



Partners In Torah

San Diego-Los Angeles-Venutra

Take home Dvar Torah

תשפ"ד Parshat Bechukotai

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Hello, Welcome!

**Partners In Torah is a community-wide,
independent and inclusive adult education program
focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by
studying text most interesting to each participant.**

**Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week,
friendships are forged between
mentors and mentees.**

Partners in Torah

***has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of
wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until
now, lacked access.***

Thank you for joining us!

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.

In Parshat *Bechukotai*, Hashem promises the Jewish people a list of eleven blessings comprising every possible benefit in the world:

1. The rains will fall in their proper times
2. The land will give its produce and the trees will yield their fruits
3. The threshing will last until the vintage and the vintage will last until the sowing
4. You will eat your bread until you are satisfied
5. You will have peace and security in your land
6. No one will frighten you and no wild beasts will enter the land
7. No sword will even pass through your land
8. You will pursue your enemies and they will fall by your swords
9. You will be fruitful and multiply
10. You will eat old grain, and have to remove the old to make way for the new crops
11. I will walk among you, I will be Hashem unto you and you will be My people – everybody will see you as a Godly nation.

Quite a list! And what do we have to do to deserve all of this? Rashi tells us (Leviticus 27:3). ***If you toil in the Torah*** שתהיו עמלים בתורה

What does *Toil in the Torah* mean? How does one do that? And what is the causal connection between working hard in Torah and the wave of blessings that will follow?

The Midrash Tanchuma (Noach 3) answers this question.

לפי שלא כרת הקב"ה ברית עם ישראל אלא על התורה שבע"פ שנאמר, כי על פי הדברים האלה כרתי אתך ברית (שמות ל"ד). ואמרו חז"ל, לא כתב הקב"ה בתורה למען הדברים האלה ולא בעבור הדברים האלה ולא בגלל הדברים אלא ע"פ הדברים, וזו היא תורה שבע"פ שהיא קשה ללמוד ויש בה צער גדול, שהוא משולה לחשך שנאמר, העם ההולכים בחשך ראו אור גדול (ישעיה ט). אלו בעלי התלמוד שראו אור גדול שהקב"ה מאיר עיניהם באיסור והיתר בטמא ובטהור

Hashem made a covenant with the Jewish people only over the Oral Torah... because it is very difficult to learn and there is much pain in studying it. It is compared to darkness as it says, "the nation that went in the darkness, saw a great light." This refers to people who study the Talmud who saw a great light because Hashem opened their eyes so they could see the correct ruling regarding what is permissible versus what is forbidden, and what is unclean versus what is clean.

Every student of the Talmud regardless of his level, upon approaching a new *sugya* (topic) in the Talmud experiences what this Midrash describes. Initially, you feel like you are in a pitch-black room groping for something that makes sense to you. Questions crop up left, right, and center plunging you deeper and deeper into the darkness, causing much distress and anguish. How does one make sense of this? You just can't figure it out. "I know it's supposed to make sense! Why can't I get it? What is wrong with me?" You study the classic commentaries, viz, the *Rashba*, the *Ritva*, the *Ramban*, and the *Meiri*, looking for clues and insights into the *sugya*. Slowly, after much thought, hard work, deliberation, and discussion with others, answers to what seemed to be impossible questions begin to emerge. After more thought and deliberation, you begin to see how the answers complement each other and coalesce to form one brilliant crystal-clear picture of the matter. Hashem has opened your eyes and let you see that clear and brilliant picture, and, when that happens, there is no sweeter moment in the world. You feel as if you have just received a kiss on the cheek from

Hashem as He has allowed you to catch a glimpse of His brilliant Torah. As you look back at the process through which you just went, you realize that the questions that perplexed you so mightily were the very tools that you needed to reach the deep underlying concepts and parameters of the matter at hand.

This process of breaking your head and taxing every one of your intellectual abilities to understand an idea or concept of Hashem's Torah constitutes עמלות בתורה - *toiling in Torah*. To Hashem, this is the most precious endeavor in which a Jewish person can engage because it reveals how important it is to us, to know a nugget of Hashem's Torah and what we are prepared to go through to get it.

Indeed, this is the only possible way to gain understanding of Hashem's Torah. The Talmud (Megillah 6b) says:

ואמר רבי יצחק, אם יאמר לך אדם יגעתי ולא מצאתי אל תאמן, לא יגעתי ומצאתי אל תאמן, יגעתי ומצאתי תאמן, הני מילי בדברי תורה אבל במשא ומתן, סייעתא הוא מן שמיא.

Rabbi Yitzchak said, "If someone tells you, 'I toiled but I didn't find the answer,' don't believe him (He really didn't toil). If he says, 'I didn't toil, but I found the answer,' don't believe him (He didn't really find the answer, or the question wasn't really a question). If he says, 'I toiled and I found the answer,' believe him. This applies only to Torah, but as far as business is concerned, it depends on Hashem's help."

