Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter LI: Nitzavim (Deut. 29:9–30:20)

Essay 3. A blessing on the Torah

מְדְרָשׁ רַבָּה "כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזּאֹת" וְכוּ', רַבָּנִין אָמְרֵי אִם בַּרַכְתָּ אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, לְעַצְמְךּ אַתְּ מְכָרַדְּ, שֻׁנָּאֲמַר "כִּי-בִי יִרְבּוּ יָמֶידְ" וְכוּ', וְשֶׁמָּא תֹּאמְרוּ לְרָעַתָּכֶם נָתִתִּי לָכֶם אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, לֹא נָתַתִּי אֶלָא לְטוֹבַתְכֶם שָׁהָרֵי מַלְאָבֵי הַשְּׁרֵת נִתְאוּוּ לָהּ וְנֶעֶלְמָה מֵהֶם שָׁנָתוֹ וְנִילִיתְן שְׁנָיתָן שְׁנָּתְן לְנוּ הַתּוֹרָה לְרָעָתֵנוּ וְהַלֹּא בְּכָל הַמִּצְוֹת שֶׁבָּה אָנוּ נוֹטְלִין עֲלֵיהֶן שָׁנָּאֵמֵר וְכוּ' עכ"ל. תִּימָא דְּהֵיכִי תִּיפַּק אַדְּעְתִּין לוֹמֵר שֶׁנָּתֵן לָנוּ הַתּוֹרָה לְרָעָתֵנוּ וְהַלֹּא בְּכָל הַמִּצְוֹת שֶׁבָּה אָנוּ נוֹטְלִין עֲלֵיהֶן שָׂכָר.

There is a Midrash Rabbah:

"Surely, this instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach." The Rabbis said: The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: "If you recited a blessing on the Torah, you recited the blessing for yourself." As it is stated: "For with Me your days will be increased, and years of life will be added for you." [G-d said:] 'If you say, perhaps I gave you the Torah to your detriment; I gave it to you only for your benefit, as the ministering angels desired it, but it was vanished from them,' as it is stated: "It is vanished from the eyes of all living and hidden from the birds of the heavens."

- Deut. Rabbah 8:2

How would it would enter your mind to say that He gave us the Torah for our detriment? For every mitzvah within it, don't we receive a reward?

ְוְיֵשׁ לוֹמֵר שָׁאִיתָא בָּמְצִיעָא פֶּרֶק ז' "עַל־מָה אָבְדָה הָאָרֶץ" דָּבֶר זָה נִשְׁאַל לַחֲכָמִים וְכוּ' "נִיּאֹמֶר ה' עַל־עָזְבָם אֶת־תּוֹרָתִי", אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָלָא שֶׁלֹּא לִשְׁמָה, שֶׁכָּל הָעוֹשֶׂה דָּבָר וְנָהֶנָה בּוֹ מְבָרֵךְ עַל הְנָאָתוֹ כִּדְאָמְרִינַן בְּפֶּרֶק ג' שֶׁאָכְלוּ עַל חַיֵּי הַנְעַסְקוּ בָּה אֶלָּא שֶׁלֹּא לִשְׁמָה, שֶׁכָּל הָעוֹשֶׂה דָּבָר וְנָהֶנָה בּוֹ מְבָרָה עַל הָנָיה הְשָּׁה מְשׁוּם הָכִי לֹא הָיְתָה יְכוֹלָה לְהַצִּילָם מָה יָבִי סְגוּלָתָה דְּמַגְּנָא וּמַצְּלָא.

It can be said what is brought in tractate Bava Metziah, chapter 7:

^{*} English translation: Copyright © 2024 by Charles S. Stein. Additional essays are at https://zstorah.com

¹ Deut. 30:11.

² Prov. 9:11.

³ Job 28:21.

"Why is the Land destroyed"?⁴ . . . "And the L-rd replied: Because they have forsaken my Torah."⁵ Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: They did not recite a blessing on the Torah prior [to studying it].

- Bava Metziah 85a-b

The commentators explained that since they didn't recite a blessing, it revealed their thinking that they didn't occupy themselves with it because of its importance or benefit, but rather for ulterior motives. For anyone who performs an action and derives benefit from it is required to recite a blessing for that benefit, as we say in the 3rd chapter of tractate Berachot entitled, "Three who eat together": "Over [food], [which gives] temporary life, one recites a blessing, all the more so [must one recite a blessing over the Torah, which gives] eternal life." Since they didn't engage in [Torah] for its own sake, it was not able to save them from the evil inclination, as a remedy that protects and saves.

