

BECHUKOSAI

THREE BLESSINGS FOR THE SOUL

A

The Blessings of Torah Study

The *parsha* begins by telling us how to earn a string of blessings. “*Im bechukosai teileichu v’es mitzvosai timshmeru va’asisem osam.* If you walk in My statutes, and observe My commandments and perform them” (Vayikra 26:3). For the Jewish People to achieve the blessings, we are required to do three things: 1) walk in God’s statutes, 2) observe the commandments, and 3) do them. What is the meaning of these three things?

On the words *bechukosai teileichu*, Rashi writes, “*Shetihyu ameilim baTorah.* You must toil in Torah.” This involves more than just knowing what the Torah says; it means investing time and effort studying the Torah. *Mitzvosai tishmeru* means, “Observe My *mitzvos*.” The Toras Kohanim says that this also refers to Torah study. Rashi elsewhere, commenting on the word *ushmartem* (Devarim 4:6), explains that the word refers to *mishna*, meaning to study the Torah. What do these two imperatives of Torah study entail?

There are indeed two parts of Torah learning. The first part is *yegi’a*, the effort and process of learning Torah. This is *laleches*, to walk towards knowledge of the Torah. Then there is actually knowing the Torah and not forgetting it. We have to put in the

hours and effort in learning the Torah, and then we have to make sure that we don't forget it. This second stage is to know what the Torah is teaching us and to protect it within ourselves, to remember what it says—*lishmor*.

Stage three involves action, *va'asisem osam*. We must actually perform the *mitzvos* and live a Torah lifestyle. These are the three things mentioned in this *pasuk*. Work hard to study, protect your Torah knowledge and review it, and then practice the knowledge you have accrued.

When we study Torah, know Torah, and practice Torah, we will receive all of the blessings of Hashem.

B

The Challenge of Balance

This seems to be such an obvious three-step process. One wonders why so many people just don't do it! I don't know how to explain this phenomenon. But many people seem to have a disconnect from the process. Many people say, "I practice Torah, I do the *mitzvos*, but I don't have to study." Others study but may not practice. Others still study Torah but don't review it to keep it in their minds.

The *yeitzer hara* is always trying to throw us off the good and proper path. Even people who are fulfilling two of these three stages can still give in to the rationalizations of the *yeitzer*. I know some people who spend a lot of time studying, but they don't review, because it is not as exciting as first-time study. But since they never review, they end up not knowing so much—even though they spend so much time studying! Others are busy doing *chesed* and other good deeds, and say they don't have enough time to learn. This is also a mistake. We must do all three. This is our responsibility. We have to achieve a proper balance. We cannot

do just one or two stages of Torah life and ignore the indivisible three-part package.

The Torah doesn't say exactly what the balance is between these three. A person needs a spiritual guide, a rabbi or teacher, to ask how to come up with the correct balance. But no matter how we balance them, we nevertheless must study, know, and practice. We have to do all three.

C

Three Levels of Soul

The Shem Mishmuel explains that the three concepts mentioned in this first verse of the *parsha* relate to the three aspects of the human soul. We have mentioned this concept before, as the Shem Mishmuel often refers to the triplicate level of the human soul. This is a fundamental point of Kabbala and has also been developed by many Chassidic thinkers.

We are all aware of the three levels of the soul—*nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*. We all feel our *nefesh*, our biological soul. We feel that we are alive. We breathe and receive stimulation through our five senses. We feel our *ruach*, the emotional aspect of our lives. We experience anger, love, hate, excitement, joy, and disappointment. Higher still is our *neshama*, our intellect and logic, and the spiritual experiences we go through as God's created people with our divine spark.

The Shem Mishmuel explains that the three responsibilities—to study, know, and practice Torah—refer to the three levels of the Jewish soul. Practicing Torah clearly refers to the physical experience, the *nefesh*. We place *tefillin* on our arms and heads, eat *matza* on Pesach, rest on Shabbos, drink *kiddush* wine, give charity, help the poor, and visit the sick. All of these *mitzvos* are done primarily with our physical side, the biological experience, with our *nefesh*.

