

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of
Chaim ben Yisroel z"l, Carlos Nash. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

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Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS EIKEV

Circle of Life

And it will be because of your listening to these laws, and safeguarding and performing them; then Hashem your God will fulfill for you the covenant that he swore to your forefathers (7:12).

This week's *parsha* opens with the rather unique promise that if we keep Hashem's laws then He will bless us with love, blessings, and numbers. He will bless your children and your crops. He will bless your grains, your wine, your oil, and your cattle. He will furthermore bless you as a nation, remove all diseases, and direct them toward your enemies. In short, we will be incredibly blessed.

On the face of it, this seems to contradict the well-known statement from *Pirkei Avos* (1:3): "Do not be as one who serves his master in order to receive reward." In general, we aren't supposed to focus on the reward of the *mitzvos* that we do; we are supposed to follow the Torah out of love. In fact, and perhaps for this reason, very few *mitzvos* have an explicit reward detailed alongside the commandment. So why does the Torah depart from the norm in this situation?

Additionally, the Torah uses an odd word to express "because" (*"eikev"*). Many of the commentators are bothered by this. Rashi (ad loc) notes the unusually utilized word for "because" and says this refers to *mitzvos* that one tramples underfoot (from *eikev* meaning heel). Ibn Ezra translates this word as "in the end when [...]," such as the heel is at the end of a body. Bal Haturim points out that the Gematria for the word *eikev* is

172 and that is equal to the amount of words in the Ten Commandments. Both Targum Onkelos and Targum Yonasan Ben Uziel translate the word "*eikev*" ("because") in an odd manner; they render the translation as "in exchange for." Ramban quotes the Targum and comments that it means to travel in a circular motion, meaning one act leads to another, and so on.

Interestingly, the Torah also uses the word "*mishpatim*" here to mean "laws." Generally, the word *mishpatim* refers to laws of social justice and interpersonal relationships. Why does the Torah limit the application of this blessing to that of keeping the laws of social justice?

If we examine the promises in this week's *parsha*, we notice that a common theme is one of rewards that are part of life and living in this world: an abundance of food, cattle, and health. The implication of this is that we will receive a high quality of life in this world. In other words, if we maintain social justice, take care of others, and sustain healthy interpersonal relationships, then Hashem will give us a high standard of living.

This is why Hashem promises these blessings as an "exchange." These aren't rewards for doing *mitzvos*, for we know Chazal's maxim: "reward isn't given in this world" (*Kiddushin* 39b). The philosophy behind this maxim is that it



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is unfair for Hashem to give reward in this world for an infinite deed; it's like paying a debt with Monopoly money. However, Hashem built into the natural laws of this world a system that rewards those who maintain the proper order of this world. This is the true nature of these blessings: if we take care of the inhabitants of the world, then all of creation will take care of us.

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Necessary Evil

You should place these words of Mine upon your heart and upon your soul; you shall bind them for a sign upon your arm and let them be for tefillin between your eyes (11:18).

The Gemara (*Kiddushin* 30b) states that the word “*vesamtem* – and you shall place” in the *possuk* is compared to a “*sam tam* – a perfect potion.” The Gemara goes on to offer the following analogy: A father hit his son rather severely. He then placed a medicated bandage on the wound and said to him, “As long as the bandage is on, you may eat and bathe as you desire. If you remove the bandage, the wound will blister.” Similarly, Hashem told the nation of Israel that he created the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) – analogous to a severe blow – and the Torah as a “*tavlin* – spice” to protect against the effects of the *yetzer hara*. The Gemara continues, “If you engage in learning Torah then you will be able to overcome the *yetzer hara*, and if not then it will overcome you.”

This analogy is very difficult to understand. To begin with, a father who strikes his son is doing so out of love. For example, a father may hit his young child who would not understand why a hot oven or wandering into the street is dangerous. Merely talking to his child might not impress the severity of this act on one who is too young. He is trying to get his son’s attention and help his son

understand to behave in a manner that could prevent injury. Yet the analogy to this severe blow is the *yetzer hara*. How can we possibly view the *yetzer hara* as something positive?

Perhaps even more perplexing; the Gemara seems to imply that the Torah is merely a response to the *yetzer hara*. In other words, the *yetzer hara* is the key to creation and the Torah is merely the spice, the protection from the *yetzer hara*. How are we to understand this concept?

The purpose and very essence of the *yetzer hara* is to make us understand our potential. This is why Chazal teach us that the greater the person is, the greater his *yetzer hara* will be as well (*Sukka* 52a). But how does the *yetzer hara* go about its job?

The Gemara (*Kiddushin* 30a) relates that the *yetzer hara* seeks to kill us each and every day. What does this mean? How could there be something within us that wants to destroy us?

The *yetzer hara* is insidious. It both makes us aware of our potential and at the same time tells us not to achieve it. It convinces

us to do things that are easy, lazy, and immoral. The greater one’s potential, the stronger the lure to sin. A person who knows they have tremendous potential is devastated when they don’t actualize their potential. This leads to self-destructive desires. It becomes far easier to escape into worldly pleasures and all sorts of addictions than to actually work to fulfill our true potential.

The *yetzer hara* is the key to our life because it provides a vision of our potential. After all, that is the point of creation; giving man the opportunity to make something of himself and draw closer to Hashem. Every one of us is born with this incredible ability to accomplish greatness. The challenge we face is the *yetzer hara*’s attempts to make sure we squander every opportunity so that it can grow and lay waste to our potential. The key, of course, is properly channeling the glimpse the *yetzer hara* shows us into actualizing our potential and God given capabilities. The Torah is the spice that refocuses our life in the right direction, and ensures that we make the most of the potential of which the *yetzer hara* made us aware.



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