

*Parashat Chukat*--the first *Parashah* we read this week--includes the verse (19:14) "This is the Torah / teaching regarding a man who dies in a tent . . ." On the level of *Pshat*, this verse is teaching a *Halachah* about the *Tum'ah* / ritual impurity associated with coming in contact with a corpse. On the level of *Drush*, however, the *Gemara* (*Berachot* 63b) interprets the verse as teaching: "Torah learning is retained only by someone who (so-to-speak) kills himself over it."

What does it mean to kill oneself over Torah study? R' Mordechai Sternberg *z'l* (1948-2022; *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Har Ha'mor in Yerushalayim) explains that it means leaving behind one's preconceived notions when one enters the *Bet Midrash* / Torah study hall. Many have a bad habit of approaching Torah study with questions that are derived from a secular world-view, and they judge Torah by whether it answers the questions that the world poses. Often, however, those are not valid or worthwhile questions. Instead, we should be discovering what questions the Torah considers worth asking and how the Torah answers those questions. This does not mean forgetting permanently about all of the questions we had before, R' Sternberg emphasizes. Rather, it means putting those questions aside until we have given the Torah's light a true opportunity to illuminate our way. Then, we will see that the Torah does have answers to any questions that remain--answers that will help us become a beacon of light for the world that is asking those very questions. (*Ohr Chadash Al Tziyon Ta'ir* p,28)

## Shabbat

The *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 57b) teaches that "Shabbat is one-sixtieth of *Olam Ha'ba* / the World-to-Come." Presumably this is the origin of the better-known saying, which is found in the *Shabbat zemer* "Ma Yedidut," that *Shabbat* is "Mei'ain *Olam Ha'ba*" / "a microcosm of the World-to-Come."

But what does this mean? R' Eliezer Ben-Zion Brok *z'l* (1904-1985; founder and Rosh Yeshiva of the Novardok-Bet Yosef Yeshiva in Yerushalayim) writes:

Our Sages teach (*Berachot* 34b) that *Olam Ha'ba* is beyond man's ability to perceive or grasp. It is an existence, says the *Gemara* (*Berachot* 17a), without eating, drinking, jealousy, or hatred, an existence in which the righteous sit with crowns on their heads and bask in the light of the *Shechinah*. R' Moshe ben Maimon *z'l* (*Rambam*; 1135-1204; Spain and Egypt) writes (*Hil. Teshuvah* 8:1): "The good that awaits the righteous is life in *Olam Ha'ba*. It is life without death and goodness without bad." And R' Moshe ben Nachman *z'l* (*Ramban*; 1194-1270; Spain and *Eretz Yisrael*) writes that *Hashem* alone knows its greatness and beauty.

Nevertheless, R' Brok writes, *Hashem* wants to give us a taste of what awaits us, to give us a little bit of the feeling and delight that are otherwise beyond our imagination. For this, He gave us *Shabbat*, a time to separate ourselves completely from mundane thoughts and work-related concerns, to sanctify the day and ourselves, to delight in the goodness that He has given us, and to rejoice that He is our King. In that way, we can taste a different type of existence.

It follows, R' Brok continues, that *Shabbat* calls upon a person to elevate himself above his normal, workday way of thinking. This idea is illustrated by the *Mishnah* (*Shabbat* 63a) which discusses whether weapons constitute "jewelry" that a man could wear in the public domain on *Shabbat*. In our world, wearing a ceremonial sword is, indeed, considered a sign of nobility or distinction. However, say the Sages, in *Olam Ha'ba* there will be no weapons. On *Shabbat*, we are expected to adopt an "*Olam Ha'ba* point-of-view" and, therefore, wearing weapons in public is prohibited. (The *Mishnah* is, of course, discussing wearing weapons for show, not for defensive purposes.)

(*Hegyonei Mussar* I p.31)

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**“Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Make yourself a serpent and place it on a pole, and it will be that anyone who was bitten will look at it and live’.” (21:8)**

The *Mishnah* (*Rosh Hashanah* 29a) asks: Does the serpent give life or death? Rather, when they looked upwards [toward the serpent on the pole] they subjugated their hearts to their Father in Heaven. [Until here from the *Gemara*]

R’ Chaim of Volozhin z”l (Belarus; 1749-1821) explains: When they looked upward at the copper serpent on the pole, they thought about how dangerous the serpent was, but they then reflected on the fact that its power was imaginary, because all is dependent on Hashem’s Will. In this merit, they were cured.

(*Nefesh Ha’chaim* III ch.12)

**“Bil’am said to Balak, ‘Build for me here seven altars and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams’.” (23:1)**

The *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 105b) teaches: A person should always engage in Torah study and *Mitzvot*, even *She’lo lishmah* / without the proper intention, because *She’lo lishmah* leads to *Lishmah* / the proper intention. As a reward for bringing 42 sacrifices (fourteen in our verse, and fourteen each--two additional times in our *Parashah*), Balak merited to have Ruth as his descendant. [Until here from the *Gemara*]

R’ Yisrael Eliyahu Weintraub z”l (1932-2010; Bnei Brak, Israel) writes: There are two ways to understand the significance of *Lishmah* / proper intentions in *Mitzvah* performance. One viewpoint is that a *Mitzvah* that is not *Lishmah* is not a *Mitzvah* at all; it is what *Halachah* refers to as “*Mis’asek*” / a mindless act. (According to this perspective, one should delay performing a *Mitzvah* even beyond its proper time if he cannot currently perform it *Lishmah*.) The correct view, however, is that the *Mitzvah* is complete whether it was performed *Lishmah* or *She’lo lishmah*; having proper intentions is merely a bonus that enhances the *Mitzvah*.

