
Yad Avraham Institute
Weekly Torah Commentaries Series

Portion of Devarim

Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*

<i>Inside This Week's Edition</i>	<u>Page</u>
<i>1. A Model of Misplaced Values</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>2. G'd's Inextricable Relationship with the Jewish people</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>3. The Power of Torah</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>4. The Full Reinstatement of the Jewish People</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>5. Inner Peace, the Setting for Clarity</i>	<i>5</i>

About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkofa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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Portion of Devarim

Presented by

Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita
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1. A Model of Misplaced Values

The Torah tells us that the tribe of Gad and Reuvain had enormous wealth, due to their large flocks and herds. They therefore requested of Moshe to remain on the trans-Jordan side, which had vast expanses of grazing lands. Due to their desire to provide for their flocks and herds, they chose to be separated from their brethren, the Jewish people, who crossed the Jordan to settle in the Land of Israel. Because of their wealth they chose to separate from their brothers. Consequently, they were the first tribes to be exiled.

The Midrash cites a verse from Psalms, “ ‘It is not found in the East and it is not found in the West...’ What is the meaning of this? One should not mistakenly believe that one becomes wealthy by traveling the globe (from the East to the West). Even if one were to travel the high seas by boat or traverse the desert from the East to West from the desert to the mountains (harim) , he will not come upon wealth. What is the meaning of ‘mountains (harim)?’ Whenever the Torah mentions the word ‘harim’ it refers to mountains, except in this particular context (regarding one becoming wealthy). In this instance, the word ‘harim’ means to become exalted. One ascends to become wealthy and is exalted not due to his own initiative or toil. If this is so, then how does one become wealthy? G’d takes the wealth from one individual and bestows it upon another. As it states in Psalms, ‘G’d Judges –He lowers one and He elevates the other.’” Although it is within G’d’s ability to provide each individual with the amount of wealth with which he should be endowed, without taking it from another, G’d chooses to keep the wealth in existence finite. He thus transfers the wealth from one individual to another.

The Midrash continues, “This is the reason possessions are referred to in Hebrew as ‘nichasim.’ Meaning, they are concealed from some (*nichsim*) and appear to others. Why are coins called ‘zuzim’? It is because they move (*zaz*) from one person to another...G’d brings His wrath upon one and elevates the other (by

bestowing upon him wealth)... A matronly gentile woman asked Reb Shmuel ben Chalafta, ‘How long did it take G’d to create the world?’ He responded, ‘It took Him six days.’ She asked him, ‘Since the completion of Creation, how does He occupy His time?’ He answered, ‘He makes ladders.’ There is a continuous ascent and descent of people. This is the meaning of the verse in Psalms ‘G’d Judges – one He lowers and the other He elevates.’ What is the proof of this? When G’d wanted the Tribe of Gad and the Tribe of Reuvain to become wealthy, He toppled the Midianites on behalf of the Jewish people so that the Tribe of Gad and the Tribe of Reuvain should acquire their wealth.” Although the Torah tells us that the reason the Jewish people needed to topple the Midianites was to avenge the tragedy that they brought upon the Jewish people through Baal Peor; evidently, there was another objective in destroying the Midianites – to provide the transfer of the wealth of the Midianites to the tribes of Gad and Reuvain. Thus, G’d lowered the Midianites in order to elevate the tribes of Gad and Reuvain.

Although the wealth that the tribe of Gad and Reuvain had come upon seems to have been a blessing of G’d, we see that it ultimately lead to a negative outcome. It was due to this wealth that these tribes separated themselves from their Jewish brothers, which caused them to be the first tribes to be exiled. We are able to see through the wealth that they received their misplaced values when they had requested to remain on the trans-Jordan side. They said to Moshe, “We will first build enclosures for our flocks and then build houses for our families.” In response, Moshe said that they should first provide for their families and then secure their flocks. G’d toppled Midian in order for the tribes of Gad and Reuvain to be faced with the challenge of wealth. They needed to choose, to either to go into the Land of Israel with their brethren, or remain on the trans-Jordan side and not have the spiritual support of the Jewish people. They chose to forfeit the spiritual, for the sake of the material. They failed in their challenge, because they made what is primary secondary and what is secondary primary.

