

# *Parshas Bechukosai*

Presented By Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky Shlita, Dean

## *1. The Special Standard to Which a Jew is Held*

The Torah states, **“If your brother becomes impoverished and his means falter in your proximity, you shall strengthen him – proselyte or resident – so that he can live with you.”**

The Torah tells us that if one sees a pack animal of his fellow faltering under its load, he is obligated to unload the animal so that it should not fall. Should the animal fall it would require many people to lift the load. Similarly, if one sees his fellow faltering due to his financial situation, he must assist him before he becomes destitute.

The Midrash *Tanchuma* cites a verse in *Mishlei* (Proverbs), “Do not steal from a poor man because he is poor. Hashem will take up his cause.” The Midrash explains, “Do not steal from the poor man because I (Hashem) decreed that he should be poor. If one victimizes the poor person it is as if he is mocking Me (Hashem).” The Midrash asks, “What is the meaning of “stealing from a poor man?” Why would one attempt to steal from one who has nothing? Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) must be addressing a specific situation. Initially one had taken upon himself to give financial assistance to his fellow to alleviate his financial plight. However, after some time the benefactor asks himself, “How long must I continue to support this needy person?” He then decides to withdraw his support.

Since the needy person had relied upon his benefactor for support, withholding the assistance is considered stealing. One must continue to support the needy individual because he has nowhere else to turn. If one withdraws his support, then Hashem will take up his cause and fight his battle. Thus if one ceases to support a needy person (who has come to rely upon him) he is culpable. How do we understand this?

The reason an individual merited wealth while his fellow did not is only because Hashem Willed this to be so. If G-d wanted to reverse the circumstances of these two individuals, He could do so easily. Thus, the person of means should be thankful that G-d put him in a position to be the benefactor rather than the beneficiary of someone else’s support. If the wealthy man decides to withdraw his support (of the one in need), G-d considers it “stealing.” Thus, we see the standard to which a Jew is held is far more reaching than the standard of the nations of the world.

The Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos* tells us that prior to the Sinai event, G-d approached the nations of the world and offered them His Torah. Each nation refused the Torah because its laws were not in conformity with their lifestyle. For example, when G-d offered the Torah to the Edomites (descendants of Esav) they asked, “What is written in it?” G-d responded, “Thou shall not commit murder.” To this they responded, “If this is the case then we cannot accept it because we received a blessing from our grandfather (Yitzchak) – you shall live by the sword.” Why did all the nations reject the Torah because its principles were contradictory to their lifestyle? Every civilized society has within its governing laws that prohibit murder, stealing, etc.

Rabbi Y.I Ruderman zt'l (Baltimore Rosh HaYeshivah) answers this question by explaining that when G-d said, "It is stated in My Torah – Thou shall not commit murder" it was not the blatant violation of shedding blood and taking a life (which is one of the seven Noachide Laws). Rather it was something at a more sensitive level. The Gemara in Tractate *Bava Metzia* states, "If one embarrasses his fellow in public to the point that his face changes color, it is considered as if he had killed him. If one undermines his fellow's livelihood it is considered as if he had taken his life." Although within the context of the seven Noachide laws, killing means literally taking a life, however, if one were to accept the Torah, he is held to a higher standard. Thus when the verse states, "Do not steal from the poor man," it does not only mean taking something that is not rightfully yours but rather one should not deprive the person who relies on his support.

Therefore when G-d provides one with wealth it is for the sole purpose of alleviating the plight of his fellow -as the verse states, "**If your brother becomes impoverished and his means falter in your proximity, you shall strengthen him – proselyte or resident – so that he can live with you.**"

## ***2. Focusing on One's Spirituality***

The Torah states, "**If your brother becomes impoverished and his means falter in your proximity, you shall strengthen him...**" On a literal level, the verse is addressing one's obligation to his fellow when he falters financially. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains this verse allegorically. The "brother" who falters is referring to one who is closest to the individual who can help him. One's soul (*neshama*) is closest to oneself. The "brother" faltering is thus referring to one's own spirituality. The Torah is telling us that when one sees that he is faltering spiritually (no longer senses illumination and does not feel energized by his own performance of mitzvos and Torah study) he must strengthen himself. One who is spiritually deficient is considered impoverished because he is disconnected from his source and has thus lost his "splendor."

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that the reason for spiritual faltering and disconnection is due to the *neshama* being influenced by the physicality of man. Thus, one must pray to Hashem to restore it to its original state which is unaffected by his own physicality. How does one restore his sense of spirituality when engaging in Torah study and mitzvos? It is only through *teshuvah* (repentance) that one is able to restore and re-instate his *neshama* to its original and exalted state. The Torah is telling us when one focuses on materialism it causes his *neshama* to wither. Therefore, the only approach to reinvigorating one's spirituality is through the process of *teshuvah*.

