

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת עקב

והיה עקב תשמעון את המשפטים האלה ושמרתם ועשיתם אתם ושמר ה' אלקיך
לך את הברית ואת החסד אשר נשבע לאבתך

“It will be when you hearken to these ordinances and you observe and perform them; Hashem, your G-d, will safeguard for you the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers” (7:12)

Rashi explains that עקב literally means “heel,” teaching that the reward described in the following pesukim is promised to those who keep mitzvos which people normally ignore and “step on with their heels.” The Yalkut Maamarim says that this also includes mitzvos which people are careful to fulfill but which they do not perform with the correct intent. Some mitzvos, such as tefillin and davening, are frequently done haphazardly without any thought being given to the meaning what one is doing or saying. It is important to focus on those mitzvos and be sure to understand what it is that we are doing in each aspect of our Avodas Hashem. In doing so, we will earn the great reward outlined in the beginning of the parsha.

וזכרת את כל הדרך אשר הוליכך ה' אלקיך זה ארבעים שנה במדבר למען ענתך
לנסתך לדעת את אשר בלבבך התשמר מצותו אם לא

“You shall remember the entire road on which Hashem, your G-d, led you these forty years in the wilderness so as to afflict you, to test you, to know what is in your heart, whether you would observe his commandments or not” (8:2)

The word מצותו is spelled in singular form but is pronounced as a plural. What is the meaning of this? R' Nissan Alpert gives an explanation based on a Gemara in Makkos 24a which described how different prophets attempted to consolidate the 613 mitzvos into a handful of categories. The purpose of this, writes the Maharsha, was because people were becoming demoralized at the thought of how many mitzvos there were and that there were so many that could not be accomplished by every individual at all times. The prophets therefore chose a few of the 613 which could be done

in any time or place for people to focus on and that would help them accomplish more mitzvos.

The Gemara shows how the number of categories slowly decreased over time until Chavakuk put all the 613 mitzvos into one single category: belief in Hashem. He said that all the mitzvos boil down to belief in Hashem because this one key mitzvah is the springboard to fulfill all the rest of the mitzvos. Once a person believes in Hashem, he accepts all the other mitzvos that Hashem commanded. The Maharsha cites a posuk from Tehillim (119:86) as proof: כל מצותיך אמונה, all your mitzvos are “emunah.” Emunah is really the one and most important mitzvah. Thus, the many mitzvos referred to in the posuk are spelled as if there is really only one mitzvah to hint to this idea that there is really just one mitzvah which serves as the foundation for all the others.

ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את ה' אלקיך על הארץ הטובה אשר נתן לך
“You will eat and you will be satisfied and you will bless Hashem, your G-d, on the good land that He gave you” (8:10)

Why is there an obligation to bless Hashem? Does Hashem need our blessing? Rabbeinu Bachya and the Sefer HaChinuch provide the same answer to this question. Hashem is the source of all blessing in the world and everything in the world was called into existence by Him, the primary cause of all existence. Without Hashem, nothing could exist. We do not recite blessings because Hashem needs them, but because through them we express our recognition that we receive food from Him alone. We show our belief that Hashem causes produce to grow and enables it to sustain us and that Hashem’s providence guides our daily life. It is our recognition of Hashem as the source of all blessings. When we express that, we will be blessed from Him. The Sefer HaChinuch concludes that someone who is careful to always recite Birchas HaMazon after eating will be blessed with an honorable livelihood for all his days.

ובני ישראל נסעו מבארת בני יעקן מוסרה שם מת אהרן ויקבר שם ויכהן אלעזר
בנו תחתיו

“The Children of Israel journeyed from Be’eros Bnei Ya’akan to Moserah, there Aharon died and he was buried there and Elazar his son ministered in his place” (10:6)

How could the posuk say that Aharon died in Moserah if we know that he died at Hor HaHar? Rashi explains that when Aharon died, the special protective clouds disappeared and the people were frightened. They traveled backwards in an attempt to return to Egypt until, at Moserah, the Leviim were able to force them back in the right direction. Since they ended up at Moserah after Aharon’s death, it is considered as if he had died there.

R’ Nissan Alpert suggests a different answer based on the following story: There once was a rabbi who interviewed for a position in a certain city and was told that R’ Akiva Eiger, the Taz and the Magen Avraham were all buried there. This impressed him and convinced him to take the job. After he arrived, he found out that this was false information and he became very upset that he had been duped. The people told him that their words were not actually false because people in that town were not learning the Torah of those great tzadikim and it was as if they were being buried in that city. Similarly, Aharon’s teachings and values were ignored when the people wanted to go back to Egypt. When they turned around and headed back to Moserah, it was as if they were burying Aharon there by not listening to what he had taught them during his lifetime.

כי ה' אלקיכם הוא אלקי האלהים ואדני האדנים הקל הגדל הגבר והנורא אשר לא
ישא פנים ולא יקח שחד

“For Hashem, your G-d – He is G-d of the powers and the Lord of the lords, the great, mighty and awesome G-d who does not show favor and who does not accept a bribe” (10:17)

What does it mean that Hashem does not take a bribe? The Ramban here and the Rambam at the end of Perek 4 of Avos say that when a person does many mitzvos and also has few aveiros, the mitzvos do not cancel out the aveiros. The person will be rewarded for his good deeds and punished for his bad deeds. No deed, good or bad, goes unpaid. In the end of the fifth chapter of Mesillas Yesharim, the Ramchal explains that Hashem’s truthfulness and justice does not allow for any action to be overlooked.

There is a concept of teshuva which overrides the strict letter of the law and enables one to erase his wrongdoings. However, everything counts and nothing is automatically forgotten just because a person is mostly good. Hashem does not accept additional good deeds as a bribe to overlook some bad ones.

ושמתם את דברי אלה על לבבכם ועל נפשכם וקשרתם אתם לאות על ידכם והיו לטוטפת בין עיניכם: ולמדתם אתם את בניכם לדבר בם בשבתך בביתך ובלכתך בדרך ובשכבך ובקומך

“You shall place these words of Mine upon your heart and upon your soul, you shall bind them for a sign upon your arm and let them be an ornament between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children to discuss them while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you retire and when you arise” (11:18-19)

To explain the sequence of these pesukim, the Alshich writes that in order for Torah to be taught properly, it has to first penetrate the heart of the teacher. When this happens, all his teachings will make an impression on the student and penetrate his heart as well. On the other hand, if the Torah is merely external for the teacher, it will be that way with the student too. That is why the posuk first instructs us to place the words of the Torah upon our heart and only then to teach Torah to our children. Then, when absorbed properly by the teacher first, his lessons will remain with the student even when the teacher is sitting at home and on the road. Even without the teacher’s presence and without his prompting, the students will remain connected to the Torah.

The context of these pesukim is specifically regarding a father teaching Torah to his son. If we want the Torah to make an indelible impression on our children, we must follow the sequence of the pesukim and internalize Torah ourselves first. The mitzvah of chinuch begins before a person has children. It is important to work on oneself so that when it comes time to educate his children, his teachings will be effective.

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