

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XXIX: Acharei Mot (Lev. 16:1–18:30)

Essay 4. The righteous one who turns away, and the wicked one who returns

יְהִי קִרְבָּן (י"ח) "וּבָשׂוּב צַדִּיק מִצְדָּקָתוֹ וְעָשָׂה עֲוֹל" וכו', "וְאֶמְרָתֶם לֹא יִתְכַן דְּרָדָה' שְׁמַעוּנָא בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל" וכו', "בְּשׂוּב־צַדִּיק מִצְדָּקָתוֹ וְעָשָׂה עֲוֹל וּמַתְּעִיבֵיהֶם" וכו', "וּבָשׂוּב רָשָׁע וְכוּ' הוּא אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ יַחֲזִיק", "וְיִרְאָה וְיִשָּׁב" וכו', "וְאָמְרוּ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִתְכַן" וכו' "הַדְרָכִי לֹא יִתְכַנּוּ . . . הֲלֹא דְרָכֵיכֶם" וכו' ע"כ. אֵלּוּ הַפְּסוּקִים אֵין לָהֶם קִשְׁר וּפְשֻׁט וְטַעַם, מִתַּחֲלָה קִשְׁר מֵאִיזוֹ סִבָּרָא יְכוּלִים יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹאמַר "לֹא יִתְכַן דְּרָדָה' ה'", "וְאִם יֵשׁ לָהֶם אִיזוֹ סִבָּרָא הַיְאֹדָה הַקַּב"ה מְשִׁיבֵם בְּמַה שְׁתִּזְוֹר לֹאמַר לָהֶם "בְּשׂוּב־צַדִּיק" וכו' שְׁכָבֵר אָמְרוּ בְּפִסּוּק הַקּוֹדֵם, וְכַמָּה דַּקְדוּקִים שְׂיֵישׁ לְדַקְדַּק בָּהֶם.

Verses of **Ezekiel** from Chapter **18**, read:

So, too, if a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does wrong, practicing the very abominations that the wicked person practiced, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds that he did shall be remembered; because of the treachery he has practiced and the sins he has committed—because of these, he shall die.

Yet you say, “The way of the L-rd is unfair.” Listen, O House of Israel: Is My way unfair? It is your ways that are unfair!

When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does wrong, he shall die for them; for the wrong he has done he shall die.

And if a wicked person turns back from the wickedness that he practiced and does what is just and right, **such a person shall save his life.**

Because he took heed and turned back from all the transgressions that he committed, he shall live; he shall not die.

Yet the House of Israel say, “The way of the L-rd is unfair.” Are My ways unfair, O House of Israel? It is your ways that are unfair!

- Ezek. 18:24–29

These verses lack connection, and explanation, and plain meaning. Initially, it's difficult what logical reasoning Israel had that allowed them to say, “The way of the L-rd is unfair,” and even if they had some logical reasoning, how did the Holy One, Blessed be He, answer them with what he answered, saying to them, “When a righteous person turns away

* English translation: Copyright © 2022 by Charles S. Stein. Additional essays available at: <https://zstorah.com>

from his righteousness and does wrong, he shall die for them,” **for He already said it in the first verse**, “So, too, if a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does wrong . . . shall he live.” **There are a number of details for which one should be investigate.**

וגרסינו בפרק קמא דקידושין ר' שמעון בן יוחאי אמר אפילו צדיק גמור כל ימיו ומרד באהרונה אבד את הראשונות שנאמר וכו', ואפילו רשע גמור כל ימיו ועשה תשובה באהרונה אין מזכירים לו שוב רשעו שנאמר וכו', ונהגי כמחצה זכיות ומחצה עונות, אמר ריש לקיש בתוקא על הראשונות ע"כ.

We find in the first chapter of tractate Kiddushin:

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: Even [if one were] completely righteous all his life and he rebelled [by sinning] at the end [of his life], he loses [his] early [merit], as it is stated: “The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him on the day of his transgression” (Ezek. 33:12). **And even [if one were] completely wicked all his life and repented in the end, he is no longer reminded of his wickedness, as it is stated [in the continuation of the verse]:** “And as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not stumble over it on the day that he turns from his wickedness.”

[The Gemara asks:] **But** [an individual who performed mitzvot all of his life and then sins] **should** [at least] **be like** [one whose acts have been] **half merits and half sins** [i.e., each should be of equal weight. Why, then, is he pronounced guilty?] **Reish Lakish said:** [This is not referring to an individual who has merely sinned but] **to** [one who] **regrets all the initial** [mitzvot he performed in the past. In this case the mitzvot he performed are not taken into account.]