ּוּבְפֶּרֶק ז' דְּיוֹמָא אָמְרִינֵן זָכָה, נַעֲשֵׁית לוֹ סֵם חַיִּים, לֹא זָכָה, נַעֲשֵׂית לוֹ סֵם מִיתָה. זָכָה, צוֹרַפְּתּוֹ לְחַיִּים, לֹא זָכָה, צוֹרַפְתּוֹ לְכָּה, וְעִשִׁית לוֹ סֵם חַיִּים, לֹא זָכָה, נַעֲשֵׂית לוֹ סֵם מִיתָה. וְעוֹד אָמְרִינֵן בְּפֶּרֶק ח' דְּקַמָּא גָּדוֹל הַמְצֵנָּוה וְעוֹשֶׂה, מָמִי שֶׁאֵינוֹ מְצֵנָּוה וְעוֹשֶׁה, וְהַפַּעֶק קַמָּא דְּקִידּוּשִׁין בָּנַי, בָּרָאתִי יֵצֶר הָרַע, בָרָאתִי לוֹ תּוֹרָה הַּבֹּלִין.

In the 7th chapter of tractate Yoma, it is said: "If one is deserving, the Torah becomes a potion of life for him. If one is not deserving, the Torah becomes a potion of death for him. . . . For one who is deserving, the Torah refines him for life; for one who is not deserving, it refines him for death."

Also, it is said in the 8th chapter of tractate Bava Kamma: "One who is commanded and performs a mitzvah is greater than one who is not commanded and performs it." The reason for this is that when one is not commanded, such that there is no punishment for not fulfilling the mitzvah, there is no evil inclination that incites him to fail.

In the 1st chapter of tractate Kiddushin, it is written: "My children, I created an evil inclination. I created Torah as its antidote."

ּוּבְכָל זָה נָבֹא לְבֵיאוּר הַמִּדְרָשׁ אָם בַּרַכְתָּ אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, לְעַצְמְךּ אַתְּ מְבָרֵךְּ, שֶׁכְּשֶׁאַתָּה מְבָרֵךְ עַל הַתּוֹרָה נְרְאָה שָׁיֵשׁ לְךּ הְנָאָה מִמֶּנָה וְאִם יֵשׁ לֵךְ הָנָאָה הוּא סִימָן שֶׁאַתָּה מִתְעַפַּק בָּה לִשְׁמָה, וּכְשֶׁאַתָּה מִתְעַפַּק בָּה לְשִׁמָה אָז יֵשׁ לָה כָּל כֹּחָה לְהִיוֹת מַגְּנָא וּמַצְלָא וּבְנַדַּאי שֶׁתַּצִיל אוֹתְךּ מֵהַיֵּצֶר הָרַע, וְהִיא הַתַּבְלִין הַמּוֹעַלִין לְמכַּת הַיֵּצֶר וּבְזָה אִי אֶפְשָׁר שֶׁתָּבוֹא לִידִי חַטְא וְעָוֹן, וּכְשֶׁלֹא תְּחַטֵּא תָּבֹא לְךָּ הַטוֹבָה וְזָהוּ לְעַצְמְךְּ אַתְּ מְבָרֵךְ.

With all this, we will come to an understanding of the Midrash: "If you recited a blessing on the Torah, you recited the blessing for yourself." That is, when you recite a blessing on the Torah, it appears that you are deriving benefit from it, and if you are deriving

⁴ Jer. 9:11.

⁵ Jer. 9:12.

⁶ Berachot 48b.

⁷ Yoma 72b.

⁸ Bava Kamma 87a.

⁹ Kiddushin 30b.

benefit from it, this is a sign that you are engaged in it for its own sake. When you are engaged in it for its own sake, then it has every power to protect and save, and certainly it will save you from the evil inclination. It is the antidote that is effective against the blow of the evil inclination, and it is impossible that you will come to sin and iniquity. When you do not sin, you will come to goodness, and this is the meaning of "you recited the blessing for yourself."

