YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**PARASHAT EKEV**

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**IN LOVING MEMORY OF**

**Jeffrey Paul Friedman**

**August 15, 1968 – July 29, 2012**

**לע"נ**

**יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל**

**כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב**

**ת.נ.צ.ב.ה**

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“If You Will Diligently Obey”

Rav Shimon Klein

Choice and Responsibility in *Mitzvot*

And it shall be, if you diligently obey My commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, that I will give you the rain of your land in its due season, the early rain and the late rain, that you may gather in your crops and your wine and your oil. And I will send grass in your fields for your cattle, that you may eat and be full. Take heed to yourselves that your heart is not deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, and then the Lord’s anger be inflamed against you, and He shut up the heaven that there be no rain, and that the land not yield its fruit, and you perish quickly from off the good land which the Lord gives you. And you shall lay these, My words, in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they will be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your home, and when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall write them upon the door posts of your home, and upon your gates… (*Devarim* 11:13-20)

This unit presents an equation. “If you will diligently obey,” then there will be rain. There will be crops, and wine, and oil; there will be vegetation for your beasts, “and you will eat and you will be satisfied.” There will be abundant blessing. If you will not obey, the heavens will be closed up; the ground will not yield its produce, and eventually “you will perish quickly from off the good land which the Lord your God gives to you.”

This equation raises several questions. What is the relationship between the nature of the Divine service presented here – “to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul” – and these descriptions of reward and punishment? Do the latter not cast doubt on the purity of a person’s motives? Is it possible to create a foundation of love where there is a warning that if this love is not maintained, there will be heavy punishment? Imagine for a moment a parent warning his child, “If you love me – all will be well; if not – woe to you!” Is this really an appropriate foundation for a profound and meaningful love?

To broaden the perspective on this unit, let us take a step backwards, to the verses that precede this unit and create its context.

“Not Like the Land of Egypt”

For the land into which you go to possess it is not like the land of Egypt, from whence you came out, where you sowed your seed and watered it with your foot, like a garden of vegetables. But the land into which you go to possess it is a land of hills and valleys, and it drinks water of the rain of heaven; a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. (*Devarim* 11:10-12)

These verses offer a definition of the uniqueness of the Land of Israel. The text declares that it is “not like the land of Egypt,” thereby contrasting the two lands with one another. The addition of the words “from whence you came out” defines this contrast as a fundamental principle. God declares: I brought you out of the land of Egypt, which follows a certain set of natural laws, to a land where a different reality prevails. In Egypt, water is readily available, and with a simple movement of the foot it can be channeled in one direction or another. In contrast, “the land into which you go to possess it is a land of hills and valleys, and it drinks water of the rain of heaven.” In a land of hills and valleys, agriculture is a more challenging task. And this land “drinks water of the rain of heaven.” Water is not constantly available, and there is no certainty of its provision.

In seeking to propose the principle behind these differences, we might say that life in Egypt is conducted without exertion and without Divine intervention. In *Eretz Yisrael*, however, one must rely for food on the hills and valleys and for rain on the heavens, and this is a complex and all-encompassing challenge. In addition, God is involved in everything that happens in the land; He cares for it, and His eyes are upon it constantly.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now, let us return to our unit. After the text describes life in *Eretz Yisrael* as demanding systematic effort, and after God is described as caring for the land and keeping His eye upon it constantly, the text goes a step further and presents the acknowledgment of this situation and the orientation towards it as a condition for being able to survive in the land: “If you will diligently obey My commandments… to love the Lord your God,” then there will be rain, and all will be good. If you will not obey, then the heavens will be shut up, the land will not yield its produce, and eventually you will perish from the good land. While the unit does indeed present an equation, this equation is in fact a description of reality, an answer to the question of “how does it work?” Now that the nation understands the “rules of the game,” it can be entrusted with responsibility for what is going to happen in *Eretz Yisrael*.

