

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XVI: Beshalach (Ex. 13:17–17:16)

Essay 15. Torah study provides protection

בְּרָכוֹת פָּרָק קמ"א אָמַר ר' שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן לֵקִישׁ כָּל הָעוֹסֵק בְּתוֹרָה יִסּוּרֵינָהּ בְּדִלִין מְמַנּוּ שְׁנֵאמַר "וּבְנֵי־רִשָּׁף יִגְבִּיהוּ עוֹף", אָמַר ר' יוֹהָנָן הָא אָפִילוּ תְּנוּקוֹת שֶׁל בֵּית רַבִּין יוֹדְעִים אוֹתוֹ, שְׁנֵאמַר "וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ־שִׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמַע" וְכוּ'. אֵלָּא אֵימָא כָּל שְׁאֲפִשְׁר לֹו לְעֹסוֹק בְּתוֹרָה וְאִינוּ עוֹסֵק הַקַּב"ה מְבִיא עָלָיו יִסּוּרֵינָהּ מְכוּעָרִין וְעוֹכְרִין אוֹתוֹ, שְׁנֵאמַר "נִגְאַלְמְתִי דוּמְיָה" וְכוּ' עכ"ל.

Tractate **Berachot**, the first chapter:

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: “For everyone who occupies himself with [the study of] Torah, afflictions are removed from him, for it is said, “For man is born to [do] mischief, just as sparks fly upward.”¹ And fly [means] nothing other than Torah, as it is stated: ‘Will you set your eyes upon it? It is gone;’² and sparks means nothing other than suffering, as it is stated: ‘Wasting of hunger, and the devouring of the sparks’³ [equating devouring sparks with wasting hunger, as both are types of suffering. From here, we derive that through Torah, one is able to distance himself, upward, from suffering, sparks].”

Rabbi Yochanan said: “Don’t even schoolchildren know this, as it is said, ‘[G-d] said: If you will surely hear the voice of the L-rd, your G-d, diligently doing what is upright in G-d’s sight, giving ear to G-d’s commandments and keeping all G-d’s laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the L-rd am your Healer.’ ”⁴ Rather, say instead, “Anyone who is able to engage in Torah yet does not engage, the Holy One, Blessed be He, brings upon him hideous afflictions that trouble him, as it is stated: ‘I was mute with silence; I was silent from good, and my pain was strong.’⁵

- Berachot 5a

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¹ Job 5:7.

² Prov. 23:5.

³ Deut. 22:29.

⁴ Ex. 15:26.

⁵ Ps. 39:3.

צריך עיון דלר' יוחנן נמי תקשי דאפילו תינזקות של בית רבן יודעים אותו, דהא מקרא ד"ויאמר אם-שמע תשמע" משמע נמי הא דמקלל לאו אתה שומע הו'.⁶

This requires investigation, for the argument that even schoolchildren know this, from the Scripture that “[G-d] said: If you will surely hear . . .,” also raises a difficulty for the teaching of Rabbi Yochanan that one who can study Torah but refrains is afflicted. This teaching is known from the principle that “from a negative statement you can infer a positive statement,”⁶ i.e., why can’t one learn the negative statement, “If you . . . keep G-d’s laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians,” and infer the positive, “If you do not keep G-d’s laws, I will bring diseases upon you.”

וניש לומר דכוננת ריש לקיש היתה לומר שאף אם נתחייב אדם ייסורין מחמת איזה חטא, אם יעסוק בתורה לא יבאו עליו, ודייק שפיר הלשון גדלין ממנו. ועל זה הקשה לו ר' יוחנן דאפילו תינזקות וכו' דקרא כתיב "ויאמר" וכו', דהמשמע אף אם הנה מן הראוי לבא עליך "המחלה אשר-שמתי במצרים לא-אשים", דאי לא הכי קשה מאי אתא קרא למימר ד"לא-אשים", ואיך סלקא דעתך דישים אם הוא שומע בקול ה'. ועוד קשה וכי מי שיהוא צדיק אין לו שום שכר אלא להיות ניצול מהמחלה. אלא ודאי שבא לומר שאף אם כבר נתחייב בהם "לא ישימם".

It can be said that Reish Lakish’s intention was to say that even if a person is deserving afflictions because of some sin, if he would occupy himself with studying Torah, [the afflictions] wouldn’t come upon him. The language “are removed from him” is nicely precise according to this understanding. On this, Rabbi Yochanan questioned that even the schoolchildren know this, for Scripture says, “[G-d] said: If you will surely hear the voice of the L-rd . . .,” which has the meaning that even if it were suitable to afflict him, “I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians.”⁷ For if this is not the case, it is difficult to understand why Scripture is coming, saying that “I will not bring upon you any of the diseases,” for how would it enter your mind that he would bring them upon a man, if he listens to the voice of the L-rd.

