

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XLV: Va'etchanan (Deut. 3:23–7:11)

Essay 10. A candle is [as] a mitzvah

פסוק "כי נר מצוה ותורה אור", הטעם שהמשיל המצוה לנר והתורה לאור, משום דקיימא לו עבירה מכבה מצוה ואינה מכבה תורה, ומי שעובר עבירה אין לו עוד זכות המצות שעשה. ומשום הכי המשיל לנר שגם הנר מתכבה, אבל העבירה אין לה כח לדחות זכות התורה ולכן נמשלה לאור שאי אפשר לאדם לכבותו, וזהו שאמר הכתוב "גִּרְרָשְׁעִים יִדְעוּ".

There is a verse: **“For a candle is [as] a mitzvah, and [the] Torah is [as] a light.”**¹ The reason that it compares the mitzvah to a candle, and the study of Torah to a light such as the sun, is because we maintain that a transgression extinguishes a mitzvah but does not extinguish the Torah. One who commits a transgression no longer has the merit of the mitzvot that he did.² Because of this, it compares [the mitzvot] to a candle, for the candle is also extinguished. But the transgression doesn't have the force to push away the merit of the study of Torah, and therefore [the Torah] is compared to a light that is impossible for a person to extinguish. This is what the Scripture intended when it said, **“the candle of the wicked is extinguished.”**³

ועוד המשיל המצוה לנר לפי שהנר אינו נדלק בלילה בכל הקדרים ובכל המקומות רק במקום שבני אדם משתמשים בו וכפי הצורך שיש להם באותו מקום מיוחד. וכן המצות אינה מוטלת החובה על כל אדם לקיימם בשנה בכל עת וזמן ובכל מקום, שהרי מי שגולד לו בן מחוייב באותה המצוה באותו היום ולא האחרים, וכן פדיון הבן, ומי שיש לו בית מיוחד לעשות מעקה והאחרים חייבים במצות אלו ביום אחר, וכן הפהגים רבה הכתוב בהם מצות, וכן מצות חליצה ויבום וכמה מצות התלויות בארץ. ומשום הכי דומות ממש לנר.

Also, the mitzvah is compared to a candle, because the candle is not lit at night in all rooms and in all places, but only in the place where people use it, and according to the need they have in that particular place. Similarly, regarding the mitzvot, the obligation is not

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¹ Prov. 6:23.

² Sotah 21a, “[It’s taught in a Baraita:] Rabbi Menachem bar Yosei interpreted this verse homiletically. . . . The verse associates the mitzvah with a lamp and the Torah with the light [of the sun]. The mitzvah [is associated] with a lamp to say to you: Just as a lamp does not protect [one by its light extensively but] only temporarily, [while the lamp is in one’s hand], so too, a mitzvah protects one only temporarily [i.e., while one is performing the mitzva]. And the Torah [is associated] with light to say to you: Just as the light [of the sun] protects one forever, so too, the Torah [one learns] protects one forever.”

³ Job 21:17.

imposed on every man to fulfill them equally, at every time and in every place, for one to whom is born a son is obligated in the mitzvah on that day regarding circumcising his son, and others who have not had a son born to them at that time are not so obligated, and so too for the redemption of the first-born son.⁴ Also, one who has a particular house must make a parapet for it.⁵ Others are required to observe these mitzvot on another day, when they become applicable to them. Similarly, for the priests, Scripture multiplies the mitzvot for them, but they don't apply to those who aren't priests. Also, the mitzvah of chalitzah and yibum,⁶ which only apply in rare cases to a few people. Also, there are a number of mitzvot that depend upon living in the Land of Israel. Because of this, [the mitzvot] are precisely similar to a candle.

אָבֵל הָאוֹר מְאִירָה לְכָל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוּ בְשָׁנָה, וְכֵן חֻבַּת הַתּוֹרָה מוּטְלָת עַל כָּל אֶחָד מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וְכָל אֶחָד בּוֹדֵק עַד מְקוֹם שְׂיָדוֹ מִנְעֵת אִם בְּמִקְרָא אִם בְּמִשְׁנָה אוֹ בְּגִמְרָא, וְכַשֵּׁם שֶׁבְנֵי שְׂאֵף עַל פִּי שְׁנֵי לְאֶחָד גֵּר לְמֵאָה מִכָּל מְקוֹם מִי שֶׁהוּא קְרוֹב לוֹ נִהְיָה מִמֶּנּוּ יוֹתֵר, כִּי הַמִּצְוָה צָרִיךְ לַעֲשׂוֹתָהּ בְּפִנְיָה רְאוּיָה וְאִזּוּ הִיא מְאִירָה כְּמוֹ גֵּר, שְׂמִי שְׂיָשׁ לוֹ בְּאוֹתָהּ מִצְוָה כְּנִגְוֵה יִתִּירָה עַל הָאֲחֵרִים הָעוֹשִׂים אוֹתָהּ הוּא מִתְקָרֵב יוֹתֵר לְמְקוֹם הַקְדוּשָׁה וְעוֹשֶׂה תִיקוּן וְיִיחוד יוֹתֵר נִפְלֵא מִהָאֲחֵרִים.

