

# Parsha Ponders

Bechukosai / Shavuos | May 31, 2019 | 26 Iyar 5779

## *The toil of Torah*<sup>1</sup>

אם-בחקותי תלכו ואת מצותי תשמרו ועשיתם אותם

If you walk in my decrees, and you guard my *mitzvos*, and perform them....<sup>2</sup>

The *parsha* begins by spelling out all the good that will happen to us if we follow Hashem's Will, and everything else that will happen if we don't. The Torah begins this stipulation with a vague requirement to walk in Hashem's decrees. What does this mean? It can't mean that we should observe Hashem's commandments, as that's what the rest of the verse expresses. We are taught<sup>3</sup> that it means that we are expected to toil in Torah. Not just learn it, but be fully engaged in the learning experience. This is in addition to our *mitzvah* observance. We are also taught that Hashem so-to-speak yearns for our toil in Torah<sup>4</sup>. Why is this so, and why is this *the* introductory requirement in order to receive Hashem's blessings?

When the Jews were at Mount Sinai, in anticipation for receiving the Torah, the Torah says that they sat at the foot of the mountain<sup>5</sup>. This is expressed as *בתחתית ההר*, which literally means that they were *under* the mountain. *Chazal* learn from here<sup>6</sup> that Hashem took the mountain and held it over their heads<sup>7</sup>. He stipulated to them that if they accept the Torah, great. If they don't accept it, then this<sup>8</sup> will be their burial place. What's hard to understand about this teaching is that the Jews already said: "We will fulfill and we will listen"<sup>9</sup>. This sounds like they fully and willingly accepted the Torah. Why then did they need coercion<sup>10</sup>?

There's a *Midrash*<sup>11</sup> which describes the difference between the Oral Torah and the Written Torah. The Written Torah describes things in generalities, whereas the Oral Torah give the specifics. The Written Torah is short, whereas the Oral Torah is vast. Only someone who truly exerts themselves, and toils away for hours, can properly acquire the Oral Torah. Not someone who seeks earthly delights and

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 26:3

<sup>2</sup> Be'er Yosef to Leviticus 26:3-14

<sup>3</sup> Rashi ad. loc., quoting Toras Kohanim ad. loc.

<sup>4</sup> Toras Kohanim loc. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 19:17

<sup>6</sup> Shabbos 88a; Mechilta D'Rabbi Yishmael Masechta DeBeChodesh § 3; Mechilta D'Rashbi ad. loc.; Midrash Tanchuma Noach § 3, as well as the sources in note 10. It's also mentioned in passing in Avoda Zarah 2b

<sup>7</sup> For an extensive treatment on this episode, see <http://parshaponders.com/shavuos-5778-part-one/> and <http://parshaponders.com/shavuos-5778-part-two/>

<sup>8</sup> Hashem said *שם תהא קבורתכם*, literally: "there" will be your burial place. The commentators are bothered by this expression and have various approaches to explain why it is phrased this way. However, the version in Mechilta D'Rashbi loc. cit. says "here" will be your burial place

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 24:7

<sup>10</sup> Tosafos to Shabbos loc. cit. s.v. כפה עליהן הר כגיגית. See there for their answer. However, according to Mechilta D'Rashbi loc. cit., the question doesn't begin. The *Midrash* clearly states that they only said *נעשה ונשמע* (we will fulfill and we will listen) **because** Hashem hung the mountain over their heads. Otzar Midrashim Kisvei Yad I pg. 96, which brings a *Sheiltah to parshas VeZos HaBeracha*, shows this as well. However, the Midrash Tanchuma loc. cit. (which follows) clearly disagrees and says that they had said *נעשה ונשמע* prior to having the mountain put over their heads. This is similarly evident from Midrash Tanchuma Shoftim § 8. For other resolutions to this contradiction, see Torah Sheleimah ad. loc. § 224

<sup>11</sup> Midrash Tanchuma Noach § 3

relaxation. Acquiring the Oral Torah can be difficult, even painful. It's like walking in the dark<sup>12</sup>. The *Midrash* then explains that when the Jews said, "We will fulfill and we will listen", that referred to the Written Torah. However, due to the intimidating nature of the Oral Torah, they had to be coerced with having the Mountain raised over their heads. Only then did they accept it.