The Mishna in Ethics of our Fathers states, “*Shammai* says, ‘Make your Torah primary and your work secondary.’” Meaning, one must understand that the material is only meant to facilitate the spiritual. Thus, one must give prioritize the spiritual. The tribes of Gad and Reuvain chose to prioritize the material at the expense of the spiritual. Similarly, G’d presents every individual with his own tailor-made challenges. It is therefore the choice of the individual to address his own personal challenge—whether to succumb to the physical or use it to facilitate and advance the spiritual.

2. G’d’s Inextricable Relationship with the Jewish people

The Torah in the Portion of Masei identifies the borders of Israel. After establishing its boundaries, the Torah designates the individuals who will divide the Land on behalf of the Tribes of Israel. The verse states, “**These are the names of the men who are to take possession of the Land for you: Elazar the Kohen and Yehoshuah bin Nun, and one leader from each tribe shall you take to possess the Land...**” Rashi in his commentary explains, “The meaning of ‘**the men who are to take possession of the Land for you**’ is that each Prince of each tribe will act as the administrator on behalf of the tribe and he will take possession of the Land and divide it among its families...The Prince will be the equivalent of an agent. It will be as if the Jewish people themselves are actually taking possession of the Land and dividing it. (As it states, ‘One’s agent is the equivalent of himself.’) This interpretation is based on the grammar used in the verse. The word that the Torah chooses to use is ‘yinchalu’ rather than the word ‘yanchilu.’ Grammatically, the first reference means that they themselves would be dividing the Land and the second reference means someone else is dividing the Land on their behalf. This is a proof that the Princes will act as the agents of the families of their tribe. ...We see another example of this type of agency in the context of the splitting of the Sea, ‘Moshe said to the Jewish people, ‘G’d will fight on your behalf...’” Based on the choice of words, grammatically, the verse is reads as if G’d is acting as the agent of the Jewish people.

It is interesting to note that G’d is not fighting the battle on behalf of the Jewish people, but rather, He is saying “I am acting as your agent, to be the equivalent of you yourselves fighting the battle.” It is difficult to fathom that the Creator of all existence, G’d Himself, is saying “I will act as your agent” although the Jewish people are His

subjects who are mere mortals. The Torah tells us that when G’d presented Himself to Yaakov, our Patriarch, He stated, “I am the G’d of Avraham, the G’d of Yitzchak...” One would think that the Omnipotent One who Created and Wills all existence, to quantify and identify Himself as “the G’d of Avraham and Yitzchak” who were mere mortal men would be unthinkable. Although the holy Patriarchs were exceptional and unique in their spiritual dimension, one would think that G’d would introduce Himself as “I am the Creator of existence.” Since the holy Patriarchs introduced G’d to existence and thus gave meaning and purpose to Creation, G’d prides Himself as being the “G’d of Avraham and Yitzchak.” Had it not been for the holy Patriarchs, G’d would have been an unknown entity in the world. Similarly, the Jewish people were chosen by G’d to be His representation in existence. They are His children who were chosen to fulfill the Torah, which is the objective of Creation. Therefore, when G’d fights battles on their behalf, He does so as their agent. They are not considered to be a separate entity from Himself, but rather, He and them are one.

When the Jewish people declare their belief in G’d they refer to Him as “Elokeinu (our G’d).” Although G’d is the G’d of all nations, because of His special relationship with the Jewish people Who He chose to be His holy priestly nation, there is a personalization between the Jewish people and G’d. Just as the word used by the Torah indicates that the Princes were chosen to be the agents of the Jewish people in dividing the Land, so too is G’d the agent of the Jewish people when He acts on their behalf.

