

PENINIM ON THE TORAH

PARSHA BOOKLET

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PARASHAT KI TAVO

And now, behold! I have brought the first fruit of the ground that You have given me. (26:10)

The Midrash emphasizes the significance of the mitzvah of Bikurim when it posits, "In the merit of three things the world was created: Challah, Maaser, and Bikurim." Three mitzvos played a pivotal role in Creation, and one of them is Bikurim. Clearly, it is an important mitzvah which infuses us with a sense of hakoras hatov, gratitude, to the Almighty for all that He does for us. What renders it important enough to be one of the three mitzvos which were the precursors of creation of the world?

Horav Yaakov Neiman, zl, gives us a practical understanding of this mitzvah, how we should approach its performance, and what impact it should have on us. Obviously, anyone who possesses a modicum of intelligence understands that Hashem created the world. This is a given for every thinking individual. What seems to create a problem-- even for the rational man-- is the fact that even those activities that seem to be consequences of his own creation are not. They are the work of the Almighty. In fact, everything and everybody are the results of Hashem's creation and His continuing will that it/they continue to exist. To believe in anything less than that is heretical.

Thus, when an individual who has toiled, plowed, planted and harvested the first fruits of his labor comes to the Sanctuary and declares: "I have brought the first fruits...that You have given me," he affirms the purpose of Creation. He acknowledges that everything in this world-- even what he has seemingly created with his own hands--all emanates from Hashem.

You shall erect these stones which I command you today, on Har Eival...There you shall build an Altar for Hashem. (27:4,5)

As the people are about to enter the Holy Land, they are commanded to renew their commitment to the Torah, by inscribing it on twelve huge stones. This commitment was to be accompanied by offering sacrifices on an altar which they were to erect. This entire experience was to be one of festivity and joy. It is, therefore, surprising that the site for this festive occurrence was on Har Eival, the site designated for the reading of the curses. Was not Har Gerizim, the mountain upon which the blessings were pronounced, a more appropriate place for festivity, commitment, altar and

sacrifices? Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, explains that the punishments of the curses were meant to encourage the people to be Torah observant. If they were confronted only with the wonderful rewards in store for the observant, it would allow the yetzer hora, evil inclination, to entice them into disobedience - by claiming that the fleeting pleasures it promises have even greater benefit and are more practical than the distant, abstract rewards which the Torah promises are prepared in the World to Come. If, however, they were to be aware of the drastic punishments which are the consequences of a life of sin, they would wake up from their slumber and react. Thus, the curses avail them a greater opportunity for survival. This is the reason for the festivity.

Perhaps we might suggest a slightly different approach. In Parashas Masei, the Torah summarizes the entire route taken by the Jewish people during their exodus from Egypt until they stood poised to enter Eretz Yisrael. The Torah emphasizes that "Moshe wrote their goings forth according to their journeys at the bidding of Hashem" (Bamidbar 33:2). We wonder why the Torah singles out this particular point, the people's journey through the wilderness, emphasizing that it was written by Moshe Rabbeinu at Hashem's bidding. Was not the entire Torah written at Hashem's instructions?

Horav Moshe Ephraim, zl, of Sedlikow, author of the *Degel Machanei Ephraim*, discusses an idea taught by his grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov. The route which Klal Yisrael followed from Egypt into the Holy Land, which included forty-two encampments, represents the journey taken by every human being throughout his life. He begins in Egypt, which is symbolized by the narrow passageway of the mother's womb: Mitzrayim, the Hebrew term for Egypt, means "narrow constraints," represented by the narrow channel through which an infant emerges. Life travels through the wilderness of the world with forty-two encampments, leading to our own inner "Holy Land," a life of transcendent holiness.

Our personal journeys through our individual wildernesses are filled with forty-two singular experiences, each composed of unique psychological, physical and emotional components which can be used as opportunities for emotional and spiritual growth and productivity. Alternatively, they can be viewed as a source of demoralization, debasement and despair. These encounters can either bring us to our inner spiritual zenith or drive us away from our spiritual destination.

In short, we see from here that Hashem writes the script of our lives. By our own actions, we determine if the "play" will be depressing or uplifting. Will the journey be one of blessing, or will it generate curse? It is all up to us. We make the choices that define our journey. We encounter the challenges that are there to elevate us or take us down. Our reactions influence the sequel.

What often seems to be a curse may actually be an opportunity to bring one closer to his or her personal "Holy Land." It is not the position in which one stands that decides his fate. It is how he perceives his position and what he does about it that determine his destiny.

Accursed is one who will not uphold the words of the Torah. (27:21)

This is a very powerful curse. According to Ramban, this curse applies to anyone who does not accept the validity of the entire Torah - each and every one of its commandments. This curse does not apply to the one who sins, but to the one who repudiates, who discards a mitzvah, claiming that it lacks relevance in our day. This applies equally to one who denies the Divinity of any part of the Torah. The Yerushalmi Sotah 7:4 goes further when it posits that this curse applies to anyone who can influence another Jew to be loyal to the Torah, but does not. This is especially true of people in authority and

those who possess the talent and the power to leave a positive imprimatur on a fellow Jew.

I wonder if, by extension, this would include those who are in the position of helping a Jewish child, by including him or her in their learning groups or accepting the child into their schools. What about those who refuse to accept a child because his family pedigree is not on the same scale as that of the other children, or because his parents have just not been "Torah-oriented" as long as the parents of "other" children? Are they to be included in "not upholding the words of this Torah"? Of course, everybody has a "justifiable" excuse, or so they rationalize, but at the end of the day, can he really say that he did not turn away another Jewish child just because he or she did not fit in to his preconceived notion of what constitutes a ben Torah. One who turns his back on another Jew who is seeking to learn, or to have his child learn, Torah thinks more highly of himself than he does of the Torah.

Finally, this pasuk enjoins us to support Torah study. There are those who are extremely selective concerning their tzedakah, charity, viewing educational institutions as the responsibility of the parents. This is a rational observation for someone who does not appreciate the significance of Torah. Without Torah, there is no tzedakah! Torah defines the totality of Jewish life, teaching us how to live under every condition. Torah is our lifeline, our blood supply, the energy that keeps us alive as Jews. Without Torah, we are no different than all of the other inhabitants of this planet. It is the responsibility of those who have, each according to his own ability, to sustain Torah study.

The Midrash in Koheles makes an intriguing statement: "One who studies Torah, reviews his studies, teaches others, observes the Torah, but has the ability to support others who study- and does not - is included in the curse." Here we have an individual who acknowledges the significance of Torah. He learns - and, clearly, if Chazal say that he learns, they mean properly, not merely a cursory reading of the text. This person "horeved," toiled, in Torah study. He taught others and was himself meticulous in its observance. He just refused to support Torah financially. Is that a reason to be cursed? He is missing just one aspect of the total Torah picture. Is that so bad?

Horav Dovid Povarsky, zl, explains that one must understand the meaning of kabbolas haTorah, receiving the Torah, from Hashem. By its essence, the Torah is a Divine creation. It is Divinely authored and, therefore, is not adaptable to this world, to mankind with his physical limitations. This is why, after learning the Torah from Hashem on Har Sinai, Moshe Rabbeinu was to forget everything that he had learned. Torah is Divine; Moshe is human. The Torah was an external entity which did not coalesce with Moshe as an individual. When Hashem gave him the Torah b'matanah, as a gift, there was a fusion, a symbiotic transfer of the Torah into the essence of Klal Yisrael. This was the Giving of the Torah. It was taken from its Heavenly perch and united with man. The Torah was no longer an external presence. It was now an integral part of the Jew. Klal Yisrael and the Torah are one!

When something is a part of an individual, he cannot exist without it. He does not tolerate life without this component. Avraham Avinu was the amud ha'chesed, pillar of kindness. The Rosh Yeshivah of Ponevez explains that this means that chesed was a part of Avraham's essence. He could not live without chesed. Therefore, even when he was ill and in extreme pain, he looked for wayfarers. He needed his chesed. When he saw the wayfarers who were sent by Hashem, he ran to them. He was energized, because he had now participated in his chesed. It was not merely an act of kindness. It was his life! It was Avraham Avinu!

This is what Torah should be to us. If one has the ability to support Torah, then he is consumed with a desire to do so. If he sees someone studying Torah, and he is able to sustain his learning, he is driven to do so with alacrity and enthusiasm because it is his life. One who studies and observes, but does not feel compelled to support Torah, indicates that the Torah still remains outside of him. It is not

amalgamated into his being, as it should be for every Jew. This is not a simple, minute deficiency. This is a serious matter and worthy of a curse.

Because you did not serve Hashem, Your G-d, amid gladness and goodness of heart, when everything was abundant. (28:47)

Imagine, the entire Tochachah, Rebuke, is the consequence of our serving Hashem without joy. We served Him; we performed the mitzvos, but it was without a sense of happiness. That is why we suffer the many tragic curses. It seems a bit demanding. We are addressing G-d fearing, observant Jews who go to shul and daven. They perform mitzvos and do basically everything that is enjoined of them. Is the fact that they do not exhibit enthusiasm and joy a reason to punish them so harshly? I have written many responses to this question over the years, and they all point to the importance of simchah, joy, in mitzvah performance. It just is not the same mitzvah.

I recently saw a simple, but compelling, explanation from Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, that really addresses the crux of the problem. In order to transmit mitzvah observance to the next generation, there must be simchah in mitzvah performance. Let us face it, you cannot fool children. They are very perceptive and always see through the facade that we project to cover up the truth. When a child sees his father performing a mitzvah amid joy, the child understands that this activity is important. It is valued by his father. If, on the other hand, the child notices complacency, indifference, even coldness in his father's mitzvah performance, then he will recognize exactly what the mitzvah is worth to his father - nothing! If a child grows up in a home in which the father does not arise bright and early for davening - if he goes altogether - the child will surely not place a premium on the value of prayer with a minyan. The list goes on, and it is needless to elaborate. Simchah is that component of mitzvah observance that guarantees the survival of the mitzvah. Without joy, the mitzvah will not have an enduring relationship with the next generation.

Having said this, we should address the meaning of simchah, a term with which the commentators grapple. Clearly, our idea of simchah contrasts the popular definition employed by contemporary society. Their joy is frivolous, without meaning, loose, uncontrolled and unabashed. Simchah has dignity, integrity and emanates from within. Does simchah mean having a good time? Does one have to shout from the rooftops to demonstrate that he is happy? Furthermore, we have mitzvos that are to be celebrated amid sadness, such as mourning for the Bais Hamikdash. How does one mourn for the Bais Hamikdash and yet still feel a sense of simchah? How does one eat maror, bitter herbs, on Pesach and experience simchah? It seems a bit incongruous.

I think we may explain this in the following manner. Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, posits that when two Hebrew words are similar, they are related in meaning. Thus, the word sameach, happy, and tzameach, grow, are related one to another. With this in mind, a whole new vista of understanding unfolds before us. Happiness means that one senses or experiences growth. When one performs a mitzvah properly, he should feel elevated, transformed, a better person, a holier Jew. He has grown! This feeling generates satisfaction, serenity, even joy. Any activity which engenders a feeling of growth is an experience of simchah. If one does not feel he has grown, then there is no simchah, because the two realities are intertwined with one another.

Hence, one can cry bitter tears on Tisha B'Av, but still experience simchah, because he has grown. He has mourned for the Bais Hamikdash. That is a growth experience! Growth generates inner

satisfaction - even if the growth has been generated by a painful experience. Growth alters the definition of pain.

When we recite the Vidduy, confessional prayer on Yom Kippur, we do so with a melody. It might be a haunting melody, but it is a melody no less. Why? This question is asked by the K'sav Sofer, who explains that when we recite Vidduy, we are carrying out a Biblical command. Therefore, we are happy and thankful to Hashem that He has availed us of this opportunity to cleanse and purify ourselves before Him. This is why we sing. Also, when we confess, we grow. We cleanse ourselves of sin and become better Jews who are now closer to the Almighty. We have grown. We are, therefore, b'simchah.

The Baal Shem Tov once visited a town in which the people came to him complaining that their chazzan, cantor, had been behaving very strangely. It seems that on Yom Kippur, when he would chant the Al Cheit, confession of sin, he would do so with a merry melody, rather than the usual solemn tune. They presented a legitimate complaint, so the Baal Shem Tov asked to speak to the chazzan.

"Rebbe," the chazzan replied, "if I were a janitor in the palace of the king, would I not be happy that I have the privilege to beautify the king's palace? I feel the same way during my recital of the al cheit. The neshamah, soul, within me is Divine. It is a part of G-d. When I confess my sins, I am actually cleansing myself, so that I can be a more pleasant place for the neshamah which resides within me. Is this not enough reason to sing with joy?" The Baal Shem Tov told the townspeople that they were very fortunate to have a chazzan of such spiritual integrity leading their service.

He recognized that he was growing and, therefore, was filled with simchah. Growth often is the product of toil. One has to exert himself in order to catalyze growth. In Yaakov Avinu's blessing to his son Yissachar, he says, "He saw tranquility that it was good... Yet, he bent his shoulder to bear and he became an indentured laborer." (Bereishis 49:15) The Kotzker Rebbe, zl, gleans from this pasuk that true simchah in life is derived through toil and shouldering responsibility. The one who "cops out," who looks for excuses to avoid taking responsibility, is not a happy person. Imagine, Yaakov says, "He saw tranquility that it was good." He presented to his son the opportunity for menuchah, tranquility and bliss. One would expect Yissachar to lay back, soak up the sun, plug himself into every electronic device, and just do nothing. Not Yissachar. He responds to the offer of tranquility by "bending his shoulder" and "becoming an indentured slave." He understood the value of serenity and peace, but he was also acutely aware that the only way to achieve this sense of calm is through ameilus, toil. Material excess and physical pleasures do not bring about tranquility. In fact, they increase one's dependency on them. Toil and responsibility effectuate growth, which is the primary component of simchah.

As we stand close to the end of the year, may we merit to cleanse ourselves of the impurities that suppress our ability to grow, so that we will enjoy true simchas ha'chaim in the coming years.

Even any illness or any blow that is not written in this Book of the Torah, Hashem will bring upon you, until you are destroyed. (28:61)

A number of distinguished commentators cite a Midrash whose source seems to be elusive; yet, its message is compelling. The Torah details many terrible punishments, concluding that even those that are not mentioned for whatever reason will also be employed as a means of punishing us. The Midrash asks what illness or painful experience is not included among the many that are enumerated here. The response is misas tzadikim, death of the righteous. This collective punishment is truly devastating.

What is the Midrash teaching us with this statement? Furthermore, what does the Midrash mean when it posits the death of the righteous is not mentioned in the Torah?

The Noda B'Yehudah explains that each of the previous Sefarim mention a tzadik who passes away. Sefer Bereishis tells us of the passing of Noach, the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs. Sefer Shemos begins with the passing of Yosef and his brothers. In Sefer Vayikra, we are told about the untimely deaths of Nadav and Avihu. Bamidbar is the Sefer in which the deaths of Aharon and Miriam are recorded. There is no death of a tzadik mentioned in Sefer Devarim. This is what is meant by the "illness or blow that is not written in this Book of the Torah."