Most people feel and believe that the time for *teshuvah* is the period of time that leads up to Yom Kippur. We recite three times a day in our tefillah (prayer), "Bring us back, our Father, to Your Torah, and bring us near, our King, to Your service, and influence us to return in perfect **repentance (teshuvah)** before You. Blessed are You Hashem Who desires **repentance.**" We continuously beseech Hashem to assist us to do *teshuvah*. If we continuously acknowledge that Hashem wants us to do *teshuvah*, and we do not attempt to repent, then for what are we praying?

Are our prayers sincere? If one truly desires to do teshuvah as much as he wants G-d to assist him with his livelihood, then there is no question that G-d will respond and give him the ability to do *teshuvah*.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Ber Solovetchik zt'l (The Bais HaLevi zt'l) at one point in his life became disillusioned with the rabbinate. His only interest was to focus on the study of Torah. A delegation from Brisk approached him to assume the position of Chief Rabbi of their community. The Bais HaLevi refused the position outright. However when they returned to him a second time they informed him that the 25,000 Jews of the Brisk community were waiting for him to assume the position of their Chief Rabbi. The Bais HaLevi was not able to refuse. He said, "If the Jews of Brisk are awaiting my acceptance, I cannot refuse." He accepted the position.

When the Chofetz Chaim heard this story he had said, "If the Jewish people were truly sincere when they pray for the coming of Moshiach, Hashem would bring him immediately." If the Bais HaLevi could not refuse the sincere request of the Brisk community, it is logical to say that Hashem, the All Merciful One, could not refuse our sincere request to bring Moshiach

The Gemara tells us, "If it were not for Hashem's assistance, one could not subdue his evil inclination." Without Hashem's intervention, it is not possible to develop, refine, and protect one's spirituality. Every Jew needs G-d's Assistance. However, one only merits this assistance if he sincerely desires it. Thus, one must first focus on developing a sincere interest in his own spiritual development and then act upon it by beseeching Hashem through *tefillah* (prayer).

On the holidays, we say a prayer in which we ask G-d to enable us to do deeds that are truly good "in His eyes." Meaning, even when one believes that he is doing the right thing, it may not be the case. It is only if Hashem values deeds as being "good" that they are so. Therefore, we must continuously pray for His Assistance to direct us to do what is truly good in His eyes.

### ***3. The Innate Value of Torah***

The Torah states, "***Im BeChukosai teileichu v'es Mitzvosai tishmeru...*** (If you will follow My Statutes and observe My Commandments and perform them); **then I will provide for your rains in their time. And the land will give forth its produce and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit.**" If one follows Hashem's Statutes, he will be deserving of G-d's endless bounty. *Chukim* (Statutes) are laws that are not able to be understood within a rational context.

Rashi cites Chazal who explain that when the Torah states, "***If you will follow My Statutes...***" it is referring to the quality of the Jew's commitment to toil in the study of Torah. Thus, the Statute that the Torah is referring to is the selfless commitment to the study of Torah. In addition, the Torah is telling us that one must study for the sake of performing mitzvos. Both the study of Torah and the performance of mitzvos should be done with selfless dedication. However, the Torah states, "***If you will not listen to Me and will not perform all of these commandments...I will turn My***

**attention against you...**” Evidently, if one toils in Torah, he will be deserving of endless blessing; however if he does not selflessly toil in Torah (although he is studying) he will be deserving of the curses stated in this Portion. How do we understand this?

Toiling in Torah study is classified as a *Chok* (Statute) which cannot be understood within a rational context. One would think that one’s dedication to Torah study would be a prerequisite for one’s quality of performance of mitzvos and understanding of the Will of Hashem. However the Torah is telling us that the reason one must toil in Torah and apply himself selflessly is not because of one’s own personal understanding but rather because it is the Decree of G-d. If one’s approach to Torah study was solely based on one’s own rational understanding of value, then it is possible that it could be undermined by another rational approach to the contrary. However, since dedicated Torah study is classified as *Chok*, it is a level of commitment that cannot be questioned.

The verse that introduces the curses - **“If you will not listen to Me...”** does not necessarily refer to one who does not toil in Torah. Rather it refers to one who may toil in Torah but he does not do so, “for Me (G-d).” Meaning, he does not accept it as a Statute of G-d (*Chok*). The dedication of Torah study must be purely for the sake of fulfilling G-d’s Decree and not for any other reason.

One only merits the bounty and the blessing of Hashem only if he negates himself to G-d and accepts Hashem’s Will as a Statute. However, if one adheres to the Statutes because of his own rational understating, (although he is observing the law) he will not merit the advanced level of blessing.

