

Darkei HaChizuk

ארבעה צריכים חיזוק (ברכות לב:) - שיתחזק אדם בהם תמיד בכל כחו (רש"י)

A *Sichah* from Maran HaGaon Rav Gershon Edelstein *shlita*, Rosh Yeshivas Ponevez • **Parashas Balak 5782** 494

Esek HaTorah — To Learn, To Teach, To Do

Esek haTorah is a mitzvah; we were commanded “*l’asok b’divrei Torah*” and “*v’dibarta bom*.” There’s also an obligation to teach others: “*v’limad’tem osam es beneichem*, and you shall teach them to your children,” “*v’shinantam l’vanecha*, and teach them thoroughly to your children — these are your students.” That’s why we daven daily: “Place in our hearts [the ability]... to learn and teach” because this is our *chiyuv* — to learn and to teach.

We learn in *Pirkei Avos* (4:5): “One who learns in order to teach is given the opportunity to learn and teach.” That is, if someone learns with the intention to be able to teach others because he is obligated to teach others too, and he learns for the sake of actual learning, but also in order to be able to teach, then since it’s something he wants to do, he will have *siyatta d’Shemaya*. *Shamayim* will enable him to learn and teach, because “one who comes to be purified is helped.” And all more the so if he comes to “purify others,” to be *mashpia* on others.

Chazal said further, “One who learns in order to do is given the opportunity to learn, to teach, to observe, and to do.” That is, if a person learns in order to put his learning into practice, because there are 613 mitzvos and he must know what they are, he is learning in order to know and to be able to fulfill his obligations. This is another reason for the *chiyuv* of *esek haTorah* — besides for the obligation to just learn, and the obligation to learn in order to teach others, we are obligated to learn Torah so that we know how to observe the 613 mitzvos! One who learns in order “to do” is *zocheh* to learn, to teach, to observe, and to do. He is *zocheh* to learn himself, to teach others, to observe the mitzvos *lo saaseh*, and to do the *mitzvos aseh*.

Torah’s Sweetness Against the Yetzer Hara

But we have a yetzer hara, and it does not let us learn. It’s a fact that the yetzer hara fights specifically against

Torah, because Torah is the strongest power against the yetzer hara. Indeed, Chazal tell us (*Kiddushin* 30b), “I created the Torah as a *tavlin* (spice, antidote) against it.” That’s why the yetzer hara attacks Torah study specifically; it does not want us to learn Torah.

That’s why Hashem created the Torah as a *tavlin*, a flavorful spice. Just as spices add flavor and taste to food, the Torah has a special flavor so it won’t be so hard to employ it against the yetzer hara. The yetzer hara is extremely powerful and the Torah is an antidote against it. The Torah is a tasty antidote, so it won’t be too difficult to be *osek baTorah* and activate the medicine against the yetzer hara.

Of course, it’s important to know that learning Torah is not *middas chassidus*, it’s not something special, beyond the letter of the law, it’s a *chiyuv*! “*V’limad’tem osem*,” “*v’shinantam l’vanecha, v’dibarta bam* — Teach them to your children and speak in them, when you are sitting at home, when on the way, when lying down, when awakening.” It’s exactly as it sounds. There is no such thing as a free moment from the *chiyuv* to be *osek baTorah*. Each person is obligated to learn according to his abilities, and for as long as he can.

That’s why Torah is sweet, because if not, it would be hard. Hashem specifically created man and the Torah this way — that a person tastes the sweetness of Torah — so that it would be easy for him to utilize Torah to overpower the yetzer hara. There are many flavors in *divrei Torah*; Torah is compared to bread and water, to wine, and to milk.

The Purpose of Physical Pleasures

The body needs four things: food (and drink), sleep, rest, and joy (see *Sefer HaChinuch* mitzvah 488). Hashem created man with an innate nature that he “wants” these things. He doesn’t have to understand why he should engage in these four things; he’s naturally drawn to them and wants them — so that his

body will be sustained and endure. So too, the Torah is a *tavlin*. HaKadosh Baruch Hu created it with a taste and sweetness so that man will be *osek baTorah* and be sustained for eternal life.

We all know that the Gra has sources from Chazal for everything he wrote in his *Iggeres HaGra*. I believe that someone put together a *mar'ei mekomos* with all the sources for whatever is written in *Iggeres HaGra*. It says there that “**All pleasures will turn into marah in the grave.**” That is, all worldly pleasures will become Gehinnom.

Lichorah, the body needs pleasure. We just said that Hashem put into our nature enjoyment for the things our body needs to be sustained. Why is it Gehinnom? The explanation is that it all depends on what a person's intention and goal is when fulfilling his physical needs. If he's simply doing it for pleasure, because he wants the pleasure, then it really is Gehinnom. The ideal is that he should want the *result* — by allowing himself this pleasure, he will be able to observe the 613 mitzvos. While the food tastes good so that he'll eat it, the purpose of good food is *Taryag mitzvos!*

If that's his purpose, then the pleasures become Gan Eden, because he's enjoying them *l'shem Shamayim*, as Chazal said (*Avos* 2:12): “All your deeds shall be for the sake of Heaven.” The Rambam writes (*Hilchos Deios*) that even when a person sleeps, if his intention is so that he'll be able to observe the mitzvos better, then his sleep is also *avodas Hashem* and he's serving Hashem in his sleep. The same is true regarding food — if his intention is *l'shem Shamayim*, he is serving Hashem as he eats. It all depends on one's intentions. Why is he eating, and what is his purpose?

In any case, just like physical needs were created with a good flavor, the Torah is a “spice;” Hashem gave it a good taste and made it sweet so that man will be *osek baTorah*, so he'll fight against the yetzer hara and merit eternal life.

