

The second of the two *Parashot* we read this week begins, "These are the journeys of *Bnei Yisrael*, who went forth from the land of Egypt . . ." R' David Twersky z"l (1808-1882; first *Tolna Rebbe*) writes: Here, the Torah is hinting at the way to serve *Hashem*--i.e., that a person must journey from point to point and from level to level until he reaches the highest level. For the simple Jew, who cannot merit complete *D'veikut* / attachment to *Hashem* all at once, this means beginning with "*Sur mei'ra*" / "distance yourself from bad," from physical desires, and from bad *Midot* / character traits. After that, one can progress to "*Asei tov*" / "do good," *Mitzvot* and good deeds. [Of course, one is obligated to perform *Mitzvot* even before ridding himself of negative traits. The *Tolna Rebbe* is merely addressing which aspect of Divine service a person should focus on.]

The *Tolna Rebbe* continues: Torah scholars, who are already on the level of "*Asei tov*," also must progress step-by-step until they reach true *D'veikut*. Thus, we read (*Tehilim* 84:8), "They advance from strength to strength." Likewise, we read (*Zechariah* 3:4), "I shall permit you movement among these immobile ones." The "immobile ones" is a reference to angels, who always remain on the same level, because they have no *Yetzer Ha'ra* to challenge them. Man, in contrast, is a physical creature, and he must constantly fight the *Yetzer Ha'ra*. The weapon man has for this fight is the Torah.

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Shemittah

Midrash Mechilta considers--and ultimately rejects--the possibility that *Shabbat*--the Sabbath Day--need not be observed during the *Shemittah*--the Sabbath Year. Though the *Midrash* rejects this idea, the fact that it could even be entertained hints at significant connections between *Shabbat* and *Shemittah*. In this space, we are exploring those connections.

R' Aryeh Leib Hakohen Shapira *shlita* (*Menahel Ruchani* of the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak, Israel) writes: One of the reasons why work is prohibited on *Shabbat* is so that we will be free to study Torah. (Not the opposite, as some think--i.e., that since we are not working on *Shabbat* anyway, it is a good time for Torah study.) In the words of R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (*Ramban*; 1194-1270; Spain and *Eretz Yisrael*), "The reason for refraining from work, in my eyes, is that this is a holy day when we turn away from thinking of this-worldly matters and give pleasure to our souls by going to wise men and prophets to hear the word of *Hashem*."

R' Shapira continues: This seems, as well, to be one of the purposes of the *Shemittah*. R' Ovadiah Seforno z"l (1470-1550; Italy) writes: *Shemittah* is called a '*Shabbat La'Hashem*' because we refrain from working the earth all year and are available to serve Him as on *Shabbat*." And, regarding *Shabbat*, R' Seforno writes: "*Shabbatot* were given to the Jewish People only to reflect on the deeds of *Hashem* and to study His Torah." We see that *Shabbat* is for Torah study, and that the *Shemittah* is a time to serve *Hashem* "as on *Shabbat*"--i.e., with Torah study.

R' Shapira elaborates: In his work *Megaleh Amukot*, R' Natan Nata Shapira (1585-1633; *Rosh Yeshiva* and *Darshan* in Krakow, Poland) cites a *Midrash* that relates: The Torah "complained" to *Hashem*, "If everyone is busy with his vineyard or his field, what will become of me?" *Hashem* reassured the Torah, "I gave them *Shabbat* on which to study Torah." Likewise, *Hashem* gave us the *Shemittah* as an entire year for studying Torah. This explains why the punishment for violating the *Shemittah* is so severe--exile from *Eretz Yisrael*--for we are taught that the one sin *Hashem* is not willing to overlook is neglecting Torah study, and the *Shemittah* is intended for Torah study. This explains, as well, why the Torah emphasizes that the *Mitzvah* of *Shemittah* was taught at *Har Sinai* (*Vayikra* 25:1-2), the place where the Torah was given.

(*Chazon L'mo'ed: Ha'Shabbat Ve'Shabbat Ha'Aretz* p.187)

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“Moshe said to them, ‘If you do this thing, if you arm yourselves before Hashem for the battle, and every armed man among you shall cross the Jordan before Hashem, until He drives out His enemies before Him, and the Land shall be conquered before Hashem, and then you shall return--then you shall be vindicated from Hashem and from Yisrael, and this Land shall be a heritage for you before Hashem.’” (32:20-22)

R’ Yoel Leib Herzog z”l (1865-1934; rabbi in Lomza, Poland; Leeds, England; and Paris, France; father of Israel’s first *Ashkenazi* Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Halevi Herzog z”l) asks: Why does Moshe Rabbeinu mention *Hashem’s* Name five times in telling the tribes of Reuven and Gad what their obligations are?