One’s adherence to Torah must be rooted in one’s unequivocal acceptance of the G-d’s Divine Edicts. If one does not accept the Torah in this context, his observance of any mitzvah (rational or not) can come into question. Whenever the Torah delineates one’s obligations it does so in the following order: *Chukim* (Statutes), *Mishpatim* (Commandments), and Mitzvos. This is to communicate that even when one performs a mitzvah that we can relate to its value, in essence it is being observed as a *Chok*. This is why the *Mishpatim* are always predicated on *Chukim* – to communicate this principle. For example, the Commandments that prohibit killing and stealing, which are classified as rational laws, are in effect not rooted in rational thought but rather based on the Divine. One adheres to all mitzvos (including the ones we seemingly understand) only because it is the Will of Hashem. One merits Hashem’s blessing when one adheres to the Torah under these terms.

Rambam rules that one is only permitted to interrupt his Torah study if another mitzvah presents itself which cannot be delegated through a third party. Thus, if one decides to interrupt his Torah study for any reason other than that permitted by the Torah (although he may be performing a mitzvah) he will not merit blessing. It is only the one who studies Torah, as outlined by the Word of Hashem, who merits blessing.

To achieve a selfless level of dedication to Torah and its ideals, one must negate his own personal rational understanding of its value. Only then will he merit the endless bounty of Hashem.

#### 4. *Why are Jews not Counted?*

Ramban at the beginning of the Portion of *Bamidbar* addresses the failing of Dovid HaMelech (King David) vis-à-vis the census that he had taken. Dovid HaMelech took a census of the Jewish people in order to quantify the dimension of his kingdom. As a result of this, thousands of Jews died from plague. Ramban explains that Dovid had violated the law that is stated, “They (the Jewish people) shall not be counted because of their abundance.” The consequence of transgressing this negative precept was the onset of plague. If the basis of the prohibition (of quantifying the Jewish people) is because they are “abundant in number” (and are un-quantifiable), then if they can be counted, they are not at that “un-quantifiable” number. In addition, why is plague a consequence of counting?

The Torah states, “**If you will follow My Statutes and observe My Commandments and perform them...You will pursue your enemies; and they will fall before you by the sword. Five of you will pursue a hundred, and a hundred of you will pursue ten thousand...**” The Torah is communicating to us that if the Jewish people adhere to the Word of Hashem, five Jews could pursue one hundred of the enemy and a hundred Jews could pursue ten thousand enemies. How is this possible when the number of people is so incongruous?

The intrinsic value of a Jew does not emanate from his own capabilities. His innate value rests in the fact that he has a connection to Hashem. The Jewish people are the “Kingly, priestly, and holy nation” of Hashem. Just as G-d’s essence is un-quantifiable and limitless, because He is infinite, anything that is connected to Him has a semblance of limitlessness. When the Jewish people adhere to the Torah and live their lives as prescribed by Hashem, they become invincible. Quantitative value plays no role whatsoever.

The Torah tells us that G-d promised Avraham our Patriarch that his offspring will be as innumerable as the stars in the heavens and the sand on the seashore. The reality is that the Jewish people (throughout history) have never reached those numbers. We have always been few in number vis-à-vis the world. How do we understand G-d’s promise to Avraham?

The “abundance” of the Jewish people that is stated in the Torah is not a quantitative measure, but rather qualitative. The Mishna in Tractate *Sanhedrin* tells us that if one saves the life of one Jew it is the equivalent of saving the whole world. Since this is the case, is it not possible to compute the value of even one Jew. Thus if one takes a census of the Jewish people for the sake of quantification, it is a distortion and a detraction of their true value. Dovid transgressed because his focus was on the physicality of the Jewish people (which is quantifiable) rather than the essence of the Jewish people.

Thus, consequence of this negative precept of counting the Jews is death. If one attempts to value the physical rather than recognizing and appreciating the essence (which is the spiritual), Hashem teaches us that the physical does not matter (i.e. plague).

Shamai, the Elder, tells us in Pirkei Avos that one's Torah study should be primary while one's work should be secondary. One's focus needs to be on his spirituality. As the Torah states, "***Im BeChukosai teileichu v'es Mitzvosai t'shmeru...*** **If you will follow My Statutes and observe My Commandments and perform them...**" Meaning if a Jew prioritizes his spirituality/Torah study then his focus is his own essence. If this is the case then there are no limitations. One becomes a receptacle for unlimited bounty and blessing without making a commensurate amount of effort.

In the story of Chanukah we read that a handful of Choshmona'im (who were known as Maccabim) were able to defeat the mighty Greek army. How was this possible? The name Maccabe identified the devoted group of Choshmona'im (priests) whose war cry was Me ChaMocha B'elim Hashem (Who is like you G-d). The Choshmona'im defeated the mighty Greeks because they relied solely on their relationship with Hashem and not their own physical capabilities. It was only because of their belief and dedication to G-d that their miniscule number was irrelevant. Thus, one who is committed to G-d and adheres to His statutes will be able to surpass many limitations and merit unlimited beracha (blessing).