The question that glares at us is what about Moshe Rabbeinu? He is certainly righteous enough to be listed among the tzadikim, and his death is recorded at the end of Sefer Devarim. The Noda B'Yehudah gives two reasons why Moshe's passing is not recorded. First, it occurred after the Tochachah, Rebuke. While Moshe was voicing the ninety-eight curses, he was obviously still alive. Second, as the consummate anav, paragon of humility, Moshe did not view himself as a tzadik. The others were tzadikim. He was not! This is an incredible statement coming from one of the greatest Torah leaders in the last two hundred years. Moshe did not consider himself to be on the spiritual plateau of his brother and sister, who were his contemporaries. He was the quintessential leader of the Jewish People, the individual who gave them Hashem's Torah after being on Har Sinai and learning the Torah directly from Hashem. Yet, he did not view himself as a tzadik. That is the definition of humility. How distant are we from this character trait?

Then you shall call out and say before Hashem, your G-d. (26:5)

When one brings his Bikkurim, first fruits, to the Bais Hamikdash, he recites a formal declaration, which includes a short sketch of Jewish history. This awakens within the bearer of the Bikkurim the awareness that the Land and its fruit belong to him only as a result of Hashem's intervention. Had "history" been untouched, he would have had nothing. The word v'anisa, is translated by Rashi as, "you shall call out (loud)." V'anisa, in this context, means to raise one's voice. In an alternate explanation, the Sefas Emes says that v'anisa is derived from the word, ani, poor man. Thus, v'anisa, means, "you shall make yourself like a poor man," lowly, self-effacing and meek. Before one approaches Hashem in prayer, he must prepare himself emotionally. He must come subdued, like a poor man who stands at the door begging for alms, with a heavy heart, acknowledging that he himself is nothing, and that he has nothing to offer Hashem. He is just here to beg, to plead, to supplicate His positive response.

One prepares himself to pray by expressing his own lowliness before he is ready to articulate Hashem's praises. This is what the Mishnah means when it says, maschil b'gnus u'msayeim b'shevach, "He begins with the shame and concludes with praise." The author of the Haggadah uses this phrase to describe the Jewish People's journey through history. Originally descendants of Terach, father of Avraham Avinu an idol worshipper and subject of Nimrov, self-proclaimed god of the world, we developed into a nation that is deserving of the appellation mamleches Kohanim v'goi kadosh, "a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation." In this sense, however, we are saying that the individual must

sense the v'anisa, his inferiority as he approaches Hashem, and only then can he begin to articulate Hashem's praises and entreat Him for His favor.

The Sefas Emes reconciles his definition of v'anisa, with that of Rashi. Clearly, the obsequious poor man standing at the door does not raise his voice. Nonetheless, the two definitions do not contradict one another, since the more one subdues himself, the louder his voice becomes, so that he can be heard. In other words, it is not always the loud "voice" that is heard. Indeed, the "loudness" may stifle the sound if it is the product of arrogance. One does not have to raise his voice in order for Hashem to hear, but he does have to lower himself if he wants Hashem to listen.

Horav Yitzchak, zl, m'Vorka was wont to say, "Chassidim should know how to be bent over when standing erect, to cry out when they are silent, and to dance without making any movement." This is a profound and eloquent statement. It is also a demanding manifesto, but it can be accomplished. With the proper discipline and state of mind, one can transport himself into a different world, while his physical body remains stationary. This is how one connects with Hashem.

As I try to come to grips with this idea, I am reminded of a story which Rabbi Yechiel Spero relates in "Touched By A Story 3." The Rizhiner Rebbe zl, would conduct his Friday night tisch, chassidic gathering around the Rebbe's table, without uttering a word of Torah. Indeed, he hardly spoke at all. Nonetheless, his tisch was the gathering place for hundreds of chassidim. They would come there merely to bask in the rebbe's presence. Two young cynics heard about this "silent" tisch and decided to see for themselves what all the "commotion" was about. They had heard of the Rebbe's captivating powers, but this did not seem possible.

They traveled to Rizhin, but by the time they prepared themselves it was too late. The tisch had already ended. The only one left in the shul was the gentile janitor who was busy cleaning up. They had traveled so far and they were not prepared to return without learning something about the Rebbe's tisch. Therefore, they asked the janitor, "Perhaps you can tell us exactly what takes place during the tisch."

The janitor was not Jewish, nor was he very erudite but he possessed a sense of perception that exceeded his acquired knowledge. "I am not really sure what transpires," he began. "All I know is that the holy rabbi sits at the head of the table, with his followers sitting on two tables parallel to his. He just sits there and does not say a word. His followers also sit there - and listen to what he does not say."

The reply touched these two men like nothing else could have. The gentile's simple description, coupled with his admiration and reverence for the Rebbe, inspired them to return once again - as participants. They would also sit and bask in the Rebbe's silence. You see, it is not always what a person says that pierces through to the neshamah, soul. At times, it is what he does not say - his silence - his devotional - that speaks louder, loud enough for the heart to hear. There is a tremendous need for silence in our shuls. A shul is a place where one goes to pray, to express his feelings, to articulate his thoughts and emotions. It is also a place for silent devotion. There are people who daven by raising their voices, beating their chests and swaying with intensity. There are others who just meditate and say the words quietly, almost silently. There are also those who, regrettably, use the shul as their social hall, gym or business office, regardless of how much it may disturb others.

The following parable related by Horav Ezra Hamway, zl, Rosh Bais Din of Aram Sova, should serve as a deterrent for us, especially as we approach the Yimai Ha'Din, Days of Judgment, when our tefillos play a critical role in our lives. The yetzer hora, evil inclination, and yetzer tov, good inclination, once met and stopped to chat. The yetzer hora said, "It is getting out of hand. We are constantly at each other's throats. Let us work out a compromise in which I will have one part of man's world, and you will have the other. In this way, we will have clearly defined boundaries, so that our

bickering and quarreling will finally be put to rest."

The negotiations were simple, since each one had a proclivity for a certain space where it would feel most comfortable. The yetzer tov opted for the domain of the bais hamedrash, the shuls, and any place endemic to holiness. The yetzer hora laid claim to the cafes, theaters, and other places of frivolity and entertainment. All went well until the day in which the yetzer tov entered a synagogue and discovered, to his chagrin, that the yetzer hora was firmly ensconced there. "What are you doing here on my property?" the yetzer tov asked. "I thought we had agreed to stick to each other's boundaries. The synagogue is my domain!"

"Yes," answered the yetzer hora. "It may appear to be a synagogue. It has an Aron Kodesh, Sifrei Torah and a bimah in the middle. For all appearances, you are right. It looks like a shul, but just listen to the sounds. There are people speaking about business deals, lashon hora, slanderous speech, and all sorts of mundane, trivial matters. It sure does not sound like a synagogue. This place looks more like it belongs in my domain!"

And He brought us to this place, and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (26:9)

The fact that Eretz Yisrael is described as a "land flowing with milk and honey" is somewhat enigmatic. This quality notwithstanding, there certainly must be other attributes of Eretz Yisrael that the Torah could have emphasized. Since when does a land's physical qualities play such a significant role? Rashi comments that makom ha'zeh, "this place," is a reference to the Bais Hamikdash. The individual is praising the Holy Land for being home to the Bais Hamikdash. He is, thus, making a spiritual statement. Eretz Yisrael's intrinsic kedushah, holiness, elevates it above all other lands, but is the connection to milk and honey?

Horav Meir Shapiro, zl, suggests that "flowing with milk and honey" is actually a metaphor for the Holy Land's spiritual character. Milk and honey are both foods that seem to be unkosher. Milk is a derivative of a cow's blood that has metabolically become milk. Furthermore, it should also be considered eiver min ha'chai, an organ from a living animal, which is also not permissible to be eaten. Despite these two characteristics, milk is kosher because Hashem says that the process which changes blood into milk is a completely transformative process which also changes its halachic status, rendering it kosher.

Likewise, a bee, which is a ritually unclean insect, should produce a similarly unclean product, which would cause it to be unkosher. Hashem, however, does not look at it this way. Since the process which produces honey occurs outside of the bee's body, it is rendered kosher. Two products, milk and honey; both should not be considered kosher, but are kosher because a transformation occurs which converts them into a totally new entity.

Eretz Yisrael has that effect on a person. The land is holy, and the individual who lives there is suffused in holiness as he immerses himself in its atmosphere. Eretz Yisrael is such that a person who has strayed throughout his life seeks to return to his faith after experiencing its greatness. There is, however, a negative aspect to this distinctive character of holiness: it has little tolerance for those who challenge it. If an individual insists on living a life of secularism and degeneracy, despite being in the world's center of kedushah, the holiness of Eretz Yisrael provides a glaring and deprecating contrast which magnifies his illicit behavior. One cannot have it both ways. Therefore, "choose life."

Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, amid gladness and goodness of heart, when everything was abundant. (28:47)

Joy is more than a frame of mind; it is a prerequisite for serving Hashem. It is also a barometer for measuring one's level of service to Hashem. An unhappy person is unproductive and, for all intents and purposes, does not really function effectively as an observant Jew. Furthermore, the mere fact that he is unhappy is indicative that something is terribly wrong with the manner in which he serves Hashem. Otherwise, how could he be unhappy? This pasuk implies that a lack of joy in mitzvah observance catalyzed the churban, destruction of the Bais Hamikdash.

The Talmud Yoma 9 posits another reason for the destruction: sinaas chinam, unwarranted hatred, among Jews. Which is it? Hatred, or a lack of joy? The Shem M'Shmuel explains that they are one and the same. One who is unhappy lacks the zest for life, probably the most important ingredient for being able to tolerate a situation, to endure a crisis, to rise above adversity. A bitter, depressed person does not get along with people. His jaundiced outlook distorts everything that he sees and generates a feeling of self-destructiveness which extends to his relationships with others. He sees demons everywhere, and he believes that every person is out to get him. Such a person is filled with self-loathing, which envelops him as he focuses on others. He begins to hate. First, it is those whom he feels who have hurt him directly or indirectly. The circle becomes smaller and tighter, as he begins to hate those who once had been his closest friends and even relatives. Yes, the Bais Hamikdash was destroyed as a result of unwarranted hatred. That hatred, however, was foreshadowed by a lack of joy in mitzvah observance, which created the unhappy person who found an outlet for his self-loathing: hatred for others.

Torah study should inject a sense of joy in a person. Yet, one who is a bitter, depressed person cannot benefit from Torah's therapeutic effect. How then is he to become happy? It is all a question of perspective: How does one view Torah study? Is it a scholarly objective, an academic challenge that he must master, or is it a Divine gift, the word of G-d, something that transcends the parameters of this world? Those who have studied Torah as just another branch of wisdom or ethics, have robbed themselves-- or have been robbed-- of its true essence. In his commentary to Devarim 26:8, the Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh writes that if people would sense the sweetness and pleasantness of Torah they would go out of their minds in their quest to consume more and more of it. Indeed, all of the gold and silver of the world would be nothing in comparison. We do not fully realize what Torah is and, therefore, cannot experience its ultimate sweetness.

Once a person begins to realize the depth and breadth of Torah, when he grasps what it is and what is its source, and Who is its Author, his entire attitude will change. Only then can Torah take its effect. In fact, as the Igrei Tal writes in his forward: "It is a mistake for one to say that he who studies Torah lishmah, purely for its own sake, with no ulterior motive, 'and enjoys' his learning - that he is detracting from the lishmah, because of his enjoyment. They are wrong! On the contrary, the essence of the mitzvah of Torah study is for the individual to be happy and filled with joy and to develop a strong sense of satisfaction and pleasure from his learning. Then the words of Torah will course in his veins and become a part of him. The more he enjoys the Torah, the greater becomes his bond to it." It is all a question of attitude.

The Alter m'Slobodka, Horav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, zl, asked Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl, to define the correct approach to teaching students. Rav Yisrael replied, "To generate life to the lowly and make

those who are in pain come alive." In other words: imbue them with a sense of geshmak, joy and satisfaction in what they are doing. When a student enjoys his learning, he will continue it as a life-long endeavor. The one who is bored will soon give up on his learning - and everything else, for that matter.

Rav Nosson Tzvi made every effort to generate a spirit of cheerfulness and joy among his students. This was especially true during the Chagim, Festival period, when there was much singing and dancing reverberating throughout the halls of the yeshivah. He felt that one who studies Torah should not walk around as if he is carrying the world's problems on his shoulders. In fact, he discouraged his students from being too serious and never smiling. It demonstrated a lack of simchas ha'chaim, joy in living. The fact that one can study Torah and perform mitzvos -- which truly catalyzes a greater closeness with Hashem -- should elevate a person to a heightened sense of joy.

Rav Meir Feist, zl, was such a person. Born in Mt. Vernon, New York, in 1907, to a family of Alsatian Jews, he was stricken with polio at the age of four and was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. His family was not observant, but he chose a life of Torah observance for himself, devoting much of his time to Torah study, eventually receiving smichah from Horav Mendel Zaks, zl, son-in-law of the saintly Chafetz Chaim. He earned his living in the family business of music publishing, which brought him into contact with the unconventional, the bohemian, and the creative personalities of the artists that frequented Manhattan's Greenwich Village. He would spend entire nights talking, guiding and inspiring the people with whom he came in contact.

When he turned fifty, he decided to intensify his religious observance. He grew a beard, began to study mussar, chassidus and kabbalah. Shortly thereafter, he sold his business and move to Lakewood, New Jersey, where he spent day and night immersed in Torah study in Beth Medrash Govohah. In 1974, he visited Eretz Yisrael and decided that he would finally realize his lifelong dream of settling there. Alas, he became ill with double pneumonia and passed away at the age of sixty-eight. When he became ill as a child, the doctors had declared that he would never live past the age of forty.

Rav Meir's life was filled with chronic disease and excruciating pain. During half of his life, he lived alone in the world, without parents or family. Yet, to anyone who knew or came into contact with him, he was a wellspring that radiated love and overflowed with kindness. His humility was typical of a tzadik, a righteous person, whose life had been molded by Torah and mussar. He exemplified a harmony of piety with a deep and loving sense of humanity, insight and love for others. Everything that he did-- from his avodas Hashem, service to Hashem, to more mundane matters-- was manifested in freshness and enthusiasm. He never failed to smile and make those around him feel good. Above all: he never complained about all of the adversity that he had had to endure. He never said a harsh word to anyone. Indeed, people would aptly describe him as "the happiest man in the world."

How does someone carry such a heavy burden of pain and deprivation and avoid sinking into the abyss of despair and bitterness? How does one see others walking around, raising families, planning for the future, while he is resigned to his little cubicle, his partner a wheelchair, his companions seforim and books, and not feel a tinge of envy? How does one continue with a will - no, a zest - for life? How does one radiate a joyful countenance, a pleasant and patient disposition, a sense of tranquility, a feeling that he is the beneficiary of good fortune? How does one maintain a sense of hope while simultaneously encouraging others? Indeed, Rav Meir integrated happiness into his very being and exuded it to everyone who came in contact with him. How?