He answers: We read (*Tehilim* 105:44-45), “He gave them the lands of nations, and they inherited the toil of regimes, so that they might safeguard His statutes and observe His teachings.” This teaches that *Eretz Yisrael* was given to us on the condition that we observe the Torah. Otherwise, we will be exiled.

The tribes of Reuven and Gad reasoned that, given this condition, exile was inevitable, so why bother fighting for the Land? In contrast, the land on the east bank of the Jordan is not subject to this condition. But, Moshe told them that they were wrong; as part of the Jewish People, they were subject to the same condition as their cousins from other tribes. The only way to secure their land, Moshe told them, was by observing the Five Books of the Torah--alluded to by the five mentions of *Hashem’s* Name. (Imrei Yoel: Matot, Drush 2)

“Aharon Ha’kohen went up to Mount Hor at the word of Hashem and died there . . . in the fifth month on the first of the month.” (33:38)

The *Gemara* (*Ta’anit* 26b) teaches: When the month of *Av* arrives, we lessen our joy.

R’ Michel Zilber *shlita* (*Rosh Yeshiva* of the *Zvhill yeshiva* in Yerushalayim) observes: The first day of *Av* is the *yahrzeit* of Aharon Ha’kohen. Our Sages relate that when Aharon died, the Clouds of Glory disappeared. The holiday of *Sukkot*, which commemorates the Clouds of Glory, is referred to as “*Z’man Simchateinu*” / “The time of our joy.” Conversely, then, the day when the Clouds of Glory vanished should be a day when our joy is lessened. (Tipah Min Ha’yam)

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At the highest level, the *Tolna Rebbe* writes, a Torah scholar studies and prays because it is the right thing to do, with no conscious awareness of his own accomplishments. To achieve this very high level, one must perfect his *Yir’ah* / awe of G-d. This, he writes, is alluded to in the verse with which we began, “*Eleh mas’ei*” / “These are the journeys. . .” The *Gematria* of that phrase (216) is the same as the *Gematria* of “*Yir’ah*,” and also of “*Gevurah*” / “strength.” By journeying step-by-step until one acquires “*Yirah*,” one will have the “*Gevurah*” to conquer his *Yetzer Ha’ra*, as we learn in *Pirkei Avot*: “Who is a ‘*Gibor*’ / ‘strong person’? One who conquers his *Yetzer Ha’ra*.”

(Magen David)

“If a man takes a vow to Hashem or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth he shall do.” (30:3)

R’ Zvi Hirsch Bonhardt z”l (1745-1810; *Maggid* of Voydislav, Poland; father of the *Chassidic Rebbe* R’ Simcha Bunim of Przysucha z”l) writes: We read (*Devarim* 23:24), “What emerges from your lips you shall keep and carry out, just as you vowed a voluntary gift to *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, whatever you spoke with your mouth.” This verse seems to be repetitive, but the explanation is as follows:

Typically, a person makes a vow because something has moved him to do so. However, by the time he is ready to fulfill his vow, his fervor has diminished. Says the Torah: What emerges from your lips, I (*Hashem*) have no doubt that you will keep. However, make sure you carry it out just as you vowed a voluntary gift to *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, *i.e.*, with the same excitement you had when you spoke the vow with your mouth.

Similarly, R’ Bonhardt continues, our verse may be understood as follows: If a man takes a vow to *Hashem* or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, I (*Hashem*) know that he will not desecrate his word. However, according to whatever comes from his mouth--*i.e.*, with the same excitement--he shall fulfill his vow.

R’ Bonhardt adds a related idea: Any of us would offer our child if we heard a direct command from *Hashem* to do so, as Avraham heard before he offered Yitzchak. However, we would fulfill *Hashem’s* command with sadness and copious tears; likely, we also would drag our feet. Avraham, in contrast, woke up early in the morning and hurried to fulfill *Hashem’s* command, just as he would do when performing any other *Mitzvah*. That is what made Avraham’s actions on this occasion so praiseworthy.

(Asarah L’meah: Drush 5)

R’ Yosef Karo z”l (1488-1575; Greece and *Eretz Yisrael*; author of the *Shulchan Aruch* and other works) offers another explanation for the seemingly extra words in our verse. He writes that the Torah is giving a person advice: If you want to ensure that you adhere to your oaths and vows, accustom yourself to always tell the truth, even when making small talk. “If a man takes a vow to *Hashem* or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he must make sure never to desecrate his word; then, according to whatever comes from his mouth he will do.” Similarly, King Shlomo writes (*Mishlei* 14:5), “One who will not deceive is a trustworthy witness,” *i.e.*, the trustworthy witness is someone who does not deceive even in inconsequential matters. (Bet Yosef Al Ha’Torah)