

One of the *Mitzvot* in this week's *Parashah* is separating *Ma'aser Sheni* / the Second Tithe of the produce. The Torah instructs us that this tithe--or its value, if the tithe itself is too much to transport--should be carried to Yerushalayim "so that you will learn to have *Yir'ah* / reverence of *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, all the days" (14:23). Being in proximity to the *Bet Hamikdash* will enhance a person's *Yir'ah*, so the Torah wants us to spend time there.

R' Yehuda Amital z"l (1924-2010; founder and co-Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, popularly known as "Gush") writes: We tend to think of *Yir'ah*, often translated as "fear," as something stern--the antithesis of *Simchah* / joy. Yet, the Torah tells us that eating *Ma'aser Sheni* in Yerushalayim will cause us to have *Yir'ah*. The Torah does not command us to sell our *Ma'aser Sheni* to buy books about *Mussar* / character improvement; in fact, buying non-food items with this money is prohibited. The Torah does say (verse 26), "You may spend the money for whatever your heart desires--for cattle, flocks, wine, or alcoholic beverage, or anything that your soul wishes; you shall eat it there before *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, and rejoice--you and your household."

R' Amital continues: Some associate *Yir'ah* with obsessing over whether a *Mitzvah* was done properly. Of course *Mitzvot* must be performed properly, but the hallmark of real *Yir'ah* is that it is uplifting and brings a person joy. This is expressed in the prayer many say on Friday night (in *Ribon Kol Ha'olamim*, printed after *Shalom Aleichem*), "Then I shall observe Your laws without *Etzev*"--a word that means both sadness and nerves.

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Teshuvah

With the approach of the month of *Elul* and the season of *Teshuvah* / repentance, one might ask: Since *Teshuvah* is a *Mitzvah*, why do we not recite a *Berachah* before repenting, as we do before performing most *Mitzvot*?

R' Yitzchak Shmelkes z"l (1828-1906; rabbi of Lvov, Galicia) offers two answers:

(1) When one performs a *Mitzvah*, he is supposed to have in mind that he is doing so because *Hashem* commanded it. Therefore, he can recite a blessing, "Who commanded us . . ." *Teshuvah* is different; by definition, a person cannot repent because *Hashem* commanded him to do so. Rather, *Teshuvah* is meaningful only if a person repents because he regrets his sin. (Imagine if a person hurt his father and then says to his father, "I am sorry because you told me to be sorry." Obviously that is not an adequate apology.)

(2) R' Shlomo ibn Aderet z"l (*Rashba*; Barcelona, Spain; 1235-1310) writes that one does not recite a *Berachah* on a *Mitzvah* that is made possible by a preceding sin (מצוה הבאה בעבירה); for example, one does not recite a *Berachah* on bread made from wheat that he stole. *Teshuvah*, also, is a *Mitzvah* made possible by a preceding sin, R' Shmelkes writes. (*Bet Yitzchak*: Y.D. II #168)

R' Shmelkes' grandson, R' Aharon Lewin z"l Hy"d (the *Reisher Rav*; killed in the Holocaust), adds a third answer: Though ideal *Teshuvah* requires words (e.g., *Vidui* / confession), it is a *Mitzvah* performed primarily in one's heart. We do not recite blessings on such *Mitzvot*; for example, there is no *Berachah* on *Bitul Chametz* / nullifying *Chametz*, since the nullification takes place primarily in one's thoughts. (*Ha'drash Ve'ha'iyun*: Nitzavim #193)

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“You shall seek out His *Shechinah* / Presence and come there.” (12:5)

R' Yehoshua Heschel Singer z"l (1848-1925; rabbi in Buffalo, NY) writes: People often ask, “What’s new in *Shul*? What did the rabbi say in his sermon?” Our verse is teaching that it is not enough to inquire (“seek out”) what happened in *Hashem*’s presence; one should “come there” himself.

Notably, R' Singer adds, the verse does not say, “Go there.” It says “Come there,” because going to *Shul* should feel like coming home.

(*Mishneh Zikaron*)

“You shall pelt him with stones and he shall die, for he sought to push you away from near (literally, ‘on’) *Hashem*, your *Elokim* . . .” (13:11)

R' Meir Simcha Hakohen (1843-1926; rabbi of Dvinsk, Latvia) writes: The *Gemara* (*Berachot* 6a) teaches that *Hashem* wears *Tefilin*, so-to-speak, that contain verses expressing His pride in the Jewish People. A person who seduces another Jew to worship idols seeks to deprive *Hashem* of that pride and to force Him to remove His *Tefilin*, so-to-speak. In effect, then, this person seeks to “push you away from on *Hashem*.”

