

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

22 Iyar, 5769 Vol. 10, No. 29

Parshios Behar – Bechukosai

“AND IF YOU WALK [IN THE WAY OF] MY LAWS...” (VAYIKRA 26:3)

THE MIDRASH (Vayikra Rabbah 35:1) quotes a similar verse in Tehillim (119:59) where Dovid HaMelech says, “I considered my ways, and turned my feet towards Your testimonies.” One of the sages of the Midrash, R. Menachem, explains: People often feel besieged by their difficulties and consequently feel an urge to slacken their service of Hashem. What they fail to recognize is that their troubles may actually stem from that very issue: Their current *avodas Hashem* is already somewhat lacking. Dovid, at one time, also felt overwhelmed by his many difficulties and wondered why this was his lot. He then examined *Parashas Bechukosai* – with its blessings and curses – and he realized that it is our choice: If we choose to keep the Torah, we will receive abundant blessings; if we choose to sin, we will bring punishment and curses upon ourselves. He then improved his areas of weakness, and as a result of that *teshuva*, found new success and blessing in his endeavors.

How could he have had even the slightest question?

One look at *Sefer Tehillim* reveals to us the sublime heights Dovid reached in *yiras Shomayim* – fear of Hashem – and of trust in Hashem. How could he have had even the slightest question about such a basic idea? Could Dovid HaMelech have ever doubted that our actions ultimately determine whether we receive reward or punishment? Furthermore, Dovid must have been familiar with *Parashas Bechukosai*. What did he gain by reading the blessings and curses this time that he didn’t know before?

Every living person is a work in progress

Complacency is one of the most potent weapons in the *yetzer hara’s* arsenal. Most people tend to assume that they are just fine the way they are – we all like to think of ourselves as good, decent people and upstanding Jews. While it is essential to have a positive self image, it is also critical to maintain an awareness of our human fallibility. When we experience misfortune or suffering, the Talmud instructs us, we should examine our deeds. Every living person is a work in progress whose previous accomplishments should only spur him on to further improvement. The Midrash here is revealing to us that even a *tzaddik* of David HaMelech’s stature can momentarily fall into the trap of a slight degree of spiritual complacency. He can experience suffering and somehow not consider it as a wake up call to do *teshuva*. With Dovid the mistake was momentary, and took the form of puzzlement, until he refocused on this week’s *parasha* and its message of reward and punishment. With us, it can be a more serious flaw of self righteousness which drives us to decrease our service of Hashem – precisely the opposite of the Divine purpose behind the suffering.

An extra review and a simple reminder can spell the difference

There is a second lesson to be gleaned from Dovid’s turnaround – caused by the reexamination of the blessings and curses, a text he undoubtedly knew by heart. That is the power of simple repetition and reminders of basic truths, one of the cornerstones of *mussar* study. The *yetzer hara* exerts every effort to prevent us from studying *mussar* and one of his favorite tactics is the complaint, “That *sefer*? You know it already! That *mussar* concept? You know it well, why bother rehashing it?” From this *Midrash* we learn that an extra review and a simple reminder can spell the difference – even for a Dovid HaMelech. How much more so is it true for us, that learning a *mussar seder* can uplift us to higher levels of *avodas Hashem* and new vistas of spiritual grandeur.