In order to attain a deeper understanding of this unit, the second paragraph of *Shema*, let us now compare it with the first paragraph, which we discussed in last week’s [*shiur*](http://etzion.org.il/en/parashat-vaetchanan-%E2%80%9Chear-o-israel%E2%80%9D).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| First paragraph | Second paragraph |
| Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. |  |
| And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. | And it shall be, if you diligently obey My commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, that I will give you the rain of your land in its due season, the early rain and the late rain, that you may gather in your crops and your wine and your oil. And I will send grass in your fields for your cattle, that you may eat and be full. Take heed to yourselves that your heart is not deceived, and you turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them, and then the Lord’s anger be inflamed against you, and He shut up the heaven that there be no rain, and that the land not yield its fruit, and you perish quickly from off the good land which the Lord gives you.  |
| And these things which I command you this day shall be upon your heart. | And you shall lay these, My words, in your heart and in your soul, |
|  | and bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they will be as frontlets between your eyes. |
| And you shall repeat them to your children, and speak of them when you are at home, and when you walk on the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. | And you shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your home, and when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise. |
| And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand |  |
| And they shall be as frontlets between your eyes and you shall write them upon the doorposts of your home, and upon your gates. | And you shall write them upon the door posts of your home, and upon your gates |
|  | In order that your days may be multiplied and the days of your children, in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers to give them, as the days of the heaven upon the earth. |

Similarities and Differences

The skeleton of the two units is similar. The first starts with love of God; the second starts with love and service of Him. Both speak of placing things “upon the heart;” both speak of teaching children, of binding upon the hand and between the eyes, and of placing God’s words upon the doorposts and gates.

The similar structure points to a similar process that takes place in both instances. In the first paragraph, the point of departure is an inner love of God, which gradually takes on tangible form in expanding spheres of the reality of life.[[2]](#footnote-2) Now we can see that the second paragraph also invites inner contemplation that likewise starts with the love of God, and from this point extends outwards. What distinguishes each of the two units? What process takes place in each of them?

Along with the similarities, there are also differences between the two units:

1. The first paragraph is formulated in the singular, while the second is (mostly) in the plural.
2. The first paragraph is preceded by the declaration, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God – the Lord is One.” The second paragraph features a concluding verse: “In order that your days may be multiplied and the days of your children, in the land which the Lord wore to your fathers to give them, as the days of the heaven upon the earth.”
3. The love of God in the first paragraph is “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” In the second paragraph, there is no mention of “might.” The demand here is “to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul.”
4. In the first paragraph, there is no mention of any system of reward and punishment; in the second paragraph, this is the main subject.
5. The first paragraph is not limited in terms of either time or place. The second paragraph has a historical context – different periods in the relationship between God and His people, living in the Land of Israel or living in exile.[[3]](#footnote-3)

There are also literary differences as well: “And these things (*ha-devarim*)… shall be…,” in the first paragraph, as opposed to, “And you shall place these, My words (*devarai*)...” in the second, as well as “being” as opposed to “placing upon the heart.” In addition, the first paragraph speaks of “repeating to your children,” while the second speaks of “teaching them to your children,” and more.

A biblical unit is more than just a collection of details. It is an organic unit, with a main subject around which everything is organized and a process that takes place over the course of it. What is the subject of each unit, and how do all the details receive meaning from their context?

Hearing, Choice, and Will

To attain a deeper understanding of each unit, let us consider the reason for the love of God according to each. In the first paragraph, there is a command, “You shall love the Lord your God” – but no explanation is given. There is a love that is embedded in the depths of Creation, somewhat comparable to the love between a child and his parents, which is not dependent on any reason; it is profoundly a part of reality. In the second paragraph, there is no command to love. The content of this unit is the setting down of an equation concerning the existence or survival of the nation in its land, which is not a simple, self-evident matter. Therefore, the commandments are given so as to mold everyday life in the land, along with the love of God, which elevates life to a higher spiritual plane. Now the choice lies in your hands. If you are attentive to these laws, your life in the land will be one of ultimate goodness. If you will not commit yourselves, the heavens will be shut up, the ground will not yield produce, and eventually you will perish. The question is: what is the reason for loving God, from the perspective of this second unit? The answer is that love of God is a component in the nation’s assumption of responsibility for its existence in the land. In other words, love of God generates and sustains life.