The Holiness of Life

The body is an important part of our religious experience. We must do *mitzvos* with it. This is a fundamental difference between Judaism and Christianity. Judaism believes that the body is a home for holiness. My fingers, hands, stomach, head, eyes, and ears are holy vessels for God's presence.

We Jews do not think of the body as abhorrent, disgusting, and terrible. Some Christian sects and eastern religions take this perspective. For us, getting married and having children are important *mitzvos*. So are the physical activities of helping the sick and poor. The body is a source of holiness.

This is why Judaism puts such a strong emphasis on the preservation of biological life itself. Even if a person is unconscious and on life support, there is a *mitzva* to keep him or her alive for even one more second. We can even desecrate Shabbos to extend the life of someone who is on life support. We recognize physical life as holy, as a Godly expression of the holy soul that Hashem Himself breathed into a human body. The body is the receptacle of the *tzelem Elokim*, the holy divine image that God breathed into man and woman. As long as a man can take a breath, his very body is holy; he is a vessel for the presence of the holy spirit of Hashem.

Recently, sociologists and psychologists conducted a survey of countries around the world. To their surprise, they found that Jews love life more than any other group in the world. We have the lowest rate of suicide coupled with quite a high birthrate. We have a tremendous love of life. We appreciate life. This is a core Jewish attitude.

Each individual life is priceless. Chazal say (Sanhedrin 37a) that man was created as an individual, as a single Adam. This teaches us that every single person is like an entire world. God created the whole world just for the individual, for Adam, and similarly for each and every one of us.

E

God's Most Precious Desire

The Torah says that good deeds that the body does are God's most precious desire. He wants us to do good deeds. In God's estimation, they make a huge difference. Other religions say that deeds are ultimately meaningless. The Torah teaches that good deeds are the primary justification and the true reason for human beings having a physical body. Hashem gave us a body to live in this world, even with the downsides of physical life. He wants us to rectify and to sanctify the body and our entire physical experience.

This was Rambam's great disagreement with Aristotle. Aristotle wrote that the intellectual side of the human being is noble and dignified, but the physical side is ignoble and animalistic. In writing the laws of the Torah, Rambam emphasizes the importance of proper physical actions. The human being has the potential and obligation to turn the physical side of life from something possibly degrading and disgusting into something noble and holy. This is the concept of *va'asisem osam*, to fix and rectify the *nefesh*, the biological side of life.

F

Emotional Passion for Torah

The second level of the soul is expressed in the emotions of people, in our *ruach*. This is the level that requires *ameilus baTorah*, investing time and effort in studying the Torah. This is an emotional investment. Time is precious, and study requires focus. It is an emotional commitment to love and learn Torah.

We always have to ask ourselves the question of what to do with our time. If I am a free person, I decide on my own what to do with my time. I can decide to play games in my spare time. If I like to make money, I can put my time into making money. The Torah

says we should put our effort and time into the study of Torah. This has to be the activity that gives each of us the most emotional pleasure. It should be what we want to do with our spare time.

Traditionally, the Jewish People, especially the men, spent their spare time learning Torah. Today, women also invest a lot of time and effort into Torah study. Our sociological situation has changed. We have seminaries and *shirum* dedicated to and designed especially for women. This study of Torah requires time. For those of you who are not rabbis or teachers of Torah, you have many other responsibilities. You may be a professional, a housewife, a lawyer, or a doctor. You are busy. However, you should take the time, whether it's one hour a week or five hours a week, and put it into learning Torah. You should be *ameil baTorah*. You thus make the correct decision to emphasize Torah study. This is because you decide that you do like it. Torah study gives you pleasure. This spiritual pleasure effects a *tikkun* of the *ruach*, a rectification of your emotional spirit. This comes through putting time and energy into Torah study.

Hashem has given us the gift, privilege, and responsibility of Torah study. We must be *ameilim baTorah*. We must put time and effort, struggle, sacrifice, and investment of time into the study of Torah. This is the expression and fulfillment of our emotional soul, our *ruach*.

