



Parashat Behukotay



English version

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LIFESTYLES

One of the biggest problems facing the Orthodox Jew is the belief that a Jew can keep “the 613” while living the lifestyle of “keeping up with the gentiles”. Who is setting the standard of what we want and what we *don't* want in life? The way we live, the path of behavior we take, will affect our fate more than anything else. In order for us to understand how to solve this problem we need to understand where it comes from, and find the tools to defeat it.

The very first thing that Ruth told her mother-in-law, Naomi, when she was certain that she wanted to convert to Judaism was באשר תלכי אלך . *Wherever you go, I will go.* The Middrash Rabbah explains this. “Naomi said to Ruth: My daughter, it is not the way of a Jewish girl to go to the theatres of the goyim.” Naomi told Ruth that to become a Jewess, one cannot follow the celebrities of the goyim and associate with them. Their way is not our way.

Why was this the most important, first message Naomi gave to her daughter-in-law who was about to convert, even before mentioning the 613 Mitzvoth? And why did Naomi need to hear Ruth say, *Wherever you go, I will go*, that she would stop going to the theatres, before Naomi was willing to convert her?

Because the path that you are going in life, the lifestyle you follow, is the expression of your ultimate decision as to what type of Jew you will be. There is a huge difference between an Orthodox Jew and a Torah Jew. What is the

difference? Orthodoxy means keeping 613. Not being 'reform' or 'conservative'. *As long as I do not alter even one commandment, I am still Orthodox. But, how I live my life, what car I drive, what type of wedding I make, my lifestyle - as long as it does not transgress the 613, I still fly under the radar of Orthodoxy.* A Torah Jew is something else. The word Torah has a similar root to the word Morah, which means teacher, guide, someone who shows the way. A Torah Jew, then, is a Jew who lives his lifestyle in line with the spirit of Torah. He constantly asks himself, *What is the Torah lifestyle that I can adopt? What is the Torah's path?* Naomi wanted to make sure that Ruth was going to be a Torah Jew. Not just an Orthodox one.

We sometimes forget how to enjoy the beauty of a Torah lifestyle and focus on the deeper truth of life. And once we forget, the glamour of the celebrity lifestyle flashes at us from every billboard, in every advertisement. It makes it so easy to lose track. There are only two tracks in life, and they are mutually exclusive. We are always going on one of these two tracks. It's just a matter of which one we choose. Allow me to explain.

What is an angel? The word 'anglos' in old Greek means messenger. The angel does not have thoughts of his own, nor does he have free choice. He is but a robot. He does whatever you program him to do. The human being is the opposite. No matter how you program him/her, you can never know if they are going to follow your directions. The difference between angels, who do not have free choice, and us is that angels are always



referred to as עומדים, standing still, while Humans are always referred to as הולכים, always going. This concept of going is the purpose of your life. The uniqueness of the Human. All of your life, you are going from point A to point B. *You chose* your point B. You can be getting closer to the life of the celebrities, the life of the gentiles, more Olam Hazeih. Or, you can be getting closer to your Neshama, your purpose in this world. The first mitzvah commanded to the first Jew was לך לך, "Go to you". What does it mean - to go to you? G-d told Avraham to go towards himself, to advance towards his purpose, towards his Neshama. Every Jew comes down to this world with that same command: לך לך. Go toward your purpose. That is the Torah's path.

What is the Gentile's path? Probably one of the most crucial moments in the whole Tanach is the moment when Bitya is at the Nile River to immerse for conversion, and she sees little Moshe in a basket. ותָּרַד בַּת־פַּרְעֹה לְרִחֹץ עַל־הַיָּאָר וַנִּעְרַתִּיהָ הַלֵּלֶת עַל־יָד הַיָּאָר וַתֵּרֶא אֶת־הַתִּבְיָה בַּתֹּוֹף הַסּוּרִי וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת־אֶמְתָּהּ וַתִּקְחֶהּ: Bitya decides to reach out to baby Moshe and save his life. The Talmud points to the words וַנִּעְרַתִּיהָ הַלֵּלֶת *and her maidservants were walking*. Where were they going? Weren't they supposed to be next to the princess Bitya?

