

Parashat Ki Tetze, 5772, 2012:

To Be Worthy Before Hashem

Rabbi David Etengoff

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 shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Our *parasha* contains 74 of the *Taryag Mitzvot* (613 Commandments). Nearly every other *pasuk* (verse) seems to contain a commandment from Hashem. One of the mitzvot we encounter is that of the *ben sorer u'moreh*, (the wayward and rebellious son):

If a man has a wayward and rebellious son, who does not obey his father or his mother, and they chasten him, and [he still] does not listen to them, his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, and to the gate of his place. And they shall say to the elders of his city, "This son of ours is wayward and rebellious; he does not obey us; [he is] a glutton and a guzzler." And all the men of his city shall pelt him to death with stones, and he shall die. So shall you clear out the evil from among you, and all Israel will listen and fear. (*Sefer Devarim* 21: 18-21, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

As we might suspect, the Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash meticulously analyzed each word, and every nuance of language, in the above found *pasukim*. Then, too, our great *meforshim* (Torah commentators) spent a good deal of time explicating each aspect of the *ben sorer u'moreh*. At first blush, it appears that this mitzvah is similar in kind to all of the 613 Biblical commandments. This thesis, however, is patently false. Our Sages in *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 71a, unequivocally declared: "*Ben sorer u'moreh lo hayah v'lo yihyeh*" ("The *ben sorer u'moreh* never existed and never will exist.") In other words, based upon extended analysis of our passage, our Sages concluded that there has never been, nor will there ever be, an instance of an individual who fits all of the definitional parameters of a *ben sorer u'moreh*.

We are now left with a major quandary: If the *ben sorer u'moreh* never existed and never will exist, why did the Torah give us this mitzvah? Our Sages' answer speaks volumes: “*Elah darush v'kibale s'char*” (“[the entire passage and mitzvah exists] so that one may analyze it and receive reward.”) Stated somewhat differently, Hashem gave us the commandment of *ben sorer u'moreh* for a specific purpose, namely, so that we would plumb the depths of its innermost meaning, and advance the holy process of Torah study and analysis. In other words, Torah study, even when couched within the parameters of the purely theoretical, has incalculable value.

I believe, however, that there is an additional and parallel reason as to why Hashem gave us the mitzvah of *ben sorer u'moreh*. It appears to me that it is part of Hashem's divine strategy to bring *zechut* (merit) to our people through its extended study and explication. *Chazal* (Our Sages of Blessed Memory) coined a term for this concept: “*l'zakot et Yisrael*.” We find the clearest and best-known expression of *l'zakot et Yisrael* in the statement of the Mishnaic period figure, Rabbi Chanania ben Akashia. It is recited at the end of each chapter of *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) and quite often at the end of a *shiur* (Torah study lesson):

Rabbi Chanania ben Akashia says: “The Holy One, Blessed is He, wished to confer merit upon Israel; therefore He gave them Torah and mitzvot in abundance, as it is said: ‘Hashem desired for the sake of its [Israel's] righteousness, that the Torah be made great and glorious.’” (Isaiah 60:21) (Translation, *Artscroll Siddur*)

Rabbi Chanania ben Akashia is unmistakably teaching us that one reason why *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* gave us His holy Torah is to make us even more worthy in His eyes. It is true that we all have some degree of *zechut avot* (merit of our forefathers). This, however, is dependent upon exactly who our particular ancestors were. As Rashi (1040-1105) in his

commentary to *Sefer Bereishit* 25:21 notes, a *tzadik ben tzadik* (a righteous individual whose father was a righteous individual) has a distinct advantage over a *tzadik ben rasha* (a righteous individual whose father was an unrighteous individual). The *zechut* of the mitzvot, however, serves to “level the playing field” and allow everyone the opportunity, regardless of his or her ancestry, to achieve prominence in “Hashem’s eyes.” In short, each of us can achieve true greatness in the “eyes of Hashem” through Torah study and mitzvot observance. Once again, we can call upon Rashi in his explanation of this concept, as presented in his glosses to *Talmud Bavli, Makkot* 23b:

The Torah had no need to command many of the mitzvot and the admonitions (prohibitions) regarding crawling bugs and improperly slaughtered animals, since there is no one who naturally does not pull back from them [in disgust]. The only reason why they were commanded was to [enable man] to receive reward by separating [himself] from them.

We are now in *Chodesh Elul* (the month of Elul). In a few short weeks, our Creator will judge us during the most awe-filled and inspiring days of the Jewish calendar, the two days of Rosh Hashanah. G-d will do this in reference to our people, and the entire world, in absolute honesty, and reject our myriad excuses and “brilliant” rationalizations. This thought alone is enough to make the entire universe tremble before Him. We are, therefore, truly blessed that the Master of the Universe has bestowed His holy Torah upon us *l'zakot et Yisrael*. Quite simply, when we loyally follow its precepts, the Torah is our greatest advocate for a divine judgment that is tempered by mercy and compassion.

In the waning weeks of this calendar year, may we redouble our efforts to be true *avdei Hashem* (servants of G-d). Let us pray, as well, that we will have the wisdom and discernment to separate truth from fleeting folly, and do our best to live lives filled with

kedushah (holiness). In sum, may we become truly worthy before Hashem, and be *zocheh* (merit) to have long, healthy, prosperous, and joyful lives as we strive to fulfill His Torah. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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My audio *shiurim* on *Tefilah and Haskafah* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sp5vt3>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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