## ***5. Appreciating the Merit of the Patriarchs***

The Torah tells us that after the Jewish people experience tragedies for not adhering to the Statutes and Commandments of the Torah, they will repent. The Torah states, "**Then they will confess their sin...perhaps then their unfeeling heart will be humbled and then they will gain appeasement for their sin. I will remember My covenant with Yaakov, My covenant with Yitzchak, and also My covenant with Avraham will I remember...**" It is evident from this verse that the Jewish people will do a sincere *teshuvah* (repentance) after experiencing the curses. If in fact the quality of their *teshuvah* is sincere and complete, then why is it necessary for Hashem to "remember" the covenant of the Patriarchs? One would think that *teshuvah* in its own right would be sufficient.

Rambam writes in *Hilchos Teshuvah* (The Laws of Repentance) that since we no longer have the Bais HaMikdash (Temple – where the offerings of atonement were brought), "teshuvah itself is the altar of atonement." If *teshuvah* brings about full atonement there should be no additional prerequisite. However, the Torah tells us that without G-d remembering the covenant of the Patriarchs, the Jewish people will not be forgiven. How do we understand this?

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that confession and repentance alone can only annul the decrees that come upon the Jewish people. The Jewish people are no longer held liable for their past transgressions. However in order to be fully reinstated (as if they had never sinned before) in the Eyes of Hashem, one needs the merit of the Patriarchs – Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

The Gemara in Tractate *Zevachim* states when one would bring a sin offering it was accompanied with a burnt offering (*korbon olah*). The Gemara uses an analogy to explain the need for the additional burnt offering. If one sins against the king and is subsequently forgiven, although a claim against him no longer exists, he is still not in the good graces of the king. He can only reach full reinstatement when he offers a gift to the king. Identically, when one brings a sin offering it brings about atonement; however, full reinstatement is not achieved until the burnt offering is brought. As much a Jew may do *teshuvah*, he will not regain an intimate relationship with G-d without the merit of the Patriarchs.

The Patriarchs were able to achieve a unique level of intimacy with G-d because of their spiritual accomplishments. When one mentions them in the course of *tefillah* (prayer), one identifies with the Patriarchs and consequently Hashem is more attentive to his prayers. Without their merit, it is not possible to attain that special level of intimacy with Hashem.

The Torah tells us that despite the failings of the Jewish people, they were not considered “detestable, or despicable to be destroyed and to have the covenant of the Patriarchs nullified.” How has this been demonstrated throughout our history?

The Gemara in Tractate *Megillah* tells us that despite the fact many of the Jewish people were Hellenized and assimilated during the time of the Greek occupation, Hashem did not abandon them. When the Jews were in Babylon, many of them assimilated and intermarried; Hashem did not abandon them. After the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans, the Jews were not cast away. This was demonstrated by sending Reb Yehudah HaNassi (Judah the Prince) and Torah sages throughout the generations to the Jewish people.

In fact, the only reason the Jewish people have been able to survive spiritually throughout the Edomite (Roman) exile, is that they were sent these Torah luminaries. Since G-d provided special individuals, who guaranteed the perpetuation and dissemination of the Torah, it is an indication that He does not want His covenant to be nullified. Despite the failings of the Jewish people, G-d did not abandon them. However, it is due to the merit of the Patriarchs that the Jewish people have that special standing vis-à-vis Hashem.

The Maharal of Prague explains that the reason G-d’s law (Five Books of Moses) is referred to as “Torah” by G-d Himself, is to indicate (as the meaning of the word implies) that it is meant to be a guide to direct and give perspective to the Jewish people. Hashem provides the Torah sage in order to transmit and communicate the Torah throughout all the generations, thus, confirming that the covenant of the Patriarchs is still intact.

## ***6. The Foundation of Torah Judaism***

As a precursor to the curses (*tochachah*), the Torah states, “**If you will not listen to Me and will not perform all of these commandments; if you consider My Statutes (*Chukim*)**

**loathsome and if your being rejects My ordinances (*Mishpatim*)...so that you annul My covenant – then I will do the same to you...**” Why would one loathe the *Chukim*, which are laws that cannot be understood on rational basis, and not all the laws that were transmitted at Sinai?

During the era of the Greeks, circumcision, the sanctification of the new moon, the observance of the Shabbos, and the study of Torah were banned. The Greek civilization prided itself in its intellectualism and appreciation for nature and its beauty. Yefes, the son of Noach, is the patriarch of the Greek people. He received a blessing from his father Noach that he should “dwell in the tents of Shem.” The tent of Shem is referring to the wisdom of Torah and its intellectualism. The Greeks had an appreciation of the intellectualism of the Jew; however, they had difficulty with its limitation because it is bound by the parameters of the Torah. Within the framework of Torah the depth and breadth of wisdom is infinite. Although there are many practices and concepts in the Torah, which are not within the human grasp, nevertheless, the Jew accepts them unequivocally because of his absolute belief in G-d. This is demonstrated through the acceptance of the *Chok* (Statute).

