

Toiling In Torah

This week's parsha Bechukosai begins, "Im Bechukosai teileichu (if you will go in My statutes)," which can't mean, if you keep My mitzvos, because the verse continues, "v'es mitzvosai tishmoru (and you will keep My mitzvos)." So what does "Bechukosai teileichu" mean? Rashi cites the words of the Sifra, that it means "That you should toil in (the study of) Torah."

Bechukosai comes from the word chok, or in plural chukim, which I translated "statutes," for lack of a better word. A chok is a mitzvah that we don't know the reason for, it's a decree from Hashem, we do it just because He wants us to, and for no other reason. As our sages say, "a chok... you don't have permission to ponder about (its reason)."

It would make sense for mitzvos to be Bechukosai, because then we would say that it means, that even though we know the reason for the mitzvos we should do them as if they are chukim, just because Hashem wants us to. That is a greater way of doing mitzvos.

However, Torah study is meant to be understood. How does it make sense for Torah study to be done in a way of "Bechukosai"?

Perhaps the reading of the written Torah, which doesn't have to be understood in order to say the blessing over its study, but you can hardly use the word toil to describe its study. On the other hand, the oral Torah must be understood in order to say a blessing over its study. Also, the written Torah is small and limited, while the oral Torah is vast and unlimited and it grows every day by diligent students of the Talmud, Halacha, etc. So only with regards to the oral Torah can we say, "That you should toil in (the study of) Torah." So what is the meaning of the word "Bechukosai" with regards to Torah study?

The Alter Rebbe explains that Bechukosai is related to the word chakika, which means engraved. In other words, one should toil in Torah study to the extent that it becomes engraved in him.

What is the difference between engraving and writing?

When you write on paper, the ink attaches to the paper and they become one. However it is not truly one, rather it is two things that are attached to each other.

On the other hand, when you engrave into stone, the words and the stone are truly one, the words are not an entity of their own, there is only the stone.

The lesson here is that our goal shouldn't be merely to learn Torah in a way that it is like two entities that are attached to one another, rather the Torah study should nullify him to the extent that he doesn't exist, only the Torah exists.

One person who reached this level is Moshe Rabbeinu. That is why he was able to say, "And I will put grass in your field for your cattle." What it means, is that Hashem would put grass... Why was he able to say "I"? Because he was so nullified before Hashem that "The Divine Presence spoke from within (Moshe's) throat," In other words, to Moshe there was only Hashem, Moshe didn't exist.

Another person who reached this level was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who said, "I have seen people who are at the highest level... If there is one it is me, if there are two..." Even though a Tzadik shouldn't say his own praises, but no one saw his statement that way, because he was so nullified before Hashem, that there was only Hashem. He was nullified to the point that he didn't exist.

When there are multiple explanations on a word, they have to be connected in some way. How do we reconcile the explanation of the Alter Rebbe, that it means engraved, and the simple meaning, that it means mitzvos which are chukim? How do we learn Torah in a way of chukim, accepting the yoke of Heaven?

One has to understand what he is learning, but he is not learning that way for his own pleasure, rather because Hashem wants us to.

Torah is a pleasure to learn, but if he only learns the amount that gives him pleasure, it's not in the way of chukim, it's not accepting the yoke of Heaven and it's not toiling. Only when he learned as much as gives him pleasure, and then he pushes himself to learn more, that it is considered Torah in the way of chukim, accepting the yoke and toiling. This kind of Torah study brings him to the self nullification in the way of chakika, engraved, one with Hashem.

We are left with a question. It says, "Im Bechukosai teileichu (if you will go in my statutes)," We have to understand how the word teileichu fits in here, because teileichu means to go or to travel. In our service to Hashem, it means not to be stagnant, to constantly reach higher and higher levels. It makes sense to say it about things you can develop, like the emotions and the mind. You can develop more mature emotions, your love can grow greater and greater. The mind can be developed and broadened to understand more and deeper. However, chukim means doing something in the way of accepting the yoke of Heaven. When it comes to accepting the yoke of Heaven, there are no levels, you either do or don't. What does teileichu in accepting the yoke of Heaven mean?

