to the appropriate people in the prescribed manner. With this mitzvah, Moshe concludes the commandments that Hashem has told him to give to the Jewish People. Moshe exhorts them to walk in Hashem's ways, because they are set aside as a treasured people to Him.

When the Jewish People cross the Jordan River, they are to make a new commitment to the Torah. Huge stones are to be erected, and the Torah is to be written on them in the world's seventy primary languages. Afterwards, they are to be covered over with a thin layer of plaster. Half of the tribes are to stand on Mount Gerizim, and half on Mount Eval, and the *Levi'im* will stand in a valley between the two mountains. The *Levi'im* will recite twelve commandments, and all the people will answer "Amen" to both the blessings and the curses. Moshe then details the blessings that will be bestowed upon the Jewish People, blessings that are both physical and spiritual. However, if the Jewish People do not keep the Torah, Moshe details a chilling picture of destruction, resulting in exile and wandering among the nations.

Q & A

Questions

1. When did the obligation to bring bikkurim begin?
2. Bikkurim are from which crops?
3. How does one designate bikkurim?
4. Who shakes the basket containing the bikkurim?
5. What does "v'anita v'amarta" mean?
6. Which Arami "tried to destroy my father"?
7. When during the year may bikkurim be brought? Until when are the special verses recited?
8. Someone declaring that he separated terumah and ma'aser says: "And I didn't forget." What didn't he forget?
9. What were the Jewish People to do with the 12 stones on Mount Eval?
10. Six tribes stood on Mount Eval and six on Mount Gerizim. Who and what were in the middle?
11. Who "causes the blind to go astray"?
12. How does one "strike another secretly"?
13. Eleven curses were spoken on Mount Eval. What is the significance of this number?
14. Why are sheep called "ashterot"?
15. How is the manner of expressing the curses in Parshat Bechukotai more severe than in this week's parsha?

Answers

1. 26:1 - After the Land was conquered and divided.
2. 26:2 - The seven species for which Eretz Yisrael is praised.
3. 26:2 - When he sees the first fruit ripen on a tree, he binds a piece of straw around it to mark it as bikkurim.
4. 26:4 - The kohen places his hands under the hands of the one bringing it, and they wave the basket together.
5. 26:5 - Speak loudly.
6. 26:5 - Lavan.
7. 26:11 - Bikkurim are brought from Shavuot until Chanukah. The verses are recited only until Succot.
8. 26:13 - To bless G-d.
9. 27:2 - Build an altar.
10. 27:12 - Kohanim, levi'im and the Holy Ark.
11. 27:18 - Any person who intentionally gives bad advice.
12. 27:24 - By slandering him.
13. 27:24 - Each curse corresponds to one of the tribes, except for the tribe of Shimon. Since Moshe didn't intend to bless the tribe of Shimon before his death, he did not want to curse it either.
14. 28:4 - Because they "enrich" (m'ashirot) their owners.
15. 28:23 - In Bechukotai the Torah speaks in the plural, whereas in this week's parsha the curses are mentioned in the singular.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Seasoning the Land

A *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* (version #1, ch. 37) teaches that just as there are Seven Heavens, so too are there seven words for the "Earth": *eretz*, *adamah*, *arka*, *charavah*, *yabashah*, *taivel* and *cheled*. Although all of these words appear to be synonyms for "the land" as we know it, each word connotes a different aspect of the land and has its own etymological basis. This series of essays will explore these apparent synonyms, seeking to find out how they differ from one another and trying to derive some meaning from this whole discussion. To begin with we will focus our attention on the word *eretz* and how it differs from the word *adamah*.

In many trilateral roots that begin with the letter ALEPH, that letter is superfluous to the underlying biliteral root that is at the core of the trilateral string. In this spirit, the Midrash Rabbah (*Genesis* 5:8) asserts that *eretz* (with an ALEPH) is related to the words *ratzon* and *ratz* (sans an ALEPH), explaining that when G-d first created the world, the land "wanted" (*ratzah*) to follow G-d's "will" (*ratzon*), so it started "running" (*ratz*) to cover as much of the Earth's surface as possible until Hashem told the land to stop. *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* (version #2, ch. 43) similarly expounds on *eretz* as related to *ritzah* ("running"), explaining that the connection highlights the land's role as G-d's loyal servant. This point is illustrated by way of a parable concerning a king who summons a family member. The relative comes running to heed the king's summons, and the king rewards him by granting him a fiefdom. The same is true of the *eretz*, which was all the more happy to be at G-d's beck and call.

