

Toldot Shimshon

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Chapter III – Mishnah 9

רבי שמעון אומר (נ"א רבי יעקב אומר), המהלך בדרך ושונה, ומפסיק ממשנתו ואומר, מה נאה אילן זה ומה נאה ניר זה, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו מתחייב בנפשו.

Rabbi Shimon said: if one is learning [Torah] while walking on the road and interrupts his learning and says, “how beautiful is this tree” or “how beautiful is this newly ploughed field,” Scripture accounts it to him as if he were accountable for his life.

למה היו ההפסקות משמשות דוקא במהלך בדרך. ודוקא בזה ההפסק של "מה נאה" וכו'. ולמה אומר "מעלה עליו הכתוב", ולא פירש מהו זה הפתוב. ומהו הלשון של "כאילו", הנה לו לומר "הרי זה מתחייב בנפשו". וכן הרגישו המפרשים, אלא דפליגי אי גרסינן "רבי יעקב אומר", או "רבי שמעון אומר". והמדרש שמואל הכריע הגירסא של רבי יעקב אומר. ואף אנו נאמר שרבי יעקב אגיל לשיטתיה. ואי גרסינן "רבי שמעון", דילמא בהא סבירא ליה כרבי יעקב.

Question 1: **“What specific function did the interruptions serve”¹ while walking on the road?**

Question 2: **Especially** what function was served by **this interruption of “how beautiful is this tree” or “how beautiful is this newly ploughed field”?**

Question 3: **Why does it say “Scripture accounts it to him”?**

Question 4: **Why doesn’t it explain what this Scripture is?**

Question 5: **What is the intent of this language “as if he were accountable for his life”?**
It should have said, “he is accountable for his life.”

The commentators² already noted these issues, but they disagree whether the text reads “Rabbi Yaakov says” or “Rabbi Shimon says.” The *Midrash Shmuel* rules that the correct version is “Rabbi Yaakov says.” We too may say that Rabbi Yaakov follows his own reasoning. And if the version is “Rabbi Shimon,” perhaps in this matter he agrees with Rabbi Yaakov.

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¹ Sifra, Vayikra Dibbura DeNedavah, 1:1:9: “And what function did the interruptions serve? To give Moses time for reflection between parshah and parshah and verse and verse.”

² *Midrash Shmuel* and *Tosefet Yom-Tov*.

דאיתא במדרש על פסוק "ויכלו השמים והארץ", אמר רבי אליעזר בשם רבי יעקב, כתיב "הגו סיגים מכסף ניצא לצרף כלי", משל לאמבטי וכו', כך כל זמן שהיה העולם תהו ובהו, לא נראית מלאכת שמים וארץ, כיון שנגעקרה תהו ובהו מן העולם, נראית מלאכת שמים וארץ וכו'. עד כאן לשונו. וכתב היפה תאר, שנה שאמר כיון שנגעקרה תהו ובהו מן העולם, נראית מלאכת שמים וארץ, הוא רמז אל הנשמה השכלית, שהיא משפלת כל טבע שמים וארץ, אלא שאין פעולותיה נראות בהיותה במיסוד החומר המונעה. אבל כשהחומר נעדר מן העולם, תגלה ותראה מלכותה ושלימותה, וזה במיתה. גם אפשר, שירמוז לענין ישראל, שבהיותם בגלות וכו'. עכ"ל.

For it is brought in the Midrash on the verse, “And the heavens and the earth were finished”³:

Rabbi Eliezer said in the name of Rabbi Yaakov, it is written, “Remove the dross from the silver, and a vessel will emerge for the refiner.”⁴ This is analogous to a bathtub that was filled with water, and there were two ornamental bowls in it. As long as it was full of water, the handiwork of the bowls was not visible. Once someone opened the drain and emptied the water from it, the handiwork of the bowls became visible. So, too, as long as the world was chaos and void, the labor of the heavens and the earth was not visible. Once the chaos and void was uprooted from the world, the handiwork of the heavens and the earth became visible.