Why did Rabbi Yitzchak use the word "מציאה - found" in reference to arriving at the answer? A מציאה - a "find" is not something you expect, or go looking for. If you are lucky, you happen upon it unexpectedly. Similarly, one doesn't go into his garage and say, "Oh look! I found my car

in the garage!” That’s not a “find” because that’s where your car should be.

Rabbi Yitzchak is merely describing the reality because there is no natural cause and effect that brings the answer forth from the toil. The answer that finally arrives is a total gift from Hashem; He has decided that you have toiled enough, and He gives you the answer like a bolt of lightning. This is why it is so sweet. You know that you didn’t think of that great answer by yourself. All you did was try to understand it and Hashem put the thought into your mind.

Toiling in Torah is not the exclusive domain of the great Rabbis, Torah scholars, Kollel men and Yeshiva students. Any person, on any level, who strains his mind to clearly understand a word of Torah is toiling in Torah.

If the entire Jewish nation would choose to learn Torah for the sake of knowing Hashem’s Torah, and toil in it as required, Hashem promises all the blessings in the world. He will take care of all of our physical needs, and we will have absolute utopia so that we can dedicate ourselves completely to toiling in Torah. Indeed, the more Torah learned, the better off the world is.

There are many aspects of Torah, and in whatever aspect one toils, he brings blessing to the world.

When one has toiled in the Torah and comes up with conclusions and laws that were never brought to light before, what is the status of that Torah? For example, as medicine and science have so rapidly advanced, scholars have had to decide the halachic status of a myriad of complex medical questions that never previously existed, or of situations or inventions that were never before even contemplated.

Organ transplants, for example, are now commonplace and considered safe. The issue, though, is that since one may not willingly injure himself, is he permitted to undergo surgery to donate a kidney to a person in need of one? Conversely, maybe someone with healthy kidneys is *obligated* to donate a kidney? What does the Torah say about this?

It is now possible to fly from Detroit Metro (DTW) to China's Shanghai International Airport (PVG), non-stop in 15 hours. Shanghai is 12 hours ahead of us, and when you add the 15-hour flight time, one arrives in Shanghai the next day three hours later than he left. Let's say he took off from DTW Sunday evening at 7:00PM on a summer day when sunset is at 9:00PM, which is 7:00AM Monday morning in Shanghai. He will land in PVG at 10:00PM on Monday night. He will be travelling in the direction of the sun, so it will be light the entire way there. What prayers does he need to say (and when) as he travels to Shanghai?

In the times of the *Sanhedrin* (the High Court) new questions were resolved by judicial vote, majority rule. But today, when we lack a single authoritative Rabbinic body governing the entire Jewish people, (1) by whom, and (2) how, are new questions resolved, (3) where do they start ?

(1) By the greatest Sages of the time. In each generation a Sage will emerge as a giant in Torah, one who knows the entire Torah clearly. Rabbis with questions direct their queries to the great Scholar who answers the question in a written scholarly work called a "responsum." In America, for almost 50 years, this person was Rabbi Moshe Feinstein ל"צ" (1895-1986). Rabbis the world over repeatedly refer to, and analyze, his responsa. In Israel, for over 40 years, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef ל"צ" (1920-2013) served as one of the leading Rabbinic authorities. These Torah giants resolved thousands of current questions that came up in all areas of Jewish life. Their flawless knowledge and thought processes as recorded in their volumes of responsa are poured over and studied

diligently by Torah scholars aspiring to acquire greatness and to consider even newer issues that continue to arise.

(2) **How do they go about resolving these issues?** They look into the Torah.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avot (5:22) says,

(כב) בֵּן בַּג בַּג אָמַר, הִפְדֵּךְ בָּהּ וְהִפְדֵּךְ בָּהּ, דְּכֻלָּא בָּהּ.

22) *Ben Bag Bag says: Learn it (the Torah) again and again, **for everything is in it.***

The Torah contains all the information necessary to answer any question until the end of time. (“Torah” as referred to here encompasses the Oral Torah that Hashem gave to Moshe at Sinai to explain the Written Torah. It was later written down in the Mishna and Talmud.) Hashem, Who wrote the Torah, also created the world. In that incredible world, He rooted the potential for every medical breakthrough or scientific invention. No researcher or inventor has ever surprised Hashem with his invention! Hashem placed it there to be discovered from the time of creation!

Therefore, Hashem wrote the Torah with the information necessary to resolve any question. Of course, the Talmud will not speak about a transplant or a jet, but it will contain information somewhere that can be applied to the current scenario and conclusively resolve the issue.