Although existence is bound by time, by Divine order, the Jewish people are able to sanctify and control time through the sanctification of the new moon. One can only accept this reality if one accepts G-d as the Absolute Omnipotent Being. The Greeks could not accept anything unless it was something they were able to comprehend within their own capacity. The concept of the human being affecting time was something beyond their comprehension and thus intolerable. The Greeks therefore decreed that the sanctification of the new moon was forbidden.

A male is naturally born with a foreskin/uncircumcised. The Greeks believed that the uncircumcised state, being part of the natural order, should be appreciated and recognized as part of the perfection and beauty of the human body. Contrastingly, G-d commanded the Jew to remove that foreskin through circumcision because it is only through that act man can achieve perfection. The act of circumcision is classified as a *Chok*. There is no rational basis for its understanding. Since the Greeks viewed the human body as naturally perfect, circumcision was seen as an act of mutilation. Thus, they forbade circumcision.

The mitzvah of charity for example is a commandment that is embraced even in the secular world only because it is understood as rational and humanitarian. However, *Chukim* such as circumcision, dietary laws, and the observance of the Shabbos are seen as archaic and primitive practices. Therefore, they are loathed. Since the *Chok* is incomprehensible, it is loathed and rejected, which is not the case regarding *Mishpatim* (rational laws). In essence, loathing the *Chukim* is rejecting G-d’s Will.

One who initially loathes the *Chukim* will ultimately come to despise the *Mishpatim* as well. Rational laws such as not stealing, not killing, etc. are accepted by the secularist because they are perceived as moral, ethical, and humanistic. However, these laws were given by G-d at Sinai and the Jew accepts them not because of their humanitarian aspect but solely because they are G-d’s Dictate. Thus, in essence, even the *Mishpatim* are not accepted because of rational understanding but because they are the Will of Hashem. If *Mishpatim* were to be based on human reasoning, then it would be possible to justify euthanasia. Thus, the *Mishpatim* would ultimately be rejected and despised because they are contrary to one’s intellectualism.

To serve G-d selflessly, one must understand that not everything is comprehensible. Man is finite and limited and therefore there are many areas that are not within the human grasp. If one believes that G-d is the Omnipotent Being, there is no basis for not accepting and adhering to the *Chukim* that are His Will. The moment one has difficulty accepting the *Chukim* because he “does not understand,” it is an indication that his weakness lies in his understanding of G-d. As long as one is unequivocally committed to the Statutes, the path to spiritual growth and development is open before him.

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Most people feel and believe that the time for *teshuvah* is the period of time that leads up to Yom Kippur. We recite three times a day in our tefillah (prayer), “Bring us back, our Father, to Your Torah, and bring us near, our King, to Your service, and influence us to return in perfect **repentance** (*teshuvah*) before You. Blessed are You Hashem Who desires **repentance**.” We continuously beseech Hashem to assist us to do *teshuvah*. If we continuously acknowledge that Hashem wants us to do *teshuvah*, and we do not attempt to repent, then for what are we praying? Are our prayers sincere? If one truly desires to do teshuvah as much as he wants G-d to assist him with his livelihood, then there is no question that G-d will respond and give him the ability to do *teshuvah*.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Ber Solovetchik zt'l (The Bais HaLevi zt'l) at one point in his life became disillusioned with the rabbinate. His only interest was to focus on the study of Torah. A delegation from Brisk approached him to assume the position of Chief Rabbi of their community. The Bais HaLevi refused the position outright. However when they returned to him a second time they informed him that the 25,000 Jews of the Brisk community were waiting for him to assume the position of their Chief Rabbi. The Bais HaLevi was not able to refuse. He said, “If the Jews of Brisk are awaiting my acceptance, I cannot refuse.” He accepted the position.

When the Chofetz Chaim heard this story he had said, “If the Jewish people were truly sincere when they pray for the coming of Moshiach, Hashem would bring him immediately.” If the Bais HaLevi could not refuse the sincere request of the Brisk community, it is logical to say that Hashem, the All Merciful One, could not refuse our sincere request to bring Moshiach

The Gemara tells us, “If it were not for Hashem’s assistance, one could not subdue his evil inclination.” Without Hashem’s intervention, it is not possible to develop, refine, and protect one’s spirituality. Every Jew needs G-d’s Assistance. However, one only merits this assistance if he sincerely desires it. Thus, one must first focus on developing a sincere interest in his own spiritual development and then act upon it by beseeching Hashem through *tefillah* (prayer).

On the holidays, we say a prayer in which we ask G-d to enable us to do deeds that are truly good “in His eyes.” Meaning, even when one believes that he is doing the right thing, it may not be the case. It is only if Hashem values deeds as being “good” that they are so. Therefore, we must continuously pray for His Assistance to direct us to do what is truly good in His eyes.