- Gen. Rabbah 10:2

The Yefeh To'ar writes that:

This statement—that once chaos and void were removed, the work became visible—is an allusion to the intellectual soul, which comprehends all the nature of heaven and earth, but whose operations are not visible while it is screened by materiality that restrains it. But when the material is removed from the world, its sovereignty and perfection are revealed—and this is at death.

It is also possible that this alludes to Israel. When they are in exile, their stature and perfection are not visible, because of the material constraints and afflictions that restrain them. But when the exile is removed, their stature will be revealed and their perfection will be seen.

- *Yefeh To'ar* on Gen. Rabbah 10:2

³ Gen. 2:1.

⁴ Prov. 25:4.

Approach I – Metaphysical: Undermining the protective function of Torah

והנה, בשעה שכיחי מזיקין, כמו שאמרו על ברכת "מעין שבע" של ליל שבת, ו"נראו עינינו" אחר "השפיקנו" בכל הלילות. וכל הדרכים בתזקת ספנה, והם נקראים "תהו ובהו". והאדם פושטתו בדרך ורוצה להנצל מהם, הוא מתעסק באור התורה כדי לעקור ולהרחיק ממנו אותם המזיקים, שהם תהו ובהו דסטרא אחורא, כמו שכתוב "תרות על-הלחת", תרות ממלאך המות וכו'.

Now, in the field, harmful forces are common, as they said regarding the Friday night blessing of “Me’ein Sheva”⁵ and “Yiru Eineinu” after “Hashkiveinu” on all nights,⁶ and all roads are presumed dangerous.⁷ These harmful forces are called “chaos and void.” When a person walks along the road and wishes to be saved from them, he occupies himself with the light of Torah in order to uproot and distance from himself those harmful forces, which are the chaos and void of the *Sitra Achra* (i.e., side of evil), as it is written regarding the verse, “engraved [*charut*] [תרות] on the tablets,”⁸ read not “engraved” but “freedom” [*cherut*] [תירות], freedom from the Angel of Death, etc.⁹ That is, Reish Lakish taught that after receiving the Torah, the Jewish people would have become immortal had they not sinned with the Golden Calf.¹⁰

Thus, with regard to Question 1 asking what specific function the interruptions served, the answer is that they break off his occupation with Torah, which was protecting him in a dangerous environment.

ואם הוא מפסיק ממשנתו ואומר, מה נאה אילן זה, ומה נאה נכרי, אף על פי שפונתו להודות להקב"ה על אילנות טובות שברא בעולמו, מכל מקום, הרי הוא סותר דיניה אדיניה, שאם הוא שונה כדי לסלק ממנו התהו ובהו של המזיקין, שהנה הנם מחמת חומר העולם, אם כן, איך משבח התהו ובהו שהם דברים הגשמיים המחשיכים אור הנשמה, שאין פעולותיה נראות שלמות בעולם הגשמי. ולכן הרי זה מתחייב בנפשו, שנראה שחביבים לו המעשים של העולם הזה, אף על פי שבהם נחשף אור נשמתו, מה שאין כן, אם לא היה פוסק מדברי תורה, שאז היה נראה שחביבים עליו דברי תורה יותר מדברים הגשמיים, ובנכות זה, הייתה מאירה יותר הנשמה באור התורה, והיה מסתלק ממנה איזה חלק מהחשך של התהו ובהו.

Question 2 asked more specifically about the effect of his comments on the beauty of trees or a field. The answer is that **if he interrupts his Torah learning and says, “How beautiful is this tree, how beautiful is this newly ploughed field,” even though his intention is to thank the**

⁵ Me’ein Sheva (“האל הגדול הגבור והנורא, אל עליון קונה שמים וארץ”) is recited by the chazzan after the Shabbat ma’ariv prayer. Shabbat 24b states that the Friday night service was lengthened because of danger. Rashi there explains that danger refers to harmful forces, that there was concern that some people would leave synagogue before others. Thus, they lengthened the prayer so that everyone could leave at the same time, for safety from these harmful forces.