G

Intellectual Achievement

Finally, our *neshama*, the intellect, is the highest level of our soul that we are aware of on a daily basis. Our *neshama* is perfected through the knowledge of Torah. The very purpose of the creation of our intellect is for us to have this knowledge, to know the words, concepts, and depths of Torah thought. This knowledge provides rectification for the *neshama*, the highest level of our soul.

This is why the Torah says that in order to receive the blessings, we have to make the commitment to Torah. We must put time and effort into Torah, as the Torah instructs us, and thereby fix our *ruach*. We must know the Torah and thereby fix our intellect and *neshama*. Finally, we must do the *mitzvos* and fix our *nefesh*.

H

Triplicate Blessings

The Shem Mishmuel explains that the Torah promises us three kinds of blessings for doing these three things. It states, “I will give you rain in the proper time. The land and trees will give produce and fruit, vintage and sowing. You will eat bread and be satiated. You will have peace in the land. You will lie down and no one will frighten you. You will not fear wild beasts nor the sword in your land. You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall by the sword. I will turn My attention to you. I will make you fruitful, giving you many children. I will build My Sanctuary among you. I will not reject you, and I will walk among you” (Vayikra 26:4–12).

Physical blessings speak of bounty, namely, that the Land of Israel will provide enough produce and you will feel satiated while enjoying the food. Your well-being will be assured, and you will thrive physically. The next set of blessings refer to emotional peace. You will not fear wild animals nor the attacks of the enemy. You will dwell in harmony. The third set of blessings is that God’s presence and His Temple will be among us. We will feel that He took us out of Egypt and guides us in the present time.

These three kinds of blessings refer to the three levels of our soul. The first set of blessings relates to physical bounty. Blessings of food, children, and life all refer to the physical dimension of our being. In the words of the Gemara (Mo’eid Katan 28a), all of us desire *bnei, chayei, u’mezonei*, children, good health, and physical

comfort. If we do the *mitzvos*, when we do with our bodies what we are supposed to do in our physical experience, then God will bless us with those physical blessings. We will have life, food, income, children, and families. We will have these three blessings of the *nefesh* in return for doing *mitzvos* with our *nefesh*.

When we have passion for Torah and put our spare time into its study, then God will give us the blessings of emotional tranquility. There won't be wars in Israel. We won't fear sudden attacks or tragedies. If God doesn't protect people, nature can be devastating, God forbid, as we have seen in recent years. The Torah says that we will have emotional tranquility. We won't have to fear terrorist attacks. Make yourself busy in Torah study, invest emotionally in Torah. Focus your love and pleasure in Torah study. You will then discover emotional tranquility. You will have protection from attacks of enemies—you will have protection even if nature itself rises up to hurt you. God will protect you. This is in the merit of struggling and investing our emotions in the Torah.

I

Fixing Our Very Souls

When we know Torah, we rectify our *neschama*, fixing our highest soul level, the intellectual soul. When we know Torah, Hashem will bless us with His holy presence. What is the greatest level of the Jewish intellect? To know God, as the prophet Yirmiyahu said: “*Haskeil v'yadoa osi*. Study and know Me” (Yirmiyahu 9:23). The knowledge of Torah is itself knowledge of God. It is a way for man and woman to discover and to know their Creator. We can have a relationship with, cling to, and feel Him in every step of our lives.

This is why Hashem says, “If you know the Torah, I will walk among you, I will be your God, I will let My sanctuary be among you.” Hashem resides inside every single Jew who knows Torah. We know that Torah scholars have a special connection with

Hashem. They are the chariot of Hashem's presence in this world. This is the third level of blessing. If we know Torah, thus perfecting our intellectual level, we will be together with Hashem. He will reside together with us in our *neshama*, in our holy soul, and we will feel His holy presence inside and around us.

The Shem Mishmuel explains that we focus on these three levels of rectification, or *tikkun*, of our *nefesh* by doing *mitzvos*, the *tikkun* of our *ruach* by developing an affinity for Torah and dedicating time to study it, and the *tikkun* of our *neshama* by knowing Torah and thereby clinging to Hashem. We will then achieve our purpose as Jews and deserve every blessing in this *parsha*.