Returning to the comparison between the two units, it turns out that even those aspects which appear similar are not actually the same because the subject of each unit is different. The second unit states, “And you shall lay these, My words, in your heart and in your soul” – but the reference is not to the love of God, as it was in the first unit. Here, the matter that should be laid in your heart is the equation setting down your responsibility with regard to existence in the land. In contrast to the formulation in the first unit – “And these things… shall be…” – we now find, “And you shall lay these, My words….” Laying something in a place is a tangible act, appropriate to the concept of responsibility, as opposed to “being,” which is appropriate to love that exists in the heart and soul. The “binding as a sign” likewise conveys a different message in each case, as does the instruction to teach the children. Concerning this latter element, it should be noted that the second paragraph states, “And you shall teach them to your children, speaking of them…” – an instruction which is understood as entrusting the parent with responsibility to educate the child. Every parent is responsible for teaching his child, and society as a whole is responsible for the education of the next generation. “If you will diligently obey My commandments” and assume responsibility for them, then your existence in the land will continue in the future generations. If you will not take responsibility, then you will perish from upon the land.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As to differences between the two units: The first paragraph deals with love of God that suffuses the heart and soul. In this context, any consideration of reward and punishment would indeed spoil and cloud this experience. In the second paragraph, the noting of the respective ramifications of choosing the good path or the bad path is the foundation that allows a person to understand reality and to assume responsibility for it. The first paragraph is written in the singular, describing an inner, intimate relationship between the individual and his God. The second paragraph addresses the collective, in the plural, with the subject being the nation’s responsibility for its survival as a society in the land. The first paragraph is introduced by the declaration, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God – the Lord is One.” This serves as the basis for the command to love God. In the second paragraph, the addition comes at the end, elaborating on the way in which the proper choice to obey God will influence life in the land: “In order that your days may be lengthened, and the days of your children, upon the land….” In the first paragraph, the love of God is described in terms that include the reinforcement, “with all your might.” The Sages interpret this as referring to a situation in which a person is required to give up his property (*Berakhot* 9:5). In the second paragraph, the subject is not selflessness, but rather the opposite – solid, flourishing success in the land. The first paragraph has as its vision a love that is independent of time and place, while the second describes an historical process – a period of success during which the nation assumes responsibility for its life, leading to the ideal of goodness: “In order that your days may be lengthened, and the days of your children, upon the land which the Lord your God swore to your fathers to give them, as the days of the heaven upon the earth.”

Responsibility, Choice, and Will

Having identified the concept of society’s responsibility in the second paragraph, we now understand that the expression “reward and punishment” is not an accurate way to define the subject. Instead, we might speak of results and ramifications.[[5]](#footnote-5) Still, we must ask: what does it mean to speak of responsibility where the subject is observance of the commandments – i.e., obeying God’s word? What is the meaning of responsibility when man has no say, nor even any choice? We might answer this question by tracing the unique place of this concept in *Sefer Devarim*. Over and over again, the *sefer* addresses the commandments as the basis for life in the land (*Devarim* 6:17; 8:6; 10:13; 11:27; 11:28; 28:9; 20:13). This orientation is not limited to the realm of spirituality and ideas, and it adds an extra dimension to the commandments that appear in *Sefer* *Devarim*. The commandments not only regulate, but also facilitate life in the land, and the imposition of the obligation to observe them goes far beyond performance of the law or some or other action. These commandments contain within them a principle, entailing responsibility to create a life system, to give it spiritual stature, and to maintain it.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Thus, we have two units – “*Shema*” and “If you will diligently obey….” Each invites the nation and its constituent individuals to listen, to be attentive and “tune in” to an internal experience. The first paragraph addresses this inner experience directly, speaking of “loving the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” The second addresses the inverse perspective – man’s choice. This choice demands his answer to the question, “Which do I choose?” or, more profoundly, “What do I want?”

