



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

Parshas Devarim 5770 פַּרְשַׁת דְּבָרִים תש"ע

WHY THE LAND WAS LOST

This question – why the Destruction was visited upon the Jewish people, their Temple, and their land – perplexed nearly everyone. As recorded by the Gemara (*Bava Metzia 85b*), even the prophets and the Sages were stunned; what exactly had this people done to deserve being plunged into disaster and exile? And while the verse provides as the underlying reason that “they abandoned my Torah (*Yirmiyah 9:12*),” the facts on the ground did not seem to square with this assessment. To all appearance, the society at that time was steeped in Torah study and adherence.

And so, the Gemara concludes, their “sin” consisted of the following: While it was true that they learned Torah, they left out an important preliminary: they did not make the *blessing* on Torah study.

This may appear strange, at first glance. If they in fact were engaged in learning Torah, why did they skip the blessing? And even if they did, why did it incur such a severe punishment? True, deleting the blessing – for whatever reason – was certainly not praiseworthy; but how are we to understand that the Jewish people lost the Beis Hamikdash and went into exile on account of this particular misstep?

This enigmatic issue is clarified by the Beis Halevy (*parshas Mishpatim*). He explains that – at the root of their mysterious omission – lay a corrupt outlook. To better understand his remarks, let us first clarify a few concepts.

TWO TYPES OF MITZVOS

Mitzvah-related activities can basically be divided into two categories: the *hechsher* mitzvah (acts undertaken

in preparation of the performance of a mitzvah) and the *guf hamitzvah* (the mitzvah itself). For instance, shaking a *lulav* on Succos is the *guf hamitzvah*; acquiring and arranging the species is the *hechsher*.

There are numerous differences in *halachah* between these two aspects. One example of these ramifications pertains to the laws dealing with oaths. The Mishnah in Shavuos (3:6) states:

נִשְׁבַּע לְבַטֵּל אֶת הַמִּצְוָה וְלֹא בִטֵּל, פָּטוּר.

“If someone swore he would refrain from fulfilling a particular mitzvah, and then he actually fulfilled that mitzvah (in violation of his oath), he is exempt (i.e., he is not liable for the transgression of breaking his oath).”

A person swore he would not shake a *lulav* on Succos; but when the holiday came, he did fulfill the mitzvah. One may have thought that his action was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, he performed the mitzvah of taking the four species on Succos, which is a Torah obligation. At the same time, this very act was (seemingly) forbidden to him and would constitute a grave sin, for he had proscribed such a deed with an oath.

The Mishnah tells us, then, that he is in the clear and has violated nothing by performing this mitzvah. The reason is that his oath was never valid in the first place; one may take an oath that he will not eat on a certain day or that he will not undertake a certain journey, but he does not have the power to swear to cancel a mitzvah (*Shavuos 27a*).

There are authorities who maintain, however, that this idea applies only to the *guf hamitzvah*, the mitzvah itself. Had he taken an oath to refrain from

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a *hechsher* mitzvah (for instance, that he would not chop wood to use for a Succah), such an oath might, in fact, be binding (*Avnei Nezer, Orach Chaim, 535:10*).

BLESSING ON THE TORAH

Another ramification relates back to the issue at hand, as it involves the question of a mitzvah blessing. Many *mitzvos* do require a preceding blessing – such as before eating matzah, before putting on *tefillin*, etc. However, it appears that we do not make a blessing before an act of mere preparation for a mitzvah (*Menachos 42*).

The generation of the Destruction received their retribution for leaving out the blessing over Torah study. As mentioned, this very arrangement appears somewhat strange; they learned plenty of Torah, yet they would not bless on it. Why did they do this? The Beis Halevy explains that they actually had *halachic* considerations. Unfortunately, they were based on a tragic misconception and lack of appreciation of what Torah is.

These individuals maintained that Torah study was important – but not necessarily in its own right. In other words, they didn't think that Torah study was inherently a mitzvah – a *guf hamitzvah*. They saw it as a practical endeavor, a means to perform the *mitzvos*. In other words, in the eyes of this generation, Torah study was merely a *hechsher* mitzvah, a necessary preliminary to the proper performance of *mitzvos*. In order to wear *tefillin* properly, one had to learn how to do it; to keep the laws of kashrus, one needed to be proficient in its numerous and intricate details. But in their minds, that's all it was – a *hechsher* mitzvah. As such, they maintained, there was no need to make a blessing before studying Torah, just as one would not make a blessing before gathering wood to build a Succah.

This was a tragic mistake. The actual *halachah* mandates a blessing for learning because Torah study is a lot more than a mere means to proper observance.

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While it is true that mitzvah performance requires advanced knowledge and study, the obligation to study Torah goes well beyond this purpose. Learning Torah is a mitzvah in and of itself, for its own sake. Even if an individual was to be completely proficient in all of the laws, he would still be obligated to dedicate himself to plumb the Torah's depths. Since it is a *guf hamitzvah*, one must recite the Torah blessing.

Had that generation appreciated Torah for its own sake and reflected on the true nature of what Torah is, they would have realized that its study was an end in itself.

What still requires explanation is the issue of severity: Why did they deserve such harsh consequences for their mistaken assessment? *Im yirtzeh* Hashem, we will address this question in a future article.

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