R Yochanan answers the question. The word halicha, here, means death, as we see in the words of Esav, הנה אני הולך למות *Behold, I am going to die*. The maidservants said to Bitya, "Are you crazy? If no one else is obeying Pharaoh's command to kill the Jewish boys, wouldn't it make sense that at least his own daughter would listen to him?!" When the maidservants spoke with those words, the angel Gavriel came and struck them dead!! (See Sotah 12b, Torah Temimah Shemot 2; 5)

Although Esav was busy hunting food, occupying himself with idolatry and women, always "on the move", he was moving towards death. הנה אנכי הולך למות. That was his direction. The life of a celebrity, here and now. If they do not have Olam Haba, they might as well have Olam Hazeih.

Yaakov, on the other hand, was an איש תם יושב, a simple man sitting in the study hall. Although he was not moving physically, but he

was steadily advancing in the direction of the Torah learning that would lead him to Olam HaBa. All of us have these same two options in life: to live Esav's celebrity life, a life that ends up as a הולך למות, or to live a life of purpose, in the image of G-d. But whatever you do, you are a הולך. You, a human being, are moving in a direction.

Our Rabbis learn the words of the beginning of the Parasha בתורה תלכו... שתהיו עמלים *If you follow My statutes, to mean that you shall toil in Torah, learn it in depth*. All of the blessings of the Torah are reserved for one who learns Torah in depth. Why does "following in G-d's statutes" refer to toil in learning? Maybe it just means to live an Orthodox life of 613?

When the Parasha tells us "to go in My statutes", it doesn't mean externally. It means internally. It means to go into your heart. It means going towards a deeper truth and making it part of your real self. Because that is the way of a Torah Jew.

BH, I have been living in Yerushalayim for 18 years. The greatest damage western culture had on me was to make me believe that "the easier the better", and "the faster the better". The Torah is teaching us that, No! אִם־בְּהִקְתִּי תִלְכוּ I want you to *toil* in Torah. If someone offers you a chip to put in your brain that will give you the knowledge of a doctor, a lawyer or a psychologist, why not? Many things in modern times are instant! But it is not so regarding Torah knowledge. G-d wants us to toil to achieve it. Although an unborn baby has learnt the entire Torah, we do not stand up, in respect, for that baby. Why not? R Chaim Shmulevitz says because that child did not toil for his Torah! This is true in regard to all self-development, and in all aspects of lech lecha, going to your life's purpose. All of the 48 ways to acquire Torah require really hard work and toil. In stark contrast to the requirements for priesthood or royalty, those requirements are presents, not things you need to work on.

The second untruth marketed by western culture is 'the faster the better'. That is not the case regarding self refinement. The greatest enemy to change is speed. וְאֶת־מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ: If you go in My statutes and you **watch** My Mitzvoth... The Torah does not

say to keep the Mitzvoth, לקיים. It says to watch the Mitzvoth, to wait anxiously for an opportunity to observe them. Not to get them over with, when the time comes. But to anticipate them. To count 49 days to wait for the Torah. To count the days toward Shabbat.

Patience. Hard work. Striving for Truth. Real Truth. Living with purpose. Mastering contentment. This is a Torah lifestyle.

GET OFF MY TRICYCLE!!

I remember the first time I decided to help out teenage kids at risk. A certain teenage boy from a religious family, who was "on his way out" of religion, came into my life. I wanted to know whether or not I was wasting my time trying to help him. I sat with someone with many years of experience and success in the field, hoping that he would teach me how to know if I was doing something worthwhile by investing my efforts with him. He taught me how to recognize "the red line". I can never forget what he told me.

יהודה בן תימא אומר הוי עז כנמר וקל כנשר ורץ כצבי וגבור כארי לעשות רצון אביך שבשמים הוא היה אומר עז פנים לגיהנם *Yehuda Ben Tema says, be brazen like a leopard, light like an eagle, swift like a deer, strong like a lion, to do the Will of Your Father in Heaven. He would say, the brazen-faced goes to Hell, and the embarrassed one goes to Gan Eden.*(Avot 5; 20)