3. The Power of Torah

The Torah states, “**G’d said to me (Moshe), ‘Understand I am beginning to give before you Sichon’...**” The Torah tells us that before Moshe passed away he rebuked the Jewish people for their failings over the forty-year period in the desert. It was only after Og and Sichon were smitten and their communities conquered did he rebuke the Jewish people. The Midrash states, “G’d said, ‘I have destroyed before you Sichon, king of the Amorites whose height is that of the largest cedars. In what merit were you able to defeat this giant? It was in the merit of Torah. That is elucidated and transmitted by the Rabbis.’” Seemingly, it would have been sufficient to state that it was in the merit of the Torah that the Jewish people were able to defeat Sichon. Why does the Midrash add, “That is elucidated and transmitted by the Rabbis?”

The Torah states in the Portion of V'Zos HaBeracha, **“The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the Congregation of Yaakov...”** If the Torah is the wisdom of G’d, then why does G’d chose to refer to it as “Torah” and not “the wisdom of G’d?” The Torah states regarding the blessing that Moshe gave to Levy before he passed away, **“They shall teach Your ordinances to Yaakov and Your Torah to Israel...”** The term that the Torah choses regarding the teaching of Torah is “*yoru (elucidate and give direction)*” to indicate that the responsibility of the tribe of Levy is to disseminate and elucidate the Torah to give guidance and direction to the Jewish people. Maharal of Prague explains that the word “Torah” that G’d chose to identify His laws and wisdom, is to indicate that the Torah was given to give guidance and direction for the Jew to live his life in conformance with G’d’s Will. The essence of the Torah, its 613 commandments (which is the embodiment of G’d’s Will) is not its intellectualism, but rather to provide direction and guidance to the Jewish people. Although when one engages in Torah study he is engaging in G’d’s wisdom, the Jew must do so with the objective and intent to understand His Will in order to actualize the mitzvos contained within the Torah (*lilmode al minaas l’asos*) and not for the sake of its intellectualism.

It was in the merit of the Rabbis who teach and disseminate the Torah with this objective, that the Jewish people were able to topple Sichon. It is the responsibility of the Rabbis to transmit the Torah in its authentic form, known as the oral tradition, from generation to generation in order to teach the people G’d’s wisdom to live their lives as proper Jews. One’s own understanding regarding the wisdom contained within the Torah is not relevant to the actual understanding or implementation but rather it must be purely based on the oral tradition that G’d had given to Moshe at Sinai, to be transmitted from generation to generation. The written law only has value, as the Word of G’d, if it is interpreted and elucidated through G’d’s oral tradition that was given at Sinai. This was the basis of the extreme failure of the Sadducees, who did not accept the oral law as being authentic and were thus categorized as heretics. It is specifically the Torah that is taught to the Jewish people by the Rabbis that is the authentic Sinai tradition that G’d intended. It was in this merit, that the Jewish people were able to defeat Sichon.

The Midrash continues, “Our Rabbis of Blessed Memory explain that Sichon was the equivalent of a great tower and a high wall. He was the most powerful creature in existence. There was no human being that could defeat

him... How then was Moshe able to defeat him? The Prophet Amos states, ‘I (G’d) will destroy his fruits from above and his roots from below...G’d toppled the archangel who was the spiritual counterpart of Sichon, his land, and his people; and gave it over to the Jewish people. As it states, ‘I will destroy his fruits from above’ and thus the Jewish people would be able to conquer them from below. As it states, ‘and his roots from below.’”

When Moshe was told by G’d to destroy Sichon he did so without hesitation; however, when he was told to destroy Og who was the father of Sichon, he was concerned. G’d said to Moshe, **“Do not be fearful...”** Why was Moshe fearful regarding the destruction of Og? Rashi cites Chazal who explain that Og was the one who initially came to Avraham, our Patriarch to inform him that his nephew Lot had been taken captive. Because of this deed that Og had done to accommodate the tzaddik Avraham, he merited to have an unusually long life. Although Og had the sinister intent to cause Avraham to die in battle in his attempt to rescue Lot, and consequently he would take Sarah our Matriarch as his wife, he nevertheless merited to live hundreds of years. Moshe was concerned that perhaps the merit that Og had for informing Avraham was still in effect. If so, he would not be able to defeat him. To this, G’d responded by saying, “Do not fear” because Og’s merit had been expended and no longer exists.