### ***3. The Innate Value of Torah***

The Torah states, “***Im BeChukosai teileichu v’es Mitzvosai tishmeru...*** (If you will follow My Statutes and observe My Commandments and perform them); **then I will provide for your rains in their time. And the land will give forth its produce and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit.**” If one follows Hashem’s Statutes, he will be deserving of G-d’s endless bounty. *Chukim* (Statutes) are laws that are not able to be understood within a rational context.

Rashi cites Chazal who explain that when the Torah states, "***If you will follow My Statutes...***" it is referring to the quality of the Jew's commitment to toil in the study of Torah. Thus, the Statute that the Torah is referring to is the selfless commitment to the study of Torah. In addition, the Torah is telling us that one must study for the sake of performing mitzvos. Both the study of Torah and the performance of mitzvos should be done with selfless dedication. However, the Torah states, "***If you will not listen to Me and will not perform all of these commandments...I will turn My attention against you...***" Evidently, if one toils in Torah, he will be deserving of endless blessing; however if he does not selflessly toil in Torah (although he is studying) he will be deserving of the curses stated in this Portion. How do we understand this?

Toiling in Torah study is classified as a *Chok* (Statute) which cannot be understood within a rational context. One would think that one's dedication to Torah study would be a prerequisite for one's quality of performance of mitzvos and understanding of the Will of Hashem. However the Torah is telling us that the reason one must toil in Torah and apply himself selflessly is not because of one's own personal understanding but rather because it is the Decree of G-d. If one's approach to Torah study was solely based on one's own rational understanding of value, then it is possible that it could be undermined by another rational approach to the contrary. However, since dedicated Torah study is classified as *Chok*, it is a level of commitment that cannot be questioned.

The verse that introduces the curses - "***If you will not listen to Me...***" does not necessarily refer to one who does not toil in Torah. Rather it refers to one who may toil in Torah but he does not do so, "for Me (G-d)." Meaning, he does not accept it as a Statute of G-d (*Chok*). The dedication of Torah study must be purely for the sake of fulfilling G-d's Decree and not for any other reason.

One only merits the bounty and the blessing of Hashem only if he negates himself to G-d and accepts Hashem's Will as a Statute. However, if one adheres to the Statutes because of his own rational understating, (although he is observing the law) he will not merit the advanced level of blessing.

One's adherence to Torah must be rooted in one's unequivocal acceptance of the G-d's Divine Edicts. If one does not accept the Torah in this context, his observance of any mitzvah (rational or not) can come into question. Whenever the Torah delineates one's obligations it does so in the following order: *Chukim* (Statutes), *Mishpatim* (Commandments), and Mitzvos. This is to communicate that even when one performs a mitzvah that we can relate to its value, in essence it is being observed as a *Chok*. This is why the *Mishpatim* are always predicated on *Chukim* – to communicate this principle. For example, the Commandments that prohibit killing and stealing, which are classified as rational laws, are in effect not rooted in rational thought but rather based on the Divine. One adheres to all mitzvos (including the ones we seemingly understand) only because it is the Will of Hashem. One merits Hashem's blessing when one adheres to the Torah under these terms.

Rambam rules that one is only permitted to interrupt his Torah study if another mitzvah presents itself which cannot be delegated through a third party. Thus, if one decides to interrupt his Torah study for any reason other than that permitted by the Torah (although he may be performing a mitzvah) he will not merit blessing. It is only the one who studies Torah, as outlined by the Word of Hashem, who merits blessing.

To achieve a selfless level of dedication to Torah and its ideals, one must negate his own personal rational understanding of its value. Only then will he merit the endless bounty of Hashem.

#### ***4. Why are Jews not Counted?***

Ramban at the beginning of the Portion of *Bamidbar* addresses the failing of Dovid HaMelech (King David) vis-à-vis the census that he had taken. Dovid HaMelech took a census of the Jewish people in order to quantify the dimension of his kingdom. As a result of this, thousands of Jews died from plague. Ramban explains that Dovid had violated the law that is stated, “They (the Jewish people) shall not be counted because of their abundance.” The consequence of transgressing this negative precept was the onset of plague. If the basis of the prohibition (of quantifying the Jewish people) is because they are “abundant in number” (and are un-quantifiable), then if they can be counted, they are not at that “un-quantifiable” number. In addition, why is plague a consequence of counting?

The Torah states, “**If you will follow My Statutes and observe My Commandments and perform them...You will pursue your enemies; and they will fall before you by the sword. Five of you will pursue a hundred, and a hundred of you will pursue ten thousand...**” The Torah is communicating to us that if the Jewish people adhere to the Word of Hashem, five Jews could pursue one hundred of the enemy and a hundred Jews could pursue ten thousand enemies. How is this possible when the number of people is so incongruous?

The intrinsic value of a Jew does not emanate from his own capabilities. His innate value rests in the fact that he has a connection to Hashem. The Jewish people are the “Kingly, priestly, and holy nation” of Hashem. Just as G-d’s essence is un-quantifiable and limitless, because He is infinite, anything that is connected to Him has a semblance of limitlessness. When the Jewish people adhere to the Torah and live their lives as prescribed by Hashem, they become invincible. Quantitative value plays no role whatsoever.