It is a waste of your time to talk to a boy who has brazenness, an "עז פנים", because it says, עז פנים לגיהנם "Brazen-faced go to Gehinom". Once a boy has this type of brazenness, you cannot work with him, because he is going in the opposite direction. You are working against the tide. I'll give you an example of what I mean. Once, I had some yeshiva boys from the Yeshiva I worked in over for a Shabbat meal. The boys stood outside on the porch, while I was helping my wife get things ready to start the meal. One of the boys on the porch sat down on my kid's tricycle, something that he could break. I did not feel that because I was having over boys who were struggling with religion that my child needed to suffer and have his trike broken. So, I went outside and asked him nicely, please don't sit on my son's bike. You can break it. He got up and apologized. I went upstairs to continue helping my wife with the kids, and from the upstairs window, I saw that the same boy sat down

again on the same tricycle. I came down, I called him over to the side, and told him that I am not interested in having him at my meal, if he couldn't respect my son's possessions. If he was so brazen to come to my house, eat my food, and not respect a simple request not to sit on my son's tricycle, there was no hope of achieving anything by working with this boy.

I asked this Rabbi how he knew he could speak like that to the boy at risk. Weren't you afraid you could lose him? He told me that a boy who is brazen, is already off anyway, for brazen-faced go to Hell. "At the moment, he is a lost case, a waste of time. His problem is mostly a psychological one of basic respect and decency, and his problem is much more than a religious one.

I asked him, "Maybe he is just not respecting you, as a person, but he does respect G-d."

The rabbi told me that it is not so. The Midrash teaches, כל הכופר בטובתו של הבירו סופו שיכפור בטובתו של הקב"ה Anyone who denies the good that his friend does for him will end up denying the good that G-d does for him. Something we learn from Pharaoh, who first denied the good that Yosef did to him, אשר לא ידע את יוסף and then denied the good and the existence of G-d, לא ידעתי את ה' (Tanchuma Shemot 5). If he has no sense of embarrassment and respect for his host, he has no respect for G-d, the Host of the World. He knows of G-d, and he is not embarrassed from Him.

What ended up happening was that the boy blushed, and said he was wrong. Once he realized how low a person he had become, the boy starting improving his behavior, from that Shabbat table on.

Blown away by this idea, of the severity of being brazen faced on practical terms, I realized something amazing. When we say Tachanun, there

is a fundamental introduction that is crucial for getting forgiveness from G-d. שאין אנהנו עזי פנים וקשי עורף... Please G-d, ... accept our prayers, for we are not brazenfaced and stiffnecked, to say in front of you we did not sin. Our saving grace, the power behind our plea for forgiveness, is that we are not brazenfaced, at least during Tachanun.

From the Mishna it seems that brazenness is the make it or break it factor, for Gan Eden or Gehinom. To go to Gan Eden, we need to have some type of embarrassment from G-d, that we owe Him so much, and whatever we do for His Sake, can never be enough. On the other hand, when doing the will of G-d, we need to tap into and internal brazenness, and *be brazen like a leopard*. Why is this juggle of emotions so important? Either you are brazen, or not brazen!?

The Bet Yosef, in his halachic compilation, writes about the psychology of people, something that is somehow a halacha, not just mussar. The Bet Yosef asks, why is it of such great importance to have brazenness, that it is mentioned before being swift, or being mighty, when doing G-d's Will? (OH 1) The Bet Yosef answers, if you want to be religious, if you want to keep halacha, you need to be brazen to go against the "norm". Why is that so?

The Bet Yosef writes, because it is human nature to fear what others think. That is one of your greatest and most powerful drives in life - what people think about you. People *naturally* care more about what people think about them, than they care about what G-d thinks about them. And there is proof to this concept:

R Yochanan Ben Zakai blessed his students with his last breath, יהי רצון שתהא מורא שמים עליכם כמורא, אשר לך תלמידיו: עד כאן? *May it be the Will (of G-d) that you have the fear of Heaven on you, as you have fear of people.* אמרו לו תלמידיו: עד כאן? *His students asked him, that's it? (Fear of G-d should only be up to the degree of fear of people?)* - אמר להם: ולואי! *He said to them, I wish! Know this, when a person does sin, he says (to himself), I hope no one is watching!* (Berachot 28b)

It was said in the name of R' Meir, Why did G-d give the Torah to the Jewish People? Because they are עזין, they are brazen. (Betzah 25b) If you want to bring up your kids to keep halacha, you need to teach them to be brazen, in the right place and the right time. To swim against the current, and be different, if that is what G-d's will is.

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