What does it mean that the Jews accepted the Written Torah? If it means the Torah scroll that we have in our possession today, that is very hard to understand. When they accepted the Torah, they didn't yet know what was written in it or what would be written in it. Further, what's written in our Torah scrolls isn't enough to know how perform the *mitzvos*. The verses are too vague, and don't give the necessary details<sup>13</sup>. For example, the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*, what they look like and what's inside them isn't written in the Torah. It just says to wear a sign on our arms and head<sup>14</sup>. What's written in a *mezuzah*? These details are lacking in the Written Torah. This can't be what they accepted.

It must mean that they would have received a sort of written summary of the Oral Torah. They would have been given all the details of each of the *mitzvos*<sup>15</sup>, directly from Hashem<sup>16</sup>. It would have involved zero toil. There would be no need to extract all the details from the generalities of the Written Torah we have today using the Oral Torah. However, Hashem specifically wanted the Torah to be written in a vague, general way. Even the most essential *mitzvos* like Shabbos would have all of its details hidden<sup>17</sup>. Those details would have to be extracted using the Oral Torah and the tools that come with it. This way to learn and understand the Torah is what they were compelled to accept. Why is this version of the Torah so important to Hashem?

The reason is that the only weapon against the Evil Inclination is the sweat and toil<sup>18</sup> of Torah<sup>19</sup>. The Evil Inclination, or *yetzer hara*, is constantly renewing its strength and strategies against man<sup>20</sup>. We are taught<sup>21</sup> that if the *yetzer hara* has grabbed onto us, we are to drag him into the study hall. Hashem created the *yetzer hara*, and Hashem created Torah as its antidote. If we toil in Torah, then we won't be given over into his hands. If Hashem created the Torah as the only weapon against the *yetzer hara*, then its clear that no other strategy will succeed<sup>22</sup>. Our new insights and understandings in Torah are the combating force against the *yetzer hara's* new strategies and methods to make us stumble.

We see then that the main form of the Oral Torah is through toil. So when the Torah says to walk in Hashem's decrees, which means to toil in Torah, it's referring to the Oral Torah<sup>23</sup>. The extraction of the details of the *mitzvos* from the generalities of the Written Torah<sup>24</sup>. This is why toil in Torah is the

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<sup>12</sup> See [Sanhedrin 24a](#) and [Rashi to Chagigah 10a s.v. אפילו](#)

<sup>13</sup> The [Maharal](#) asks this question in his introduction to [Ohr Chadash](#). See there for how he addresses it

<sup>14</sup> [Deuteronomy 6:8](#)

<sup>15</sup> I suppose similar to the [Mishneh Torah](#), or [Shulchan Aruch](#)

<sup>16</sup> I'm not sure how this answers the [Be'er Yosef's](#) first question

<sup>17</sup> See [Chagigah 10a](#) with [Rashi](#)

<sup>18</sup> See [Minchas Asher Sichos Bechukosai](#) for a treatment on exactly what constitutes toil in Torah

<sup>19</sup> See [Sukkah 52b](#)

<sup>20</sup> [Kiddushin 30b](#)

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>22</sup> [Mesillas Yesharim](#) Chapter 5

<sup>23</sup> See [Zohar III p. 103a](#). See also [HaKesav VeHaKabbalah](#) to [Leviticus 26:3](#)

<sup>24</sup> [Malbim](#) to [Toras Kohanim](#) *loc. cit.*

introductory requirement to receive Hashem's blessing. It's *the* foundation for overcoming the *yetzer hara*, and thus necessary for fulfilling all the *mitzvos*.

Good Shabbos