The Torah tells us that G-d promised Avraham our Patriarch that his offspring will be as innumerable as the stars in the heavens and the sand on the seashore. The reality is that the Jewish people (throughout history) have never reached those numbers. We have always been few in number vis-à-vis the world. How do we understand G-d’s promise to Avraham?

The “abundance” of the Jewish people that is stated in the Torah is not a quantitative measure, but rather qualitative. The Mishna in Tractate *Sanhedrin* tells us that if one saves the life of one Jew it is the equivalent of saving the whole world. Since this is the case, is it not possible to compute the value of even one Jew. Thus if one takes a census of the Jewish people for the sake of quantification, it is a distortion and a detraction of their true value. Dovid transgressed because his focus was on the physicality of the Jewish people (which is quantifiable) rather than the essence of the Jewish people.

Thus, consequence of this negative precept of counting the Jews is death. If one attempts to value the physical rather than recognizing and appreciating the essence (which is the spiritual), Hashem teaches us that the physical does not matter (i.e. plague).

Shamai, the Elder, tells us in Pirkei Avos that one's Torah study should be primary while one's work should be secondary. One's focus needs to be on his spirituality. As the Torah states, "***Im BeChukosai teileichu v'es Mitzvosai t'shmeru... If you will follow My Statutes and observe My Commandments and perform them...***" Meaning if a Jew prioritizes his spirituality/Torah study then his focus is his own essence. If this is the case then there are no limitations. One becomes a receptacle for unlimited bounty and blessing without making a commensurate amount of effort.

In the story of Chanukah we read that a handful of Choshmona'im (who were known as Maccabim) were able to defeat the mighty Greek army. How was this possible? The name Maccabe identified the devoted group of Choshmona'im (priests) whose war cry was Me ChaMocha B'elim Hashem (Who is like you G-d). The Choshmona'im defeated the mighty Greeks because they relied solely on their relationship with Hashem and not their own physical capabilities. It was only because of their belief and dedication to G-d that their miniscule number was irrelevant. Thus, one who is committed to G-d and adheres to His statutes will be able to surpass many limitations and merit unlimited beracha (blessing).

## ***5. Appreciating the Merit of the Patriarchs***

The Torah tells us that after the Jewish people experience tragedies for not adhering to the Statutes and Commandments of the Torah, they will repent. The Torah states, "**Then they will confess their sin...perhaps then their unfeeling heart will be humbled and then they will gain appeasement for their sin. I will remember My covenant with Yaakov, My covenant with Yitzchak, and also My covenant with Avraham will I remember...**" It is evident from this verse that the Jewish people will do a sincere *teshuvah* (repentance) after experiencing the curses. If in fact the quality of their *teshuvah* is sincere and complete, then why is it necessary for Hashem to "remember" the covenant of the Patriarchs? One would think that *teshuvah* in its own right would be sufficient.

Rambam writes in *Hilchos Teshuvah* (The Laws of Repentance) that since we no longer have the Bais HaMikdash (Temple – where the offerings of atonement were brought), "teshuvah itself is the altar of atonement." If *teshuvah* brings about full atonement there should be no additional prerequisite. However, the Torah tells us that without G-d remembering the covenant of the Patriarchs, the Jewish people will not be forgiven. How do we understand this?

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that confession and repentance alone can only annul

the decrees that come upon the Jewish people. The Jewish people are no longer held liable for their past transgressions. However in order to be fully reinstated (as if they had never sinned before) in the Eyes of Hashem, one needs the merit of the Patriarchs – Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

The Gemara in Tractate *Zevachim* states when one would bring a sin offering it was accompanied with a burnt offering (*korbon olah*). The Gemara uses an analogy to explain the need for the additional burnt offering. If one sins against the king and is subsequently forgiven, although a claim against him no longer exists, he is still not in the good graces of the king. He can only reach full reinstatement when he offers a gift to the king. Identically, when one brings a sin offering it brings about atonement; however, full reinstatement is not achieved until the burnt offering is brought. As much a Jew may do *teshuvah*, he will not regain an intimate relationship with G-d without the merit of the Patriarchs.

The Patriarchs were able to achieve a unique level of intimacy with G-d because of their spiritual accomplishments. When one mentions them in the course of *tefillah* (prayer), one identifies with the Patriarchs and consequently Hashem is more attentive to his prayers. Without their merit, it is not possible to attain that special level of intimacy with Hashem.

The Torah tells us that despite the failings of the Jewish people, they were not considered “detestable, or despicable to be destroyed and to have the covenant of the Patriarchs nullified.” How has this been demonstrated throughout our history?