- Kiddushin 40b

ולפי זה יש לומר שפושט מעו ישראל שהקב"ה אמר "ובשוב צדיק מצדקתו" וכו' "כל צדקתו אשר עשה לא תזכרנה" וכו', הנה קשה בעיניהם משפט הנה פקושיית הגמרא ונהגי כמחצה זכיות ומחצה עונות, וכמו שריש לקיש תירץ שם בתוקא על הראשונות, ואף הקב"ה תירץ אליהם כן.

Because of this, it can be said that when Israel heard that the Holy One, Blessed be he, said, “So, too, if a righteous person turns away from his righteousness . . . None of the righteous deeds that he did shall be remembered,” this sentence was hard in their eyes, as per the difficulty of the Gemara that it should [at least] be like [one whose acts have been] half merits and half sins, and as Reish Lakish solved there, it’s talking about [one who] regrets all the initial [mitzvot he performed in the past], and even the Holy One, Blessed be He, solved thus.

וְזָהוּ פִירוּשׁ הַפְּסוּקִים אָמַר הַקַּב"ה "וַאֲמַרְתֶּם לֹא יִתְכַן דְּרָךְ ה' " מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהֵיךָ לוֹ לְדוֹנוֹ כְּמִחְצָה זְכוּיֹת וּמִחְצָה עֲוֹנוֹת, "הַדְּרָכִי לֹא יִתְכַן" אֲדַרְבֵּא לְדוֹנוֹ כְּדַבְרֵיכֶם לֹא יִתְכַן, וְהוֹלֵךְ וּמִפְּרֵשׁ הַטַּעַם, "בְּשׁוּב־צַדִּיק מִצְדֻקְתּוֹ וְעָשָׂה עָוֹל וּמַת עֲלֵיהֶם בְּעֵנְלוֹ אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה יָמוּת".

This is the explanation of the verses: The Holy One, Blessed be He, said, “Yet you say, ‘The way of the L-rd is unfair,’ ” because He should have judged him as one who had half merits and half sins. “Is My way unfair?” To the contrary, to judge Him according to their words isn’t fair, and it continues and explains the reason, “When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does wrong, he shall die for them; for the wrong he has done he shall die.”

וְקִשָּׁה לָמָּה אָמַר "וּמַת עֲלֵיהֶם" בְּלִשׁוֹן רַבִּים וְהֵלֵא "עָוֹל" הוּא לְשׁוֹן יְחִיד וּכְמוֹ שֶׁמִּסְיִים הַפְּסוּק "בְּעֵנְלוֹ" וְכוּ', אֶלֶּא וְדַאי רָצָה לוֹמַר לָהֶם שְׁנֵה הָעוֹל הוּא שְׁתוּקָא עַל הָרַאשׁוֹנוֹת וּלְפִיכּוּד כָּל זְכוּיֹתָיו מִתְהַפְּכִים לוֹ לְעֲוֹנוֹת. וְלָכֵן אָמַר "וּמַת עֲלֵיהֶם", אַף כִּי לְכַאוּרָה לֹא עָשָׂה אֶלֶּא עֲבִירָה אַחַת, מִכָּל מְקוֹם יָמוּת עַל זְכוּיֹתָיו, וְלָמָּה מַת עֲלֵיהֶם, מִשּׁוּם שְׁתוּקָא עַל הָרַאשׁוֹנוֹת "בְּעֵנְלוֹ אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה יָמוּת". וְעוֹד לְדַבְרֵיכֶם שֶׁאַתֶּם רוֹצִים לְדוֹן כְּמִחְצָה זְכוּיֹת וְכוּ' "וּבְשׁוּב רָשָׁע" וְכוּ' "הֵיךָ יִהְיֶה לֹא יָמוּת", וְאִם ה'רָשָׁע" מִיִּירֵי וְדַאי לְאַחַר שְׁתוּקָא עַל הָעֲבִירוֹת הָרַאשׁוֹנוֹת, שֶׁאֵז אֵין גְּזַפְרִים לוֹ עוֹד. אִם כֵּן, מִן הַדִּין שֶׁאַף הַצַּדִּיק יִהְיֶה כִּד בְּעַת שִׁיְהֵי תוֹקָא עַל הָרַאשׁוֹנוֹת שֶׁיֵּאבֵד הַכֹּל.