(3) Where do they start?

They begin by reviewing (generally, *mentally*, because they often know most of the pertinent material by heart) every passage in the Talmud, its many hundreds of commentaries spanning some 2,500 years, and the entire responsa literature that may be relevant to the current

question. Then they methodically delve into each one to determine if it is truly relevant and sheds light on the question. There are often contradictory positions that require much thought and ingenuity to resolve. Sometimes, the contradictions derive from a different way of thinking about the matter. In short, it is a very intense process, which requires every bit of mental prowess that the Sage can muster. The response to a single question can continue for pages and pages of deep analysis and critical thinking.

It goes without saying that only the greatest of the great and most brilliant of the brilliant reach a level to adequately address a difficult query. One who has not mastered the length and breadth of the Talmud and its commentaries is not in a position to even think about resolving a halachic question.

In times of old when communication between communities and countries was very slow and, often, almost nonexistent, each large city or province would have a scholar who would resolve inquiries that arose in his area. Occasionally, scholars in different places took different approaches to the same questions and came up with different conclusions. Each one's decision was binding on his particular constituency, often creating a knotty question of how one should conduct himself when visiting a city that has a different custom, based on its Rabbi's teaching.

This is the basis for the differences in custom between Ashkenazic Jews who lived in Europe and Sephardic Jews who lived in the Middle East. Each had its great Sages who sometimes differed in their Halachic rulings.

So, who is right? Which decision trumps the other?

The answer is that they are both correct. The Ashkenazic decision is binding on the Ashkenazic Jews, and the Sephardic decision is binding on the Sephardic Jews, and there is no issue. The Torah was written with many possible understandings all of which are true and correct. If the Sage has correctly applied the true concepts of the Torah to his process, and his thinking is clear and logical, his conclusion is valid, irrespective of the ultimate result. If one, however, omits, misuses, distorts, or uses wrong information in his analysis, of course, his conclusion is invalid, also irrespective of the result.

Here lies a most remarkable concept.

Once the Sage has come to his conclusion, his original work becomes part of Torah acquiring the same holy attributes as Hashem's words to Moshe. When a Torah student studies it, he is studying authentic Torah, and he will receive reward for studying Hashem's holy Torah. The *Code of Jewish Law* will now incorporate this new Torah decision into its rulings, and it will be binding on all those who keep Jewish law.

More significantly, in Heaven, Hashem will now use this decision as the conclusive law in this matter. In Hashem's holy court of judgment, a person's status as guilty or not guilty will be based on this Torah Sage's analysis. What an amazing and powerful gift Hashem has given to rabbinic scholars: The ability to create authentic Torah that Hashem accepts alongside the Torah that He gave Moshe on Sinai.

But rendering a ruling in Jewish law is but one aspect of toil in the Torah.

There are also the Talmudists who, rather than conduct their analyses to solve practical questions, delve into the commentaries and explain the different nuances in their and others' interpretations of the

Talmud. They, too, toil in the Torah to clearly understand every detail of the *sugya* (topic) and their abstract and sometimes theoretical conclusions and clarifications are also incorporated in the Torah.

There is yet a deeper level to this concept that is expressed in the Talmud (Bava Metzia 59b).

Rabbi Eliezer HaGadol, had an argument with the majority of Sages of his time about a certain type of oven. Rabbi Eliezer said it is *tahor* (spiritually clean) and the majority of Sages said that it was *tamei* (spiritually unclean).

תנא : באותו היום השיב רבי אליעזר כל תשובות שבעולם ולא קיבלו הימנו. אמר להם, אם הלכה כמותי חרוב זה יוכיח! נעקר חרוב ממקומו מאה אמה ואמרי לה ארבע מאות אמה

The Sages taught: On that day, Rabbi Eliezer responded to all the questions on his position posed by the other Sages, but they would not accept his answers.

He then said to them. "If I am right (pointing to a carob tree), let this carob tree prove it!" The carob tree uprooted itself and flew 200 feet and some say it was 800 feet.

אמרו לו אין מביאין ראיה מן החרוב

The Rabbis said to him. "You can't prove anything from a carob tree!"

The Vilna Gaon explains that Rabbi Eliezer wanted them to realize that he was not one who sought to have delicacies in his life. The carob tree represents a meager existence, as it says about Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa who subsisted on a small flask of carob and a small bottle of water per week. By uprooting itself, the tree proved his point. The Sages

responded, “Granted, you are a holy person, but the ruling still goes according to the majority, and we are the majority.”

חזר ואמר להם אם הלכה כמותי אמת המים יוכיחו חזרו אמת המים לאחוריהם

*He then said to them. “If I am right, let this stream of water prove it!”
The stream’s flow reversed its direction.*

אמרו לו אין מביאין ראיה מאמת המים

The Rabbis said to him. “You can’t prove anything from a stream of water.”