The Gemara in Tractate *Megillah* tells us that despite the fact many of the Jewish people were Hellenized and assimilated during the time of the Greek occupation, Hashem did not abandon them. When the Jews were in Babylon, many of them assimilated and intermarried; Hashem did not abandon them. After the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans, the Jews were not cast away. This was demonstrated by sending Reb Yehudah HaNassi (Judah the Prince) and Torah sages throughout the generations to the Jewish people.

In fact, the only reason the Jewish people have been able to survive spiritually throughout the Edomite (Roman) exile, is that they were sent these Torah luminaries. Since G-d provided special individuals, who guaranteed the perpetuation and dissemination of the Torah, it is an indication that He does not want His covenant to be nullified. Despite the failings of the Jewish people, G-d did not abandon them. However, it is due to the merit of the Patriarchs that the Jewish people have that special standing vis-à-vis Hashem.

The Maharal of Prague explains that the reason G-d’s law (Five Books of Moses) is referred to as “Torah” by G-d Himself, is to indicate (as the meaning of the word implies) that it is meant to be a guide to direct and give perspective to the Jewish people. Hashem provides the Torah sage in order to transmit and communicate the Torah throughout all the generations, thus, confirming that the covenant of the Patriarchs is still intact.

## 6. The Foundation of Torah Judaism

As a precursor to the curses (*tochachah*), the Torah states, **“If you will not listen to Me and will not perform all of these commandments; if you consider My Statutes (*Chukim*), loathsome and if your being rejects My ordinances (*Mishpatim*)...so that you annul My covenant – then I will do the same to you...”** Why would one loathe the *Chukim*, which are laws that cannot be understood on rational basis, and not all the laws that were transmitted at Sinai?

During the era of the Greeks, circumcision, the sanctification of the new moon, the observance of the Shabbos, and the study of Torah were banned. The Greek civilization prided itself in its intellectualism and appreciation for nature and its beauty. Yefes, the son of Noach, is the patriarch of the Greek people. He received a blessing from his father Noach that he should “dwell in the tents of Shem.” The tent of Shem is referring to the wisdom of Torah and its intellectualism. The Greeks had an appreciation of the intellectualism of the Jew; however, they had difficulty with its limitation because it is bound by the parameters of the Torah. Within the framework of Torah the depth and breadth of wisdom is infinite. Although there are many practices and concepts in the Torah, which are not within the human grasp, nevertheless, the Jew accepts them unequivocally because of his absolute belief in G-d. This is demonstrated through the acceptance of the *Chok* (Statute).

Although existence is bound by time, by Divine order, the Jewish people are able to sanctify and control time through the sanctification of the new moon. One can only accept this reality if one accepts G-d as the Absolute Omnipotent Being. The Greeks could not accept anything unless it was something they were able to comprehend within their own capacity. The concept of the human being affecting time was something beyond their comprehension and thus intolerable. The Greeks therefore decreed that the sanctification of the new moon was forbidden.

A male is naturally born with a foreskin/uncircumcised. The Greeks believed that the uncircumcised state, being part of the natural order, should be appreciated and recognized as part of the perfection and beauty of the human body. Contrastingly, G-d commanded the Jew to remove that foreskin through circumcision because it is only through that act man can achieve perfection. The act of circumcision is classified as a *Chok*. There is no rational basis for its understanding. Since the Greeks viewed the human body as naturally perfect, circumcision was seen as an act of mutilation. Thus, they forbade circumcision.

The mitzvah of charity for example is a commandment that is embraced even in the secular world only because it is understood as rational and humanitarian. However, *Chukim* such as circumcision, dietary laws, and the observance of the Shabbos are seen as archaic and primitive practices. Therefore, they are loathed. Since the *Chok* is incomprehensible, it is loathed and rejected, which is not the case regarding *Mishpatim* (rational laws). In essence, loathing the *Chukim* is rejecting G-d's Will.

One who initially loathes the *Chukim* will ultimately come to despise the *Mishpatim* as well. Rational laws such as not stealing, not killing, etc. are accepted by the secularist because they

are perceived as moral, ethical, and humanistic. However, these laws were given by G-d at Sinai and the Jew accepts them not because of their humanitarian aspect but solely because they are G-d's Dictate. Thus, in essence, even the *Mishpatim* are not accepted because of rational understanding but because they are the Will of Hashem. If *Mishpatim* were to be based on human reasoning, then it would be possible to justify euthanasia. Thus, the *Mishpatim* would ultimately be rejected and despised because they are contrary to one's intellectualism.

To serve G-d selflessly, one must understand that not everything is comprehensible. Man is finite and limited and therefore there are many areas that are not within the human grasp. If one believes that G-d is the Omnipotent Being, there is no basis for not accepting and adhering to the *Chukim* that are His Will. The moment one has difficulty accepting the *Chukim* because he "does not understand," it is an indication that his weakness lies in his understanding of G-d. As long as one is unequivocally committed to the Statutes, the path to spiritual growth and development is open before him.