It’s difficult why it said “and does wrong, he shall die for them,” the word “them” being in the plural form, for isn’t the word “wrong” in the singular form, and as the verse concludes “for the wrong that he has done,” which is again in the singular form. Rather, it certainly wants to say to them that this wrong is that he regrets all the initial mitzvot he performed in the past, and therefore all his merits reverse into sins. Therefore, it said, “he shall die for them,” because apparently, he only committed one sin, but nevertheless he shall die for the merits, and why shall he die for them, because he regrets all the initial mitzvot he performed in the past, and these plurality of merits have reversed into a plurality of sins, thus “for the wrong he has done he shall die.” Also, according to their words that they want [G-d] to judge according to half merits and half sins, “And if a wicked person turns back . . . he shall live; he shall not die.” The “wicked person” spoken of, who shall live, is certainly being discussed after he regrets all the initial sins, for now they are not remembered anymore against him. I.e., the label “wicked” is what he was in the past, but now he is reformed and is no longer wicked. If so, then it’s legal that even for the righteous person, if he regrets all the initial mitzvot he performed in the past, he will lose everything. I.e., the initial verse says, “if a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does wrong . . . none of the righteous deeds that he did shall be remembered,” and the label “righteous” is what he was in the past, but now he has ruined that and he is no longer righteous.

ועל כָּפֶל הַלְשׁוֹן, שֶׁכָּבַר אָמַר "הוּא אֶת-נַפְשׁוֹ יִחְיֶה" וְלָמָּה חִזַּר וְאָמַר "וַיִּרְאֶה וַיִּשָּׁב" וְכוּ', יֵשׁ לוֹמַר שָׂאֵם עָשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה לְהִבָּא שְׂלֵא לְשׁוּב עוֹד בְּדַרְךְ הַרְעַ הַצִּיל נַפְשׁוֹ מְדִינָה שֶׁל גֵּיהֵנָם, אָבֵל מְכַל מְקוֹם עַל הַחֲטָאִים שֶׁעָבַר צָרִיךְ לְקַבֵּל עֲלֵיהֶם עוֹנָשׁ, וְאִם "וַיִּרְאֶה וַיִּשָּׁב מִכָּל-פְּשָׁעָיו אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה" גַּם כּוּ, אִז "חִיּוֹ יִחְיֶה" כְּלוֹמַר בְּעוֹלָם הַגֵּה וּבְעוֹלָם הַבָּא וְאִף "לֹא יָמוּת" גּוֹפֵו בְּחֻלָּאִים.

There is a question regarding the duplicative language, that it already said, “such a person shall save his life,” and thus why did it return and say, “because he took heed and turned back from all the transgressions that he committed, he shall live; he shall not die.” It can be said that if he repented, as long as he doesn’t return anymore to the evil path, he has saved his soul from the judgment of Gehenna. But in any case, regarding the past sins, he needs to receive punishment for them, and if as well “he took heed and turned back from all the transgressions that he committed,” then “he shall live,” as if to say he shall live in this world and in the World-to-Come, and also “he shall not die,” meaning his body will not die from illnesses.

וּמַעֲמָה חוֹזְרִים לְהַקְשׁוֹת "לֹא יִתְכַן דְּרָךְ" וְכוּ', דְּהֵינּוּ כְּשֶׁם שֶׁהִתְרַטֵּה מוֹעֲלָת בְּמִי שֶׁהִיָּה צָדִיק שֶׁיִּאֲבָדוּ מִמֶּנּוּ כֹּל זְכוּיָתָיו שֶׁכָּבַר עָשָׂה, כִּי מוֹ הָרְאוּי הִיָּה שֶׁתוֹעִיל חֲרָטָה מִי שֶׁהִיָּה רָשָׁע שֶׁיִּתְרַחֲקוּ מִמֶּנּוּ כֹּל עוֹנֹתָיו וְלֹא יִהְיֶה צָרִיךְ לְקַבֵּל עָלָיו עוֹנָשׁ תַּעֲגִיזוֹת וְסִיגוּפִים עַל מַה שֶׁכָּבַר חֲטָא. וְאִם הִתְרַטֵּה שֶׁעוֹשָׂה מִי שֶׁהִיָּה רָשָׁע אֵינָה מוֹחֲקֶת לְגַמְרֵי הַעֲבִירוֹת, גַּם הִתְרַטֵּה שֶׁל הַמְצוֹת שֶׁעוֹשָׂה מִי שֶׁהִיָּה צָדִיק לֹא הִיָּה לָהּ לְמַחֲוֹק לְגַמְרֵי הַמְצוֹת שֶׁעָשָׂה.