Another difficulty is: Can it be that one who is righteous has no other reward other than to be free from the disease? Rather, certainly it is coming to say that even if he is already deserving of [the afflictions], “I will not bring them.”

⁶ Nedarim 11a, 13b; Sotah 17a; Shevuot 36a.

⁷ Ex. 15:26.

ותירץ פל שאפפער לו לעסוק בתורה ואינו עוסק, אף אם יהיה שומר מצוה ולא יהיה חייב בייסורין משום חטא אחר, עם כל זה יבואו עליו ייסורין. וזה לא משמע מפשט הפסוק של "ויאמר אם-שמע תשמע", שהרי הפסוק מירי במי שפבר נתחייב בהם, ואם לא היה אלא הפסוק של "נאלמתי דומיה" היתתי אומר דמירי במי שפבר חטא ונתחייב ייסורין. אלא שאם היה עוסק בתורה היתה מנגנת עליו, והואיל שנגאלם ממנה משום הכי "ויכאבי נעפר". ומעתה שיש אף הפסוק של "אם-שמע תשמע" שמורה על זה, קשה "תרי קראי למה לי?" ועל פרה צריף לומר דמירי אף במי שלא חטא ולא נתחייב, ומשום הכי הוצרכו תרי קראי לר' יוחנן.

The solution offered by Rabbi Yochanan is that everyone for whom it is possible to occupy himself with Torah, but he does not occupy himself, even if he observes the commandment[s] and isn't deserving of afflictions for any other sin, nevertheless the afflictions will come upon him. This does not have the simple meaning of the first verse cited by Rabbi Yochanan of "[G-d] said: If you will surely hear . . .," for the verse is speaking of one who is already deserving of afflictions.

Also, if you only had the second verse cited by Rabbi Yochanan, "I was mute with silence," I would again say that it's speaking of one who has sinned and who is deserving of afflictions. Rather, that if he had occupied himself with Torah, it would have protected him, but since he was silent from her, i.e., "silent from good," refraining from Torah study—because of this, "my pain was strong."

Now that we have the verse of, "If you will surely hear," that teaches this, a difficulty is "why do I need two verses?"⁸ You must say that it's speaking even about one who has not sinned and who is not deserving of afflictions, and because of this, two verses were needed for Rabbi Yochanan.

ועוד יש לומר דלפעמים יעלה על לב האדם שפדי לשמור בריאות הטבע שלו צריף להתענות מעט ולהתבטל מדברי תורה, כדי להשיב נפשו שלא לבא לידי חולי מרה שחורה וכיוצא. ואין הכי נמי שהוא מכנין לעשות זה העידון והביטול לשם שמים כדי לקיים "ונשמרתם מאד לנפשתיכם", ועל זה קאמר פל העוסק בתורה ייסורין בדליו ממנו דכתיב "כל-המחלה . . . לא-אשים עליך", אף על פי שלפי הטבע שלו היה קרוב שיבואו לו ייסורין, מפל מקום זכות דתורה משמרתו. ור' יוחנן חידושא טפי, קא משמע לו, שאם יתבטל מהתורה בשביל להנצל מהייסורין הקרובים אל הטבע, הקב"ה מביא עליו ייסורין מכושרין חוץ מהטבע נמי ועוכרין אותו.

Also, it can be said that sometimes it occurs to a person's heart that in order to preserve his healthy nature, he needs to refine himself a little and temporarily renounce the studying of words of the Torah, in order to restore his soul so that it does not come into the hands of the sickness of the black bile, i.e., depression, and the like. It is indeed so that he is directed to this refinement and temporary renunciation for the sake of Heaven, in order to

⁸ A common Aramaic question in the Talmud.

fulfill the directive, “Be very watchful of your souls.”⁹ About this [Reish Lakish] said, “For everyone who occupies himself with [the study of] Torah, afflictions are removed from him,” as it is written, “I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians.” Even though according to his nature, he is likely to receive afflictions, nevertheless, the merit of his studying the Torah will protect him. Rabbi Yochanan’s greater novelty teaches us, that if one temporarily renounces the study of Torah in order to save himself from the afflictions of nature, the Holy One, Blessed be He, will bring upon him hideous afflictions that are unnatural, and he will also suffer from them.

וְעֵינַי לְקַמֵּן רִישׁ פְּרִשְׁתַּת בְּחֻקֹּתַי עַל מִדְרָשׁ "הַשְּׁבֵתִי דְרַכֵּי" בְּכֹל יוֹם הַיִּיטִי מִחֶשֶׁב וְכוּ'.

Refer later in this book, at the beginning of parashat Bechukotai¹⁰ on the midrash,¹¹ “ ‘I have considered my ways:’¹² Every day I have considered going to this or that place, but my feet led me to the synagogues and study halls.”

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⁹ Deut. 4:15.

¹⁰ *Zera Shimshon*, Chapter XXXIII: Bechukotai, Essay 1.

¹¹ *Vayikra Rabbah* 35:1.

¹² Ps. 119:59.