He explained, applying David HaMelech's pasuk in Tehillim 84:11, "One day in Your courtyard is better than a thousand (elsewhere)." Rashi explains, "It is better to be in Your courtyard and die the next day than to live a thousand days in another place." Since the destruction of the Batei Mikdash,

Hashem's courtyard is the yeshivah and study halls where Torah is studied. Thus, living as a ben Torah for a single day is more rewarding than living a life of pleasure for a thousand years.

Wow! This was the secret of Rav Meir's success. He understood and felt that every day that was afforded him to spend studying Torah in the bais hamedrash was an unsurpassed opportunity for dwelling in the chatzar, courtyard, of Hashem! Every day that he lived and experienced avodas Hashem was an unparalleled opportunity for dveikus, clinging, to Hashem. Only in this way could he have continued to live in joy and contentment throughout his misery and pain.

The Navi says in Megillas Eichah (3:39), "For what should the living complain." Chazal explain that just being alive is sufficient reason for a person not to complain. Rav Meir exemplified this quality. For him, the mere fact that he was alive, despite all of his hardships, was an opportunity that should not be wasted. He understood the infinite value of life. Indeed, he lived life to its fullest.

In an alternative exposition, Horav Mordechai Pogremonsky, zl, views this pasuk homiletically. "Because you did not serve Hashem" is a general statement referring to sin. One who does not serve Hashem is sinful. Sin is bad, but one would think that a sinner at least has feelings of remorse and regret for his lack of observance. No! "You remained with gladness and goodness of heart." Not only did the sin not bother you, but you retained a sense of happiness despite having rebelled against Hashem. Why? How could one continue to feel so self-satisfied, so smug, even filled with joy after knowingly transgressing His mitzvos? It is because "everything was abundant." We had it good. We possessed wealth, prestige, all the good. We became obese as a result of Hashem's benevolence; we took, and gave nothing in return. We asserted that we gained everything through our own powers and doing - ignoring the Almighty. Is it any wonder that one is not troubled by his iniquity? He has it too good.

It will be when you will enter the land...that you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground...and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose, to make His Name rest there. (26:1,2)

As a rule, the juxtaposition of pesukim and parshios usually conveys an underlying message. At times, the commentators, most notably Rashi, underscore this lesson and emphasize its impact. Thus, when the parsha of Bikurim is juxtaposed on the previous parsha, which relates how Amalek, our archenemy, attacked us - and presents the enjoinder to blot out any vestige of remembrance concerning this evil nation, we wonder at the relationship. Horav Yosef Sholom Eliyashiv, Shlita, takes a pragmatic approach in explaining this.

The Torah records that Amalek "happened" upon us. The word "karcha," happened upon, may also be translated as, "he cooled you off," relating to the word kar, cold. Amalek destroyed our enthusiasm, our passion, our excitement concerning our relationship with Hashem and the Torah. At a moment when our commitment was at an all time high, he came along with the intention of destroying the mood. We must avenge this attack. We must seek to recapture what he destroyed. How are we to do this? What is the Torah's approach to revenge? How do we exact vengeance for Amalek's incursion?

Through the vehicle of the mitzvah of Bikurim, with its accompanying ceremony, we take revenge against Amalek. When we bring Bikurim to the Bais HaMikdash, we precede the contribution with a ritual recalling our bitter history and miraculous survival. Lavan -- who sought to destroy us, and Egypt -- who enslaved us for hundreds of years -- are gone. We have Hashem to thank for our

continued existence. When we remember our past and how we reached our present, and we glorify in Hashem, His many miracles and His constant protection of us, we are taking revenge on Amalek. The greatest revenge on Amalek is to demonstrate to ourselves and to the world community that we still exist and that we are thriving as a nation and as a religion.

This idea applies equally to every ritual, to every celebration, to every Jewish experience. It is important that we make the most of these endeavors, as they serve not only to strengthen our bond with Hashem in performing His mitzvos, but they also convey a message to all of the enemies of our tradition: We are here, and we are thriving!

Accursed is the man who will make a graven or molten image. (27:15)

The Torah records twelve curses and twelve corresponding blessings. The blessings are for those who observe specific mitzvos and practices, while the curses befall those who spurn them. The catalysts for these blessings and curses are types of activities that one does in private. Thus, these stealthily committed transgressions are of a nature that indicate a low point in the sinner's behavior. Perhaps it is the unique nature of these sins, and the opportunity for covering up their commission, that causes them to carry the label of arrur, accursed, more than other sins do. We do not find other sins carrying this attachment to the prohibition. The Torah says, "do not," and that is it. Concerning these sins, the Torah emphasizes that he who transgresses them should be cursed.

On the other hand, these sins were first preceded with the blessing in which the Leviim would declare: "Blessed be the man who does not make a graven or molten image." This was followed with, "Accursed is the man who will make a graven or molten image." Where do we find an instance where reward is granted merely because he does not perform a sin?

Horav Tuvia Lisitzin, zl, explains that the yetzer hora, evil inclination, has a much stronger voice concerning a sin that is easily committed in private without anybody ever discovering the perpetrator. Such a circumstance places the individual under much greater tension and pressure to commit the sin. After all, who will ever know? He can still maintain an outward stance of piety and righteousness in the community. This intense pressure may be compared to a situation in which the opportunity presents itself and one dominates over his inclination and does not sin. One who emerges triumphant under such duress merits blessing.

Alternatively, we find Chazal distinguishing between a ganav, thief, and a gazlan, robber. Both of these individuals are reprehensible. Yet, the gazlan, who robs overtly, only pays back the actual principle and nothing more. The ganav, who conceals his thievery, pays the principle plus an added fine of another principle. If he cannot pay this double payment, he is sold as a slave. Why is there such a disparity in their judgment?

Perhaps the difference lies in their method of committing their treachery. The thief is ashamed in the face of other people. He would like to have his cake and eat it, openly acting like an upstanding member of the community, while secretly plundering, cheating and resorting to thievery. The robber does not care what people think. He is unashamed, so he acts as he pleases. He wants money, and public opinion is not something he considers to be a deterrent.

The Torah is more stringent with sins that one commits clandestinely. They represent greater evil and a greater failing in one's character. It is especially noteworthy to take this into concern and to

heed the Torah's admonishment. We live in a society in which many opportunities via the media and modern technology present an awesome and, at times, overwhelming enticement to fall into the abyss of immorality and worse. All this is presented under the guise of concealment. One can sin and, until it affects his total character, his sin is kept covert. It remains between himself and Hashem. That should be a sufficient deterrent. If one realizes that his sin falls under the realm of arrur, accursed, he might act differently. Well, at least he should.

And you shall only be above, and you shall not be below. (28:13)

Simply, this means that we will be on "top," revered, looked up to, sought after. Horav Ezriel Hildeseimer, zl, explains that this blessing emphasizes the Jew's gravitational pull toward spirituality and holiness. We note that, in the world of nature, a rock that is falling down does so quickly. That is the law of gravity. Conversely, when one throws a rock up into the air, it ascends at a much slower pace than if it were to be falling earthward. We see the opposite concerning fire: It rises quickly, but travels slowly when it is going downward. Why does the rock rise slowly, in contrast to fire which makes a rapid ascent? He explains that, by nature, a stone is drawn to the earth, which is its source. Fire, however, is an energy which gravitates heavenward. The rule is: Everything travels quickly to its source and slowly when it is moving away from its origins.

This idea applies to the Jewish neshamah, soul, which strives to absorb more from its Heavenly Source. Yeridah, descent, is a movement that is incongruous with the "nature" of the neshamah. The nefesh, man's corporeal essence, however, gravitates downward, as aliyah, spiritual ascendancy, is antagonistic to its nature. Thus, the Torah blesses us that our aliyah, ascension, will be rapid, since our predominant force is our neshamah, which strives Heavenward. We will not be l'matah, below, rising as something whose gravitational pull is heavily downward - like a rock.

The Kotzker Rebbe, zl, elucidates a similar idea with a different approach. He explains that Hashem has a ladder available for the soul to descend to this world. As soon as the soul reaches its destination, Hashem removes the ladder, but continues to call to the neshamah to return to its Source. The soul seeks a way to return, but, alas, the ladder is gone. There are three types of neshamos in this world. The first group does not even begin to try to ascend. The neshamos feel it is a useless endeavor, since they will not succeed. The second group makes the attempt. These individuals try, fall down, then try again. After awhile, they, too, give up. The members of the third group continue, even though they are acutely aware that it is an insurmountable feat. They fall down, brush themselves off, and -- with renewed vigor -- attempt the climb again. They continue to hear that penetrating voice, and, with mesiras nefesh, unbounding dedication to the point of self-sacrifice, they move on. Hashem sees their extreme devotion and assists them in their battle. Beyond these dedicated neshamos are those of the righteous, and above even them are the neshamos of the Avos Ha'kedoshim, holy Patriarchs.

After all is said and done, something seems to pull us to a holy source, to spirituality and a deeper meaning of life. I recently had occasion to speak to a non-observant Jew who said, "I do not know why but, whenever I drive through the observant community, I sense a gravitational pull." Indeed, what is that force that pulls at us?

The Torah tells us in Devarim 30:4, "Even if you have been driven to the ends of the heavens, Hashem will gather you in." Hashem is always present, waiting to assist in our return to Him. The use of the phrase, "end of the heavens," is somewhat out of place. The Torah should really say, "at the ends

of the earth." Why is there an emphasis on the heavens? The Baal Shem Tov, zl explains that if there is a little bit of "heaven" left, a little spark of Shomayim, Heavenliness, spirituality, holiness, then Hashem will gather us in. We are created as human beings, but concealed within us is a chelek Elokai miMaal, component of G-dliness from Above, a pure neshamah, soul, that -- regardless of our actions -- remains untainted and holy. It does not change. We do. We cover it up with the dross of physicality and materialism. If even a small vestige of the pure neshamah penetrates this covering, however, Hashem will be there to accept us.

Yes, there is a gravitational pull. It is the neshamah, that pintele Yid, Jewish spark, within all of us that searches and gravitates to its Source. Similar to a compass that always pulls to the north, the neshamah wants to return. Therefore, when given the opportunity, it springs forward and achieves far beyond our expectations. You see, it had never really left. It had only been hidden beneath the surface.

Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d with gladness. (28:47)

Simchah, joy, happiness, is a wonderful emotion, but does it really affect mitzvah performance? Does the lack of joy in carrying out a mitzvah constitute an adequate reason to sustain the punishment of this litany of curses? The Sfas Emes says that the Torah here is attributing all of the persecutions and troubles that have accompanied us during our galus, exile, to a lack of joy in mitzvah performance. We do it because we have to - not because we want to. We do not enjoy performing mitzvos. Mitzvos do not captivate and excite us. We are observant Jews and, as such, we do by rote what we have been raised and told to do. Such an attitude to mitzvah performance only leads to a lack of observance.

This idea has regrettably proven itself time and again in contemporary society. In the past, when a child from an observant home would go "off the derech," leave the path of Torah, it was attributed to a negative attitude towards observance in general, and its expositors in particular, that he had sensed. There was always someone to blame: a parent, a teacher, a friend, a neighbor. This did not explain, however, why children who had not suffered emotionally, who had experienced a happy childhood in a wonderful, caring and loving home would just leave the Torah way of life - for no apparent reason.

I recently read an article in which the author cited a number of interviews with this type of young person. Among the comments they made were: "Religion did not really add anything to my life." "I never really felt positive about it..." "I just decided one day to quit - for no reason. "When I first desecrated Shabbos, I had no feeling; it had never really meant that much to me."

These were young people who had never really suffered, but neither had they ever felt anything positive. They did not have the geshmak, good feeling, the passion, the enthusiasm. Yiddishkeit had never touched their hearts. Since they had never really connected with Yiddishkeit, it did not hurt to break away. After all, they had never really identified with it. Apparently, their observance had been neutral, tepid, lukewarm - at best. They had not perceived simchah, joy, in serving the Creator. Their Shabbos table was missing the lively zemiros, singing, the challenging divrei Torah, the beauty and serenity that should accompany Shabbos observance. They probably did not "dress up" l'kavod Shabbos, in honor of Shabbos. Everything they experienced was presented in neutral colors.

Keeping mitzvos is not enough to protect us from alienation. It is how we observe these mitzvos that makes a difference. Unless we exhibit love and joy, these mitzvos will not become a part of our psyche, and we will not establish a bond with the Almighty. Mitzvos should be viewed as something positive - not as a burden. All too often people relate to the Lo saasei, prohibitive commandments of the

Torah. Thus, they view the Torah as a manual which emphasizes negativity. This belief could not be further from the truth. Indeed, as the Meshech Chochmah in his commentary to Sefer Bereishis explains, the first mitzvah that Hashem gave Adam ha'Rishon, the very first command in the Torah, is essentially to eat and enjoy of all of the trees of Gan Eden. Had Adam conveyed to Chavah that Hashem had commanded them to eat from the trees, then fulfilling Hashem's command would have protected them from the prohibition of eating from the Eitz Ha'Daas, Tree of Knowledge. Had the prohibitive mitzvah been couched in a positive context, it would not have become a vehicle with which the nachash, serpent, could entice them. Furthermore, we see the significance of embellishing religious life with a positive experience. Accentuate the positive, so that the prohibitive and restrictive demands of religion will not loom so heavily upon a person. One should not only enjoy serving Hashem, he should also consider it to be a privilege to have been selected for this mission.

And you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as slaves and maidservants - but there will be no buyer! (28:68)

In this tragic curse, we will beg to be purchased as slaves, but slavery is a state that our captors will eschew. They will seek something more permanent and final. Nothing short of our execution will satisfy our enemies. In this terrible vision, the irrational will occur. One would expect that our conquerors would rejoice at the opportunity to enslave and degrade us. What greater sense of victory is there than crushing one's opponent and transforming the once powerful and haughty nobleman into a common, pithy slave. In addition to the economic benefits, slavery should be the perfect solution. Yet, our enemies will demure and reject this opportunity. They will demand our death, not enslavement. Why is this?

The K'sav Sofer cites the Midrash that makes an addendum to the pasuk: v'ein koneh, but there will be no buyer - for Torah. What does the Midrash mean? Are we attempting to sell Torah to the gentiles? He explains that it is first necessary to analyze the source of anti-Semitism. Why do the other nations hate us so? What is the reason that we have been scorned and vilified throughout the millennia? Are we that bad?

In his Iggeres Teiman, the Rambam reveals the roots of the gentile's enmity towards the Jews. "Because Hashem has singled out the Jewish nation with His mitzvos and special laws, the gentiles have developed an implacable jealousy against our religion. They have, consequently, encouraged their kings to persecute us. There has never been a period from the time in which the Torah was given at Har Sinai that there has not been a king or ruler who did not seek to destroy us. This was originally a reaction to our religion, but it has developed into an all - out, irrational hatred."