Henceforth, [the House of Israel] returned to question, “The way of the L-rd is unfair.” That is, they reasoned, just as remorse causes one who was righteous to lose all of the merits that he already accomplished, thus regret should benefit one who was wicked who distanced all the iniquities from himself, such that it should not be necessary for him to receive punishment of fasting and affliction upon himself for what he has already sinned. Yet we say that he needs to receive punishment for his past sins! So, if the regret of one who was wicked does not completely erase the sins, then too the regret of the commandments fulfilled by one who was righteous should not completely erase the commandments that he had fulfilled.

וְהַשִּׁיב לָהֶם הַקּוֹב"ה "הַדְּרָכֵי לֹא יִתְכַנוּ . . . הֲלֹא דְרָכֵיכֶם לֹא יִתְכַנוּ", וְאַחַר כֵּן מְסִיִּים "אִישׁ כְּדַרְכֵּי אֲשֶׁפֶט אֶתְכֶם" וְכוּ' "שׁוּבוּ וְהַשִּׁיבוּ" וְכוּ', וְקוֹשֶׁה דָּאֵם הָאֵמַת שֶׁדְּרָכְכֶם לֹא יִתְכַנוּ לָמָּה רוֹצֶה לְשׁוֹפְטֶם לְפִי דְרָכְכֶם.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, answered them, “Are My ways unfair, O House of Israel? It is your ways that are unfair!” Afterward, He concluded, “I will judge each one of you according to his ways . . . Repent and turn back from all your transgressions; let them not be a stumbling block of guilt for you.” It is difficult, for if the truth is that their ways are unfair, why does He want to judge them according to their ways?

אֵלָא עַל פְּרָתָךְ צָרִיךְ לומר שְׁפִנּוּנַת הַקַּב"ה הִיא כָּף, שְׁהָרִי קָרָא פְּתִיב רְחוּק ה' מְרַשְׁעִים", וְכִשְׁהִרְשַׁע עוֹשֶׂה תְּשׁוּבָה מִן הָרְאוּי הוּא שְׁיִתְזוּר לְהִתְקַרֵּב אֲצִלּוֹ. אֲבָל הַקַּב"ה הוּא טְהוֹר וְקָדוֹשׁ וְאֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לְהִתְקַרֵּב לְגַמְרִי, מִחֲמַת טוּמְאַת הָעֵבִירוֹת שְׁעָשָׂה, וְלִפְיָךְ מִתְקַרֵּב אֲצִלּוֹ בְּרִיחוּק מְקוּם, וְכִשְׁיִקְבַּל עָלָיו הָעוֹנָשִׁים הָרְאוּיִים וַיִּטְהַר לְגַמְרִי מִן הָעוֹנוֹת אִזְ יִתְקַרֵּב לְגַמְרִי.

Rather, you must necessarily say that the intent of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is thus: The verse is written, “The L-rd is distant from the wicked,”¹ and when the wicked repents, it is appropriate that He will return to bring Himself near him. But the Holy One, Blessed be He, is pure and holy, and he is not able to approach Him completely, because of the impurity of the sins that he committed. Therefore, he approaches Him at a distance from the Omnipresent, and when he accepts upon himself the appropriate punishments and becomes completely purified from the sins, then he can approach Him fully.

אֲבָל כְּשֶׁהֲצַדִּיק מִתְחַרֵּט וּפּוֹשֵׁעַ אִזְ מִתְרַחֵק מִמֶּנּוּ לְגַמְרִי לְפִי שְׁנַעֲשֶׂה כְּלוֹ טְמֵא, וְאֲדַרְבָּא מְרַחֵק מִמֶּנּוּ נְמִי הַמְצִוֹת שְׁכַרְבַּר עָשָׂה כְּדִי שְׁלֵא יִתְטַמְּאוּ, וְנוֹתֵן אוֹתָן לְצַדִּיקִים אֲחֵרִים כְּמוֹ שְׁכַתְּבוּ הַמְקוּבָלִים. וְסוֹף דְּבַר הַקְּדוּשָׁה אֵינָהּ יָכוֹלָה לְעוֹלָם לְהִיּוֹת עִם הַטוּמְאָה בְּכַפִּיפָה אַחַת וְלָכֵן אָמַר לָהֶם "הֲלֵא דַרְכֵיכֶם לֹא יִתְכַּן" וְכו'.

But when the righteous man regrets and transgresses, then G-d distances Himself from him completely, because he has made himself completely impure. To the contrary, He has also distanced from him the commandments that he has already performed, in order that they should not become impure, and He has given them to other righteous people, as the Kabbalists wrote.² The end of the matter is that holiness cannot reside in a basket with impurity,³ and therefore He said to them, “It is your ways that are unfair!”