The Radak in *Sefer Shorashim* explains that *eretz* relates to "running" because of the planet's non-stop astronomical motions. Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893) understands *eretz* as a reference to

the physical aspect of creation, as opposed to its spiritual aspect known as *shamayim*. The observable, physical parts of reality are powered by the unseen spiritual "batteries" that provide energy. The nature of that which receives its energy from elsewhere is to always "run" towards its source of power. Therefore, the *eretz* can be said to be constantly "running" towards the *shamayim* that powers it. On the other hand, Rabbi Toviah ben Eliezer (11th century) in Midrash *Lekach Tov* (to Gen. 1:1) offers a more morbid explanation of the connection between *eretz* and "running": Whether they like it or not, everyone is "running" to the *eretz* in the sense they will eventually be buried in the ground after death.

Interestingly, Rabbi Shaul Mortera of Amsterdam (1596-1660) writes that the verb *shoretz* ("spreading out") – from which the noun *sheretz* ("insect") is derived – comes from *eretz/ratz* (possibly using the *shiphah* inflection or following the approach that any letter can join with a two-letter root to form a three-letter root).

Avot d'Rabbi Natan (version #2) explains that the "land" is called *adamah* because Adam was created from the earth. But what is the difference between *eretz* and *adamah*?

In many places in the Torah, the unqualified term *eretz* refers specifically to the Holy Land, while *adamah* refers specifically to the Diaspora. Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865) sheds light on this distinction by drawing from Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim's understanding of the etymology of *adamah*: Rabbi Pappenheim explains that the biliteral root DALET-MEM refers to "similarity" (e.g., *domeh*), which implies "incongruity" – because if two things are only said to be *similar*, then this precludes them from being exactly the same. A corollary of this

meaning begets *domem* (“quiet/inactive”), because the cessation of activity creates “incongruency” between one’s inner goings-on that continue to be active and one’s outer activity which has been paused. As a result, Rabbi Pappenheim explains the word *adamah* as an off-shoot of this tributary of DALET-MEM, because the *adamah* is the environment in which plants grow and are active, yet the *adamah* itself remains passive and sedentary.

Expanding on this explanation, Rabbi Mecklenburg writes that the term *adamah* applies to the lands outside of the Holy Land because those who live in such places remain sedentary and inactive in terms of fulfilling the Torah’s agricultural laws, which apply exclusively in the Holy Land. On the other hand, *eretz* derives from the root REISH-TZADI (“fluency” or “persistency”), an allusion to the Earth’s persistent orbit around the sun, and its rotation on its axis. Rabbi Mecklenburg explains that this term especially applies to the Holy Land, wherein people must be constantly active and vigilant in order to fulfill the Torah’s agricultural commandments – the exact opposite of the passivity implied by *adamah*.

In a previous essay (“The Land Down Under,” June 2018) we differentiated between *eretz* and *adamah* by explaining *adamah* as restricted to the topmost strata

of the Earth’s crust, while *eretz* could even refer to that which is deeper down. Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook (1891-1982) explains that *ratzon* refers to a person’s “final goal” or “ultimate will,” while *chefetz* refers to one’s more tangible, immediate goal. This is why tangible items are called *chafetzim* in Mishnaic Hebrew (see Rashi to Koh. 3:1). In other words, one’s *ratzon* is what one *really wants* deep down inside. This parallels the word *eretz*, which also includes that which lies beneath the surface. *Midrash Mishlei* (ch. 8) writes that the land is called *eretz* because people “run” on it. This means that the *eretz* serves as the “game board” upon which one plays out his true goals and dreams. In contrast, the word *adamah* is more associated with superficiality, as it derives from the biliteral root DALET-MEM (“similarity”). One’s *dimyon* (“imagination” or “delusion”) might superficially *resemble* reality, but it is not the real McCoy. The *adamah* does not imply the place where one does what *he really wants* to do, but where one does whatever he has deluded himself into thinking he wants to do.

In the next installment we will discuss the remaining synonyms for *eretz*.

The Ohr Somayach family expresses condolences to Mrs. Helena Stern on the passing of her dear husband David Stern, zatzal. A loving and dedicated husband, father and grandfather, David was a good, kind and humble person, a ben Torah who attended shiurim in Ohr Somayach for many years, and a mensch par excellence. He will be missed dearly by his family and Klal Yisrael.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

THE BLESSINGS OF THE SHEMA: (PART 1)

“The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched
– they must be felt with the heart.”
(Helen Keller)

The first blessing begins: “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the Universe, Who forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates all.”

Why did our Sages see fit to begin the blessings of the Shema with the concept of light and darkness? How are they connected to each other? Before we begin saying the *Shema* – the ultimate declaration of our acceptance of Hashem’s majesty and dominion over us – our Sages wanted to make sure we know just how extraordinary the Creation really is. They enacted this first blessing to tell us that we should dedicate a moment to contemplating the luminaries – the sun, moon and stars – and how they collaborate to bring us warmth and light. How their existence gives us life.