⁶ Hashkiveinu is the 2nd prayer after the Shema on weeknights, and Yiru Eineinu is part of the 3rd prayer after the Shema. Tosafot to Berachot 4b: “Why do we then recite the blessing Yiru Eineinu and other verses after Hashkiveinu? . . . So that while one is saying it, one’s friend who came late is able to finish his prayer at the same time, so that one will not go home leaving the other stranded on his own.”

⁷ Yerushalmi Berachot 4:4: “Rebbi Simeon bar Abba in the name of Rebbi Hanina: Any road is presumed to be dangerous.”

⁸ Ex. 32:15.

⁹ Ex. Rabbah 32:1.

¹⁰ Avodah Zarah 5a.

Holy One, Blessed be He, for the good trees He created in His world, nevertheless, he contradicts himself. For if he is learning Torah in order to remove from himself the chaos and void of the harmful forces, which stem from the materiality of the world, how can he praise that very chaos and void—namely, the physical things that darken the light of the soul, whose actions are not seen in perfection in this material world? Therefore, he is accountable for his life, for it appears that the deeds of this world are dear to him, even though through them the light of his soul is darkened.

Whereas, if he had not interrupted his Torah learning, it would have appeared that words of Torah were more precious to him than physical things, and by this merit the soul would shine more with the light of Torah, and some portion of the darkness of chaos and void would depart from [his soul].

Approach II – Theological: Affirming a defective reality

אי נמי בדרה אחר, דאמרינו במדרש על פסוק "ונברך אלהים את יום השביעי", כל מה שנברא בששת ימי בראשית, צריכים עשייה ותיקון. הסדרל צריך למיתוק, התורמוסים למיתוק, החטים צריכים להטחון, ואדם עצמו צריך תיקון. עכ"ל. והטעם שלא נברא הכל מתוקן הוא מפני שנבראו גם כן המזיקין בעולם. ובאמת שעתה שנברא הכל בלי תיקון, יש שבה למעשה אדם המשתמר עם בוראו לתקן הקלקול ולהתעסק ביישובו של עולם, כמו שפירש הגהה תאר על המדרש הנ"ל.

Alternatively, in another approach: As is stated in the Midrash on the verse, “And G-d blessed the seventh day”¹¹:

Everything that was created during the six days of Creation requires some action and perfection. Mustard requires sweetening, lupines require sweetening, wheat requires grinding, and even man needs to be perfected.

- Gen. Rabbah 11:6

The reason that everything was not created perfected is because harmful forces were also created in the world.¹² Indeed, now that everything was created without perfection, there is praise for human action that partners with the Creator to repair the defect and to engage in the settlement of the world, as explained by the *Yefeh To'ar*.¹³

While Gen. Rabbah 11:6 doesn't cite Scriptural support, *Toldot Shimshon* will later reference the end of Gen. 2:5, that plants had not yet sprouted “because there were no human beings to till the soil.” This supports the idea that the world is inherently defective without human intervention.

¹¹ Gen. 2:3.

¹² Pirkei Avot 5:6, listing demons as having been created at twilight on Eruv Shabbat. [As to why harmful forces were created, human action would have been irrelevant in a perfect world; so the creation of harmful forces created a space where human choice matters. Also, the harmful forces provide a resistance to the repair of the world, and make possible the praise and merit that humans deserve for our efforts of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world.]

¹³ *Yefeh To'ar* on Gen. Rabbah 11:7.