The Alter Rebbe explains that the reward for acting in the way of Bechukosai, accepting the yoke of Heaven, is teileichu, taken higher and higher without end. However when we teach children this verse, the reward is in the following verses, where Hashem enumerates all the blessings, "I will give your rain in its time..." And teileichu refers to the service of the Jewish people to Hashem.

The Alter Rebbe tells us that emuna, belief, is for levels of G-dliness that is beyond your ability to understand. The levels that you understand, you don't need belief for. The higher one's ability to understand, what is beyond him is even greater. So his emuna has to be at a higher level. Being that every day his mind develops and is able to grasp

loftier ideas, what he needed emuna for yesterday, makes sense today. Therefore he doesn't need emuna for them. Now he needs emuna for even higher levels of G-dliness. And it is a never ending cycle, always attaining higher and higher levels.

From this we can understand that when it comes to chukim there are also levels, and movement in the way of teileichu, because yesterday's mitzvos which were chukim, today is understood and now there are higher levels within chukim, so in chukim there is the possibility of teileichu, going higher and higher.

May we go from strength to strength in our Torah study, going to a higher level every day. Through this we will merit to learn the Torah of Moshiach, which will take us higher than we could imagine. May it happen soon.

Jewish Beauty

Baruch Hashem, I am here to see my daughter Fruma get engaged, and to a wonderful bochur, from a wonderful family.

Mazal Tov to the Karpes and the Glicks, and to the Hurwitzes and Berkowitzes, Baruch Hashem, this is a match made in heaven. And now, if there was someone in Lubavitch that you weren't related to yet, you can be certain that you are now.

You are getting engaged in the week of Behar-Bechukosai.

You may ask, what does Behar-Bechukosai have to do with shidduchim?

The last Mishnah of maseches Taanis, talks about shidduchim. It tells about Tu B'Av, when the eligible girls of Yerushalayim would dress in white and dance in the Vineyards. They would say to the boys, "Bochur, lift up your eyes and see, what will you choose for yourself? Don't look at beauty, look at family. Charm is false and beauty is futile, a woman who is G-d-fearing is to be praised."

The Rebbe asks, "Was it possible, that every maiden in Yerushalayim came from a good family, that she would be able to say, look at my family?"

The question becomes stronger, when you see what the Talmud says next. It brings a beraisa that details what exactly the young ladies said. The pretty ones said, "look at beauty." The ones with yichus said, "look at family." The homely ones said, "take your pick for the sake of heaven."

The beraisa seems to be contradicting the Mishnah, the Mishnah seems to put everyone in one boat, "look at family," but the beraisa says that they said details. Also, it seems very vain and shallow of the pretty ones, to say, "look at beauty." Is that a Jewish value? And how does it fit with the wholesome message of the Mishnah, that "Charm is false and beauty is futile?"

There are two approaches when it comes to viewing the qualities of a person. You can take a general view of a person, or you can look at the details.

In the general view, you see a Jewish girl, a daughter of our matriarchs, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah, who inherited their beautiful qualities. Even though they might be hidden at the moment, you know that they are there, and that eventually they will surely surface. The Mishnah is talking about this general view, that is why it says, "Lift up your eyes and see," because he is taking a general view. And when it says, "Charm is false and beauty is futile," it is referring to shallow beauty and shallow Charm.

The beraisa is talking about a detailed view, after he already has seen the general view. The girls of Yerushalayim are talking about meaningful Jewish virtues. Why is she beautiful, because she took the beautiful inheritance that she got from Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah, and made them her own. Therefore, she is truly beautiful on the inside, and when you are beautiful on the inside, it comes out on the outside, that is Jewish beauty worth mentioning. That is not false and not futile.

In other words, if you accept the gifts that are your inheritance and make them your own, then the details have value. Real beauty and real family in the light of Torah, in the light of Yiddishkeit, and Chassidus. However, if you only have the details without making the inheritance your own, it is empty beauty, false and futile.