Many generations of Jews have contemplated this second unit and perceived in it a system of reward and punishment, and perhaps the fear that paralyzes man and distances him from sin. With the return to our land, we are able to adopt a different position in relation to this unit. “If you will diligently obey” – all with be good. “If your heart is deceived…” – things will not go well. In between these two poles stands man, who must make his choice and decide which he wants.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The following *midrash* expresses eloquently the idea of God involvement in all that happens in the land: “‘From the beginning of the year to the end of the year’ – This tells us that at the beginning of the year it is decreed how much rain and how much dew will fall, how much the sun will shine upon the land and how much wind will blow through it. A different interpretation: ‘From the beginning of the year’ I will bless you in your transactions, in your building and planting, in your engagements and marriages, and in all your endeavors I will bless you. A different interpretation: ‘From the beginning of the year to the end of the year’ – but are there fruits in the field from the beginning of the year until its end? [Surely not,] rather, they are within My domain, to give them My blessing in the house just as I give them My blessing in the field, as it is written (*Devarim* 28:8), ‘The Lord shall command the blessing upon you in your barns, and in all that you put your hand to, and He shall bless you,’ and it is written (*Chaggai* 2:19), ‘Is the seed yet in the barn? And do the vine and the fig tree and the pomegranate and the olive tree still not bring forth? From this day I will bless you’” (Sifri, *Ekev* 40). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See our *shiur* on [*Parashat Va’etchanan*](http://etzion.org.il/en/parashat-vaetchanan-%E2%80%9Chear-o-israel%E2%80%9D). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Living in the land is conditional upon behavior, and it is mentioned again in the concluding verse: “In order that your days may be multiplied… in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers to give them…” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the first paragraph, the instruction to teach the children precedes the instruction concerning *tefillin*; in the second paragraph, teaching children is mentioned after *tefillin*. This would seem to reflect the similar structure of both units – an inner point of departure that widens and expands to other areas of life. In the first paragraph, the subject is inner repetition and study (see our *shiur* on [*Parashat Devarim*](http://etzion.org.il/en/parashat-devarim-morality-and-world-politics)), and therefore the teaching precedes the commandments. In the second paragraph, the subject is teaching as an expression of responsibility for the next generation, and in relation to the personal commandment of *tefillin*, which pertains to the individual, this represents a broadening. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. While the text does mention God’s involvement – “then the Lord’s anger be inflamed against you, and He shut up the heaven…,” this nevertheless comes across as part of the “rules of the game.” When such a situation comes about in the land, this will inflame the anger of God, Whose eyes are upon the land, and this outcome must be taken into consideration. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A similar interpretation of the concept of “commandment” is found in *Massekhet* *Kiddushin*: “Every place where the text mentions ‘command’, it is meant as an exhortation… as it is written, (*Devarim* 3), ‘And command Yehoshua, and strengthen him and encourage him.’” In other words, wherever the Torah “commands,” it should be understood as an exhortation, an urging and encouraging, and this is learned from where Moshe is told, “Command Yehoshua and strengthen him and encourage him, for he shall go over before this people, and he shall cause them to inherit the land which you shall see.” Moshe is commanded to strengthen and encourage Yehoshua – to “urge” or “exhort” him – in anticipation of his appointment as leader of the nation. The *Tanna* defines the concept of commandment here not as an order or instruction, but rather as “exhortation” or “encouragement.” This represents a twofold teaching. First, this meaning is extended to every place that mentions “command” (“Every place…”), and it negates other exegetical possibilities that one might attach to the expression (“it is meant as an exhortation [*ziruz*]”). The word “*ziruz*” is used by *Chazal* to mean encouragement, exhorting, adjuring. Along with the context that is cited in the *gemara* as proof for this interpretation (the “strengthening and encouraging” of Yehoshua), there are also other sources (Tosefta, *Berakhot* 1:14). The words “command Yehoshua” signify an entrusting of authority and responsibility for leadership of the nation. The extension of this concept of “responsibility” as the broader meaning of “command” is an audacious step. A different model of “command” might view its focus as the issue of authority, or the manner in which authority and discretion belong to the person who is issuing the command. In this case, however, the figure of authority and responsibility – Moshe – is entrusting all of this to his successor – Yehoshua. From now on, the “command” lies with Yehoshua; it is his responsibility. This being so, all that Moshe can now do is to encourage him, with the word, “Be strong and of good courage.” This model of “command” awards the Sages authority and discretion in interpretation of the commandments, essentially like the discretion with which the leader is entrusted. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)