והנה המהלך בדרך במקום מזיקין, ושונה כדי להרחיקם ממנו כנ"ל, ומפסיק ממשנתו ואומר, מה נאה אילן זה, מה נאה וכו', שהם מעשי ידי אדם. ולמה הוצרכו מעשה ידי אדם, מפני שהכל נברא בלי תיקון. ולמה נבראו בלי תיקון, מפני שיש מזיקים בעולם. נמצא שקשה הוא משבח מעשה ידי אדם, נקרא שיש לו הנאה שהעולם נברא בלי תיקון, וממילא יש לו הנאה שיש מזיקין בעולם. ומשום הכי, מעלה עליו הפתוב כאילו מתחייב בנפשו, שהרי עתה מחמת דיבורו אפשר שהמזיקין יבואו עליו, הואיל שמודה בפיו שיש לו הנאה שיהיו בעולם, והוא הפך הפונה שמתחלה היה שונה כדי להרחיקם מעליו.

Now, one who walks along the road in a place of harmful forces and learns Torah in order to distance them from himself, as above, and then interrupts his learning and says, “How beautiful is this [cultivated] tree,” or “how beautiful is this newly ploughed field,” for they are works of human hands¹⁴—why were works of human hands needed? Because everything was created without perfection. Why was it created without perfection? Because there are harmful forces in the world.

It follows that when he praises human handiwork, it is considered as if he takes pleasure in the fact that the world was created without perfection. Consequently, since the world's imperfection is tied to the existence of harmful forces, praising the ploughed field is seen as an implicit admission that he takes pleasure in the existence of harmful forces in the world. Therefore, Scripture ascribes to him as if he were accountable for his life, for now, because of his speech, it is possible that the harmful forces will come upon him, since he admits with his mouth that he takes pleasure in their existence, contrary to his original intent in learning Torah, which was to distance them from himself.

Approach III – Kabbalistic: Arousing forces of accusation

אי נמי בדרך אחר, קרוב למה שאמרנו במדרש על פסוק "וכל שים השדה", כל האילנות להנאתן של כל הבריות נבראו, שאפילו הרוחות והשדים נהנים ממה ששוכנים בהם. מעשה באחד שבצר את פרמו וכן בתוכו, ובא הרוח ופגעתו. עכ"ל. וברמזי התורה מציינו "שים" בגימטריא "קטרוג", ואף בבורות ובתפירות, שולטים המזיקים, פנוע. ועוד אמרו ו"ל כל הגדול מחברו, יצרו גדול. ואף כאן, זה האילן והגיר שהוא נאה, גם קטרוגו יותר במעלה מאחרים.

Alternatively, there is another approach, close to what we said regarding the Midrash on the verse, “when no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the L-rd G-d had not sent rain upon the earth and there were no human beings to till the soil.”¹⁵ The Midrash states:

All the trees were created for the benefit of all creatures, such that even spirits and demons benefit from dwelling within them.¹⁶ There was once a man

¹⁴ The plural “they are works of human hands” means that the tree too was not growing wild, but was a cultivated fruit tree planted, pruned, and maintained by human effort to achieve its stature. This would certainly be the case along the roads of 18th Century Italy, and perhaps also along the roads of the Land of Israel in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries.

¹⁵ Gen. 2:5.

¹⁶ The words “such that even spirits and demons benefit from dwelling within them” does not appear in our edition of Gen. Rabbah, but is explained by *Yefeh To'ar*.

who harvested his vineyard and slept within it, and a spirit came and harmed him.

- Gen. Rabbah 13:2

In *Remezei Torah*,¹⁷ we find that שיח [siach] [“shrub”] has the numerical value of 318, the same as that of קטרוג [kitrug] [“accusation”]. This teaching is meant to emphasize the danger of the natural world, where forces of strict judgment can be activated to prosecute someone for spiritual deficiencies.

Even in pits and ditches, harmful forces rule, as is known.¹⁸

They also said, “Whoever is greater than his fellow, his evil inclination is greater.”¹⁹ So too here: this tree or field that is beautiful, its accusing force is correspondingly greater than others.

