

Morals and Meanings

Parsha Reflections for Living

Nitzavim

Touching Beis with One's Ideas

וְהָיָה בְּשָׁמְעוֹ אֶת דְּבָרֵי הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֹּאת וְהִתְבָּרַךְ בְּלִבּוֹ לֵאמֹר שְׁלוֹם יְהִיָּה לִי כִּי
בְּשָׂרוֹת לִבִּי אֵלָּךְ

And it will be, when he hears the words of this curse, he will bless himself in his heart, saying, "Peace will be with me, for I will go as my heart sees fit."¹

The commentators wonder how it is meaningfully possible for a person to hear the curses of the Torah for one who violates its mitzvos and still assure themselves that all will be with them when they do as they please! Perhaps one answer can found in the concluding verse of this section, which reads:

הַנְּסֻתֹת לֵה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְהַנִּגְלֹת לָנוּ וּלְבָנֵינוּ עַד עוֹלָם לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה
הַזֹּאת

The things that are hidden are for Hashem, our God, and the things that are revealed are for us and our children forever, to do all the words of this Torah.²

What is the meaning of this verse? What are “the things that are concealed” and “the things that are revealed,” and how does this constitute the conclusion of Moshe’s address to the Jewish people?

¹ Devarim 29:17-18.

² Verse 28.

A fascinating explanation of this verse is presented by Rabbeinu Bachye, in the name of the Rambam.³ He writes that although a person may investigate the reasons for the mitzvos, ultimately, they remain “concealed” from us and are known only to Hashem, while what is “revealed” to us are specifically the practical aspects of the mitzvos in order to perform them. It emerges that the individual in our verse may feel that if he perceives the reason for the mitzvah, he will no longer need to actually perform it – a notion from which the concluding verse disavows him. According to this approach, the word “טָרִירוֹת” derives from the word “טָרָה” which means “to see”, and refers to the person’s assertion that *his vision* regarding the meaning of the mitzvos will guide him and absolve him of the obligation to perform them. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the root letter *reish* in the word טָרִירוֹת is doubled over – something which generally denotes intensity. In our instance, it reflects his self-assurance regarding the penetrating and profound nature of his vision: while most people see with one *reish*, he sees with two!

Taking this idea a little further, we note that in the verse’s two references to the heart, the first has two letter *beis*’s (בְּלִבְּךָ), while the second has only one (לִבִּי). What is behind this shift? The Sages inform us that when the word for heart has two *beis*’s, it refers to both parts of a person make-up: his *yetzer tov* (positive inclination) and his *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). This then, is the full depiction of this individual. He is sure that his moral compass and vision alone will steer him right because he is convinced that he sees only with his *yetzer tov*, hence he uses the term לִבִּי with just one *beis*. This gives us a fascinating from of conservation of “Torah letter matter”, whereby one whose vision uses only one *beis* of his heart, can see with two *reishes*. The reality, however, is that his vision, like that of everyone else, derives from both *beis*’s of his heart, so that it only really has one *reish* and hence is prone to error and incomplete understanding.

The terrible irony of this whole situation comes when we recall that the verse’s first reference to the heart, which is where the person’s notion of “super-vision” comes from, has two *beis*’s (וְהִתְקַדֵּר בְּלִבְּךָ). In other words, the very idea that the person can see only with his *yetzer tov* is itself being fed to him by his *yetzer hara*! The one “virtue” the *yetzer hara* can lay claim to is that of modesty, whereby it is fully prepared to allow others to take credit for its best ideas. To this end, the Torah insists that we “quote our sources” and recognize ideas that come from the *yetzer hara*, even as he is directing all our attention toward the *yetzer tov*! 🙏

3 Rabbeinu Bachye cites this explanation as coming from the Rambam’s commentary on the Torah. Aside from this reference, I am not aware of any other mention of this commentary.