R’ Weintraub continues: The *Gemara* quoted here proves that the latter perspective is correct, for Balak certainly did not have proper intentions when he offered sacrifices, yet he was rewarded for doing so. Indeed, his *She’lo lishmah* led to *Lishmah*, for his descendant King Shlomo offered thousands of sacrifices in the *Bet Hamikdash* with proper intentions.

(Quoted in *U’vacharta Va’chaim Al Nefesh Ha’chaim* p.410-411)

**“Behold! it is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations.” (23:9)**

R’ Joseph B. Soloveitchik z”l (1903-1993) writes: Bil’am may have perceived this as a negative characteristic of the Jewish People. However, it clearly is not so, for Moshe Rabbeinu promised in his final address to *Bnei Yisrael* (*Devarim* 33:28), “*Yisrael* shall dwell secure, solitary, in the likeness of Yaakov.” This solitariness is nothing less than a magnificent and glorious existence, R’ Soloveitchik writes, holy and sanctified. It is a solitariness that expresses the uniqueness of the Jewish People.

(*Divrei Hagut Ve’ha’arachah: Kol Dodi Dofek* p.54)

**“This is the Torah / teaching regarding a man who dies in a tent . . .” (19:14)**

The *Gemara* (*Berachot* 63b) teaches: Torah learning is retained only by someone who (so-to-speak) kills himself over it, as our verse says: “This is the *Torah*! [It belongs to] a man who dies in a tent [*i.e.*, the study hall]. [Until here from the *Gemara*] Commentaries explain that success in Torah learning requires a person to subdue his natural desire for worldly pleasures, because any energy expended on pursuing worldly pleasures is energy not devoted to Torah study. In addition, a person who is accustomed to filling himself with the coarse pleasures of this world will be unable to appreciate the very subtle pleasure that comes from studying Torah--much as a person who is accustomed to drinking soda will have trouble appreciating subtle differences among fine wines.

*Pirkei Avot* (6:4) teaches, “Such is the way of the Torah--eat bread dipped in salt, drink a measured amount of water, sleep on the ground, live a life of sorrow, and toil in Torah. If you do this, you are fortunate and it will be good for you--fortunate in this world and good for you in the World-to-Come.” [Until here from *Pirkei Avot*.] R’ Aharon Lewin z”l *Hy”d* (the *Reisher Rav*; killed in the Holocaust; his *yahrzeit* was last week) asks: Can it really be said that a person who lives such a life is “fortunate”?! He explains, citing R’ Meir Schiff z”l (*Maharam Schiff*; Germany; 1605-1641): If a person has nothing but bread and water to eat and nowhere to sleep but the floor, he can hardly congratulate himself that he is sacrificing for the sake of Torah study. Rather, the *Mishnah* means: When is it praiseworthy that you live such a lifestyle for the sake of Torah study? When you are fortunate in this world, *i.e.*, when you have access to a life full of luxuries but you forego those luxuries for Torah study.

In this light, continues R’ Lewin, we can understand an enigmatic *Midrash*. We read (*Bemidbar* 11:4), “The *Asafsuf* / rabble that was among them cultivated a craving, and *Bnei Yisrael* also wept once more, and said, ‘Who will feed us meat?’” *Midrash Rabbah* says: Who were the *Asafsuf*? The members of the *Sanhedrin*, about whom it is written (11:16), “*Esfah* / Gather to Me seventy men from the elders of *Yisrael*.” [Until here from the *Midrash*.] How can it be that the members of the *Sanhedrin* craved meat? asks R’ Lewin, and he explains: Even the elders were tired of having only *Mahn* day-in-and-day-out, because it meant that they had no luxuries they could forego for the sake of Torah study. Therefore, they craved meat--specifically so that they could forego it. (*Ha’drash Ve’ha’iyun*)

**“On the open field--anyone who touches a Chalah / one slain by the sword . . . shall be contaminated for seven days.” (19:16)**

R’ Avraham Zvi Kluger *shlita* (*Chassidic Mashpia* in Bet Shemesh, Israel) writes: A corpse is called a “*Chalah*”--literally, a “void”--because a person’s dying leaves his loved ones with unanswered questions, a void in their understanding. The resulting doubts make a “*Chillul Hashem*” / desecration of G-d’s Name. (*Chalah* and *Chillul* share the same root.) The antidote is to make a *Kiddush Hashem* / sanctification of G-d’s Name by accepting His Will without question. Hence, *Parah Adumah*, a decree that we do not understand, purifies the *Tum’ah* associated with death.

(*Ve’hitkadishti* p.14)