והשתא קאמר התנא, אם הוא שונה בדברי תורה כדי להנצל מהמזיקים המצויים בדירה, ואחר כך מפסיק לומר כמה נאה אילן זה, או גיר זה, שבנה הוא משבם למקטרג שיושב באותו הגיר או האילן, הרי הוא פאילו מתחייב בנפשו. שבדברי הוא מעורר אותו הכח של הטומאה, ואין לו עוד התורה שתגין עליו. ולכן התנא אמר סתם "מעלה עליו הכתוב", לפי שלא נתברר לו הפסוק בנדאי, שהרי בדירה הראשון נפקא מן "הגו סיגים מכסף" וכו'. ובדירה השני נפקא מן "ואדם און לעבד את האדמה". ובדירה השלישי נפקא מן "וכל שים השדה". אבל ממה נפשך בא הלימוד על נכון, למר פדאית ליה, ולמר פדאית ליה, מהמדרשים הנ"ל.

Now with this understanding, the Tanna is effectively saying: **If he is learning words of Torah in order to be saved from the harmful forces found on the road, and afterward interrupts to say, “How beautiful is this tree” or “this field,” thereby praising the accuser that dwells in that tree or field, it is as if he were accountable for his life.** The answer to Question 3, then, why this Mishnah says “Scripture accounts it to him,” is that **through his words he arouses that power of impurity, and he no longer has the Torah to protect him.**

Therefore, the Tanna stated simply, “Scripture ascribes to him,” because the exact verse is not definitively established. According to the first approach, it is derived from the verse from Proverbs mentioned in Gen. Rabbah 10:2: “Remove the dross from the silver, and a vessel will emerge for the refiner.”

According to the second approach, it is derived from Gen. Rabbah 11:6, and while not explicitly quote, we can refer to the end of Gen. 2:5, “and there were no human beings to till the soil.”

According to the third approach, it is derived from the beginning of Gen. 2:5, as mentioned in Gen. Rabbah 13:2, “when no shrub of the field was yet on earth.”

¹⁷ *Remezei Torah*, literally “hints of Torah,” does not mean a specific sefer by that name, but generally refers to interpretations, often mystical or via *gematria* (numerical value), that reveal hidden meanings in the Torah. This teaching appears in *Yalkut Reuveni*, parashat Bereisheet.

¹⁸ Yerushalmi Yevamot 16:6: “Rebbi Abun said, damaging spirits are as frequent in cisterns as they are frequent on the fields.” See also Gittin 66a, discussing the possibility of a demon being in a pit.

¹⁹ Sukkah 52a.

Thus the answer to Question 4, why this Mishnah didn't say which verse was relevant, is that there are different approaches, each supported by a different Scriptural text.

But in any case, the teaching stands correctly—each according to his view—from the Midrashes cited above.

Question 5 asked why the Mishnah states “as if he were accountable for his life.” The answer is that his action of interrupting his Torah learning does not constitute direct, certain self-endangerment, but rather creates a condition that can be understood—through multiple interpretive frameworks—as functionally equivalent to endangering one's life.

ומאי דמברכינן בימי ניסן, הנינו "שברא בו בריות טובות ואילנות טובות ליהנות בהם בני אדם" דנקא, ולא מזיקין. ועוד, הוואה אילנות טובות, מברך שפכה לו בעולמו, ואינו מברך על היופי, רק על הטובה. ועוד, דמברך סתם, ואינו אומר "זה".

Question 6: If praising a tree is problematic, **what about the blessing we make in the days of Nissan on flowering trees, “Who created in it good creatures and good trees for the benefit of mankind?”**²⁰ The answer is that **this** purpose of the good creatures and good trees is **specifically** for the benefit of mankind, **not for harmful forces**.

Furthermore, one who sees good trees blesses, “Such things He has in His world,”²¹ **and is not blessing on beauty, but only on goodness.**

Furthermore, he makes the blessing in general terms, and does not say “this tree,” “this field,” etc.

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²⁰ Berachot 43b.

²¹ Berachot 58b.