Torah — the Spice for Middos Rectification

Torah is the *tavlin* against the yetzer hara, but which yetzer hara does the Torah rectify? The yetzer hara of *middos!* There are bad *middos* — and they are the yetzer hara, and the Torah is the antidote to transform them into good *middos*.

Esek haTorah gives a person good *middos*, as it says in the Gemara (*Kiddushin* 30b), “*Mai oivim ba'shaar?* Even a father and son and a *rav* and *talmid* who are learning Torah under one gate become enemies (*oivim*)

with each other. They do not budge from their places until they become loved ones (*ohavim*), as it states, ‘*Es vahav b'sufah.*’” That is, even though they were like enemies at the beginning because there was opposition and arguments — and that could have led to hatred, yet, if they continue learning, they will become loving at the end. This is the Torah's power. Torah is a *tavlin* to rectify *middos*, and it counteracts the yetzer hara of bad *middos*. Torah is the spice of good *middos*.

This is the reality. I've been told about secular Jews who aren't Torah observant who began to learn Torah and their *middos* changed. This eventually leads to them to become *baalei teshuvah* and come back to Yiddishkeit, as it states (*Pesichta d'Eichah Rabbasi* 2) “the light within it returns them to the good [path].” The Torah's light, the light of Torah, rectifies one's *middos* and transforms them into good *middos*.

Bittul Torah Is Degrading Torah

Now, I've seen the following *mashal* in *sifrei kadmonim*. If there are many gold coins strewn all over the place, free for the taking, anyone who is able to will surely come take as much as he can. But if someone stands there watching and doesn't take any coins for himself, that's only because he doesn't value gold. So too, if someone can be *osek baTorah*, but he doesn't, Chazal say about him (*Sanhedrin* 99a), “For he has despised (*bazah*) Hashem's word.” What does *despised* mean? That he is not *machshiv Torah!* He doesn't value Torah! Because if he did, he surely would be *osek baTorah*. If he isn't learning Torah, it's just like someone who doesn't take those gold coins because he doesn't value gold. I don't remember where I saw this *mashal*. (See the Chassid Yaavetz's commentary on *Pirkei Avos* 3:3, and *Yesod V'Shoresh HaAvodah, Shaar HaNitzotz*, chap. 1.)

However, if a person has no idea what gold is, he just isn't informed; he's not despising it. So this is how we can be *dan l'kaf zechus* those who are not *osek baTorah*. They simply are not aware of the *chashivus haTorah*; they aren't despising Torah. They just don't know how incredibly valuable Torah is. Just as a person does not know what gold is, they don't know what Torah is.

A Sin Due to Ignorance

The truth is, Chazal said (*Avos* 4:13), “A mistake due to [lack of] learning is considered an intentional sin.” That is, if someone did not learn and therefore accidentally sinned, it's considered an intentional sin. After all, the reason he didn't know about the sin is

chelkeinu that we *baruch Hashem* are *osek baTorah*, each one of us according to our abilities and possibilities, with good *middos* and leading a life with *middos tovos*. In this way, we feel fortunate and happy, and we live good lives.

Davening for All Klal Yisrael

We beg Hashem to have mercy on all Klal Yisrael, that they should be *zocheh* to lead such lives. We say, "Return us to Your Torah, bring us close to service of You, and return us in complete repentance before You." We say it in the plural form, asking that all Klal Yisrael should merit to be *osek baTorah* and do complete *teshuvah*.

If our *tzibbur's* prayers were really recited with true *kavanah*, if we really had pity on our distant brothers, we would have experienced *siyatta d'Shemaya* already and they would have done *teshuvah*. While we do have the *gedolei ha-dor* and every city has some single individuals who surely beg for *rachamei Shamayim*, they are individuals. We need *tefillas rabbim*; we need the prayers of a large group, as Chazal say (see *Brachos* 8), "Behold, Hashem is great and will not despise." If there would have been a *tefillas rabbim*, a large *tzibbur's* prayers, and the *tefillos* would have been recited with *kavanah* out of pity for our distant brothers, the *tefillos* would have been effective and we would have seen *siyatta d'Shemaya*!

The *eitzah* is to learn *mussar*, which are also *Torah-tavlin* for the yetzer hara, as it states in *Mishnah Berurah siman 1. Mussar sefarim* influence a person to have *yiras Shamayim* and good *middos*, and they include *Torah*, *yiras Shamayim*, and good *middos* — which are the three pillars that hold up the world: *Torah*, *avodah*, and *gemillus chasadim*. *Avodah* is *yiras Shamayim*, and *gemillus chasadim* is good *middos*.

Good *middos* are actually part of Klal Yisrael's nature. Chazal say (*Yevamos* 79a): There are three signs in this nation: they are merciful, bashful, and perform *chesed*." Why is this so? Because HaKadosh Baruch Hu "chose us from all the nations." This means that He turned us into a chosen nation, He made us "choice, prime," people with good *middos*. And then, as a result of these good *middos*, "He gave us His Torah." Indeed, in *Shemoneh Esrei* for *Shalosh Regalim*, we say, "You have chosen us from all the nations," You made us "choice," and then "You sanctified us with Your mitzvos."

We thank HaKadosh Baruch Hu for this — for making us into His Chosen nation, with such good *middos*, not like all the other nations. We've already spoken about the fact that it's well known that Jews have a different personality than non-Jews. *Ashreinu, mah tov chelkeinu! B'ezras Hashem*, may we all be *zocheh* — every single one of us from all of Klal Yisrael — to be chosen, with *ashrecha baOlam haZeh*.

Dedicated by
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