

A PARASHA THOUGHT

Teshuva Isn't Distant?

Parshas Nitzavim describes a cryptic *mitzvah*: "Because this *mitzvah* that I'm commanding you today isn't hidden from you and isn't distant. It's not in the Heavens... And it's not across the sea... Because this matter is very close to you, it's in your mouth and your heart to do it." (Devarim 30:11-14). Rashi and the Ramban debate which *mitzvah* the Torah is in fact talking about. Rashi maintains (based on the Gemara in *Eruvin* 55a) that the Torah is delineating the *mitzvah* of learning Torah. According to Rashi, the Torah is telling us that learning Torah isn't hidden, in the Heavens, or across the sea; it was given to us in both written and oral form and is therefore very close, or available to be learned.

According to the Ramban, however, the Torah is describing the *mitzvah* of *teshuva*

(repentance). How does the Torah's description of a *mitzvah* that is very close and available to us align with our understanding of the *mitzvah* of *teshuva*? One simple answer is that the *mitzvah* of *teshuva* doesn't involve an object that is far away, but instead requires oneself to correct one's wrongs and return to one's best character through the process of *teshuva*.

To say, however, that the Torah is commenting on how *teshuva* isn't physically distant is hard to imagine. I believe that the Torah is teaching us a much deeper lesson, one that truly expounds on the concept of *teshuva*. Rav Yisroel Salanter in *Ohr Yisrael* (Letter 8) discusses the weight of *mitzvos* and *aveiros* (transgressions). Rav Yisroel Salanter says (based on the Gemara in *Menachos* 43a) that punishments for not fulfilling Hashem's will (i.e. transgressing *aveiros* or not doing *mitzvos*) are commensurate with the level of difficulty involved with the fulfillment of Hashem's will. Hashem will hold a person substantially more accountable for *mitzvos* that are easy to perform or *aveiros* that one can effortlessly avoid, as these are more demonstrative of carelessness

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RABBI
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THE RABBI WAS ASKED ON THE PARASHA

THIS WEEK WITH
RABBI YITZCHAK PREIS

Q. Is there something for us to learn from the oversized letter "lamed" in "vayashlichem"? (Devarim 29:27)?

A. We'll share one approach as recorded in the *sefer Shalal Rav* in the name of the author's father. He references the Avudraham and Vilna Gaon who describe the letter "lamed" as being associated with "limud" / Torah learning. With this in mind, he posits that the large *lamed* represents an emphasis on learning. The Torah is hinting that despite tragic "vayashlichem" / expulsion, Israel will be sustained through expansion of Torah learning. Some of the examples he provides: the development of Talmud Bavli in Bavel (Babylon/Iraq), the proliferation of *halachah* / legal works following the Spanish expulsion, and the post-Holocaust surge of yeshivas.

Shalal Rav also references the Chida who notes that sans

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THE RABBI WAS ASKED ON THE PARASHA

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“lamed,” the word *vayash(l) ichem* would be left with letters whose numerical value equals “Eisav.” This reminds us of the enemies who are empowered if we fail to keep the “lamed/limud” (learning) primary while in exile. 🤖

Something always bugged you about the upcoming parasha (or last week's)? Ask! Submit a question on the parasha by Monday at noon by emailing parasha@cincynkollel.org. Questions will be selected to address at the discretion of the Rabbi who is answering that week. Questions may be edited for brevity/clarity.

A PARASHA THOUGHT

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in serving Hashem. By the same token, those who work on challenges that are naturally easier for them will save themselves a great deal of punishment with much less effort expended than if they had worked on their more daunting challenges.

Rav Yisroel Salanter in *Ohr Yisrael* (letter 8) also expresses the concept of doing *teshuva* on a part of an *aveirah*; this is also considered an abandoning of the misdeed, a step in the *teshuva* process. *Teshuva* isn't an “all or nothing” proposition, and one will be able to achieve forgiveness for the fraction of the misdeed that one is abandoning.

When we combine these two powerful ideas, we come to the following conclusion: energy invested into doing *teshuva* is best spent on performing *mitzvos* that require the least struggle or dodging *aveiros* that have the least appeal. One can even zero in on specific aspects of *mitzvos* or *aveiros* that one finds the least intimidating and prioritize what one wants to accomplish. Furthermore, when one

starts to make an effort in the right direction, Hashem gives the person Divine assistance, like the Gemara in Yuma 38b states: “One who comes to purify himself, Hashem helps him.” This effort exerted into making oneself a better person will be the catalyst to propel one to lofty spiritual heights and can even lead a person to do a complete *teshuva* on all of one's wrongdoings.

With this groundbreaking understanding of *teshuva* that Rav Yisroel Salanter describes, we can now understand why the Torah expresses that *teshuva* isn't so distant from us. The Torah isn't describing the physical closeness between us and the *mitzvah* of *teshuva*. The Torah is revealing to us that the *mitzvah* of *teshuva* isn't difficult. One can even accomplish *teshuva* by abandoning those sins that are easy to abandon and one can even focus on the lighter forms or fragments of the *aveirah*. *Teshuva* can be easy if one breaks down one's *aveiros* into bite-sized portions.

We should always merit to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *teshuva* in the best way that we can and in doing so we should elevate ourselves to much greater spiritual heights than we ever imagined. 🤖



TRIVIA

RABBI GAVI KADISH

It is common that at a *bris* ceremony performed in a synagogue following the morning services many of the attendees will be found still wearing their *tefillin*. This is in observance of a tradition of deliberately delaying the removal of *tefillin* until after the *bris* is complete. The custom is primarily recorded in 17th century Ashkenazic *halachic* commentaries such as *Magen Avraham* (Rabbi Avraham Gombiner 1635-1682), which cites the 14th century *sefer Haga'ahos Minhagim*, a compendium of practices of Central European Jewry, as its source. In terms of references from Sefardic circles, the *Chida* (Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai 1724-1806) defends the practice of wearing *tefillin* at a *bris* from detractors who felt doing so was actually disrespectful to the *bris milah* ceremony, and Rabbi Yaakov Chaim Sofer writes in *Kaf Hachaim* of an ancient custom for the mohel, *sandek*, and father of the child to wear their *tefillin* during the *bris*. The basic rationale behind this custom is that both a *bris milah* and wearing *tefillin* are a sign of the Jewish people's relationship with G-d and as such are fitting to be expressed simultaneously. 🤖