ּוּמֵעַתָּה בָּא מָקוֹם לְסָלְקֵא דַּעְתָּךְ לוֹמֵר שֶׁלְרָעָתֵנוּ נָתָן לָנוּ אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, שֶׁהָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה נִיתְּנָה לַתַּלִין לַנֵּצְר הָרַע אֲבָל צָרִיךּ לעֲסוֹק בָּה לשְׁמָה דַּוְקָא וּכְשָׁאֵין עוֹסְקִים בָּה לְשְׁמָה אָז חַס וְשָׁלוֹם נַעֲשֵׂית סֵם הַמָּנָת. אָם כֵן יוֹתֵר טוֹב הָיָה לְנוּ עָמִלּא יָתֵן לְנוּ הַתּוֹרָה וְאָז לֹא הָיִינוּ מְצֵוּוִים וּכְשָׁאֵין צִוּוּי אֵין יֵצֶר הָרַע, וְאַף עַל פִּי שֶׁלֹא הָיָה לְנוּ נָמֵי כָּל כָּךְ שָׁכָר, דְּגָדוֹל הַמְצֵנָּה וְעוֹשֶׁה מְמֵי שֶׁאֵינוֹ מִצֵנָה, לֹא אִיכְפַּת כְּלָל, שֶׁהָרֵי כְּנֶגֶד זָה לֹא הָיָה לְנוּ נָמֵי עוֹנֶשׁ כִּדְאָמְרִינַן בְּקִידּוּשִׁין סִלְקָא דַּעְתָּךְ אָמִינָא: ״אִם תּאֹבוּ״, טוֹבָה, ״וְאִם תְּמָאֲנוּ״, לֹא טוֹבָה וְלֹא רָעָה.

Now there's room for it to enter your mind to say that it was to our detriment that the Torah was given to us. For the Torah was given as an antidote to the evil inclination, but one needs to engage in it particularly for its own sake, and when one does not engage in it for its own sake, then G-d forbid, it becomes a potion of death. If so, it would have been better if He had not given us the Torah, and then we would have not been commanded by it, for when there is no command, there is no evil inclination. Even though we also would not have much of a reward for fulfilling the mitzvot—for one who is commanded and performs a mitzvah is greater than one who is not commanded and performs it—that doesn't matter at all, for the flip side is that we also wouldn't have punishment. This is as it is said in tractate Kiddushin: "[It might] enter your mind to say: 'If you are willing' [you will receive] good, 'but if you refuse' [you will receive] neither good nor bad." 10

ְּעַל זֶה מְתָרֵץ לֹא נָתַתִּי אֶלָּא לְטוֹבַתָּכֶם שֶׁמַּלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת נִתְאוּוּ לָה, כְּלוֹמֵר אֵין מָקוֹם לְסְבָרָא זוֹ שֶׁהָרֵי מַלְאָכֵי הַשְּׁרֵת אֵין לָהָם מְתָּבִי לָהָם הְּמִּלְאֲכֵי הַשְּׁרֵת נִתְאוּי גוֹרֵם לַיֵּצֶר הָרַע אָם הִיוּ גַּם הָם מְצִּוִּים הָיָה לָהָם כְּמוֹ כֵן יֵצֶר הָרַע לָהֶם יֵצֶר הָרַע "וּבְמַלְאָכִיו יָשִׁים תָּהָלָה" וַאֲפִלּוּ הָכִי נִתְאַוּוֹ לָה שְׁמֵע מִינַּה שֶׁגִּדוֹל הַשֶּׁכֶר מִן הַהָּפְסָד. וַאֲפִילוּ אָם תִּרְצוּ לוֹמֵר שְׁאֵין יֵצֶר הָרַע שׁוֹלֵט כְּלָל בַּמַלְאָכִים כְּמוֹ שֶׁהָשִׁיב לָהֶם מֹשֶׁה בְּפֶרָק ט' דְּשַׁבָּת יַצֶר הָרַע יֵשׁ בֵּינֵיכֶם וְכוּ'. אָם כֵּן לֹא יִהְיֶה לָהֶם נְמֵי שׁבִּע מַנְי שָׁכִר הַרְצָה. שִׁבּם שַּׁלֵּר הָכִי הָיוּ מִתְאַוִּים לְהָתִעְפֵּק בָּה מִשׁׁיבוּתָה וַהַנַאַתָּה, מְכֵּל שַׁכֵּן אַתָּם שַׁיֵּע לָכֶם שַׂכָר הַרְבָּה.

Regarding this, it is explained that I only gave it for your benefit, for the ministering angels desired it. This means that there is no room for this argument that the Torah is to our detriment, since the ministering angels do not have an evil inclination, and even so, they desired it.

If it's brought that the command to follow the Torah were to cause the evil inclination, then if they were also commanded, they would have an evil inclination as well. This is as it is written, "Behold, He puts no trust in His servants, and charges His angels with folly," which suggests that the angels could also be incited by the evil inclination. Even so, they desired [the Torah]. Hear from this that the reward is greater than the disadvantage.

¹⁰ Kiddushin 61b.

¹¹ Job 4:18.