In other words, we think that the gentiles hate the Jews. What is there about us that inspires such loathing? The truth is that they do not hate us personally. This is only a facade to cover up their real hatred, the vile aversion that they have for the Torah. As long as Jews exist, there will continue to be a Torah in this world. This reality does not allow the gentile to rest until he has abrogated the Torah from this world. When the gentile makes an evil decree against the Jew, his intention is really to undermine and ultimately destroy the Torah. Their culture is to "live by the sword," something that is antithetical to the lifestyle championed by the Torah. Our Torah is a living condemnation of their lifestyle, indeed of everything they represent. Is it any wonder that the Torah is their public enemy number one?

This is why, even after they have triumphed against us, that they have no interest in our

enslavement. It is not us that they hate. It is a jealousy of what we stand for and represent. They want nothing less than our complete annihilation. For as long as we exist as the standard bearers of the Torah, we live in direct confrontation to their meaningless culture. If they were to buy us as slaves, they would be compelled to sanction the continuity of the Torah. They could never reconcile themselves to that. Thus, they refuse to buy the Torah. To purchase us is to sustain the Torah.

Then you shall speak up and say before Hashem, your G-d, "An Aramean attempted to destroy my father; then he descended to Egypt." (26:5)

There is a recurring theme throughout the mitzvah of Bikurim: gratitude. While the first pesukim which instruct us in the mitzvah of Bikurim seem to emphasize the significance of this most essential character trait, the actual declaration of gratitude which the Torah cites seems to run off on a tangent. The farmer begins with a recitation of Jewish history and the trial and travail to which our ancestors were subjected. While it is true that one must never forget his past, even if it is not that glorious, why is it included in the Bikurim presentation?

We glean from here an important lesson concerning the nature of the obligation to pay gratitude: it is all-encompassing. We do not merely give thanks for our immediate delivery from travail, while ignoring the suffering that we have undergone to bring us to this day. It is incumbent that we recognize that every experience plays a role in our salvation - even the vicissitudes that distress and afflict us. They are here for a purpose. When we pay a debt of gratitude, we should not ignore the bad. To bear resentment for suffering undermines the incredible purging and ennobling experience that suffering engenders.

Perhaps this is the underlying meaning of the pasuk, V'somachta b'chol hatov, "And you shall rejoice in all the good" (Devarim 26:11). There is "good," and there is "all the good." We must realize that what we had originally perceived as not being in our interest is inherently good, and we must be makir tov, acknowledge that good.

Accursed is one who strikes his fellow stealthily. (27:24)

Rashi explains that b'seiser, stealthily, is a reference to lashon hora, evil speech. While this is certainly one of the most destructive forces at one's disposal, it is a transgression that is often misunderstood. There are situations in which what seems like lashon hora really is not -- and vice versa. Perhaps the following vignettes will give us a clearer perspective of the definition of this baneful sin. Horav Shlomo Lorincz, Shlita, a member of the Israeli Knesset and a close talmid, disciple, of the Brisker Rav, zl, relates that one Erev Yom Kippur he had occasion to be together with the Brisker Rav at the funeral of a distinguished Torah scholar. As they were walking behind the funeral procession, the Rav remarked, "He was a great Torah scholar, but some of his hashkafos, perspectives, were questionable." He then elaborated his concerns regarding specific hashkafos.

Rav Shlomo was surprised that of all times to speak about someone, the Rav chose Erev Yom Kippur, during the man's funeral, as they walked in the procession! Furthermore, what about lashon hora? He gathered up his courage and voiced his feelings to his rebbe.

The Brisker Rav turned to his student and explained his behavior, "First of all, you should know that the laws concerning lashon hora are very specific. If one were to question an individual's veracity regarding a business proposition, a possible partnership, or an investment opportunity, it is incumbent that the truth not be withheld due to lashon hora concerns. One must tell the truth: if the person in question is dishonest, then this must be articulated. If this halachah applies to a minor financial loss, how much more so does it apply to a spiritual perspective which can affect many more, in a much more compelling manner. Since you are a communal leader, it is essential that I apprise you of the deceased's philosophic shortcomings.

"With regard to your other question as to why I chose Erev Yom Kippur, while I am walking in the man's funeral procession, to voice my opinion about his hashkafah? The laws of lashon hora are very complicated, and when a halachic dispensation permits one to speak the truth, regardless of its disparaging implications, one must do so with only one intention: to spare someone a loss, either material or -- as in this case -- spiritual. When a person has completed an all inclusive self-analysis and, through introspection and soul-searching, has determined that he is acting only l'shem Shomayim, for the sake of Heaven, or to save someone from a financial loss, then he must come forward and speak. Otherwise, it is lashon hora.

"As I walked in the funeral procession on the day preceding the holiest day of the year, I weighed the matter in my mind. I came to a firm and clear decision. As the Brisker Rav, on this special day, I am certain that I have no vested interests whatsoever in speaking disparagingly of the deceased. Whatever I say is for one purpose: to see to it that no one is spiritually harmed by his hashkafos. Hence, I felt that I could - and should - voice my opinion."

Another episode which supports this concept occurred concerning Horav Chaim Soloveitchik, zl, at the first meeting to organize the Agudath Israel organization. One of the speakers at that meeting ascended to the podium and spoke disparagingly of a noted communal leader. Rav Chaim immediately arose from his seat, saying, "It is forbidden to sit here, since they are speaking lashon hora." He left the meeting and never attended another meeting.

Remarking about this incident, the Chazon Ish, zl, explained, "What was the lashon hora? After all, the meeting was for a purpose. Klal Yisrael was at a crossroads. Many Jews were falling under the influence of spiritual leftists and cripples. The speaker was attempting to make a point and get everyone's attention. What was wrong?"

"The answer is," said the Chazon Ish, "the speaker spoke with an attitude. He spoke triumphantly as if we had bested them: 'You see what they did and what resulted from their actions.' He was overjoyed at their failure. That is not the way we speak. He should have said, 'My friends, a tragedy has occurred, a spiritual calamity is taking place. Have compassion! Let us do something!' Had he spoken like that, it would have reflected purpose. Otherwise, it was pure, unmitigated lashon hora!"

I believe this story needs no explanation, since we all have something to learn from it.

And it shall be that if you hearken to the voice of Hashem, your G-d, to observe, to perform all of His commandments. (28:1)

The pasuk enjoins us to listen to Hashem's voice, to observe and fulfill his mitzvos. The concept of "listening to Hashem's voice" appears a number of times in the Torah. What is the meaning of shmia

b'kol Hashem, "listening to the voice of Hashem"? Is there some special voice that we hear? Horav Mordechai Gifter, zl, gives a definitive explanation of this voice and its appeal to us.

Man is comprised of two elements: a physical dimension, represented by his *guf*, body, and a spiritual dimension, signified by his *neshamah*, soul. Man's *neshamah* does not desire any of the world's physical/mundane pleasures, nor can these pleasures satisfy the soul's yearning for spiritual pleasure. The soul has a single desire: to grow, to develop spiritually in order to come closer to the Almighty. We often confuse our soul's yearning with our body's physical desire. Thus, we attempt to satisfy the spiritual quest for growth with mundane satisfaction. It does not work. Regardless of how much man defers to his physical desires, he cannot satiate his *neshamah*.

Shlomo Hamelech says in *Koheles* 6:7, "All man's toil is for his mouth, yet his wants are never satisfied." Chazal analogize this *pasuk* to a commoner who marries a princess. He supplies her with every luxury. Yet, she remains unhappy. He would give her anything, but the one thing for which she yearns, the one thing that she desires so badly, he cannot provide. She lacks royalty. She remains a princess married to a commoner. That will never change. Likewise, man seeks to satisfy his desires with worldly pleasures. The more he has, the more he seeks. He is insatiable, because he does not feed it what it truly seeks - spiritual growth. Hence, his desires remain ungratified.

Man is constantly besieged by his desires. They always want something. We understand this to be the *neshamah's* discontent with its status quo. Man's *neshamah* is constantly calling out to him to rise up, to elevate himself, to grow spiritually. This voice, this inner calling, is what the Torah refers to as the voice of Hashem. The *neshamah* is a spiritual entity that is a *cheilak Elokai Mimaal*, minuscule part of Hashem Above. That voice calls out to us. We hear its calling, but we do not necessarily listen to its message. In order to merit Hashem's reward, we must listen to His voice as He continually calls out to us.

Hashem shall open up for you His storehouse of goodness. (28:12)

The story is told that prior to his passing from this world, the *Mezritcher Maggid*, zl, told his *chassidim* that when he dies and ascends to Heaven, he will approach the Heavenly Tribunal to petition for an end to Klal Yisrael's suffering. The *Mezritcher* passed from this world and -- lo and behold -- the suffering continued unabated. The *chassidim* were concerned. After all, their *Rebbe* had promised to intervene. One day, one of the *Mezritcher's* primary disciples went to his grave and prayed. He made a point to "remind" the *Rebbe* of his promise to intercede on their behalf. The next day, the *Mezritcher* appeared to his student in a dream and said, "True, when I was alive, I felt the pain and was sensitive to the affliction that we sustained, but now, here in Heaven, things appear much different. I see occurrences from a different vantage point. The troubles and persecutions that loom so large on the earthly horizon are really not troubles at all. I view them to be a source of comfort and salvation. Therefore, I cannot pray for you, because there really is no reason to pray."

Simply, this means that the *Rebbe* was now afforded a different perspective in life. He now saw life's challenges, its vicissitudes and travail from a more "global" position. What made no sense in this world suddenly became rational and even necessary in the Eternal World of truth.

There is another approach towards dealing with issues that are overwhelming to the intellect and which certainly play havoc with our emotions. In a thesis about how we should relate to the challenges in life, Horav Yissachar Frand, *Shlita*, cites *Sefer Iyov*, which is the "handbook" on relating

to suffering. We all know that Iyov was a righteous, G-d-fearing individual who was subjected to incredible inflictions. He not only lost his wealth, but he also lost his children and personally became victim to a painful condition that ravaged his body. Iyov was visited by his three friends who attempted to console him, to no avail. Afterwards, Eliyahu HaNavi visited him and attempted to explain his affliction on an esoteric level, also to no avail. Last, Hashem spoke to Iyov and demonstrated to him the paucity of man's understanding of the workings of the world. In the end, Iyov replied to Hashem, "Until now, I knew of You through the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You" (Iyov 42:5). The relationship that he now had with the Almighty was different. The prophetic experience that he had just undergone gave him the ability to transcend the concerns of this world. That is the pashut pshat, simple explanation.

Horav Moshe Eisemann, Shlita, suggests a somewhat novel approach that gives us something to think about concerning our affinity to Hashem. Prior to Iyov's prophetic vision, his association with Hashem had been on a purely, cognitive plane. After Hashem moved closer to Iyov and took him on a guided tour of the cosmos, granting him an unprecedented perspective, Iyov experienced an emotional closeness with Hashem to supplement his intellectual appreciation of Him. Faith and trust are emotional functions, not rational ones. When we view a situation from an intellectual perspective, everything must fit into place. There has to be a logical explanation for everything. Not so, from an emotional standpoint. Just because an idea does not fit logically does not mean that I cannot trust it. Indeed, my trust and faith help me to overcome any intellectual oddity that I might encounter. When you love someone, this love surmounts any actions that may seem irrational. Love means believing in someone even when you do not necessarily understand the basis of their actions.

Rav Frand cites Ibn Ezra's commentary to Devarim 14:1, "You are children of Hashem, your G-d, you shall not cut yourself" (as a display of mourning). He explains that now that we know that we are Hashem's children, and that He loves each of us more than a father loves a son, we are not permitted to mutilate ourselves over the death of a loved one. Even if the loss is incomprehensible, we must rely on our belief that Hashem is doing what is correct and necessary - even if it hurts. This is no different than the father who slaps the hand of his son who is about to place that hand in the fire.

Iyov still had no idea why he had been afflicted. Since he knew from Whom it originated, however, his newly-concretized relationship gave him the ability to trust and accept the situation with love. May Hashem grant us that the forthcoming New Year bring us only joy, so that this thesis remains in the abstract.

Your life will hang in the balance, and you will be frightened night and day. (28:61)

Rashi explains that as long as the Jews are in exile, they will never be certain of their safety. One minute they are secure; the next minute could be their last. This general, tenuous situation applies to earning a livelihood. They will never be sure of what will happen: Will the markets be shut down in general - or just to the Jew? This is how we have lived throughout centuries of exile, never knowing what tomorrow will bring - or if there will even be a tomorrow. Yet, we Jews have always maintained the conviction that even when the sharp blade of a sword is on our necks, we never give up hope of salvation. The following episode concerning the saintly Klausenberger Rebbe, zl, demonstrates this verity.

While interred in the concentration camp, he was subject to constant harassment by the cruel

guards. In order to "clean up" the ranks and rid the camp of the weak and ill prisoners, every few weeks the commandant would declare a selektsia, selection, in which all of those who were infirm were immediately sent to their deaths. Everyone was lined up in a single file, surrounded by the Nazi beasts brandishing machine guns. Those who appeared weak were "weeded" out from the group.

In one of the rows, the Rebbe, against all rules of the selektsia, was standing bent over in prayer. This was categorically prohibited; it was suicidal. Yet, the Rebbe, who was shortly joined by a small group of followers, was praying. What was he saying at this time, which might have been his last moments on earth? He was reciting over and over, Avinu, Malkeinu, kra roa g'zar dineinu. "Our father, Our King, tear up the evil decree of our verdict." Those surrounding him repeated the words. The Rebbe then continued with, Avinu, Malkeinu, nekom nikmas dam avodecha ha'shafuch, "Our Father, Our King, avenge the blood of Your servants that is being spilled." Avinu, Malkeinu, aseih l'maan rachamecha ha'rabim, "Our Father, Our King, act for the sake of Your abundant compassion."

Anyone who witnessed this mind-boggling spectacle could not believe his eyes. They did not seem to be in a concentration camp surrounded by death and awaiting execution. They acted as if they were in shul on Yom Kippur and were praying to Hashem! In the midst of the terror and persecution, the Rebbe was declaring that the Nazis were not in charge. They would not determine their future. Only Hashem could make that decision. This is emunah, faith, at its apex. The Rebbe and all those who sequestered themselves to recite the Avinu Malkeinu prayer were spared from death. The Nazis had their plan; Hashem had another one.

You shall take of every first fruit of the ground... then you shall call out and say before Hashem, your G-d. (26:2.5)

The underlying motif for the mitzvah of Bikurim is hakoras hatov, gratitude. Rashi cites the Sifri that explains that the declaration which accompanies the Bikurim is an indication that we are not ingrates, a sign that we understand that Hashem has given us the land as a gift. David Hamelech says in Sefer Tehillim 14:11, "The naval, degraded man, says in his heart, there is no G-d; they have corrupted and made abominable their actions, there is no doer of good." Horav Chaim Vital, zl, explains that naval is a reference to he who is a kafui tov, ingrate. The Sefer HaChinuch also refers to the ingrate as a naval, abominable person. Horav Avraham Schorr, Shlita, suggests that the source of this name originates with Avigayil, who said about Naval, her husband, "For he is as his name implies - naval is his name and revulsion is his trait." (Shmuel 25:25) The Sefer Chassidim explains that Naval was an ingrate to David Hamelech who watched his sheep, because ultimately Naval refused to pay him. Thus, the term naval characterizes the individual who does not appreciate the benefits he receives from others. Hashem despises such a person, and He does not delay in remitting swift punishment to him.