This brings us to Behar-Bechukosai. Behar is a mountain, tall, strong and beautiful, it is the details. Bechukosai is our essence, our inheritance, the Torah. If you make the Bechukosai, the Torah your own, then the Behar, the details are of value. But if you only have the Behar, the details, it is a pretty rock, with no Yiddishe taam and no Jewish value.

We are blessed to have Fruma and Levi, who have it all. They know where they come from, the Karpas the Glicks the Hurwitzes and the Berkowitzes, who have amazing virtues, they are honest, kind, giving, talented, strong, learned, smart and chassidish, to name a few. And you both are internalizing them. It is wonderful to see such an amazing couple coming together, just keep it up. Make Hashem proud, and the Rebbe proud, and you will certainly make us and all klal Yisrael proud.

And to my Fruma, you come from a long line of great, smart, kind, and strong women, who made a difference. I see that in you. Take a lesson from your mother and from Levi's mother, who are both truly beautiful because they internalized it. And since they are beautiful on the inside, they are beautiful on the outside as well.

You have it in you to be like them and even better.

Mazal Tov! Mazal Tov!

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Haftora: Strength Trust Hope And Healing

The Haftora for parshas Bechukosai (and Behar-Bechukosai when they are together), is from the book of Yirmyahu. In it you will find a prayer, prophecy, words of rebuke and warning about not putting our trust in Hashem and not keeping the

sabbatical years. But you also find words of hope, trust in Hashem, and healing.

The connection to our parsha(s), is that Bechukosai (and Behar-Bechukosai) speaks of the sabbatical year, that we can trust that Hashem will provide for us in the years that our fields lay fallow. Blessing will be showered upon us for trusting in Hashem and keeping the sabbatical years, and punishment for not keeping them.

The Haftora begins with Yirmyahu saying, "Hashem is my strength and my stronghold, and my refuge in times of trouble." The opening words of the Haftora, in essence, is the central message of the Haftora. Hashem is always there for us, especially in times of trouble, all we need to do, is trust in Him.

Of course the consequences for not trusting in Hashem is clearly defined in the Haftora. When we put our trust in people or in ourselves, thinking that it is my abilities and strength that will take care of me, and we forget that everything we have and will have is from Hashem, we will inevitably fail.

The Haftora describes this with the words, "Cursed is the man (gever), who puts his trust in man (adam) , relying on (mortal) flesh for strength, and turns his heart away from Hashem." The basic meaning of the verse is understood, that putting our trust in man is futile. But why does the verse use two different names, gever and adam, to say "man?"

Gever refers to physical and emotional strength of man. Adam refers to the intelligent and spiritual makeup of man.

The verse is telling us a deeper message here. When someone thinks that his gever, his emotional strength, comes from his "adam," his intellect and because he has a great soul. It becomes a slippery slope. Eventually he will be "relying on flesh for strength," meaning, that he will convince himself that his emotional strength comes because he has a highly refined body. He thinks so highly of his body and soul, that he doesn't think that he needs

to work on himself. He becomes locked in his ego, and he "turns his heart away from Hashem."

This teaches us that even one who is learned and at a high spiritual level has to continue working on himself to get closer to Hashem.

When he thinks that he has reached the top and he doesn't have to work on himself anymore, he is locking himself away from Hashem, and he is alone by his own doing.

The Haftora continues, "Blessed is the man who puts his trust in Hashem, and Hashem will be his trustee. And he will be like a tree planted by the water, who sends its roots into the rivulet, it is not affected when the heat comes and its leaves remain green, it doesn't worry in a year of famine, and it doesn't stop producing fruit."

The contrast here is clear, putting our trust in Hashem and recognizing that it is all from Him, is a path to continuous growth and blessing in our lives.

The Haftora continues to say that it is silly to think, "who will know" where my trust is? Hashem knows! Or to be dishonest, because it will be found out, you will lose the dishonest gain and "you will be (exposed) as a scoundrel."

