

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Ki Tavo

Life, Mitzvos and the Pursuit of Happiness

תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר לֹא עֲבַדְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְטוֹב לֵבָב מְרֹב כֹּל

Because you did not serve Hashem, your God, through joy and goodness of heart, from an abundance of everything (28:47)

These words, which appear in the middle of the curses of the *Tochachah* in our parsha, are the Torah's explanation as to why those curses will come upon the Jewish people. The common approach to this pasuk is to read the words "you did not serve Hashem, you God, through joy and goodness of heart" as one phrase. In this understanding, the pasuk states although the people are in fact serving Hashem, they are not doing so out of joy; and the message is that even Divine service that is performed, but without joy, is cause for curse and calamity.

However, the Meshech Chochmah takes a different approach. In his understanding, the words "you did not serve Hashem" are a self-contained phrase, and refer to the people actually abandoning Torah and mitzvos. The ensuing words, "through joy and goodness of heart, from an abundance of everything" are stated in explanation as to *why* they abandoned the mitzvos. Their focus on attaining happiness through obtaining as much material blessing as they can diverts their attention from serving Hashem. That is cause for calamity.

In fact, the matter goes further. The full tragedy described in this pasuk is that not only is abandoning the mitzvos due to the pursuit of happiness morally unacceptable, it is also flawed in its own terms, for it reflects an approach to attaining happiness which cannot succeed. The words "through happiness and goodness of heart from an abundance of everything" reflect the belief that happiness will come through amassing many possessions – an endeavor which then enlists all of a person's time and energy. This is a tragic error, for ultimately, happiness comes not from the quantity of things that a person owns, from a quality that exists within the person himself – the quality of contentment. As Chazal have stated in Pirkei Avos:¹ "Who is rich, he who is happy with his portion."

¹ 4:1.

This, then, is the message of the pasuk: Happiness and goodness of heart do not come from having an abundance of everything. Rather, having an abundance of everything comes from happiness and goodness of heart.

Moreover, not only will absorbing this basic truth free a person from the endless and futile exercise of amassing more and more wealth, thereby allowing him to devote the time to mitzvos that they deserve, it will also lead him to greater happiness. The highest level of happiness is when a person realizes that his needs are provided for by Hashem Himself, as the pasuk states earlier in our Parsha:² “וְשִׂמְחָתָּ בְּכֹל הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ” –And you shall rejoice in all the good that Hashem ,your God ,has given You “.The words “That Hashem ,your God ,has given you “are not there merely for informational value. Awareness that the good one enjoys was provided by Hashem is itself the cause for joy. When a person attains this understanding ,the pursuit of happiness at its truest and most profound level will actually strengthen his involvement in Torah and mitzvos ,leading him away from a path of calamity – toward the highest blessing.

A Heart to Know and Eyes to See

וְלֹא נָתַן ה' לָכֶם לֵב לְדַעַת וְעֵינַיִם לְרִאֹת וְאָזְנוֹיִם לְשִׁמֹּעַ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה

And Hashem did not give you a heart to know or eyes to see or ears to hear until this day (29:3)

The preceding pasuk (pasuk 2) discusses the wonders which the Jewish people beheld in Mitzrayim, while the pasuk that follows (pasuk 4) describes the wonders which accompanied them during their forty years in the midbar. Our pasuk states that Hashem “did not give the Jewish people the heart to know etc. until this day.” The Meshech Chochmah explains that the phrase “until this day” means “up to and including this day”! Why did the Jewish people at the end of their sojourn on the midbar still not have “a heart to know,” and when was this expected to change?

The wonders in Mitzrayim and the midbar do not represent the ideal mode of existence for the Jewish people. With Hashem’s Providence so plainly manifest as it was in those places – between the miraculous Exodus from Mitzrayim, to the manna from heaven and the water from Miriam’s well etc. – one did not need a knowing heart or seeing eyes to recognize that Hashem controls the world. The role of those formative years was to instill these messages within the consciousness of the Jewish people so that they could enter with them into Eretz Yisrael and be guided by them as they would become involved in more earthly and temporal pursuits. That would represent the ultimate Torah existence in this world, and it is *there* that they would need “hearts to know and eyes to see” so that they not lose sight of these fundamental truths even as they encounter and deal with the forces of nature. Those forces are what Chazal refer to as the “Heavenly Assembly”

2 26:11.

when they say that when the Jewish people fulfill Hashem's will, they increase power in the Heavenly Assembly. This means that when the people are guided by Torah values and principles even as they engage in the physical world, Hashem send blessing through the forces of nature to bring about material plenty and success.

This is the meaning of the concluding words of pasuk 5: "לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם" – In order that you shall know that I am Hashem, your God." Of the two names mentioned, the first name – the *Shem Havaya* (יהוה-יה) – refers to Hashem as the Performer of miracles, while the second name – "Elokim" – refers to Hashem as the Controller of nature. The pasuk is thus stating that the role of the forty years in the midbar was to instill within the people the realization that Hashem, the Performers of miracles which violate the rules of nature, is also "Elokim" who guides those very rules when they are being preserved.