With this understanding, the wording of the blessing is actually quite intriguing. Hashem “*forms* light” and yet He “*creates* darkness.” According to the Abarbanel, the word “creates” implies creating something from nothing, *ex nihilo*, whereas the words “forms” and “makes” imply the formation of something from preexisting material. Therefore, the inference of the blessing is that Hashem formed light only after having created the darkness.

As mentioned previously, our Sages teach that darkness is analogous to bad, and light is analogous to good. If so, the blessing seems to suggest that Hashem *created* evil, as opposed to good that was fashioned only afterwards. The Abarbanel explains that since Hashem is infinitely good, there was no necessity to *create* light, because light is the embodiment of goodness. Evil, however, has no part within Hashem, as it were, and it therefore needed to be created.

However, paradoxically, according to the Rabbis it is the creation of darkness that allows the light to be perceived and appreciated. Without darkness, there would be no way to recognize just how wondrous the light really is. As the prophet Micha so eloquently expresses (7:8), “Although I sit in the darkness Hashem is my light.”

However, due to their conflicting realities, it requires Hashem’s “arbitration” to bring these two disparate entities of darkness and light to a state of coexistence so they can harmoniously serve Him in our physical world. This is why the blessing ends with the statement that Hashem “makes peace and creates all.”

Many years ago, I heard a thought-provoking explanation about the optimal definition of peace from Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, one of the greatest scholars and authorities in Jewish Law from the previous generation. The very best form of peace is not one that is made after two sides have had a falling out with each other. Ultimate peace is when two differing entities understand that living in harmony together is beneficial for both of them without their having fought about it first. Optimal peace is the ability of both sides to recognize the necessity of the other. Darkness is truly a powerful entity, but the darkness “understands” that even a small amount of light can dispel it. Rabbi Auerbach quoted the famous adage, “A little light dispels the darkness” (see *Chovot Halevavot*, *sha’ar* 5; *Chofetz Chaim*, *Machaneh Yisrael* volume 1,

chapter 18, and *Nidchei Yisrael*, chapter 22; and many Chassidic sources). It is as if the darkness comprehends that once the light appears, it is no longer its task to shroud everything in darkness. For this reason, light is the symbol of peace.

The Jerusalem Talmud (Berachot 1:1) explains that just as the light slowly increases from dawn until the sun rises, so too, the final redemption will begin slowly, with Hashem's light beginning to penetrate the darkness, pushing away the exile – until finally everything will be bathed in the most brilliant and pure light of the redemption. May we all merit experiencing it very, very soon.

According to Rabbi Auerbach's interpretation, our blessing has just taken on a new and astonishing dimension. In the same way that darkness submits itself to the light, so too there will come a time when the evil in the world will yield to the good. As we await that precious era, we would be well served to remember Rabbi Auerbach's valuable lesson and aspire to live lives of true peace with all those around us.

To be continued...

Ohrnet Magazine is a weekly Torah magazine published by Ohr Somayach Institutions, POB 18103, Jerusalem 91180, Israel · Tel +972-2-581-0315 · Email. info@ohr.edu

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TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Ki Tavo: Succah 41-47

A Time for Comfort

Rabbi Elazar bar Tzadok said, “This was the custom of the people of Jerusalem on Succot: They would leave their homes with lulavs in their hands, they would go to the synagogue with their lulavs in their hands, they would say the Shema and pray with their lulavs in their hands. When they would read from a Torah scroll or say the Priestly Blessings, they would place the lulavs down. They would go to visit the sick or comfort the mourners with lulavs in their hands. When they were about to enter a Yeshiva study hall to learn Torah, they would send the lulavs home with someone.”

This teaching of Rabbi Elazar bar Tzadok on our daf conveys the love they had for mitzvahs to fulfill them in the most passionate way possible.

One case mentioned by Rabbi Elazar bar Tzadok appears to be problematic. Why did he say that when they would go to comfort mourners, they went with their lulavs in their hands? The halacha is that there is no *aveilus* (mourning) during the entire period of the Chag. If a close relative passed from this world right before the Chag begins, the period of mourning — called *shiva* — ceases when the Chag begins. And if a relative passes during the middle days of Succot, the mourning period of *shiva* begins only after Succot ends. (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 548:1, 7)

One answer I have seen over the years is that there is an alternate text for what Rabbi Elazar bar Tzadok said. The text found in the Talmud Yerushalmi omits the words “and when they went to comfort mourners.” It would seem that this omission is intentional and is due to the lack of mourning during Succot due to the joyous nature of these days. As the Torah states, “And you will rejoice on your Chag, and you will be only joyful.” (*Devarim 16:14*) However, all texts of the Talmud Bavli of which I am aware indeed include — not omit — the words “and when they went to comfort mourners.”

