YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**YHE-HOLIDAY: SPECIAL SHAVUOT 5776 SHIUR**

**Vitality in the Service of God**

**Based on a *shiur* by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein *zt”l***[[1]](#footnote-1)

[*Note: In the final months of his life, Rav Lichtenstein zt”l gave a shiur in his home on Shabbat afternoons to a group of long-time students. What follows is the last shiur Rav Lichtenstein zt”l delivered.*]

**Upholding the Torah**

In the framework of Moshe’s rebuke of the people of Israel in *Parashat Ki Tavo*, there appears a list of admonitions, each one beginning with the phrase “Cursed be.” The final admonition is “Cursed be he who will not uphold the words of this Torah” (*Devarim* 27:26). Rashi explains that this is a general curse that encompasses the entire Torah: “Here he included the Torah in its entirety, and they accepted it upon themselves with a curse and an oath.”

But the Ramban interprets differently. He agrees with Rashi regarding the scope of the final admonition, but in his opinion there is a novel element here. In accepting upon themselves this curse, claims the Ramban, the people of Israel are accepting a new quality in fulfilling the *mitzvot*. What is this innovation? The Ramban writes:

I saw in *Yerushalmi Sota* (7:4): “‘He who will not uphold’ – Is it possible for the Torah to fall? Rabbi Shimon ben Yakim said: This refers to the sexton. Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta said: This refers to the earthly court. R. Yehuda and R. Huna said in the name of Shmuel: Yoshiyahu rent his clothes because of this matter, saying, ‘It is my responsibility to uphold it.’ Rabbi Assi said in the name of Rabbi Tanchum bar Chiya: One who learned and taught and observed and performed [the Torah] and had the capability of strengthening it but did not strengthen it – he is included in the category of those who are cursed.”

This “upholding” can be expounded to include the king’s household and the leaders [of the community] who have the capability of upholding Torah in the hands of those who nullify it. Even if one was an utterly pious individual in terms of his actions, but he could have strengthened Torah [observance] among evil people who nullify it [and he did not] – he is included in the category of those who are cursed. This is similar to what we explained. In addition, they said on the aggadic level: “This refers to the sexton” – who does not uphold the Torah scrolls by standing them up properly so they do not fall.

In the *Yerushalmi* cited by the Ramban, the *Amora’im* posit that King Yoshiyahu tore his clothes in mourning because of this very verse. In that episode, detailed in II *Melakhim* 22, Yoshiyahu finds a long-neglected Torah scroll and is greatly unnerved when his scribe reads its contents to him. The narrative implies that while the Torah certainly existed prior to this incident, after the scroll was found it was as if a “new Torah” came into being.

But why did Yoshiyahu tear his clothes? II *Divrei Ha-yamim* relates that in the twelfth year of his reign, Yoshiyahu purged the land of “the shrines, the sacred posts, the idols and the molten images” (34:3). What happened in the eighteenth year of his reign – when the Torah scroll was found – that led Yoshiyahu to forge a new covenant between God and Israel, to “follow the Lord… with all their heart and soul; that they would fulfill all the terms of this covenant” (II *Melakhim* 23:3)? What was it that caused Yoshiyahu such inner turmoil, driving him to tear his clothes in anguish? The answer is the sudden discovery of a gaping inadequacy in the people’s service of God. Yet this very crisis revealed to him a new dimension of divine service.

***Kiyum*: Infusing the Torah with Vitality**

Let us examine the expression “he who will not uphold (*asher lo yakim*)” more closely. The word *yakim* evokes the notion of *kiyum*, a concept with two meanings that stand in opposition to one another. *Kiyum* can refer to validation, such as in the case of *kiyum shtarot* – ratification of documents. When a legal document has not yet been ratified, there may be concern that it is counterfeit; the *kiyum* process allays this concern. Essentially, *kiyum* of this variety serves to sustain things, leaving them in their current state.

However, there is also an entirely different kind of *kiyum*, one that infuses things with vitality, invigorating them and empowering them. This kind of *kiyum* creates a new entity. One who upholds the Torah in this sense becomes a new person altogether, a reborn and revitalized servant of God.

This understanding leads us to a fascinating insight. The Ramban cites the *Yerushalmi*’s statement that one who learned Torah, taught Torah, etc., but did not strengthen it is included in the curse of one who does not uphold the Torah. But there is another statement in the *Yerushalmi* that the Ramban did not cite:

Rabbi Yirmiya said in the name of Rabbi Chiya bar Abba: One who did not learn and did not teach and did not observe and did not perform [Torah] and did not have the capability of strengthening it but [nevertheless] strengthened it – he is included in the category of those who are blessed.

In light of the two parallel statements in the *Yerushalmi*, the disproportionate role of *kiyum* in the Torah's assessment of a person’s spiritual accomplishments is simultaneously compassionate and savagely harsh. If one learned and taught and observed and performed, yet did not “uphold” the Torah – all of his efforts to accrue blessing are erased. The reverse is true of one who did not perform or teach, but succeeded in upholding the Torah; here it is a great kindness that his neglect of the Torah is erased. Although a balance between these two sides exists in our consciousness, this is still a very challenging dichotomy to accept.

The Yerushalmi presents us with a two-dimensional demand. The first dimension is what one could have accomplished but did not. (I have said many times that a person is judged not only on what he did or did not do in terms of specific positive and negative commandments, but also on what he could have done – on the unrealized potential that was in his hands.) The second dimension is whether one introduced vitality into his service of God; one must answer for this as well.

On the one hand, this dual outlook represents a retrospective evaluation of a person’s life, looking back at the end of a finished product and pronouncing: He learned and taught and observed and performed, but he did not uphold the Torah – and in conclusion, he is wholly in the category of the cursed. And if he accomplished the reverse during his lifetime, the conclusion is reversed as well – he is wholly in the category of the blessed. But on the other hand, the extent of one’s engagement in *kiyum* is not merely assessed in hindsight, as an afterthought to one’s life; rather, it applies throughout one’s time on earth, at every stage. Every mitzva that one fulfills brings with it the potential for *kiyum*, for instilling vitality in one’s service of God. This element is constantly demanded of a person throughout his life.

The Rambam does not mention the requirement to uphold the Torah. His position on the matter may have been similar to that of the Ramban, but he did not record this. Even the Ramban was certainly aware of the difficulty of this demand, and thus leaned on the words of the *Yerushalmi* for support. But in any case, the authority of the Ramban alone is more than enough to render this injunction binding for us.

**A Final Thought**

According to the Ramban, the requirement to uphold the Torah is directed at a king or ruler. But it is important to stress that it is not only the king who must do so. While the king rules over the entire kingdom and thus presumably has the power to uphold whatever he desires, even the smallest person is charged with upholding the Torah to the extent that he is capable. It is our hope that if we follow this charge to the best of our abilities, we will merit inclusion in the category of those who do not merely learn the Torah and perform its commandments, but uphold the Torah – in the true sense of *kiyum* and vitality – as well.

1. Adapted by Rav Dr. Chanoch Gamliel; translated by Rav Daniel Landman; edited by Rav Reuven Ziegler. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)