Now the Haftora concludes, "Hashem is Israel's hope, all who abandon You will be ashamed, those who turn away from Me will be inscribed into the earth, because they abandoned the source of living waters, Havaya (Hashem). Heal me and I will heal, save me and I will be saved, because You are my praise."

Why does it call our connection with Hashem, the source of living waters? How does the second verse about healing and saving fit in? Why the double expression, heal me and I will heal, save me and I will be saved? How do the words "because you are my praise" fit in this verse?

We have to realize that Hashem is our hope, and when we forget that, it is separating ourselves from the source of living waters, which is a spiritual

illness. That is where the second verse comes in, it is explaining the process of healing this spiritual illness through Teshuva.

First, we have to understand what the illness is and then it can be healed. The illness is understood through the metaphor of "abandoning the source of living waters."

Living waters is another name for a natural spring of fresh water. Spring water goes through three stages after it comes out of its source. The first stage is flowing down the stream or river to the sea. In this stage the water is revealed. In the second stage the water flows underground in various channels making its way to the spring. In this stage the water is hidden. The final stage is when it breaks out of the ground, again revealed. These three stages signify the stages of Hashem's creative energy coming into the world, from his name Havaya, the source.

The first kind of existence is in the spiritual realm known in Kabbalistic teaching as the world of Briya (Creation). Being that it is the first step of creation *ex nihilo* (from nothing to something), it is full of G-dliness, therefore, the existence isn't a complete existence. The angels of the world of Briya, called Serafim, are angels of great wisdom. Since they experience their source, Havaya, they are totally nullified in His presence. They therefore say, "Holy holy holy Havaya of hosts." They also understand that our part is the most important, as we fill the world with G-dliness by learning Torah and doing mitzvahs. And so they say, "the whole Earth is full of His glory." Since Briya is filled with G-dliness, the experience in that world is a revealed one, just like the river going to the sea.

The second realm is the world of Yetzira (Formation). In this world the existence is a total existence, it doesn't experience Havaya, because it is creating something from something. Its source is totally hidden, therefore the experience in the world of Yetzira is hidden.

The final realm is where we are, the world of Assiya (Action). As mentioned earlier, our job is to reveal

G-dliness down here through learning Torah and doing mitzvahs. The revelation that we can accomplish is far greater than the world of Briya, because mitzvahs are rooted in a higher place, in the source itself, prior to Briya, in Hashem's essence. So the experience in Assiya, is of the essence of Havaya breaking out and being revealed in the world.

By studying Torah and doing mitzvahs, we are not only drawing living waters, but we are drawing from the source of living waters, Hashem's essence prior to existence. And we fill the world with this great revelation, greater than any angel could.

When a Jewish person has fallen to a spiritual low, where he is not learning Torah and doing mitzvahs, he has abandoned the source of living waters. He is spiritually ill.

How does he become healed? Hashem takes the first step, "Heal me Hashem," an inspiration from above. Now that he is inspired, his job is to do Teshuva from his own effort, "and I will heal." And in this way he reconnects with the source.

How far will this connection go? That is where the praise comes in. Praise is an amazing thing. When you praise someone, you bring out strengths and abilities in that person, that are hidden inside, that he never knew he had. Praise is even more powerful, it could bring new strengths and abilities which are beyond the person being praised. By praising Hashem, we are able to draw G-dliness from a place beyond our abilities. Not only do we reconnect, but we connect deeper than we could have imagined.

Writing this article was very meaningful to me, because it is about Hashem being our strength and refuge, and it is about trust, hope in Hashem and healing. Somehow, writing about these things strengthens these ideas in me and I am grateful.

By putting our hope and trust in Hashem, He becomes our strength, our refuge, and the One we can rely on. We bring blessing in our lives and

spiritual healing, which brings physical healing beyond anything we could imagine.

May we all find the strength to weather this exile and overcome every challenge, knowing that Hashem is always with us. And may we merit the coming of Moshiach soon. The time has come.