In his commentary to Sefer Tehillim, the R'am Almoshino explains that the naval/ingrate denies the gifts that he receives from Hashem. He says, ein Elokim, "there is no G-d." In other words, he is saying that the various occurrences which have spared us throughout time were not from Hashem. Each was a mikreh, a chance event, that had no connection to G-d. Therefore, these events do not obligate us to be grateful to Him. The naval substantiates his apostasy, asking why -- if everything comes from Hashem -- do some things have a bad ending? If there was a good and benevolent G-d, everything would culminate on a positive note. The ingrate cites the tragedies of life as proof that Hashem does

not guide the world, in order to prove that he does not owe Him anything in return.

Rav Schorr cites the Mechilta in Parashas Beshalach that includes Amalek, the archenemy of the Jewish People, among those who personify *kafuyei tovah*, ingratitude. Amalek seeks to dismiss everything G-d does as a mere *mikreh*, chance event. He maintains that things do not happen by design, and there is no Divine *Hashgachah*, Providence; things "just happen." This is the meaning of the words *asher karcha baderech*, "that he chanced upon you on the road." Amalek wanted to diminish the Jew's belief in Hashem by asserting that everything happens by chance.

The *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, seeks to create a sense of *shikchah*, forgetfulness, within the Jew, in order to make him forget Hashem and what He constantly does for us. If it would not be for this *shikchah*, our passion to serve Hashem would retain its fire and verve. The *Baal Shem Tov* explains that Amalek's function is to generate *shikchas ha'Boreh*, forgetting the Creator. By *v'ram levavecha*, increasing the haughtiness in our hearts, we forget Hashem. Interestingly, the *gematria*, numerical equivalent, of *ram*, is 240, which coincides with the *gematria* of Amalek.

Rav Schorr concludes by explaining the juxtaposition of the *mitzvah* of *Bikurim* upon the *mitzvah* of erasing Amalek's name, which concluded Parashas *Ki Seitzei*. *Bikurim* teach us the significance of *hakoras hatov*, recognizing and repaying the good we receive from Hashem. This is the antithesis and, concomitantly, the antidote for the evil that is represented by Amalek. Amalek seeks to infuse us with a lack of gratitude by causing us to forget about Hashem and view His Divine guidance as a chance occurrence. When one sees Hashem's guiding hand in every-day events, he fights the evil generated by Amalek and his modern-day counterparts.

I have not transgressed any of your commandments, and I have not forgotten. (26:13)

Rashi interprets *v'lo shochachti*, "I have not forgotten," as a reference to thanking Hashem using a blessing for the opportunity to perform the *mitzvah* of *Hafroschas Maasros*, separating tithes. Although the act of reciting a *brachah* is Rabbinic in origin, this *pasuk* is an *asmachata*, a scriptural allusion, to a law destined to be enacted by Chazal. Indeed, the privileges that are afforded us to perform a *mitzvah*, to serve Hashem, should inspire within us a propensity to bless Hashem. It should be a natural response to a unique opportunity. The *Seforim* suggest that this attitude prevailed within the Jewish psyche until the period of Chazal, when they felt that the people were diminishing their sense of gratitude for *mitzvos*. Hence, the Rabbinic obligation to recite a blessing prior to performing a *mitzvah* developed.

How should one recite a blessing? What should be his focus of concentration? The *Yesod v'Shoresh HoAvodah* writes that when one begins the *brachah*, when he says, *Baruch Atah*, "Blessed are You," he should imagine in his mind that he is standing before the Almighty and speaking. He should say the words, *Elokeinu Melech haOlam*, "Our G-d, the King of the world," slowly, reflecting on its meaning, rejoicing in the fact that Hashem is our G-d and that His monarchy encompasses the entire universe. A *brachah* recited in this manner certainly has greater meaning.

I recently read a profound comment made by *Horav Avraham Yaakov, zl, m'Sadigur* to one of his *chasideim*. He said, "It is possible that a person travels to the city of Lemberg for a business purpose -- or so he thinks. He does not realize that the Almighty, the *Mesabeiv Ribos*, Cause of all causes, wanted him in Lemberg for a different purpose: to recite a *Shehakol niheyeh bidevaro* on a glass of water in Lemberg!

We can derive two lessons from this statement: First, we have to remember that Hashem guides our life and everything happens in it for an underlying purpose. Second, brachos have great significance - to the point that they have a profound effect on the place in which they are recited. Perhaps the next time we take a drink of water, we might stop to think before we make the brachah. It might just make a difference.

Then all the peoples of the earth will see that the name of Hashem is proclaimed over you. (28:10)

When Klal Yisrael raises the banner of its value and beliefs, the nations around them will understand that Hashem's blessing is upon them. Horav Mordechai Sharabi, zl, was a Sephardic gadol, Torah leader, who truly exemplified this concept. His total demeanor reflected Hashem's Divinity hovering over him. He was a saint who attempted to recluse himself. He had no interest in pursuing idle conversation with the members of the Muslim clergy. This, of course, did not please them. Furthermore, Rav Mordechai never touched a Muslim, and no one -- not even a Jew -- was permitted to touch the utensils used for his food.

When the Muslim sheiks noticed how Rav Mordechai rebuffed them, they decided to trump up a libel against him. They informed the Emir of their community, a noted anti-semite, who was a close confidante of the Imam of Yemen. The Imam was also no great friend of the Jews, and he sent the gendarme to Rav Mordechai's home to arrest him.

As soon as the rabbanim of Yemen heard that the gendarme was dispatched to arrest their beloved leader, they declared a public fast and Yom Tefillah, day of prayer. When Rav Mordechai heard about this, he dissuaded them from fasting, saying that he would triumph with Hashem's assistance. He would not allow anyone to accompany him as he was taken to the Emir's palace. His bitachon, trust in Hashem, was echoed in everything he said.

There was an unwritten rule in the Emir's home that anyone who entered had to genuflect and say, "Peace to my master," and to remain bowed until the Emir instructed him to rise. He then was to stand until the Emir offered him a seat. Rav Mordechai did exactly as Mordechai HaYehudi in Shushan did, and he refused to bow down to the Emir. He also refused to greet him as master. With great faith and trust in the Almighty, Rav Mordechai entered the room, sat down next to the Emir, and asked, "Yes, what is it that you want?"

The Emir, slightly taken aback, turned to him and asked, "Are you Mordechai?"

"Yes, I am," replied Rav Mordechai.

"We have a number of serious allegations against you," said the Emir. The Emir began to read the list of complaints, among which was the fact that he would not shake hands with the Muslim clergy.

Rav Mordechai patiently explained to the Emir that gentiles eat non-kosher food. When they travel, the sweat that is on their hands is the product of unclean, unkosher animals. He asked, "How can I, a servant of the Almighty G-d, touch these hands? I will defile my body! Also, I never leave my home except to pray in the synagogue. I study Hashem's Torah all day. How do you expect me to waste my time discussing religious philosophy with people that are not members of the Covenant of Hashem?"

This went on and on. Every time the Emir posed a question to Rav Mordechai, he received a quick and lucid response. The Emir saw that Rav Mordechai was pious, committed and sincere in his belief in Hashem. When people see that we are upright and sincere, they respect us. The Emir's attitude quickly changed, as he was enlightened about the level of conviction that was maintained by Rav Mordechai, the representative of the Jewish community. He sent him home with pomp and regalia, as befitting a man of distinction and a friend of the king. Respect from others is the result of the self-respect one has for himself. When we maintain pride in our heritage and commitment to our religion, we will achieve the respect of the outside world.

Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, amid gladness and goodness of heart. (28:47)

After a lengthy litany of frightening curses, the Torah states a reason for these terrible punishments: a lack of joy on our part in serving Hashem. The Torah seems to be emphasizing that joy is a primary obligation. Let us take a moment and reflect on this statement. Is it really possible to remain happy with so much suffering all around? To ignore the pain of others is callous and insensitive. Apparently, there is a deeper understanding of the meaning of joy and its relationship to the Jew in this world.

First and foremost, we must understand that the greatest gift granted to us by the Almighty is the gift of life. Being alive is an intrinsic reason for expressing joy - regardless of the negative experiences one may encounter. Life is an opportunity for growth and that in itself has the ultimate value. Life is everything: without life, one has nothing. We are placed on this world for a purpose: to serve Hashem and earn ultimate happiness in the World To Come. The awareness that everything positive we do on this world earns for us a portion in the World To Come should be a constant source of joy. The mitzvah to be happy is the knowledge that our sojourn on this world is a means of achieving ultimate pleasure and joy. The error of many is that they think that this world is an end in itself. No, it is only an opportunity, a means toward achieving the true goal.

Regrettably, many of us realize too late the value of the gift of life. It is only when our lives hang in the balance, when one almost loses life and then miraculously gains it back, that he discovers the wonderful opportunity that he has had. We become complacent with what we are accustomed to having. Familiarity breeds neglect and a lack of appreciation. When that complacency is shaken, one quickly awakens from his slumber.

Let us go a step further in understanding the Torah's demand for joy. Upon carefully perusing the text, one gains a powerful insight into this mitzvah. The Torah does not say that we must constantly be happy, that we must always walk around with a smile on our faces, regardless of our mood or the circumstances with which we are confronted. The Torah does not say that we must live in happiness; the Torah says that we must serve Hashem amid joy. Serving Hashem has to be performed with happiness. It should be our reason for ecstasy. The source of joy is the ability and opportunity to carry out Hashem's command to be His servant. The pain does not hurt; the work is not difficult -- because it is for Hashem. This is the true meaning of joy.

We worry when we lose sight of where we are and Who guides us. If we would take into account that everything in our lives is directed by the Almighty, we would not worry. A secular author once told the story of a ship at sea during a fierce storm. The passengers were in great distress. After awhile, one of them, against captain's orders, ascended to the deck and made his way to the pilot. The

seaman was at this post, calmly carrying out his function at the wheel. When he saw that the passenger was agitated, he gave him a big, reassuring smile. The man then returned to the other passengers with the following words of comfort, "I have seen the face of the pilot, and he smiled. All is well."

It is all in the attitude. If one realizes that the challenges he encounters in life are directed by Hashem and that Hashem will be with him throughout the ordeal, he will view the situation through a different prism. I recently came across the following story cited in, *Touched By A Story 2*, by Rabbi Yechiel Spero. I believe it goes to the core of what we are saying.

The story is about a bus driver for a group of boys in the Bucharim neighborhood. The boys were tough, and driving them every day was difficult. The respect they demonstrated for him left something to be desired. It was just not an appropriate job for him anymore. At the end of the month, he approached the principal to inform him of his decision to seek employment elsewhere. The principal, being an understanding man, listened intently and commiserated with the driver. He assured him that he would speak to the boys, and he even offered him a raise for his troubles.

The driver, although appreciative of the raise, said that he had had enough. It was not because of the money. The boys were not really bad. They were just acting in the manner that boys of that age act. He wanted a change, something different, something more relaxing. As they were walking towards the door, the principal made one last attempt, "Would you mind visiting with Horav Ben Zion Abba Shaul?" The driver agreed, thinking to himself that the great Sephardic rav could not say anything to him that would change his mind.

They walked together to the rav's apartment and sat down to talk. The principal explained the predicament: how the bus driver had served the school faithfully for a number of years, and now he had decided that it was time to move on. While it would be a great loss to have to replace him, the bus driver insisted that he could go on no longer. He was emotionally spent, and he badly needed a change of scenery.

It was time for the rav to respond. Rav Bentzion's eyes sparkled with warmth and sensitivity as he looked at the bus driver. In reality, he was focusing on his heart. He said, "My dear friend, you think that you are driving a simple van, but actually you are driving a mobile Aron Kodesh! The children are not just passengers; they are living Sifrei Torah! When you open the door to your mobile Aron Kodesh, you are being honored with Pesichah, opening the Aron Kodesh! Each and every child on that van is precious. He is our future!"

When the bus driver heard his vocation being interpreted in this way by the great rav, he felt ashamed for having been so petty. He assured the rav that he would continue performing his function with distinction and esteem. The next morning, the attitude he displayed to his young charges was visibly altered. "Good morning boys," he greeted them. "Thank you for granting me the privilege to drive you to yeshivah today, so that you can learn Torah."

As the last boy exited the van, he looked up at the driver and said, "Thank you." The driver smiled and countered, "No, thank you!"

It is all in one's attitude. The opportunity to live and serve Hashem should be our ultimate source of joy.

It will be when you enter the land...and you possess it and dwell in it. That you shall take of the very first fruit of the ground. (26:1,2)

Rashi derives from the words, "and you possess it and dwell in it," that the Jews were not obligated to bring Bikurim, the first fruits, until after Eretz Yisrael had been captured and divided according to each tribe. Why is Bikurim different from the mitzvah of Challah, which was imposed on them as soon as they entered the land? Why should they have been required to wait until the land was divided up? In his sefer Simchas HaTorah, Horav Simchah Shepps, zl, explains that the underlying motif of the mitzvah of Bikurim is to actualize the hidden potential of hakoras hatov, gratitude, that Klal Yisrael is to manifest to Hashem for giving them the land. Indeed, when they recite the accompanying liturgy, they begin with recounting their history, detailing how Lavan hoArami sought to destroy Yaakov Avinu. They recall the various kindnesses that Hashem did for them. Eretz Yisrael and hakoras hatov go hand in hand. Only after the Jew realizes that he is in the land only through Hashem's kindness, does he become worthy of inheriting the land. True gratitude can come only with Eretz Yisrael, and Eretz Yisrael can be attained only through gratitude. Thus, when the people became worthy of possessing the land, they concomitantly became deserving of its first fruits.

True hakoras hatov is the recognition that everything that has contributed to the favor that one receives comprises a factor in his favor and, thus, must be appreciated. Everything is the result of many little parts - each part a necessary cog in bringing about the gift that he receives.

With this in mind, Rav Shepps explains the Midrash that posits that Bereishis bara Elokim should be understood as, "In the beginning of Hashem's Creation." "In the beginning" is a reference to Bikurim, the first fruits, indicating that the world was created in the merit of this mitzvah. This is an incredible statement. The suggestion that the world's *raison de' etre'* is Bikurim is a powerful statement. What is the unique significance of this mitzvah such that no other mitzvah warrants this comment?

Rav Shepps explains that hakoras hatov is the glue that keeps us connected to Hashem. When we recognize how much we owe Hashem for the innumerable benefits of which we are the beneficiaries, our relationship becomes stronger. The mitzvah of Bikurim is unique in the sense that through it Hashem reveals to us the principle of hakoras hatov. Bikurim teaches us that our debt of gratitude to Hashem extends far beyond the immediate benefits we receive from Him. Indeed, we must recognize the genesis of Hashem's kindness, the original source of every benefit we receive. Hence, we thank Hashem for sparing Yaakov from Lavan, and we focus on Yaakov's going down to Egypt, the Egyptian bondage and ensuing redemption, until we finally arrived in Eretz Yisrael and built the Bais HaMikdash. Yes - hakoras hatov goes all the way back to the point that we come to realize that everything - every benefit - has one source, one origin: - Hashem. Hakoras hatov is the foundation of the world. Hakoras hatov defines our relationship with Hashem.

