

Parashat Bechuchotai 5771, 2011:

Torah Study: The Essence of Our Lives

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The first three words of our *parasha* offer a significant exegetical challenge. The phrase “*Im bechuchotai taleichu*” theoretically should be translated as: “If you will walk after (or follow) My [G-d’s] *chukim*,” wherein *chukim* has the standard connotation of those commandments whose reasons currently remain unknown. They are most often contrasted with *mishpatim*, *mitzvot* whose rationale are manifest. This distinction is presented in the following well-known passage from *Talmud Bavli, Yoma 67b*:

Our Rabbis taught: “You should perform my *mishpatim*” (*Sefer Vayikra* 18:4). These are matters that were they not actually written [by G-d] it is logical that they would have been. These are some examples: the prohibitions of idol worship, illicit sexual behavior, murder, stealing, and cursing Hashem. “... and you should guard my *chukim*” [Ibid.] These are matters wherein the Satan [Rashi, *yetzer harah*, the “evil inclination”] attempts to disprove their validity and veracity. These are some examples: the prohibitions of eating pig flesh, wearing garments comprised of a mixture of linen and wool threads, the act of relieving a brother-in-law of his obligation to marry his widowed sister-in-law (*chalitzah*), the ritual purification of the individual afflicted with *Tzarat*, and the scapegoat rite [of Yom Kippur]. [Since you cannot understand them] perhaps you will say that they are completely worthless and devoid of meaning! Therefore the Torah states [Ibid.]: “I am the L-rd your G-d.” I am He who has decreed it [i.e. the *chukim*] and you do not have permission to question them. (Translation, my own)

At the beginning of our *parasha*, however, Rashi (1040-1105), the Prince of Torah commentators, does not translate *bechuchotai* as a form of *chukim*, and as referring to fulfillment of the Torah’s precepts. Instead, he explains *bechuchotai* as a synonym for intense involvement with Torah study:

If you follow My statutes I might think that this refers to the fulfillment of the commandments. However, when Scripture says, “and observe My commandments,” the fulfillment of the commandments is [already] stated. So what is the meaning of “If you

follow My statutes [*chukim*]”? It means that you must toil in the study of Torah (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendation)

Rashi’s deviation from the approach of the above-cited Talmudic passage is based upon another section in the writings of *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory):

“If you follow My statutes (*chukim*)” – I would have thought that this refers to the mitzvot. When, however, the Torah writes: “...and My mitzvot you will keep and perform them” – that is referring to the mitzvot. [If that is the case,] how do I fulfill “If you follow My statutes (*chukim*)?” – this perforce refers to intense involvement in Torah study (*amalim b’Torah*). (*Midrash Torat Kohanim* 26:2, translation and emphasis my own)

Clearly, then, Rashi has solid precedent for translating *chukim* in our context as “toil in the study of Torah,” rather than as referring to those *mitzvot* whose rationale currently elude our understanding.

What, however, does “intense involvement with Torah study” (“*amalim b’Torah*”) actually mean? The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) offers us a classic definition that is based upon a variety of Talmudic sources:

A person is obligated to divide his study time in three: one third should be devoted to the Written Law; one third to the Oral Law; and one third to understanding and conceptualizing the ultimate derivation of a concept from its roots, inferring one concept from another and comparing concepts, understanding [the Torah] based on the principles of Biblical exegesis, until one appreciates the essence of those principles and how the prohibitions and the other decisions which one received according to the oral tradition can be derived using them. The latter topic is called *Talmud*. How is the above expressed? A person who is a craftsman may spend three hours each day involved in his work, and [devote] **nine hours** to Torah study: In those nine hours, he should spend three reading the Written Law; three, the Oral Law; and three, meditating with his intellect to derive one concept from another...

The above applies in the early stages of a person's study. However, when a person increases his knowledge and does not have the need to read the Written Law, or occupy himself with the Oral Law constantly, he should study the Written Law and the oral tradition at designated times. Thus, he will not forget any aspect of the laws of the Torah. [However,] he should focus his attention on the *Talmud* alone for his entire life, according to his ambition and his ability to concentrate. (*Mishneh Torah, Sefer Madda, Hilchot Talmud Torah* 1:11-12, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, with my emendations)

based upon Rabbi Yosef Dovid Kapach's Hebrew edition, underlining and bolding my own)

It should be noted that the Rambam is referring in this section to a craftsman (i.e. an artisan or a worker) and not a professional Torah scholar, rebbe, or rav. Everyone, therefore, is obligated to intensely study, and attempt to master, the entire Torah (*kol haTorah kulah*) through the utmost dedication and focus of his spiritual and physical efforts. Thus, Torah study must be the essence and being of a person's life, rather than merely something in which he occasionally engages.

In my view, intellectual honesty is one of the most important characteristics of those who are *amalim b'Torah*. This means that no matter how much work and effort has been expended in developing the most multi-faceted analysis of a Torah topic, one must be prepared to jettison everything in pursuit of the truth. Allow me to share a remarkable story of my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993); known as the "Rav," that illustrates this approach to Torah study and analysis in no uncertain terms:

The Rav's intellectual honesty was impressive and awe-inspiring. He had been developing a certain line of thought in one of the *sugyot* [Talmudic topics] over a number of days, when one of my friends interrupted him to say that one of the *Rishonim* [early Talmudic commentators] appeared to contradict his whole thesis. His first reaction ... was to vigorously defend his position. This time was no exception; then suddenly he fell silent, put his head in his hands and said nothing for 20 minutes. After the twenty minutes, the Rav stood up, closed his *Gemara* and announced to his stunned students that the *shiur* [Torah lesson] was over.

The next day he came to class, announced that the student had made a valid point and had caused him to rework the concept and the *shiur* to include the objections which had been raised. We were overwhelmed by his remarkable intellectual honesty! The Rav could have fudged it, he could have used his superior mind and knowledge to manipulate the text and, in the process, rescue his theory and his ego. But he did nothing of the sort! Through that incident he showed us in the clearest manner that the primary goal of Talmud Torah [Torah study] is truth, and that in the pursuit of intellectual honesty and "truth in learning," nothing can be an impediment. (Rabbi Dr. Bernard Rosensweig, in

Mentor of Generations: Reflections on Rabbi Joseph B, Soloveitchik, Zev Eleff, editor, pages 46-47, brackets and underlining my own)

May *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He) help us to be true *amalim b'Torah* and to pursue the highest heights of intellectual honesty in our desire to understand His holy Torah. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my website:

<http://reparashathavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at rdbe718@gmail.com.