Your Speech Has The Power To Change You

In this week's parsha, Bechukosai, we read that the Jewish people will confess their iniquity and their fathers' iniquity. In the next verse it says, that Hashem will bring them into the land of their enemies. It would seem, that after we admit our wrongdoings, Hashem would take us to the Promised Land.

What is the purpose of taking us to the land of our enemies, especially, when in the narrative, we are already in the land of our enemies? What good does admitting our mistakes do for us? How can we apply this to our lives?

These verses, come towards the end of a section, which is filled with the consequences for not keeping the Torah and mitzvahs. We refuse, because of our stubbornness, not willing to open our hearts to accept Hashem's Torah and mitzvahs wholeheartedly, and of our own will. It is only as a result of the suffering we endure, that we admit our wrongdoing. It is like saying, "I realize that it wasn't worth doing those things." It is not a wholehearted confession, with the resolve to change. This kind of confession, doesn't grant forgiveness. Yet the Torah calls it a confession, so it must have some value.

Speech is powerful, the words we say has an affect on the people who hear it, and on the one speaking. In the case of confession, after repenting and making a commitment not to do it again. It helps to say it out loud, as your words will add strength to your commitment. Also, when one recognizes that he sinned, putting what he has done to words, will cause him to regret what he did. Even in our case, where his admission is half

hearted, it still has some good effect. What it does is bring you to the next step.

Hashem says, "... and I will bring them into the land of their enemies." The key words here are, "and I will bring them," meaning, that now Hashem will be more involved. As Rashi explains, that this is a good thing, because Hashem will send his prophets, to bring us closer to Him. This will bring us to true remorse, and forgiveness.

This all came to pass during the Babylonian Exile, bringing us back to the land of Israel for the Second Temple Era. However, when Moshiach comes, the Rambam says, that we will repent and immediately be redeemed. This is because, we will return to Hashem of our own free will, and not because the pressure of the exile.

This is true in our relationships. When you do something wrong, the best thing is to admit your wrongdoing, commit to change your ways, and to ask for forgiveness. But for some, this pill may be to hard to swallow, either because of stubbornness or some other reason. This is when admitting, that it wasn't worth it becomes a stepping stone, to rebuilding the relationship. Working on it Together, with counseling, you will only get closer and earn forgiveness.

It is my hope, that soon we will experience returning to Hashem of our own free will, and immediately be redeemed.

Who Do You Think You Are

In this week's parsha, Bechukosai, we read, how being in exile, Hashem will remember the promise He made with our forefathers. "And I will remember My covenant with Yaakov and also My covenant with Yitzchak and also My covenant with Avraham..."

Why is the order of our forefathers reversed? First should be Avraham the oldest, then Yitzchak his son and finally Yaakov.

Sometimes it seems that all great people lived in the past. We feel that we are not so holy but our grandparents were holy. "How could I be expected to be great? How could small me make a difference?"

By reversing the order, the Torah is telling us, that though our grandparents were great, we possess qualities and abilities that they did not. If we tap into our G-d given strengths, we can accomplish wonderful things. We can be great as well.

You may then ask, who am I to aspire for greatness?

One of the qualities Yaakov had over Avraham, was that he was the descendant of great and holy people. Yaakov was born great, all he needed to do was to reveal what he already was.

You too descend from Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. You don't have to aspire for greatness, you were born that way. All you need to do is reveal who you are.

When I was diagnosed with ALS and losing my ability to walk, talk, sing, dance, play the guitar, teach etc., I was faced with a dilemma: What purpose is there for me? What is there for me to accomplish? What difference can I possibly make?

The answer became clear with the outpouring of love all around me. I saw how wonderful you all are and witnessed greatness from the most unexpected places. It dawned upon me that if my crisis brought out greatness in others, perhaps if I dig deep I will find some way to make a difference too. I was pleasantly surprised to find that there were still ways for me to make a difference and what more, even greater than before.

You are greater than you think. Go make a difference.

Dedicated to the memory of Ita bas Shlomo Bistrizky, a woman of valor and mother of a great family.