In an alternative understanding, the mitzvah of Bikurim has another aspect. Besides the actual appreciation of Hashem's beneficence that is the hallmark of the mitzvah, there is *hodaah*, expression of gratitude, with the public fanfare that accompanies it. The end result is the raised public awareness of Hashem's kindness towards us. In this light, Bikurim serves as the vehicle for public recognition of Hashem's beneficence. The entire creation was worth it for the mitzvah of Bikurim and the consequent sanctification of Hashem's Name.

Just as we are enjoined to thank Hashem for all the good that He bestows upon us, we are, likewise, instructed to show that same gratitude to anyone that benefits us. Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl, understood the parameters of hakoras hatov and served as a paragon of ethical behavior for others to emulate. He would often say concerning the saying in Pirkei Avos 4:1, "'Who is honorable? He who honors people.' If one thinks that he can be honorable without honoring others, he is wrong!" He

understood the enormity of the individual's responsibility towards others. Rav Chaim would make every effort to attend the wedding of any student who attended his shiur - even if he was from a different yeshivah! So great was his sense of hakoras hatov. It made no difference whether the favor he received was great or small, whether the benefactor went out of his way or had done very little on his part, if Rav Chaim had benefited from him, he felt he must show his gratitude.

Horav Meir Don Plotzki, zl, author of the Klei Chemdah, was in London to raise funds for the European yeshivos. After a day of visiting a number of London's wealthy philanthropists, trudging from door to door and neighborhood to neighborhood, Rav Meir Don finally returned to his host to rest up for the next days' trip to Belgium and then on to America. Waiting for him was Reb Michael Levi, a distinguished lay leader in the London Jewish community. He brought regards from his aged father who regretted that he was too frail to personally pay his respects to the Torah leader. After about an hour of conversation, it became known to Rav Meir Don that Reb Michael's father was the one who in his younger years had discovered the commentary of Rabbeinu Chananel on Meseches Pesachim and had it printed. Immediately upon hearing this, Rav Meir Don put on his coat and said, "There is not enough honor that I can bestow upon such a person, to whom the entire Torah world is in his debt for this great gift. Come, we must go to your father, so that I can thank him for what he has done." Rav Meir Don understood that he had benefited from this person; even though he was one of many and it was an indirect benefit, he felt it behooved him to show his appreciation. This is the mark of a great person.

Look down from Your holy abode, from the Heavens, and bless Your people, Yisrael. (26:15)

The word hashkifah, look down, usually has a negative connotation. It implies to cast an evil eye on a subject. The sole exception to this rule is the hashkifah of Viddui Maaser, which is the confessional prayer which one recites upon successfully dispensing the required tithes. In this case, we ask Hashem to look down and bless us. The Midrash explains that this is the power of tzedakah. It can transform the Middas Hadin, attribute of strict Justice, into the Middas HoRachamim, attribute of Mercy. Although hashkifah generally implies evil, when people act in accordance with Hashem's will, dispensing their tithes to the Levi and the poor, it is transformed into a positive word.

The Kesav Sofer cites his father, the Chasam Sofer who questions this. Why should the Torah use a word that has a negative connotation only to "change" its implication into a positive meaning? Why not simply use a word that originally has a positive overtone?

The Kesav Sofer explains that prosperity and material blessing can, in fact, have a negative effect on a person's life. First, the more material reward a person receives in this world, the less he is likely to receive in the World to Come. Furthermore, wealth has the ability to impede one's relationship with Hashem and to diminish his fear of Him. Throughout the Torah we find pesukim alluding to the negative reaction one may have to wealth and material abundance. Since the goal of a Jew is to raise his spiritual level and to serve Hashem faithfully, so that he can achieve eternal reward in the World to Come, it makes sense that too much materialism is a severe deterrent to attaining this goal.

Yet, when one makes good use of his material resources by sharing it with those less fortunate, by supporting Torah institutions, this wealth becomes a source of blessing and spiritual merit. This is the Torah's lesson. Just as hashkifah can be transformed into a positive connotation, so, too, can material abundance be used for our spiritual benefit. It is not the resources that are inherently bad; how

we use them defines their value.

Hashem will send in your midst attrition, confusion and worry, in your every undertaking that you will do. (28:20)

Inner peace eludes many of us. We search for it, never realizing that it is right in front of us. The Yismach Moshe once dreamed that he was in Gan Eden. He entered a room that was very plain, completely devoid of ornamentation, and noticed a group of Torah scholars studying Torah. He was quite surprised that this was all there was to Gan Eden. Suddenly, a voice called out to him, "If you are under the impression that the scholars are in paradise - you are wrong. It is paradise that is within the Torah scholars."

We are always searching for a touch of paradise. Look around at how many people spend their hard-earned money on exotic vacations. Although there is certainly nothing wrong with it, do they really find the tranquility and serenity they seek? True, for a few weeks they are relaxed and calm, but what happens as soon as they "land" and return to their daily lifestyle? To be truly free of all tension one must find inner-peace within himself.

The problem is that we often think that we are in charge of our destiny. Consequently, we are always nervous about what we can do to insure a positive result to our endeavor. The cure to this problem is, bitachon, trust in Hashem. When we are ready to begin trusting Hashem and believing that everything that He does is for our good, then we can achieve inner-peace and experience a little bit of Gan Eden in this world.

One of the leading causes of depression is a lack of material success. Earning a livelihood is a challenge which becomes magnified when one's wife and children make unreasonable demands for the bread winner to keep up with the Jones'. There is nothing like having one's child wonder out loud why his father cannot be as financially successful as his neighbor. Families have to be supportive, not add to the challenge. A person must realize that his lot in life is decreed by Hashem for a purpose, a purpose that is inherently good for him. Horav Zushia, zl, m'Annipole lived in abject poverty. He never complained. In fact, he accepted his circumstances with a smile. He was once asked, "How can you be sincere in reciting the brachah, blessing, of She'asah li kol tzarki, thanking the Almighty for granting all your needs, when, in fact, you are so much in need?"

Rav Zushia responded, "Hashem knows fully well what my needs are better than I do. He knows that one of my needs is poverty. Who am I to argue?" It all reverts to the same idea. Do we trust Hashem to make the correct decision? Do we truthfully believe that what He does is for the best? As long as we think that success or failure in financial endeavors is in our hands, we will be dejected when our efforts do not prove successful. If we realize that what Hashem gives us is in our best interest, we can be happy even if we receive less than we have anticipated.

The cause of all this mistrust is man's archenemy - the yetzer hora, evil-inclination. Horav Yaakov Yosef, zl, m'Polnaah says, "In the past, the yetzer hora directed its efforts at preventing people from acquiring their share in the World to Come. Now, the yetzer hora is busy at work preventing people from having enjoyment from their earthly existence." We have unprecedented opportunities to enjoy life; yet, we make ourselves miserable. Is that normal? We should be happy, but we are not. We do not realize that it is all the yetzer hora's ploy. Instead of enticing us to sin, it sows discontent and depression within us. We should learn to reject depression the way we repel a sin. By acknowledging

the source of our problem, we can learn to overcome its effect.

Your sons and daughters will be given to another people - and your eyes will see and pine in vain for them... You will bear sons and daughters, but they will not be yours, for they will go into captivity. (28:32,41)

There seems to be a redundancy in these two tragic curses. We suggest that, unfortunately, they are two distinct curses, each one focusing on a different type of loss. In the former, the children are given over to another people. They might be living under the same roof as their parents, but their values are different. They are alienated from their people and are instead enchanted by the culture of another nation. In the latter curse, the children are no longer home; they have been taken captive by another nation. They are slaves to another people.

In the first curse, the Torah refers to the sons and daughters as "your sons and daughters." They are home. You see them every day but, regrettably you pine in vain for them. In the latter, they are gone, no longer your sons and daughters. They have been taken captive. Which curse is worse? No parent should ever be faced with this question, but from the sequence it would seem that curses become more serious as they progress. Thus, having the children at home, even though they no longer respect and adhere to their parents' wishes and level of observance, is still far better than having them out of the specter of parental influence and taken captive by another nation. As long as a child is home, there is hope. The parents still have an opportunity to reach out, to assuage the hurt feelings, to repair the breach. Once the child has moved out and moved on, it is so much more difficult. On the other hand, to observe a child's deterioration on a daily basis is a traumatic experience, one that for most people is gut-wrenching and devastating. Yet, the Torah seems to be telling us that as long as the child stays home, there is hope; as long as we consider them our children, they can still come back, because the return address has not been erased.

Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, amid gladness and goodness of heart. (28:47)

Joy in mitzvah performance, aside from being an essential prerequisite to the actual fulfillment of the mitzvah, also has a very practical application. Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, explains why so many children of European immigrants who came to America after World War I did not remain observant. Their parents were deeply committed to Yiddishkeit. They slaved long hours, performing all kinds of backbreaking labor to eke out a meager living. They would never compromise their observance of Torah and mitzvos. Shabbos was paramount, and kashrus was a standard in their homes. So, what went wrong? How did so many Jews who were moser nefesh, sacrificed themselves for Torah, fail to see nachas from their children?

They were not happy. "Oy! Es is shver tzu zein a Yid." It is difficult to be a Jew. When they came home after a difficult day in the sweatshops - they complained. When they observed Shabbos, sometimes at the expense of their jobs - they complained. When the price of kosher meat was too much for their meager paychecks - they complained. Their children heard nothing but complaints. This was surely not a strong motivating factor for them. They grew up viewing Judaism as a pain, as a religion that imposed hardship, poverty and unhappiness. Their reaction was simple: they did not want to be

miserable like their parents. Therefore, they dropped the source of their parents' misery: religious observance. Now they could be happy. Regrettably, now their children would follow them - until they would see for themselves the beauty and joy inherent in mitzvah observance. The home serves as the greatest and most important training ground for our children. The way we act at home can either inspire or impede. We have only ourselves to blame.

You shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground...and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose to make His Name rest there. (26:2)

The mitzvah of Bikkurim, offering one's first fruits to the Kohen in the Bais HaMikdash, is a mitzvah which symbolizes the Jew's sense of gratitude, by dedicating everything that he has to the service of Hashem. We must realize that regardless of the time and effort we invest in any given endeavor, the successful results are a gift from Hashem. Much has been said and written about one's overwhelming responsibility to recognize, appreciate and pay gratitude to those who benefit us. Indeed, this is probably the measure of a man. One who appreciates, is a human being - one who does not appreciate, simply is not to be counted among the members of the human race.

Among those who are on the top of the list of those who earn and deserve our gratitude are, of course, Hashem and our parents. They share one thing in common: we can never sufficiently repay them for what they do for us. I recently came across a noteworthy story which is well worth imparting. It is about a woman who wanted to do something special for her mother, to give her a gift that would convey her gratitude and love.

She tried to imagine what it was that her mother needed most. After careful introspection she came to a simple, but profound conclusion, one that probably applies to all parents: Her mother needed to know that she made a difference in the lives of her children. While we all know this to be true, how many of us stop to think about it? Furthermore, how many of us do something about it? Parents give up so much for their children. Some give up money, others give up time. There are those very special parents who even give up their dreams, their own opportunities for personal growth and advancement - all for their children. All they really want in return is a little feedback, some indication that their efforts were not in vain.

So, in recognition of her mother's efforts and in gratitude, she made a "memory jar" for her. She purchased a large glass jar with a lid and placed over one hundred little pieces of paper in the jar. On each piece of paper she jotted down a memory that she wanted to share with her mother. They were simple but meaningful memories. She remembered the talk they had when she became engaged and the one right before she got married. She remembered how she saved her money to buy a dress and how her mother had paid for half of it. She remembered how scared she was as a little girl when her mother was sick and had to go to the hospital. She remembered calling her mother to inform her that she had just become a grandmother. Simple memories - but each one told a story of love and caring.

There are variations to this jar. I am sure that if we would sit down and think we could come up with a "number" of instances during our lives for which we must thank our parents. Some of us might find it difficult to say thank you because that is human nature. The debt of gratitude we owe our parents is overwhelming and the time during which we can express ourselves is limited. So, what are we waiting for?

Gaze down from Your Holy abode, from the heavens, and bless Your People, Yisrael. (26:15)

The parsha of Bikkurim ends with a special prayer entreating Hashem to gaze down from His sacred abode in Heaven, and listen to the pleas of Klal Yisrael. The Midrash Tanchuma relates that Moshe Rabbeinu, upon seeing through Ruach HaKodesh, Divine Inspiration, that the Bais HaMikdash will one day be destroyed, established for Klal Yisrael a ritual of three daily prayers. Prayer is even more beloved to Hashem than good deeds and sacrifices. We see from here that there is an intrinsic relationship between prayer and Bikkurim.

Horav Gedaliah Schorr, zl, explains that both through the mediums of Bikkurim and of prayer, one recognizes and conveys the notion that everything comes from Hashem. It is for this reason that we begin the Shemoneh Esrai prayer with the berachah of "Atah chonen l'adam daas," "You graciously endow man with knowledge," a prayer that expresses our gratitude for being endowed with intelligence and the ability to recognize the source of all things. Likewise, in the Bikkurim entreaty we convey our gratitude for the blessings that we have been granted. Consequently, Moshe implored Hashem that Klal Yisrael always retain the power of prayer - even when the Bais HaMikdash and its ensuing mitzvah of Bikkurim are no longer functional. The recognition of "Atah chonen," "You graciously endow," catalyzes our hakoras ha'tov, appreciation and gratitude, for all that He does for us.

In an alternative exposition, Rav Schorr cites the Chidushei Ha'Rim who explains that just as Bikkurim is a way of consecrating the reishis, beginning/first fruits, so too, does prayer sanctify the beginning of our "time." Subsequently, immediately upon rising in the morning we hurry to the shul to pray to Hashem. In the afternoon, as the sun begins to set in the west, we hasten to the shul so that we may convey our gratitude to Hashem. Likewise, at the onset of night, we accept upon ourselves the Ol Malchus Shomayim, yoke of the Heavenly Kingdom. We hope that our actions will have an "overflow" effect on the other hours of the day, so that our zman, "time," will be holy.

What Moshe Rabbeinu achieved through his entreaty was that Hashem will accept our heartfelt prayers although they are not embellished by the sanctity of the Bais HaMikdash. Our prayers should be like the Bikkurim of old, which were offered with profound gratitude to He that is the Source of everything.

All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you. (28:2)

The berachos, blessings, will reach one who is worthy of blessing. What does one do to be worthy of blessing? What merit catalyzes blessing? The following narrative sheds light on this question. It was Purim day in the small town of Bendin. The entire community was involved with the mitzvos of the day. Some were sending Mishloach Manos, traditional gifts of food, to each other, while others were occupied with the mitzvah of Matanos l'Evyonim, giving charity to the poor. Yet others were observing simchas Purim, the joy of Purim by singing, dancing, and feasting, celebrating the Jewish People's being spared from Haman's evil decree. The entire community was thus engaged, well almost the entire community, everyone but one Jew, Rav Zev Nachum Burnstein, zl, who studied Torah all day long, "Lo posak pumei migizsei," "His mouth did not stop for a moment. He was always studying Torah. A scholar of note, Rav Burnstein was also a chassid of the famous Kotzker Rebbe.

