**S.A.L.T – PARASHAT BECHUKOTAI**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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**This week's SALT shiurim are dedicated in memory of  
David Moshe ben Harav Yehuda Leib Silverberg z"l,   
whose yahrzeit is Thursday 18 Iyar, May 26**.

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Motzaei Shabbat

One of the blessings which the Torah promises in the beginning of Parashat Bechukotai in reward for observing God’s laws is “*va-akhaltem lachmekhem la-sova*” – “you shall eat your bread to satiation” (26:5). The Torah here describes an abundance of food which will allow us to not only eat, but eat to the point where we feel satiated and do not experience hunger.

The Midrash (*Midrash Eikha*, *Petichta*, 11) notes the contrast between this promise and the dreadful state of poverty described by Yirmiyahu in Eikha (1:11), “All her people gasp, seeking bread.” If we were worthy of God’s blessing, the Midrash comments, then we would have enjoyed the satiation described in Parashat Bechukotai; but because we failed, we faced the hunger described in Eikha. The simple reading of the Midrash’s comment is that it laments the people’s forfeiting the blessing of prosperity and instead suffering hunger due to their failure to obey God’s laws.

Rav Aharon Lewin (the “Reisha Rav”) *Hy”d*, however, in his *Ha-derash Ve-ha’iyun*,adds a deeper reading of the Midrash. He suggests that Chazalhere note a contrast between two different attitudes towards food. In the state of spiritual devotion of which the Torah speaks here in Parashat Bechukotai, people eat their bread “to satiation” – simply to satisfy their hunger and sustain themselves. In Eikha, however, Yirmiyahu speaks of people “*mevakshim lechem*” – who seek and pursue food as an end unto itself, purely for the sake of enjoyment and indulgence. Of course, the simple meaning is that in Parashat Bechukotai people enjoy prosperity and are thus able to experience satiation, whereas in Eikha people frantically seek food to relieve their pangs of hunger wrought by shortage. Nevertheless, on a deeper level, the contrast noted by the Midrash also refers to the difference between satiation and wanton indulgence; between approaching food as a need that we must fill, and as an objective all its own. When we devote ourselves to God as described in Parashat Bechukotai, we view our physical needs as means which enable us to pursue higher and loftier goals, rather than the goal itself.

Sunday

Parashat Bechukotai begins with a description of the blessings which God promises to bestow upon *Benei Yisrael* in reward for their obedience. This section concludes with the vague promise, “*Ve-hit’halakhti be-tokhekhem*” (26:12), which seems to mean, “I will walk about in your midst.” The question arises as to the precise nature of this promise, as well as the distinction between God’s “walking about” in our midst and the earlier promise, “*Ve-natati mishkani be-tokhekhem*” (“I shall place My sanctuary in your midst” – 26:11). Why does God promise to “walk about in your midst” after already promising to reside among us in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*?

Rav Yehonatan Eibshitz, in his *Tiferet Yehonatan*, suggests that whereas the earlier promise speaks of *hashra’at ha-Shekhina* – the impact of God’s presence among the nation, the term “*ve-hit’halakhti be-tokhekhem*” refers to judgment. God tells us that if we are generally devoted to His service, then He will judge us favorably and overlook our occasional wrongdoing. The term “*ve-hit’halakhti*,” Rav Eibshitz explains, means to “walk about” without remaining stationary for too long in any specific location. In this verse, then, God promises that when the time comes to judge us, He will judge in a cursory, superficial manner. Rather than dig deeply to thoroughly examine our conduct, He will judge us loosely and perfunctorily. This is the meaning of “*ve-hit’halakhti*,” and the distinction between this promise and that of “*ve-natati mishkani be-tokhekhem*.” God promises to make His permanent residence, as it were, among us so we can reap the immense spiritual benefits of a direct relationship with our Creator, but when it comes to judgment, He will “walk about” without examining us too closely.

Rav Yehonatan Eibshitz’s interpretation of these verses perhaps teaches us about our relationship with others. Often, we are most critical and judgmental of the people with whom we are closest. The more time we spend with people, and the more we get to know them, the more likely we are to uncover negative qualities, and thus the more critical we can become. The promise of “*ve-hit’ahalkhati*,” as understood by Rav Yehonatan Eibshitz, should remind us to build and maintain friendships without becoming overly critical, to be loose and superficial in our judgment of people even as we draw close to them.

Monday

In the final section of Parashat Bechukotai, the Torah presents a series of laws concerning *hekdesh* – the consecration of property. The Torah allows a person not only to consecrate an animal as a sacrifice, but also to consecrate any kind of property, which the Temple treasurer then sells and uses the money for the expenses of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. One such case described by the Torah is one who consecrates his home, which is then sold, with the money going to the Temple treasury.