וְעוֹד מוֹסִיף הַקַּב"ה וְאוֹמֵר אֵף עַל פִּי שְׁדַרְכֵיכֶם לֹא יִתְכַּן מִהֲטַעַם שְׁאֵמְרָנוּ, הוֹאִיל שְׁלִפִי סְבַרְתְּכֶם הוּא דְרָךְ נְכוֹן וּמִתּוֹקֵן וְטוֹב לָכֶם, כָּךְ אֲנִי עוֹשֶׂה לָכֶם. דְּהֵינּוּ שְׁתַּרְטֵת הָרִשָׁע תִּהְיֶה מְקוּבָּלַת מִיָּד מִבְּלִי שְׁיִקְבַּל עָלָיו יִיסוּרִין, אֲבָל לְטוֹבֵתְכֶם אֲנִי אוֹמֵר לָכֶם שְׁלֵא יַעֲלֶה בְּיָדְכֶם מֵה שְׁאַתְּמֵם רוּצִים, שְׁהָרִי הָעֵבִירוֹת שְׁעָשִׂיתֶם הֵם מְקַטְרָגִים בְּכֶם וְאֶפְשָׁר שְׁיִתְזַרוּ לְטַמְּאוֹת אֲתֶכֶם בְּעֵבִירוֹת אֲחֵרוֹת אִם לֹא תִשְׁנַתֶּם לְגַמְרִי מֵה שְׁקַלְקַלְתֶּם, וְלָכֵן "שׁוּבוּ וְהִשִּׁיבוּ" וְכו' "וְלֹא יִהְיֶה לָכֶם לְמַכְשׁוֹל עוֹן", הַשִּׁיבוּ הָעֵבִירוֹת שְׁיִהְיוּ מִתּוֹקְנִים כָּל הַקַּלְקוּלִים שְׁעָשִׂיתֶם וְאִזְ הַמְקַטְרָגִים יִתְהַפְּכוּ לְסִנִּיגוּרִים וְלֹא יִהְיוּ עוֹד לָכֶם לְמַכְשׁוֹל לְהַחֲטִיא אֲתֶכֶם. וְאֶפְשָׁר נְמִי שְׁכַשְׁאֵמַר לָהֶם "הֲדַרְפִּי לֹא יִתְכַּן" וְכו' נִתְכַּוֵּן עַל זֶה, דְּבִשְׁלֵמָה הָרִשָׁע מוֹכַרְחַר לְקַבַּל עָלָיו יִיסוּרִין כְּדִי לְמַרְק הַחֲטָאִים וְלַעֲשׂוֹת שְׁהַמְקַטְרָגִים יִתְהַפְּכוּ לְהִיּוֹת סִנִּיגוּרִים כְּדִי שְׁלֵא יִכְשִׁילוּהוּ מִכָּאן וְלְהַבָּא, אֲבָל הַצַּדִּיק שְׁנִתְחַרֵּט אִי אֶפְשָׁר שְׁהַמְצִוֹת יִמְלִיצוּ עָלָיו, שְׁהָרִי אֲדַרְבָּא הֵם שׁוֹנְאִים אוֹתוֹ בְּשִׁבִיל שְׁתֵּהֵא וְנִתְחַרֵּט עָלֵיהֶם.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, adds more, saying, even though your ways are not fair, for the reason that we have said, since according to your opinion it is the proper and corrected way and good for you, so I do for you. That is to say, the regret of the wicked will be immediately received without him accepting suffering upon himself, but for your sake I tell you that you won't be able to do what you want. For the transgressions you have committed

¹ Prov. 15:29.
² Pri Etz Chaim, Gate of the Silent Prayer 19:20.
³ Cf. Yevamot 112b: “A person cannot reside in a basket with a snake.”

will be prosecutors against you and it is possible that they may return to defile you with other transgressions if you have not completely corrected what you have corrupted. Therefore, “repent and turn back from all your transgressions; let them not be a stumbling block of guilt for you.” Turn back the transgressions, that all the misdeeds that you did will be corrected, and then the prosecutors will reverse to become advocates, and you will no longer have the obstacle to lead you to sin. It’s also possible that when He said to them, “Is my way unfair,” His intent was thus, that granted, the wicked man is compelled to accept upon himself sufferings in order to cleans the sins and to arrange the prosecutors to reverse to become advocates, so that they will not fail him from now on, but regarding the righteous man who regrets his previous good deeds, it is impossible that the mitzvot will advocate for him, for to the contrary, they hate him because he has regretted them.

* * *