(*Meshech Chochmah*)

“If there shall be a destitute person among you, any of your brethren in any of your cities, in the Land that *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, gives you, you shall not harden your heart or close your hand against your destitute brother.” (15:7)

Rabbeinu Yonah Gerondi z"l (1210-1263; Spain) writes: The Torah commands us not only to give *Tzedakah* / charity, but to distance ourselves from the trait of cruelty, and to acquire the trait of pleasantness. It is possible, after all, to not close one’s hand to the poor, but at the same time to give charity in a way that is cruel (for example, by embarrassing the recipient).

(*Sha’arei Teshuvah* III 36)

R' Gershon Edelstein z"l (1923-2023; Rosh Yeshiva of the Ponovezh Yeshiva) elaborates: Acquiring the “trait of pleasantness” means learning to love performing *Chessed* / kindness. The way to do this is to perform small acts of kindness discretely, in situations where one will not receive public acclaim for his acts. Little by little, as one becomes accustomed to do this, his love of *Chessed* will strengthen.

(*Peninei Chizuk*)

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R' Amital adds: *Chassidim* say, “Sadness is not a sin; it is worse than a sin.” Without joy, a person cannot progress; he has no confidence in himself or his abilities. A person with *Yir’at Shamayim* / awe of Heaven needs to know when to laugh also. (Editor’s note: Interestingly, the Patriarch who our Sages associate with the trait of *Yir’ah* was Yitzchak, whose name means, “He will laugh.”)

(*Le’olam Yehei Adam* p.23)

“See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse: The blessing--that you listen to the commandments of *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, that I command you today. And the curse--if you do not listen to the commandments of *Hashem*, your *Elokim* . . .” (11:26-28)

R' Yedayah Ha’penini z"l (13th century; Provence) writes: Man has absolute *Bechirah* / free choice, and nothing in nature forces him to choose one way or another, *i.e.*, between the correct thing to do or the incorrect one, or between true beliefs or false ones. Neither a person’s temperament nor any star forces him to choose one or the other. It is true, R' Yedayah writes, that a person’s temperament may tempt him in one direction or the other--be it toward physical desires, a need to be in control, courage, generosity, alacrity--nevertheless, a person has *Bechirah* whether to follow those instincts or to make a different choice--good or bad. This is clear based on the emphasis that the Torah places on the principle of reward and punishment, for a person cannot be rewarded and punished if he has no choice how to act.

(*Be’ur Haggadot: Devarim Rabbah*)

“Rather, only at the place that *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, will choose from among all your tribes to place His Name shall you seek out His *Shechinah* / Presence and come there.” (12:5)

R' Shraga Feivish Hager z"l (1958-2024; *Kosover Rebbe*) writes: One must know that everything that has ever happened or will happen, from the time of Creation until the end of time, emanates from the site of the *Bet Hamikdash*, as the *Gemara* (*Yoma* 54b) teaches: The place of the *Kodesh Ha’kodashim* / Holy of Holies is called the “*Even Shetiyah*” / “Foundation Stone,” because the Creation of the world began there and spread outward from that point.

This, continues R' Hager, explains why the Torah never tells us where the *Bet Hamikdash* should be built. Rather, our verse tells us to “seek out His *Shechinah*.” The more precious something is, the less available it is, and the more one must make an effort to find or obtain it. And, the location of the *Bet Hamikdash* is the most precious place of all!

For hundreds of years after *Bnei Yisrael* entered *Eretz Yisrael*, they did not know where the *Bet Hamikdash* would be built, R' Hager notes. Finally, the Prophet Shmuel and the future King David identified the location through their careful study of relevant verses. (See *Zevachim* 54b.)

In this light, R' Hager continues, we can better understand why we mourn the loss of the *Bet Hamikdash*. The *Bet Hamikdash* is the place from which sustenance flows to the world. When it stood, a person could visit there, feel G-d’s Presence, and feel a strong attachment to the *Shechinah*. When it is not standing, that opportunity is missing.

(*Kovetz Safah Berurah* p.262)