The Gemara, in a well-known passage in Masekhet Bava Kama (69b), views this particular instance of *hekdesh* as a prototype for all other situations of consecrated property. Specifically, the Gemara comments, “*Ma beito bi-rshuto, af kol bi-rshuto*.” Just as one both legally owns his home and also has physical possession over his home, similarly, anything one consecrates as *hekdesh* must be legally and physically in his possession. The example given by the Gemara to illustrate this point is a stolen object. Even if the owner still anticipates recovering the object, and thus he is still the legal owner (as the thief becomes the legal owner only if and when the owner despairs), nevertheless, he cannot declare the object as *hekdesh* before it is returned to him. Since the object is not *bi-rshuto* – in his physical possession – he does not have the authority to consecrate it. Of course, the thief is also unable to consecrate the object, as he is not the legal owner. Both conditions – legal ownership and physical possession – are required for a person to be able to declare an object *hekdesh*.

Underlying this *halakha*, perhaps, is the fundamental precept that the sacrifices we make to achieve *kedusha* must be entirely our own. It is admirable to give of oneself in the pursuit of holiness, but not if this in any way comes at the expense of other people. If one seeks to donate his time, attention, energy or financial resources to “*hekdesh*,” for meaningful spiritual purposes, as we all should, he must ensure that everything he sacrifices is “*shelo u-bi’rshuto*” – entirely his. If anybody has any sort of stake in the matter, than the sacrifice is not entirely his, and it therefore loses its legitimacy. The sacrifices we make must be fully our own, and not come at the expense of other people.

Tuesday

Parashat Bechukotai begins with God’s promise of reward for fulfilling His commands, opening with the phrase, “*Im be-chukotai teileikhu*” – “If you follow My statutes.”

The *Or Ha-chayim*, remarkably, offers forty-two interpretations of this phrase, explaining why the Torah here refers to *mitzva* observance with the verb “*teileikhu*,” which literally means “walk.” One explanation builds upon *Chazal*’s famous comment, cited by Rashi, that “*Im be-chukotai teileikhu*” refers to intensive Torah study. The *Or Ha-chayim* suggests that if, indeed, this phrase speaks not of observance, but rather of learning, then “*teileikhu*” perhaps refers to Torah study while traveling. If a person makes a point of learning Torah even on the road, as he travels, he demonstrates his immense love for, and devotion to, study, which he refuses to discontinue even during travel.

The Tolna Rebbe noted that the significance of the *Or Ha-chayim*’s comment lies in its dispelling the “all-or-nothing” perspective with which we might be tempted to view Torah learning, and our religious responsibilities generally. Most people are unable to study with full intensity under circumstances of travel. The environment, as well as the sense of anxiety that often accompanies travel, make it exceedingly difficult, and, for many, impossible, to muster the kind of concentration and mental energy required to absorb complex and intricate material. Thus, when the *Or Ha-chayim* speaks of the importance of learning in circumstances of “*teileikhu*,” he likely refers to the study of light material, as opposed to the kind of intensive study that we ought to involve ourselves in under ordinary circumstances. The message conveyed, then, is that “*ameilut ba-Torah*” – intensive Torah study – includes not only rigorous learning, but also the study of light, easy material when rigorous study is not possible. The concept of “*teileikhu*,” according to this interpretation of the *Or Ha-chayim*, refers to an overarching devotion to Torah learning which includes both intensive learning when the situation allows, and lighter study when this is all that one can do.

This message applies not only to Torah learning, but to all areas of religious life. All people will inevitably encounter situations which do not allow them to maintain the high spiritual standards that they should ideally be pursuing. Whether it’s a physical condition, emotional turmoil, or a simple matter of logistics, we all find ourselves on occasion in a position where we cannot study and observe as we would ideally want. The message of “*teileikhu*” reminds us that we must do our best in any circumstance, rather than despair in light of the limitations we face. Even when we find ourselves unable to achieve our ideal goals, we should put in the effort to achieve whatever we can under the current conditions. This is how we realize the ideal of “*be-chukotai teileikhu*,” of following the Torah throughout our journey of life, doing the best we can in every situation.

Wednesday

The Torah in the beginning of Parashat Bechukotai describes the rewards God promises to grant His nation “*im be-chukotai teileikhu*” – literally, if we “walk” in accordance with His statutes.