Here is one answer offered by our commentaries for the text of our *gemara* (and I invite the reader to share other explanations). According to Rabbi Elazar bar Tzadok in

our *gemara*, it is actually permitted, and even a mitzvah to comfort “mourners” during Succot. True, there is no “sitting *shiva*” or saying Kaddish or other practices of mourning during the Festivals. Nevertheless, a person may know of someone whose close relative passed from this world shortly before or during Succot and feel that a visit with singing and food and drink together would help lessen the person’s sadness and lift his spirits, helping the person to fulfill the mitzvah to enjoy Succot. In this case, it is correct for a person to do so, despite the lack of a technical mourning period during these days. (See Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 548:6) This is what Rabbi Elazar bar Tzadok means when he says “and when they went to comfort mourners.”

One additional point: Why does Rabbi Elazar bar Tzadok specifically mention that this was the custom of the people of Jerusalem? Why not in other places? A simplistic answer would be that he lived in Jerusalem and was well aware of the customs of Jerusalem. However, I have heard another explanation. This custom was the practice only in Jerusalem due to the nature of the mitzvah in Jerusalem in particular. The *mishna* in *masechet* Succah (41a) states: “Originally, the mitzvah of lulav was for all seven days of Succot in the “Mikdash,” while the mitzvah was for only one day in the “Medina.” Later, after the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai established a rabbinic mitzvah to take the lulav on the other days as well, as a “reminder of the Mikdash.” Although other Rishonim define the Mikdash as the Beit Hamikdash proper, the Rambam’s view is that the “Mikdash” in this *mishna* includes Jerusalem as well. This view is apparently not the majority view nor the halacha. However, we should not dismiss the significance of this ruling that the mitzvah was, and still is, a Torah mitzvah in Jerusalem for all days of Succot (except for Shabbat when it is forbidden to take it according to a rabbinic decree). This may help understand why, specifically, the people of Jerusalem had a special connection and love for this mitzvah — making a special effort to hold the lulav throughout the day.

• *Succah 41b*

LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Herschman

Avowal of Mission Fulfilled

The lawgiving concludes with the institution of *viduy ma'aser*, the avowal that was recited after an individual faithfully performed his tithing obligations. The commandments of *ma'aser* are the only ones which require a retrospective avowal, a fact that indicates the great importance attached to the principles and attitudes promoted by these mitzvahs.

The three tithes, *ma'aser rishon*, *m'aaser sheini* and *ma'aser ani*, teach us that we are to use our material resources for the purposes set by Hashem for these tithes. *Ma'aser rishon* is given to the Levi. Through this tribute we provide for the sustenance of the landless *Levi'im*, who cultivate the spirit of Torah. *Ma'aser sheini* elevates the physical, sensual act of eating and transforms it into a holy act of duty. An individual is to eat this only in Jerusalem, in sight of the Temple. This commandment emphasizes that the Torah does not recognize nearness to Hashem and human dignity attained by the spirit alone, while the physical, sensual side is dismissed and relegated to moral degradation. Instead, Judaism enlists every aspect of human nature for the purpose of man's ennoblement, and regards the sanctification of the physical aspect of life as the first, indispensable requirement for man's elevation to Hashem. In fact, the avowal primarily emphasizes this *ma'aser sheini* as opposed to the other tithing obligations,

underscoring that sanctification of the sensual is the foundation stone of a Jewish life of duty. It is the same message expressed in the mitzvah of *brit milah*, and in a myriad of other ways throughout the Torah. Finally, *ma'aser ani* is given to our needy brethren, emphasizing the duty to promote the welfare of our fellow man.

In the performance of the tithes, *ma'aser rishon* must be first. For only the spirit of the Torah, fostered by the *Levi'im*, instills in man the consciousness of his life's mission: He is to sanctify and uplift sensual corporeality – *ma'aser sheini* – and, bound by the duty of love, he is to look after the welfare of his fellow man – *ma'aser ani*. Without the Torah's enlightenment, a person would gratify himself like an animal, and his aspirations to acquire possessions would be empty egoism.

The realization of these three purposes encompasses the sum total of our national mission. When the avowal is recited, and these aims are realized, we can then call upon Hashem and request His gaze to be directed to us along with His bountiful blessing: *O direct Your examining look down from Your holy place from Heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the soil that You have given us, as You swore to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.*

- Sources: Commentary, Devarim 26:15, 14:22

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