It is interesting to note, that Moshe had no concern and did not hesitate to destroy Sichon, who Chazal tell us was more powerful than any creature in existence. Seemingly, his own father Og was not as powerful as he was. Yet, regarding the destruction of Og, who lived an extended life in the merit of a mitzvah that he had once performed for Avraham, this caused Moshe to be concerned that he would be undefeatable. Because Og had accommodated and performed a good deed for Avraham, our Patriarch who had introduced G’d to existence, although he had done so with a sinister intent, he still had the merit of a mitzvah which had unending value.

We see from this that when one performs a mitzvah, even if it was not with the purest intent, the value and merit that it generates is not to be fathomed. If one performs a mitzvah with the proper intent, its value is far greater. As it states in Ethics of our Fathers, “The reward of a mitzvah in this world does not exist.”

4. The Full Reinstatement of the Jewish People

The Torah states, “**Moshe said to the Jewish people, ‘Hashem, our G’d spoke to us at Chorev (Sinai) saying ‘You have much as a result of dwelling by this mountain.’**” Rashi cites Chazal, “‘You have much’ means ‘You have received much acclaim and reward as a result of dwelling by this mountain (Mt. Sinai). What happened to you at the mountain? You built the Mishkan, the Menorah and all of its vessels. You received the Torah. You appointed a Sanhedrin (High Court)...’” Seemingly, the accomplishments that took place at Sinai are not stated chronologically. Regarding the order of events, the first event, which was the ultimate, was the receiving of the Torah. However, Chazal mention the receiving of the Torah after the building of the Mishkan and its vessels. Why do Chazal enumerate these events in this order?

Sforno writes in his commentary in the Book of Shemos that had the Jewish people not sinned with the Golden Calf after the receiving of the Torah at Sinai, there would not have been a need to build the Mishkan. The Torah tells us the objective of the Mishkan was to be the dwelling location of the Divine Presence amongst the Jewish people. As it states, “**Make for Me a Sanctuary so that I may dwell amongst them....**” The Mishkan was the medium through which the G’d dwelled amongst His people. Prior to the sin of the Golden Calf, the Jewish people, because of their dimension of spirituality and purity, themselves were qualified to be the dwelling location for the Divine Presence. There was no need for a medium because there was no distance between them and G’d.

As a result of the sin of the Golden Calf Moshe broke the tablets that he had received from G’d. Chazal tell us that the breaking of the tablets was the equivalent of an annulment of a marriage. Although the Jewish people had received the Torah at Sinai and thus were taken as G’d’s Holy people, due to the sin of idolatry, they terminated their relationship with G’d. They became spiritually tainted and could no longer be the dwelling location for His Presence. G’d therefore commanded the Jewish people to build the Mishkan to act as a medium, in order for them to solidify their relationship with Him. Thus, after the sin of the Golden Calf, the relationship with G’d was not fully restored to the Sinai level until the Mishkan was built. Therefore, regarding the accomplishments and the basis for deserving reward, it is no longer based upon the chronological order but rather based on the order of

reinstatement. Chazal therefore mention the building of the Mishkan and its vessels first and then the receiving of the Torah. Only after the Mishkan was operative were the Jewish people able to fully cleave to G’d. He provided them with the medium to bring this about. As the Torah states, “**But you who cling to Hashem, your G’d, you are all alive today (Vatem HaDevakim Ba’Shem Elokeichem Chayim Kulchem HaYom).**”

