

Parashat Haazinu, 5773, 2012:

How to Authentically Serve Hashem

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlainmah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Some *pasukim* (verses) of the Hebrew Bible are “luckier” than others. Their frequent repetition has enabled them to become active components in the liturgical repertoire of the Jewish people. The beginning of our *parasha* (Torah portion) contains an example of such an oft-quoted verse: “*Ki shame Hashem ekra havu godel l’Elokeinu*” (“When I call out the name of the L-rd, ascribe greatness to our G-d;” this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). Rashi, the Prince of Commentators, explains our *pasuk* in the following manner:

When I call out the name of the L-rd: Here the word וְכִּי means “when,” just as [it also means “when” in the verse]: “When (וְכִּי) you come to the land...” (*Sefer Vayikra*, 23:10). [The meaning of our verse is therefore:] When I call out and make mention of the L-rd’s name, you shall ascribe greatness to our G-d, and bless His name. From here, our Rabbis derived [the rule] that [the listeners] should respond: “Blessed be the Name of His glorious Kingdom [forever and ever]!” after [every] blessing [recited] in the Temple [instead of “Amen,” which is the response outside the Temple]. — [*Talmud Bavli*, *Ta’anit* 16b]

Herein, Rashi cites one of the many rabbinic explanations that explicate our verse. In particular, it clarifies the reason as to why we declared, “Blessed be the Name of His glorious Kingdom [forever and ever]!” within the Holy Temple’s precincts, rather than “Amen,” as is pronounced outside of the Holy Temple’s environs upon hearing a benediction. The *Talmud Yerushalmi*, in *Berachot* 7:1, however, takes a different approach in its analysis and application of our verse:

We have examples in the Torah wherein a *bracha* is recited before a particular act whereas a blessing is not found after the completion of the act. What is an example of a blessing found in the Torah that precedes a particular act [i.e. in the instance of being called to the Torah – *aliyah*, and Torah study in general]? “*Ki shame Hashem ekra havu godel l’Elokeinu.*” In the instance of *Birkat Hamazon* (Blessings After Eating Bread), we find that there is a biblically mandated blessing at the completion of the meal. What is missing, however, is a biblically ordained blessing prior to beginning the meal. What is recited at the completion of the meal? “And you will eat and be sated, and you shall bless the L-rd, your G-d, for the good land He has given you.” (*Sefer Devarim* 8:10) If this is the case [i.e. that in one instance there is a blessing prior to an act and in the other case a blessing after the act], how do we know that what applies in one case should be applied to both cases? Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachmani in the name of Rabbi Yonatan learned it from the word “*shame*” (“name”) that appears in both of these verses [*gezarah shaveh*, in one case as “*shame*,” and in the other instance as *yud kay vav kay*]. (See *Talmud Bavli, Berachot* 21a for support of my suggested interpretation of this passage.)

Thus, according to the *Talmud Yerushalmi*, “*Ki shame Hashem ekra havu godel l’Elokeinu*” teaches us the requirement to recite a blessing before the public reading of the Torah, as well as prior to individual Torah study [i.e. *Birchot HaTorah*]. The question, of course, is “why?” Stated somewhat differently, “Why must Torah study and its public recitation be preceded by a *bracha*?” I believe we can find an answer to our query by briefly examining a passage found in *Talmud Bavli, Nedarim* 81a, as seen through the interpretive lens of Rabbeinu Nissim of Gerona (known as “the Ran,” 1320–1376):

For Rab Judah said in Rab's name: What is meant by, “Who is the wise man, that he may understand this? [*Sefer Yirmiyahu* 9:11, i.e. why was the Land of Israel destroyed in 586 B.C.E. etc.]” Now, this question was put to the Sages, Prophets, and Ministering Angels, but they could not answer it, until the Almighty Himself did so, as it is written, “And the L-rd said, Because they have forsaken my law which I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, neither walked therein”(Ibid., 12): But is not “have not obeyed my voice” identical with, “neither walked therein?” — Rab Judah said in Rab's name: “[It means] that they did not first recite a benediction over the Torah.” (Translation, *Soncino Talmud*, with my emendations)

The Ran, basing himself upon Rabbeinu Yonah (died 1263), notes that beyond a doubt, the scholars of the time were engaged in dynamic and on-going Torah study. In addition, as far as the “Sages, Prophets, and Ministering Angels” were collectively concerned, this

alone should have been sufficient protection for the Land of Israel and it, therefore, never should have been destroyed. Yet, Hashem knew the absolute truth and the “story behind the story.” Yes, the Sages of the Sixth Century B.C.E. engaged in vigorous Torah interpretation and analysis. Unfortunately, however, they did not recite a *bracha* prior to this act. What exactly was the substance of this act of omission? Rabbeinu Nissim suggested the following insight:

The Torah was not important in their eyes to the extent where they believed it was deserving of having a blessing recited prior to its study. This was the case since they did not study it for its own sake (*lishmah*) [but rather simply out of sheer self-serving intellectual pleasure.] Therefore, they acted in a dismissive manner regarding the recitation of the benediction. This is what the verse means when it states: “neither walked therein.” This means that the Sages of the time lacked the proper intention in their Torah scholarship and failed to study it for its own sake, [i.e. as a service to Hashem]. (Translation and brackets my own)

In many ways the Ran’s interpretation is a spiritual *tour de force*. He teaches us that even if a mitzvah appears to have been perfectly performed, without the proper intention of serving Hashem it is nothing at all. Even worse, it can lead, G-d forbid, to the most dire consequences and frightening results. Therefore, whether we are learning Torah or performing some other mitzvah, we must always remember that we are duty-bound to serve Hashem “with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your means.” (*Sefer Devarim* 6:5) *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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