J

Three Types of Holy Days

The Shem Mishmuel then explains that we have three kinds of Jewish holidays, each one emphasizing a different dimension: Shabbos, Yom Tov, and Rosh Chodesh. Each one relates to a different level of the Jewish soul. Yom Tov relates to our biological life force, our *nefesh*. This is divided into three blessings: *bnei chayei*, and *mezonei*. On Pesach, we eat a lot of *mitzva* food: Korban Pesach, *matza*, and *maror*. Pesach relates to food, *mezonei*. On Shavuot, Hashem gave us the Torah, which gives us long life, *chayei*. Our people is timeless. Other nations come and go, but our nation is eternal. We have outlived all of our enemies, including the Romans, Greeks, Persians, and Egyptians. We have outlived the kings and queens of Spain, Germany, England, and Russia, and all the countries that have expelled and persecuted us. All of these nations tried to snuff out the life of Israel. They have disappeared from history, but we live on. Today's new aspiring Hitlers will also disappear, and we will survive their threats just as we have survived the earlier ones. We live on because we have the Torah, the eternal Book of Life.

Sukkos is the holiday of Jewish children and the family of Israel, *bnei*. We celebrate the holiday of Sukkos with our families in the holy Sukkah, enveloped by the holiness of God's presence.

Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkos are the holidays of *bnei*, *chayei*, and *mezonei*, the three physical blessings we all aspire to. These are the three holidays of the *nefesh*.

Rosh Chodesh, when the moon returns after its disappearance, is according to Chassidus the holiday of Dovid Hamelech. It is the holiday of renewal. King Dovid was the great commander of Shaul's army, but then he was banished, only to return as king of Israel. King Dovid teaches us the lesson of hope, faith, and renewal. Rosh Chodesh contains within it the powers of survival, tranquility, peace, and renewal. It is the holiday of the *ruach*.

Dovid Hamelech wrote, "*Kavei el Hashem chazak v'ya'ameitz libecha v'kavei el Hashem*. Have hope in God, be strong, and have hope in God" (Tehillim 27:14). Maintain hope when things are good. Be strong and have hope even when things are not good. Keep your faith in God even then. Jewish optimism and faith are the blessing of the *ruach*. They come from our passion for Torah and from the effort we invest in its study and observance.

K

Shabbos and the Holy Soul

The holy day of Shabbos is the holiday of the *neschama* and of Torah. On Shabbos, we read seven *aliyos* from the Torah, more than any other day. On Yom Kippur we read six, on Yom Tov five, on Rosh Chodesh four, and on weekdays we read only three.

We learn and know Torah on Shabbos. It is the day when we feel closest to Hashem. It is *mei'ein olam haba*; we feel our greatest closeness to God. On Shabbos, His presence is revealed in a unique way, and we can connect to and feel it. What is amazing is that this holiest of days revisits us every week! We get to feel a

taste of the closeness to Hashem that we will experience in *olam haba*, and we experience it through our knowledge of Torah.

L

Our Prayer for Holiness and Blessings

We read of the blessings of bounty, children, tranquility, closeness to God, and attaining holiness. We all want these blessings. We yearn for them, especially after such a long and difficult exile. But we cannot attain these blessings unless we fulfill the Torah's mandate at the beginning of this *parsha*.

This is our deepest prayer, that Hashem give us the strength to do what is right and to achieve His blessings. With Hashem's help, we and every Jew in the world will be able to fulfill the verse, to walk in God's *mitzvos*, to keep them, and to do them.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the three stages of Torah learning that the *parsha* instructs us to pursue?
2. What are the three levels of the soul?
3. How do they relate to the three stages of Torah learning?
4. What is the source of the body's *kedusha*?
5. What is God's most precious desire?
6. How do we fix each of the three levels of soul?
7. What are the three basic physical needs of people?
8. How do the blessings of the *parsha* relate to three levels of soul?
9. What is the connection between the holidays and the physical blessings?
10. To what level of soul is Rosh Chodesh related?
11. To what level is Shabbos related?

EXERCISE

1. Keep a chart for a week, and track activities you do daily with your *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*.