5. Inner Peace, the Setting for Clarity

The Torah states, “**Moshe spoke to the Children of Israel...after he had smitten Sichon, king of the Amorites, who dwelt in Cheshbon, and Og, king of Bashan, who dwelt in Ashtaroth...**” The Torah tells us that before Moshe passed away he rebuked the Jewish people for their failings over the forty-year period in the desert. It was only after Og and Sichon were smitten and their communities conquered did he rebuke the Jewish people. Rashi cites Chazal, “Moshe said, ‘If I should rebuke them even to the slightest degree before they enter into the Land to any degree, the Jewish people will say, ‘What does Moshe expect of us? What good did he do for us? He is only coming to criticize and find fault with us (that we are unworthy to enter into the Land). It is because he does not have the ability to bring us into the Land.’ Therefore, Moshe waited until the destruction of Og and Sichon and the conquest of their communities, before he rebuked them. This was to demonstrate to them that he did have the ability to bring them into the Land of Israel, (and his rebuke was for their own benefit for their future spiritual advancement in the Land of Israel).”

Sforno explains that Moshe did not rebuke the Jewish people only until after they had come to this point because, “it was only at this time did the Jewish people achieve a sense of tranquility that they were in a settled location.” It was only after the Jewish people had that level of tranquility would they be receptive to the rebuke of Moshe. In order for one to have the capacity to be attentive, internalize, and accept rebuke one must be in a state that is not distracted. One must be in mental and emotional state that will allow him to understand and appreciate what is being told to him.

Rambam writes in the Laws of Proper Conduct (Hilchos Deos), “One must be attentive to one’s physical condition to ensure that it is intact, vibrant, and strong. This is so that the individual could have the clarity of mind to understand who G’d is. It is impossible for one to

comprehend wisdom if one is hungry or in pain from any of one's limbs (or organs)...." Thus, one must maintain one's physical health in order not to be distracted so that one could understand G'd properly to be able to serve Him. We see from Rambam's words that any level of distraction is sufficient for one not to be able to process what one experiences properly. Any distraction takes away one's ability to focus and comprehend what is at hand.

Ramchal writes in his work Path of the Just that the Torah identifies a Nazirite (one is not permitted to drink wine) as one who is holy. Yet, the Torah also refers to the Nazirite as one who is a sinner. Seemingly it is a contradiction. On one hand removing oneself from the physical and denying himself certain pleasures is considered to be spiritually exalted, while on the other hand such a denial of a physical amenity is sinful. If one is at the level that when he denies himself certain material amenities he does not feel deprived, then he is at the spiritual level that classifies him as "holy" in his denial. It is because if he does not feel deprived he is not distracted from his focus. However, if one feels that he is deprived due to denying himself the material that he needs, then it is considered to be sinful. This is because if one experiences deprivation one becomes distracted and thus cannot serve G'd properly.

The Gemara in Tractate Taanis tells us that if one fasts a non-obligatory fast, he is considered to be a sinner. However, the Gemara also states that one who fasts is considered to be "holy." How is this so? Once again, it depends on the individual. If one has is able to accept upon himself fasts and is not distracted to any degree, then he is considered to be holy; however, if the individual by fasting is distracted then he is considered a sinner. G'd provides one with the material to facilitate the fulfillment of the Torah and to serve Him to the best of one's ability. That is the sole value of one's physicality. Therefore, if one does anything that causes his physical abilities to become diminished and thus minimizes his ability to serve G'd, then the individual sinned because he did not use his physicality as intended.

Moshe waited to rebuke the Jewish people after Og, Sichon, and their communities were destroyed and were settled in a tranquil state so that they should not be distracted to any degree. He wanted them to be the greatest beneficiaries of his rebuke.

Chavos Halevavos writes in the Gate of Faith that the value of faith (*bitachon*) in G'd is unlimited. This is because when one has sufficient faith in G'd, one is not concerned to any degree about anything that is beyond his personal ability. He is not distracted by anything. He is thus able to focus on his service of G'd. In contrast, if one does not have sufficient faith, he has unlimited worries. He is concerned about all issues that touch upon him. This creates a sense of distraction that does not allow him to serve G'd due to his lack of clarity.