The Kotzker later related that on that Purim there was a great uproar in the Heavenly Tribunal. Had Rav Nachum Zev not been learning during that period, there would have been an interval when the study of Torah - pure study with toil and diligence would have been lacking. This would have created an awesome spiritual crisis. Rav Nachum Zev must therefore be rewarded. His zchus ha'Torah, merit of Torah study, achieved great heights. His reward was commensurate with his deed. He was given a special gift - his son, Rav Avraham, who authored the incredible volumes of Iglei Tal and Avnei Nezer, whose encyclopedic knowledge and brilliance illuminated the Torah world.

We may add that we derive from here that Hashem rewards a person commensurate with his values. One who appreciates and values Torah will have unparalleled joy to see his son grow up to be a gadol b'Yisrael, Torah leader. Conversely, others might not be enamored with such a blessing, viewing the Torah scholar in a somewhat disdainful manner. They would much rather see their son become a successful professional. Well, to each his own.

Hashem will confirm you for Himself as a holy people...if you observe the commandments of Hashem...and you go in His ways. Then all the peoples of the earth will see that the Name of Hashem is proclaimed over you and they will revere you. (28:9,10)

Horav M.D. Soloveitchik, Shlita, cites Chazal who interpret the enjoinder to "follow in His ways," as to emulate Hashem. Just like He is compassionate, so shall you be compassionate, etc. Subsequently, we achieve deveikus, we cling to Hashem, through our mitzvah performance. Thus, when people will observe that Hashem's Name is "called upon us," they will ultimately fear the Almighty. What greater Kiddush Hashem, sanctification of Hashem's Name, is there than by seeing the positive actions and good deeds of His followers.

Rav Soloveitchik notes the awesome responsibility this presents for the Jew. When one performs a mitzvah it no longer is a personal experience - it has a direct influence on the klal, general community. Consequently, when one transgresses it has a negative effect not only on him, but on the community as well. A Jew must realize that he cannot isolate himself from the community. He does not live alone in a vacuum. His actions - both positive and negative - have an effect on others. This should inspire and motivate our positive performance.

Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, amid gladness and goodness of heart. (28:47)

Simchah, joy, is the characteristic upon which our Sages have placed great emphasis. Indeed, it is one of the primary tenets upon which the concepts of Chassidism is based. Being born into a world of lingering doom and depression, the world of chassidus focused on overcoming dejection and melancholy and its overriding effect on one's religious life. While joy and the display of joy became the benchmark of chassidus, they did not have a monopoly on the concept. While there were detractors who felt that excessive joy betrayed a lack of seriousness, most others felt that these emotions injected a welcome vitality into the solemnity of religious life.

The focus on joy takes on a number of aspects. At its most basic level, joy means not being depressed. At its zenith, a Jew is overjoyed at being part of the Chosen People. Fundamental to chassidic doctrine is the joy inherent with being near Hashem. The world is Hashem's creation and man

is a part of that world. Man is filled with joy knowing that the Almighty has befriended him.

We must add, however, that even in sadness there are two aspects. Horav Nachman, zl, m'Breslov distinguished between a lev nishbar, broken heart, and atzvus, sadness and sorrow. He explains that sadness is expressed in anger and irritability, whereas brokenheartedness is much like a son cleansing himself before his father, like a child crying and complaining that he has been sent far away from his father. The purifying desire, the longing for reconciliation is interpreted as a "brokenheart." This form of sadness is not the antithesis of joy. Indeed, for us to achieve such a plateau of longing for Hashem, should in itself be a source of joy.

The Breslover focuses much of his lectures on the significance of joy and the harmful effect of depression. He considers sadness as being part of the kelipos, outer shells, the Kabbalistic symbol of evil. Sadness and melancholy are like dust which clog the Jewish heart, rendering it unable to burst into flame from the fiery passion of serving Hashem. By removing extraneous emotional burdens, joy enables one to intellectually cogitate upon his ultimate purpose in the world, and thereby make it possible for his religious experience to flourish. When one dances out of joy at a simchah shel mitzvah, for the sake of Heaven, he is able to rid himself of all sinful and immoral acts involved with his legs. A cheerful frame of mind gives one the opportunity to pray to Hashem with greater ease and ecstasy.

As mentioned, the joy inherent in being a part of Klal Yisrael should be most inspiring. The Divrei Chaim, zl, was wont to say, "If a Jew would realize how lucky he is to be a Yehudi, he would be delirious with happiness." What a penetrating statement! If only more of us would realize our distinctiveness we might act appropriately.

It goes even further. A widow once approached the Divrei Chaim as he was sitting in conference with Rav Sholom, zl, m'Kaminka. She bewailed her miserable lot in life. Her husband's demise left his family bereft of a breadwinner. She and her children were overcome with abject poverty. Now, their landlord was trying to eject them from their home. Her incessant weeping and grievous circumstances had their effect on Rav Sholom, who began to cry with her. The Divrei Chaim, on the other hand, declared in a joyful tone, "Do not worry. Go home, things will work out for you." After she had left, Rav Sholom, queried the Divrei Chaim how he could retain his happy disposition after listening to the widow's tale of woe. He responded, "To be able to intercede on behalf of another Jew one must be b'simchah, filled with joy." We submit that the reason for this is that one must approach Hashem with confidence, with faith, with belief that Hashem will see the positive virtue of the one in need. After all, it is difficult to "sell something" that one does not believe in.

Lastly, to sum up the feeling of joy intrinsic in mitzvah performance, we cite the following anecdote. Horav Avraham, zl, m'Teschinov had a close friend who was also a great gaon, brilliant scholar. His friend once asked him, "Explain something to me. Both of us have studied Torah for many years, and have become proficient in its profundities. Moreover, we both diligently perform mitzvos and serve Hashem with great devotion. Why then is it that you are called "Rebbe" by everyone and I am not?"

Rav Avraham responded, "Can you tell me when you experienced such heightened joy that you can not even describe it?" "Yes," answered his friend. "Once, I made ten thousand rubles on a single business venture." Hearing this, the Teshchinover Rebbe said, "My friend, when I stretch out my arm to put on Tefillin as my Creator has commanded me, I am filled with much greater joy than you experienced when you profited ten thousand ruble!" When the friend heard this, he declared, "If so, the world is not mistaken - you truly deserve to be called Rebbe."

That you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in from your land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you. (26:20)

The mitzvah of Bikurim is unique. The Torah refers to Bikurim as "reishis pri," the first fruit. The first words of the Torah are "Bereishis bara Elokim," "In the beginning Hashem created." The Midrash comments that Hashem created the world in the merit of Bikurim, which is called reishis. When the farmers who were bringing their first fruits to Yerusholayim would come with their produce, all of the artisans would halt their work to pay their respects to them. Although it is forbidden for a workman to take time off from his work to speak to anyone, he is permitted in this situation-out of an overriding sense of respect for the mitzvah of Bikurim.

Why is this mitzvah so special that it is given "favored" status? The Alshich Ha'kadosh explains that Bikurim are man's way of showing his gratitude to Hashem. The importance of hakoras ha'tov, recognizing, appreciating and showing gratitude to the One Who gives us everything, is a behavioral mitzvah of acute significance. One must reflect and cogently recognize that everything comes from the Almighty. Everything stops when this mitzvah is being performed, so that people will become inculcated with the importance of hakoras ha'tov. Horav Shalom Eisen, zl, was a moreh tzedek, arbiter of Jewish law, in Yerusholayim for over half-a-century. Appreciation and gratitude were more than mere words in his lexicon; they constituted his way of life. When he was very ill, a group of yeshivah students addressed his needs. He was prepared to move heaven and earth for these young men, in response to his sense of gratitude to them. He attended their simchos, joyous occasions, regardless of the distance and personal physical difficulty involved in getting there. This did not yet demonstrate his sense of gratitude. As his illness progressed, he became less and less mobile: his legs were weakened; his eyesight had dimmed; his body was wracked with pain. He traveled to America in search of medical treatment that might avert the course of his devastating illness.

Regrettably, he returned to Eretz Yisrael still a very sick man, who was slowly succumbing to the effects of his disease.

It was Purim, usually a time of joy. That year, the joy was marred with the news that the venerable gadol hador, Torah luminary, leader of the generation, Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, had passed away. His levayah, funeral, was to take place in Yerusholayim on Purim, which is celebrated on the fifteenth of Adar, a day after it is celebrated everywhere else. Rav Shalom wanted badly to attend. His son would not hear of it, claiming that in his father's debilitating physical state he was not obligated to attend. His weakness overcame his desire to attend, and he deferred to his son's decision. He told his son, however, "According to halachah, Jewish law, you should assemble a minyan, quorum of ten Jewish males, and go to Rav Moshe's kever, grave, to implore mechilah, forgiveness, on my behalf, for not attending his funeral. His son was shocked and responded, "But father, you had no koach, strength, to attend."

Rav Shalom looked at his son and said, "You are right. From the standpoint of halvoyas ha'm'es, paying final respects and attending the funeral of another Jew, even one so great as Rav Moshe, but what about my hakoras ha'tov that I owe him? When I was in America, lying in the hospital, my body wracked with pain and agony, do you know who came to visit me? None other than the gadol hador, Rav Moshe! I owe him! I have no recourse for absolving myself from my obligation of hakoras ha'tov other than imploring his neshamah's forgiveness. I have no teretz, excuse, to "justify" my lack of attendance. You must go to his grave and beg his forgiveness for me." We now have "some" idea of our responsibility for repaying our obligation to others.

Rav Shalom derived a significant lesson in hakoras ha'tov from his own rebbe, the great ga'on, Horav Isser Zalmen Meltzer, zl. When his son became a bar mitzvah, Rav Shalom invited his close friends to the kiddush on Shabbos. Out of respect for his rebbe, he sent an invitation to Rav Isser Zalmen. His rebbe's advanced age and deteriorating health would never permit him to entertain the idea of making the long walk to Rav Shalom's apartment, which also happened to be four flights up.

The kiddush was graced by Yerusholayim's greatest Torah luminaries. Indeed, every table was a "head" table. Suddenly, the door opened up, and in walked Rav Isser Zalmen. Seeing his rebbe standing there bedecked in his Shabbos garb, the shine of Torah emanating from his visage, he, together with everyone in attendance, stopped everything and stared incredulously. "How is it that the Rosh ha'yeshivah troubled himself to walk such a long distance?" they all asked. He responded, "It is true that it was a long and difficult walk, much more than my body can handle, but, I owe a debt of gratitude to the baal simchah, host. Because of him, I came." Rav Isser Zalmen proceeded to explain, "When I received the bar-mitzvah invitation, a shocking thought ran through my mind. It was just 'yesterday' that I had attended Rav Shalom's wedding, and now he's already celebrating his son's bar-mitzvah. Time flies; I must 'do teshuvah,' repent, before it is too late. This hirhur teshuvah, thought of repentance, was motivated indirectly by Rav Shalom. I owe him a debt of gratitude. Therefore, I came to join in his simchah."

Before we ask ourselves which story conveys a more powerful message, we should reflect upon how distant we are from action on a par with either one.

Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, with gladness and with goodness of heart. (28:47)

From the early days of Ezra ha'Sofer, the custom among the Jewish People has been to read the "Tochechah," curses, of Parashas Ki Savo close to Rosh Hashanah. In the Talmud Megillah 31b, Chazal explain that it serves as a good omen, so that "tichleh shanah v'kilelosehah," the year with its curses should end. Upon perusing the parsha with its terrible curses, one is shocked and horrified at the extent of Hashem's anger against those who willfully and knowingly rebel against him. What is more jarring is the fact that, for the most part, many of the curses have befallen us. We have only to turn back the pages of history sixty years to note the cataclysmic destruction that was wrought against our people.

What were the spiritual conditions that comprised the precursors of the tragedies that befell us? After all, if we are to prevent these calamities from revisiting us, we must be acutely aware of their cause. The Torah presents a powerful idea, which at first might not seem significant; but, after careful consideration, we see that it is the primary source of so much of our pain and affliction. "Tachas asher lo ovadeta es Hashem Elokecha b'simchah u'vetov leivav meirov kol." Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, with gladness and with goodness of heart. While serving the Almighty with joy is certainly a virtue, does the lack thereof warrant such retribution? Moreover, the Torah itself begins the Tochechah by saying, "But, it will be that if you do not listen to the voice of Hashem, your G-d, to perform all His commandments and all His decrees." (28:15)

How do we reconcile the two disparate reasons, unless we were to say that one leads to another? Mitzvah performance devoid of feeling, a service to the Almighty bereft of joy, will ultimately lead to total alienation from Torah and mitzvos. Indeed, a number of the commentators espouse this view. The Mesilas Yesharim writes that the knowledge that one is able to serve the Almighty, to study His Torah, and to observe His mitzvos should bring one to joy and ecstasy. This is the ultimate sheleimus,

perfection, that one can achieve. Yet, we are hard-pressed to understand the underlying reason for the curses. If one does not achieve perfection resulting from joy in mitzvah performance, is he deserving of such grave punishment? Horav Moshe Leib Sassover, zl, claims that a lack of joy stands at the root of all spiritual deficiencies. While the actual destruction of the Bais Hamikdosh was the result of Klal Yisrael's abandoning the Torah, the source was in our complacent, cold attitude. To paraphrase the Lev Simchah, "If mitzvah performance and serving Hashem would be dear to a person more-so than anything else in the world, it would be impossible to sin."

A spiritual downfall does not happen over-night. It is a slow digression in which a lack of joy leads to total non-observance and regrettably, later on, to harboring animus toward those who adhere and observe. One should have an internal connection to Torah and mitzvos. The joy inherent in their observance demonstrates this internal bond.

How does one develop this simchah? How does one attain this pinnacle of observance? Horav Shmelke, zl, m'Nikolsburg, says that the primary source of joy should be the knowledge that Hashem has chosen us from among all the nations and that He has separated us from those who have strayed. He has distinguished us from those who are lost, who wander around aimlessly, searching, seeking, lost without any clue as to their past, their future and even their present. It is told that the Tzemach Tzedek was once asked by one of his chasidim, what he should do to be able to act with the joy necessary for complete mitzvah observance. The rebbe, taken aback, responded, "Is it conceivable that one would not be constantly replete with joy?" Indeed, the mere fact that he can daily recite the blessing of "shelo osani goi," "That He has not made me a goi, that He has created me as a Jew," should be one's greatest source of joy. Keeping this notion in mind should serve as a compelling, motivating factor to enhance one's feeling of joy.