In explaining this verse, the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 35:1) cites a verse written by King David in Sefer Tehillim (119:59), in which he proclaims, “I calculated my ways and I turned my feet toward Your testaments.” The Midrash explains: “Each and every day, I would calculate [where I should go] and say, ‘I will go to such-and-such place and to such-and-such residence,’ but my feet would bring me to synagogues and study halls.” This comment is generally understood to mean that regardless of where King David would decide to go, his feet naturally led him to institutions of prayer and study. Although he made calculated decisions of what he would do each day, he ended up learning and praying, as he was instinctively drawn to these activities. The verse “*Im be-chukotai teileikhu*” thus speaks of a level where we naturally “walk” toward God’s laws, when we are instinctively drawn to Torah study and observance even when we consider doing something else.

Alternatively, however, it might be suggested that the Midrash here says just the opposite. In the aforementioned verse in Tehillim, David says, “*ve-ashiva raglai el eidotekha*” – “I turned my feet toward Your testaments.” The implication, clearly, is not that David’s feet directed him to the houses of prayer and study, but rather that David directed his feet towards these sacred acts. Accordingly, it would seem that *Chazal* here describe David as making a calculated decision and then directing his steps based on his decision. He is saying that he had many different options of where to go and what to do, and proceeded to the houses of prayer and study only after a process of “*chishavti*,” of careful consideration to determine what his priority ought to be each day.

According to this reading, the Midrash is specifically warning against living by force of habit and inertia. It is teaching us that each day requires a new process of “*chishavti derakhai*,” a fresh calculation to determine what our priorities ought to be and which areas deserve the bulk of our attention. David “walked” only after a thorough process of “*chishavti*,” of careful thought and planning, because the urgent goals and needs of one era are not necessarily those of today. The Midrash urges us not to follow our instinctive, habitual routine, but rather to carefully think to determine what our priorities should be and act accordingly.

Thursday

Yesterday, we cited the well-known comment of the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 35:1) in interpreting the opening phrase of Parashat Bechukotai, “*Im be-chukotai teileikhu*” – “If you walk in accordance with My statutes.” The Midrash explains this verse by referencing a verse from Sefer Tehillim (119:59) in which King David proclaims, “I calculated my ways and I turned my feet toward Your testaments.” According to the Midrash, David here says about himself, “Each and every day, I would calculate [where I should go] and say, ‘I will go to such-and-such place and to such-and-such residence,’ but my feet would bring me to synagogues and study halls.” And it is to this level of religious devotion that the Torah refers when it speaks of us “walking in accordance with My statutes.”

Rav Natan Gestetner explained the Midrash’s comment as noting the contrast between the way we are to experience and relate to *mitzvot* and to our other areas of engagement. According to Rav Gestetner, King David is not saying that his legs always brought him to the synagogue and study halls, such that he never went anywhere else. Rather, David is saying that when he engaged in other activities, he needed to “calculate his ways”; his engagement was driven solely by his calculated decision that this was what he needed to be done. By contrast, when it came to prayer and Torah study, “my feet would bring me to synagogues and study halls” – he went naturally. The experience felt fully natural; this is where he felt most comfortable and most at ease. Of course, he needed to engage in a wide array of activities, tending to his own needs as well as those of the nation which he led. However, he always felt most natural and most at ease in the synagogues and study halls.

According to this reading, *Chazal* teach us that we should aspire to make Torah and *mitzvot* our most natural setting, the activity with which we feel most comfortable. Although we are of course involved in many different things, our connection to Torah must run deep enough that we can consider it our most natural and comfortable experience, even more so than our regular mundane activities.

Friday

Parashat Bechukotai begins with God’s promising reward “if You walk in accordance with My statutes, observe My commandments and perform them.” Rashi, citing *Chazal*, famously explains the opening phrase, “*Im be-chukotai teileikhu*,” as referring not to *mitzva* observance, but rather to intensive Torah study. In Rashi’s words, “*she-tiheyu ameilim ba-Torah*” – “that you toil in Torah [study].”

The [Klausenberger Rebbe](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36046&st=&pgnum=298&hilite=) suggested associating this interpretation with God’s emphasis in this verse on the observance of “**My** statutes” and “**My** commandments.” If we do not study Torah with the proper intensity, the Rebbe explained, then even if we sincerely wish to serve the Almighty, we will be unable to fulfill **His** laws; instead, we will follow our intuitive sense of what He wants us to do and how He wants us to live. Without *ameilut ba-Torah* – serious engagement in Torah learning – we will end up fulfilling “our” *mitzvot*, practices that we come up with on our own, as opposed to the true will of God. The Rebbe adds that for this reason the verse concludes, “*va-asitem* ***otam***” – “and you perform **them**.” The emphasis here is on the actual *mitzvot*, the values and laws that God truly wants us to uphold, in contrast to the values and laws that we might devise and then presume to reflect the divine will. Serious engagement in Torah study is necessary to ensure that we understand what God truly wants of us, so we do not determine our values and the proper mode of conduct based on our own intuition or foreign value systems, and instead follow the authentic will of our Creator.

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