Maybe you would want to say that the evil inclination doesn't rule over angels at all, as Moses answered them in the 9th chapter of tractate Shabbat, where it is reported that he told them: "Is there an evil inclination within you [that would need these commandments]? Immediately they agreed with the Holy One, Blessed be He [that He made the right decision to give the Torah to man]." Nevertheless, they also wouldn't have any reward from it. Even so, they wanted to engage in it because of its importance and benefit, even more so, you should want to engage in it, for you stand to have a great reward from it.

וְאַף אָם לֹא תַּקְפִּידוּ עַל הַשָּׂכָר מֵחֲמת הָעוֹנֶשׁ מִפָּל מָקוֹם הוֹאִיל שֶׁיֵשׁ בֵּינֵיכֶם יֵצֶר הָרַע אַף אָם לֹא הֵייָהֶם מְצֵּוּוִים אָפְשָׁר שָׁהַבֵּצֶר הָרַע יִתְגָּרָה מְעֵט בֵּינֵיכֶם וְיַזִּיק לָכֶם. וְעַל כֹּל פָּנִים אַף אָם לֹא נִיתְנָה לָכֶם בְּצִוּוּי וְאַזְּהָרָה שֶׁמֵעַתָּה אֵין עוֹד טַעֲנַת עוֹנֶשׁ הָיָה לָכֶם לְהָתְנַדֵּב לְעְסוֹק בָּה מֵחֲמת חֲשִׁיבוּתָה נְהָנָאָתָה כְּמוֹ שֶׁהָיוּ רוֹצִים לְעֲשׁוֹת הַמּלְאָכִים. וּכְשָׁתָה, נְּהָ מָה אִיכְפַּת לָכֶם לְהָיוֹת מְצֵוּוִים הָרֵי כְּשֶׁתִּעְסְקוּ בָּה לֹשְׁמָה אֵין כָּאן יֵצֶר הָרַע נְקָרָא שָׁאַתָּם מִתְעַסְקוּ בָּה לֹשְׁמָה אֵין כָּאן יִבֶּר הָרַע, בָּרָאתִי לוֹ תַּבְלִין, וּכְּנֶגֶד זָה תִּהֶיֶה לָכֶם טוֹבָה כְּפוּלָה וּמְכוּפֶּלֶת.

Even if you do not care about the potential reward because of the risk of punishment, nonetheless, since there is an evil inclination among you, even if you were not commanded, it is possible that the evil inclination will provoke you a little and cause you harm. In any case, even if you were not given a command and warning, from now on there is no longer an argument about punishment. You should have volunteered to engage with it because of its importance and benefit, just as the angels wanted to do. When you have this benefit, it is considered that you are engaging with it for its own sake. Therefore, what difference does it make for you to be commanded? When you engage with it for its own sake, there is no evil inclination and there is no punishment at all. Thus, [the teaching from Kiddushin] is indeed fulfilled: "My children, I created an evil inclination. I created Torah as its antidote." In return, you will receive double and redoubled goodness.

ּוּבְזֶה יוּבֵן הַפָּסוּק "כִּי לֶקָח טוֹב נָתַתִּי לָכֶם תּוֹרָתִי אַל־תַּעֲזֹבוּ", אָמֵר הקב"ה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי נָתַתִּי לָכֶם לֶקָח טוֹב וְאַף אִם אַתֶּם אוֹמְרִים שָׁהִיא לְרָעַתְכֶם שָׁהִיא מִקָּח רַע הָלֹא סוֹפָה לְהִיוֹת טוֹבָה לָכֶם. וּכְתַב הַשַּׁלְחָן עָרוּךְ חֹשֶׁן מִשְׁפָּט (סִימָן רל"ג) מָכֵר לוֹ אוֹמְרִים שֶׁהִיא יָפוֹת אֲפִילוּ אִם לֹא נִתְאַנָּה בִּסְכוּם, מוֹכֵר יָכוֹל לַחְזוֹר בּוֹ וְלֹא לוֹקְחַ. וְלָכֵן אִי אֶפְשֶׁר שֶׁתַּעַזְבוּ תּוֹרָתִי שֶׁהְרֵי הַלוֹק מֵץ יִכוֹל לַחְזוֹר בּוֹ.

With this, the verse can be understood: "For I give you good instruction; do not forsake my teaching." The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Israel: I have given to you good instruction, and even if you say that it is to your detriment, that it is an inferior acquisition, won't it be good to you in the end? It is written in the Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat, siman 233, se'if 1: "[If a seller sold what he thought was] bad [wheat] and it is found to be good, even if there was no deceit around the price, the seller can renege on [the sale], but not the buyer." Therefore, it is impossible for you to leave My Torah, for the buyer cannot renege.

* * *

¹² Shabbat 89a.

¹³ Prov. 4:2.

¹⁴ See also Mishnah Bava Batra 5:6.