There is one slight problem, however. In order to establish this sense of joy, one must cleanse himself of all spiritual deficiencies and impure thoughts. Only then can he achieve the optimum plateau of joy in mitzvos. Horav Bunim, zl, m'Peshischa says that this idea is inferred from the words "u'betuv leivav," "and with goodness of heart." He explains that the word "tuv" is related to "cleansing," as in the service of preparing the wicks of the Menorah. They would prepare the wicks, cleansing the lamps from the past days; impurities and remains, in a process called hatovas ha'neiros. The new oil was able to burn clean, its flame brilliant and clear, as a result of this cleaning. Taharas ha'lev, purifying the heart, cleansing it of any indiscretions and impurities, is an inherent component in the process of developing our sense of joy in mitzvah performance.

This exemplary sense of devotion is demonstrated in any of a number of ways throughout the dynamics of living as a Torah Jew. Under times of duress, during periods of incredible trial and challenge, our faith and commitment is put to the supreme test: to serve, or not to serve; to maintain our sense of joy, to retain our feelings of gladness despite being subject to pain, cruel punishment, persecution and affliction, or to let go and defer to our natural instincts. Countless stories detail the spiritual heroism of our people during such periods of tribulation. One especially poignant story that comes to mind took place during World War II, in a concentration camp where the accursed Nazis were carrying out their final solution against the Jews. A survivor of Auschwitz writes that one day as he was lying on his cot, he observed the assistant commander enter the barracks carrying a rubber truncheon with which to beat someone. Beatings were common as a means of "punishing" the prisoners for their lack of "discipline." Usually, they would use a wooden stick which would break as a result of the beatings. They were now introducing a more reliable tool for disciplining the prisoners. The Nazi went over to one of the cots and stood over a fourteen-year-old boy, who was apparently expecting him. "Get down," the assistant commander yelled at him. The boy bent over, and the Nazi began to beat him.

Slowly, a group of men gathered around the young boy and watched each lash, counting the blows individually. The boy did not cry, nor did he yell; he did not even sigh. To everyone's amazement, he showed no emotion whatsoever. Usually, the beatings did not extend beyond the twenty-five mark. This time it was past thirty and counting. When the attacker passed forty blows, he turned the boy over and began to beat him on his legs and head. Still, the boy did not respond. Not a cry, not a moan, not a whimper - not even a sigh. A boy of fourteen - and he did not even give a sigh!

The Nazi beast became angry when he passed the number fifty and there was still no response from the boy. He left disgusted. The other prisoners gathered around the beaten child and picked him up. His head was bruised. A large red welt was evident across his forehead from one of the smashes of the rubber truncheon. When he was asked why he was subject to the beating, the boy answered, "It was all worth it. Every blow was well worth it. I brought my friends a few Siddurim, so that they could pray." He added nothing; he said no more as he got up and climbed onto his cot. He sat there, his face not contorted with pain, but rather, aglow with gladness, knowing that he was beaten so that others could daven.

v Perhaps, the next time we open our Siddur to supplicate Hashem, it might serve us well to remember this young boy. Indeed, it might even enhance our tefillos.

But Hashem did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear until this day. (29:3)

Rashi writes, "I have heard that on the day that Moshe Rabbeinu gave the Book of the Torah to Bnei Levi, all of Klal Yisrael came to Moshe and said to him, "Moshe Rabbeinu! Our Master, we, too, stood at Har Sinai, and we accepted the Torah. It was given to us. Why do you put the sons of your tribe in charge of it, so that one day they may say to us, "It was not given to you, it was given to us?" Moshe rejoiced over the matter. In response, he said to them, "This day you have become a People to Hashem your G-d: This day I have understood that you cleave to and desire the Omnipresent.

The Slonimer Rebbe, zl, cites the Rav m'Lechuvitch, who explains the meaning of "until this day." After all, Klal Yisrael had certainly exhibited mesiras nefesh, dedication to the point of self-sacrifice, for Hashem and His command. Did they not slaughter the sheep, the Egyptian godhead, for the Korban Pesach? They walked into the Red Sea with the water churning up to their necks, because of their belief in Hashem. Is that not mesiras nefesh? He says that now Moshe saw their chavivus, love, for the Torah. True, they were willing to sacrifice themselves for the Torah, but, until they had come forward to demand their share in the Torah, they had not yet demonstrated their love. It is one thing to be willing to give up everything for the Torah, it is yet another to love it. Klal Yisrael achieved that lofty level of love. They displayed an understanding and appreciation of the Torah that manifests itself in love for the Torah.

These shall stand to bless the people on Har Gerizim... And these shall stand for the curse on Har Eival... The Leviim shall speak up and say...(27:12,13)

In Sotah 32a, the Mishnah describes the intriguing scene that took place as the Shevatim, tribes, recited the blessings and curses on their respective mountains. Six tribes went up on Har Gerizim and six tribes went up on Har Eival, while the Kohanim, Leviim and the Aron Ha'kodesh were on the ground between them. They turned their faces towards Har Gerizim and began to recite the blessings,

to which everyone responded, "Amen". Afterwards, they turned towards Har Eival and recited the curses. Ostensibly, through this scenario, the Torah sought to convey a message that would remain with Klal Yisrael for all time.

Horav Moshe Reis, Shlita, derives from this pasuk that a gap exists between good and evil. The valley that stood between the two mountains, each respectively representing blessing and curse, symbolizes that the parameters between these two have been set: It is either good or evil; there are no gray areas, no in-betweens. The greatest threat to humanity is the removal of these boundaries.

The Seforim Ha'Kedoshim explain that prior to Adam Ha'rishon's sin, a clear, definite line of demarcation, existed between good and bad. Each one stood alone, unmistakably distinguishable from one another. After the sin, everything became "tzumisht," mixed up. No longer was good unquestionably good; no longer was evil unequivocally evil. The yetzer hora, evil-inclination, had succeeded in distorting the definition of good and its evil counterpart. Prior to entering Eretz Yisrael, Hashem explicitly defined blessing and curse, leaving no room for misunderstanding.

In Tehillim 104, David Hamelech describes the wonders of the world. In pesukim 20-22 he writes, "You make darkness and it is night, in which every forest beast stirs... The sun rises and they are gathered in, and in their dens they crouch." There are beasts of prey that function only when it is dark. As the sun rises, they revert back to their caves. We may note that many individuals act in congruence with these animals from a spiritual perspective. They function only in the dark, when there is no light -- during times of ambiguity, when there is no clarity of vision. The early commentators write about those who run away from the truth, for the truth places new responsibilities upon them. When the light of emes, truth, glares at them, they have a difficult time justifying their behavior. They are like the person who finds a lost article. He announces his find publicly only as long as he knows the owner will never hear about it. He is not interested in returning the lost object; he only wants to appear to be a decent person. He functions only when uncertainty reigns, when the people around him are unsure of themselves.

The Baalei Mussar note this phenomenon in regard to the confrontation between Yaakov Avinu and Eisav's guardian angel. At night, in darkness before the light of day, Eisav had power; in darkness, he functioned well. He challenged Yaakov, the amud ha'emes, pillar of truth, at a time when uncertainty and vagueness dominate. When Yaakov asked the angel, "What is your name?" he responded, "Why do you ask my name?" In other words: Do not ask questions. Eisav's influence, his essence, is in control where there is uncertainty. Questions demand answers which clarify a situation. Eisav had a problem functioning when there is clarity. Indeed, when the morning star arose, the angel begged to leave. Light is his mortal enemy; truth continues to overwhelm and vanquish Eisav. The Torah places before us brachah and klalah, blessing and curse. There are no options in between; it is either blessing or curse.

When Klal Yisrael entered Eretz Yisrael, Hashem conveyed this message to them through the medium of separate mountains.

Cursed is the man who makes a graven or molten image, an abomination to G-d... And sets it up in secret. (27:15)

The eleven arurim, curses, have something in common - secrecy. They are performed in secret, either to hide the nature of the sin and/or as a reflection of the sinner's hypocrisy. The specific use of the word "ba'seser," at the beginning and end of this series of sins, is purposeful. It emphasizes that the

secret character of these sins is considered especially deserving of a curse. This curse affects those who practice spiritual, moral, and social abominations, concealed beneath the cloak of outward respectability.

Using Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, as a text, we attempt to identify these sins as they are manifest in contemporary times: One who outwardly acts like a pious and virtuous man, but in secret disdains Hashem as the sole Creator and Ruler of the world; one who shows respect to his parents in public, but privately disparages them and treats them in the most demeaning manner; one who develops a reputation for integrity and sensitivity towards others, but, when observed, infringes upon the rights of others to his own advantage; one who publicly promotes the welfare of those in need, who is first and foremost in establishing funds to benefit the needy, but, in fact, takes advantage and even brings misfortune upon those who are short-sighted and naive; one who grovels at the feet of the high and mighty, who plays up to those in power, but distances himself from the weak and helpless whom he should be available to assist. In addition, we note: the hypocrite who presents himself as the paragon of morality, but whose private life is immoral and lewd; one who never publicly points a weapon at his neighbor, but has no compunction about killing his happiness, peace of mind and dignity with disparaging innuendoes that cut deeper than a knife; one who is a respectable member of the community, holding a position of responsibility, but abuses this trust through covert acts of corruption. Last, is the individual who himself a devout, observant Jew, stands idly by while observance among his contemporaries declines dismally.

The above curses regrettably are as relevant today as they have been historically. The difference is that today few people have the resolution to expose those who hide their actions. Few have the courage to confront those who undermine Judaism while sanctimoniously acting as if they are saving the world. Today, as then, Hashem does not allow these hypocrites to thrive.

Accursed is one who will not uphold the words of this Torah. (27:26)

The commentators offer a number of explanations for this pasuk. The Ramban cites the Talmud Yerushalmi 7:4 where Chazal say this is a reference to one who learns Torah, teaches Torah, observes the mitzvos, but does not support those that study Torah. This is an incredible statement! We are not talking about an evil person, a sinner who malevolently seeks to undermine the Torah. We are addressing one who does it all, who studies, observes and teaches others, so that they will also study and observe. Yet, because he does not use his money in support of Torah, Chazal view him as a sinner deserving to be cursed.

Chazal teach us that personal study and observance are not sufficient when one has the financial ability to support others. We have a moral obligation to sustain the Torah that is studied and disseminated by others - even if we ourselves are also studying Torah. Yes, even those who have dedicated their lives to Torah chinuch must also support others who do the same.

After analyzing the various commentaries and sources, Horav Moshe Reis, Shlita arrives at the conclusion that four distinct levels, or types of people, comprise the category of "lo yakim es divrei ha'Torah hazot," "will not uphold the words of this Torah": First, there is the one who stoops to the lowest of the low to despise, repudiate, disdain and even prevent others from performing mitzvos. This person has fallen to the nadir of depravity in his desire to harm other Jews. Is such a person necessarily an evil human being? Not necessarily! He simply cannot handle the threat which Torah Judaism

presents to his current lifestyle. When one chooses to live as a secular human being, devoid of any religious values or meaning, he does not want anybody around who, by virtue of his beliefs and way of life, undermines his secular lifestyle. Simply, when one chooses to live as a gentile, he does not want other Jews to remind him by their example that his heritage is calling. This shameless type has regrettably plagued us in many ways, but, surely, the Torah need not address such behavior with a specific curse.

Second is a Jew who is possessed by another type of strange behavior. He is the Jew who, albeit himself meticulously observant, is intolerant of others who follow suit. He wants to be the only one in the limelight. This is unfortunately a disease that is becoming increasingly common. Some people cannot handle what they perceive to be competition. Rabbeinu Yonah calls such a person a "sonei Hashem," hater of Hashem! After all, one who loves the king exhibits great joy when he sees others also serving him.

There is a third, more subtle, "non-supporter" of the Torah; he who studies and observes, easily accepting others who are doing the same. He does not, however, see to it that others join in this endeavor, he does not reach out to the unaffiliated and alienated who simply need a show of love and caring to catalyze their return. Such a person has not fulfilled his responsibility to uphold the Torah. He, too, is included in the curse.

We refer to the beginning of our thesis for the fourth example of those who are guilty of non-support of the Torah. He is the individual who studies and observes, manifesting no problem with others who do likewise. He even reaches out with his time and effort to bring others closer to Hashem. He lacks one characteristic: He does not give material support to those who need it; he does not share financially with those who need this support.

The Midrash in Vayikra Rabba 34:16 cites an incredible story which clearly defines the unusual character of Rabbi Akiva. It is related that Rabbi Tarfon gave Rabbi Akiva six hundred measures of silver, a considerable amount of money in those days, for the purpose of purchasing property for himself, so that the great Tanna could study Torah unencumbered by material needs. Rabbi Akiva proceeded to distribute this sum of money to scribes, scholars, and those who toiled in the field of Torah. The Midrash recounts the dialogue that took place between these two distinguished Tanaiim, concluding by referring to Rabbi Akiva as one who builds up the churbos, destroyed institutions, of Klal Yisrael. Rabbi Akiva, the greatest Tanna, whose devotion to the Torah defies description, merited this appellation only after he had given of his material assets to support others who learn Torah. Indeed, the Ramban praised his contemporary the Rambam for his brilliance, astuteness, scholarship, humility, kindness to others, and his wallet that remained open at all times to minister to the needs of those who were studying Torah.

It can be reduced to one premise: One who cares about the Torah will do everything in his capacity to sustain the Torah, including giving financial support.

All these curses will come upon you... because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, amid gladness and goodness of heart, when everything was abundant. (28:45,47)

The Torah seems to imply that serving Hashem with a lack of simchah, joy, has produced these terrible curses. There are two ways of looking at this idea. First, we can say that the admonishment is for a lack of avodah, service to Hashem, which, should - by the way - be performed with joy. Thus, the

punishment is actually for our non-service, but not as a direct result of a lack of joy. The second perspective is that one is to serve Hashem joyfully. Neglecting to observe and execute one's duties as a servant does for a master -- or even simply out of compliance -- warrants these curses. Simchah is an integral component of mitzvah observance. Without joy, the mitzvah has not been fulfilled.

Rabbeinu Bachya and the Rambam imply that a lack of simchah foreshadows the curses. To serve Hashem without simchah is not to serve Hashem. Simchah makes the mitzvah whole; a lack of simchah indicates one's true attitude toward the mitzvah's observance.

Horav Matisyahu Solomon, Shlita, first cites the Rambam in Hilchos Talmud Torah which implies the converse: that the curses are for a lack of service, not for a lack of joy. He suggests a practical understanding of this pasuk. There is no doubt that Hashem punishes us only for a lack of observance. While joy is important, joylessness will not result in these terrible curses. The Torah, however, sought to teach the origin of our lack of observance: Where did it all begin? What caused us to lose touch with mitzvos and Hashem? It was a lack of joy in our mitzvah observance. Had we put a little "varmkeit" -- warmth and enthusiasm -- into our mitzvah performance, had we been joyful, looking forward to serving Hashem, we would not have sunk to the nadir of mitzvah neglect. True, the punishment is for non-observance, but the origin of this curse is in the lack of joy. We have to remember one thing: We have no mitzvah to walk around all day and be joyful just for the sake of being joyful. Simchah is significant only as part of the framework of avodas Hashem, service to the Almighty. In such a context, it enhances the mitzvah and guards against complacency.

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