But the light illuminates the whole world in equal measure, and likewise the obligation of learning the Torah falls on each Israelite and each one examines as far as the place his hand reaches,⁷ i.e., to the best of his ability, whether in the Bible or in the Mishnah or Gemara. Just as with a candle, we note that regardless of whether it's a candle for one person or a candle for a hundred,⁸ the one who is closest to it enjoys it more, so too with the mitzvah, one must perform it with intent, and then it will illuminate like a candle. For one who has for the same mitzvah more intent than others who perform the same mitzvah, he is closer to the place of holiness, and he effects correction in the world, and effects a unification⁹ that's more wonderful than that of others.

וְהַטַּעַם שֶׁבְּמִצְוָה הַקְּדוּמִים "גֵּר" לְ"מִצְוָה" וּבַתּוֹרָה הַקְּדוּמִים "תּוֹרָה" לְ"אוֹר" וְלֹא כָּתוּב כִּי גֵּר מִצְוָה נִאֹר תּוֹרָה אִי נִמְי כִּי מִצְוָה גֵּר תּוֹרָה אוֹר, יֵשׁ לוֹמֵר לְפִי שֶׁבְּמִצְוָה צָרִיךְ שִׁתְּקַדִּים הַכְּנִיָּה לְמַעֲשֵׂה הַמִּצְוָה וְהַכְּנִיָּה שְׂיָשׁ לוֹ לְאֶדָם בְּתַחֲלַת הַמִּצְוָה הִיא עֲצָמָה הַכְּנִיָּה שְׂיָשׁ לוֹ עַד סוֹף גִּמְרַת הַמִּצְוָה. אֲמָנָם בַּתּוֹרָה אֵינּוּ כֵּן כִּי הָאֶדָם קוֹרָא וְלוֹמֵד וְלִיגְרוּס אֵינִשׁ וְהַדָּר לִיסְבֵּי אֶרְוֵא עַל גַּב דְּלֹא יָדַע מֵאֵי קְאָמֵר, וְאַחֵר כִּי צָרִיךְ שְׂיִתְעַצֵּם בְּהַבְנַת הַלִּימּוּד וְיִהְיֶה שׂוֹאֵל עֲזָרוֹ מִקְדָּשׁ שְׁה' יֵאִיר עֵינָיו בְּתוֹרָתוֹ, וּמִשׁוּם הֵכִי כְּתִיב "וְתוֹרָה אוֹר" שְׂאֵסֵר קְרִיאַת הַתּוֹרָה כִּי הָאוֹר וְהוּא אוֹר מְמִשׁ וְלֹא גֵּר בְּלִבָּד, וְכֵן כְּתִיב "גַּלְעֵינִי וְאַבִּיטָהּ נִפְלְאוֹת מִתּוֹרָתָךְ".

Going back to the verse we are reviewing, “For a candle is [as] a mitzvah, and [the] Torah is [as] a light,” what is **the reason that for the mitzvah, the word “candle” precedes the word**

⁴ Ex. 13:12–15.

⁵ Deut. 22:8.

⁶ Yibum is a Levirate marriage, where a widow who has no offspring is married by her late husband's brother. See Gen. 38:8, Deut. 25:5–6. Chalitzah is a procedure whereby the brother-in-law can avoid marrying his brother's widow. See Deut. 25:7–10.

⁷ Pesachim 8a, 8b.

⁸ Shabbat 122a: “[The light of] a lamp for one is [the light of] a lamp for one hundred [people].”

⁹ A proclamation of the unity of G-d.

“mitzvah,” and that for the Torah, the word “Torah” precedes the word “light”? [Why] is it not written in parallel construction, “For a candle is [as] a mitzvah, and a light is [as the] Torah,” or alternatively, “For a mitzvah is [as] a candle, and [the] Torah is [as] a light”?

It can be said regarding the mitzvah, that intent is required before the performance of the mitzvah, and the intent that a person has at the beginning of the mitzvah is itself the intent that he has through the end of the performance of the mitzvah.

But for the Torah, this is not so, for a person reads and learns, i.e., a person studies¹⁰ and then understands.¹¹ This is so even though he doesn’t know what he is reading, and afterwards he needs to strengthen himself in understand the learning, and he needs to ask for Holy help, that G-d will enlighten his eyes with his Torah. Because of this, it is written, “and [the] Torah is [as] a light,” that after the reading of the Torah, the light comes, and this is particularly a great light and not only a candle, and it is also written, “Unveil my eyes, and I will behold wondrous things from Your Torah.”¹²

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¹⁰ Avodah Zara 19a.

¹¹ Shabbat 63a.

¹² Ps. 119:18.