This Vilna Gaon explains that Rabbi Eliezer wanted to prove to them that he was humble, because Torah will only reside in a humble person. Just as water always flows to the lowest point, so, too, the Torah, which is compared to water, will only reside in a humble person. By reversing its direction, the stream validated Rabbi Eliezer’s claim. Once again, the Rabbis rejected his proof because they were the majority.

חזר ואמר להם אם הלכה כמותי כותלי בית המדרש יוכיחו הטו כותלי בית המדרש ליפול גער בהם רבי יהושע אמר להם אם תלמידי חכמים מנצחים זה את זה בהלכה אתם מה טיבכם לא נפלו מפני כבודו של רבי יהושע ולא זקפו מפני כבודו של רבי אליעזר ועדיין מטין ועומדין

Rabbi Eliezer then said. “If I am right, let the walls of the Bet Midrash (study hall) prove it!” The walls started tilting as if to cave in when Rabbi Yehoshua (one of the opposing Rabbis) yelled at the walls, saying to them, “If Torah Scholars are challenging one another in Torah law, what right do you have to cave in on them?” Out of honor for Rabbi Yehoshua the walls did not cave in, but they would not straighten up out of honor for Rabbi Eliezer.

The Vilna Gaon explains that Rabbi Eliezer wanted to prove from this that he was diligent in his Torah study and that he spent many hours studying in the Bet Midrash. To become a Sage, one must put in many consecutive hours of study a day without interruption. By attempting to cave in, the walls testified to his claim. Rabbi Yehoshua did not need to formally respond to this, since his command to the walls was accepted, and the walls did not cave in.

חזר ואמר להם אם הלכה כמותי מן השמים יוכיחו יצאתה בת קול ואמרה מה לכם אצל רבי אליעזר שהלכה כמותו בכל מקום

Rabbi Eliezer then said. "If I am right, let them prove it from Heaven!" A voice came Heaven and announced, "What is your issue with Rabbi Eliezer? The law goes in his favor every time!"

עמד רבי יהושע על רגליו ואמר לא בשמים היא מאי לא בשמים היא. אמר רבי ירמיה שכבר נתנה תורה מהר סיני אין אנו משגיחין בבת קול, שכבר כתבת בהר סיני בתורה אחרי רבים להטות

Rabbi Yehoshua then stood up and said, "In the verse it says (Deuteronomy 30:12)

(יב) לא בַּשָּׁמַיִם הוּא

The Torah is not in Heaven, and Rabbi Yirmiyah explained this to mean, 'Once the Torah was given on Sinai, we do not listen to Heavenly voices (if they tell us something contradictory to what it says in the Torah)' and in the Torah it says, אחרי רבים להטות -The majority rules! And we are the majority!"

In other words, not only has Hashem given the Jewish people the Torah, He has empowered them to decide the law even if it overrides Hashem's own opinion. Here Hashem said that the law is like Rabbi Eliezer, and the Rabbis overruled Him. "Hashem, you gave us the Torah, and now it is ours to use as we see fit. You have no say in the matter!"

There is an epilogue to this story.

אשכחיה רבי נתן לאלהיו אמר ליה מאי עביד קודשא בריך הוא בההיא שעתא אמר
ליה קא חייך ואמר נצחוני בני נצחוני בני

*Rabbi Nosson met Elijah the Prophet. He asked him, “What was Hashem doing when Rabbi Yehoshua and his court overruled Him?”
Elijah the Prophet told him, “He was smiling and saying, ‘My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me’”*

As we approach the festival of Shavuot when we celebrate receiving the Torah on Sinai, we are awestricken to realize that Hashem gave us the Torah, and it is “ours.” He has empowered us and put us (so to speak) on His level and has given our Torah- the very ideas and conclusions that we arrived at with our own minds- a higher status even than His!

What are we to make of this? What does this mean?

This shows us the great heights that a human being can achieve through living a holy life of toiling in Torah. One who toils in the Torah achieves such a holy place that his Torah is on par or even greater than Hashem’s Torah. This is why it is so impactful and is a source of great blessing to the world. Now that’s something to work hard for!

We now stand 3,336 years after the Sinai event, the Shavuot on which the Jewish people received the Torah, and we are still studying it diligently. We are still toiling in the Torah. Although, we certainly could have done better, what an unbelievable feeling of gratitude we should feel that we are still connected to the Torah after so many years and so many attempts to tear us away from it. Each of us is fulfilling Moshe’s last charge to the Jewish people to guard and preserve the Torah. With this inspiration, this Shavuot, let us all redouble our efforts to learn more

Torah through which we will bring more of the greatest blessings to the world.