



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת חקת-בלק תשס"ט 5769 Parshas Chukas-Balak

THE GIFT OF TORAH

It had been another long day. Another day of toil, sweat, and tears. And yet, the taste of even a modicum of success eluded him.

Menachem yearned for Hashem and His Torah; yet he did not seem to possess the capabilities to comprehend the Torah's words. Try as he might – and the amount of time and effort he invested in this endeavor was certainly huge – his mind just could not grasp the flow of logic contained in the holy words.

How often he prayed; he thirsted for the gift of understanding – yet none seemed to come. On this day – another of the many fast days he undertook in an effort to beseech the Heavens – he was weary, both physically and emotionally. As he sat in the *beis medrash*, he succumbed to his drowsiness and fell asleep.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar figure approached and woke him. "Drink this," said the individual, as he handed Menachem a cup of water. For some reason, the drowsy Menachem felt compelled to listen and downed the liquid.

Returning to his learning, Menachem immediately noticed a stunning change. Peering at his text, he realized that for the first time, the topic he was studying was crystal clear! He was suddenly able to perceive deep meaning in the words of his *sefer*!

From that moment on, Menachem's erudition increased manifold on a daily basis. He rose to the level of a *gadol b'Torah*, and composed many works, even in the most difficult field of *Kabbalah*. And so he gained his place as one of

the great *Rishonim* (medieval commentators). This is the story of R' Menachem Recanati (*Binyan Olam* 10:2).

While most of us may not experience such dramatic transformations in such an overtly miraculous fashion, the essential idea of this testimonial is very much applicable, even in our times.

THE MEANING OF MATANAH

The *pesukim* in this week's *parshah* describe the journeys of the fantastic mobile well that accompanied B'nei Yisrael:

וּמִמִּדְבָר מַתָּנָה וּמִמַּתָּנָה נַחְלִיאֵל וּמִנַּחְלִיאֵל בָּמוֹת :

"From the desert it was given to them; once it was given to them, it descended with them to the valleys, and from the valleys, it ascended with them to the high places," (*Bamidbar* 21:18-9).

This translation follows the Targum, who interprets the verse in a literal sense. He understands the word *מַתָּנָה* as an object that is *given*, referring here to the well; *נַחְלִיאֵל* refers to *valleys*, from the term *נַחַל*; and *בָּמוֹת* is a reference to the high, mountainous terrain.

Chazal perceive an allusion in the words of this verse. The Mishnah in *Avos* (6:2) records their interpretation:

כָּל מִי שֶׁעוֹסֵק בְּתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה הָרִי זֶה מֵתְעַלֶּה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (בַּמִּדְבָּר כֹּא) וּמִמַּתָּנָה נַחְלִיאֵל וּמִנַּחְלִיאֵל בָּמוֹת.

"Whoever immerses himself in the study of Torah becomes uplifted, as it says (*Bamidbar, ibid.*), 'And from *matanah* (gift) he becomes

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nachaliel (Hashem's possession), and from nachaliel, he attains *bamos* (high levels)."

The Mishnah sees the *matanah* as referring to the Torah, which was given to the Jewish people in the desert (as alluded to in the preceding words: "From the *midbar* [desert] – came the *matanah* [gift of Torah]"). By excelling in Torah study, a Jew becomes ever more beloved in the eyes of Hakadosh Boruch Hu, to the extent that he is considered a prized "possession" of the Almighty. (Chazal understood the term נְחִילֵיָא as a word-combination stemming from נְחִלָּה [inheritance or possession] and ל-א [one of the Names of Hashem]). Upon earning this special status, he ascends to great spiritual heights.

A truly wondrous principle emerges from this teaching of Chazal. Apparently, there is a completely unique method of excelling in Torah study: namely, by receiving it as a "gift."

"BUYING" TORAH AND RECEIVING TORAH

R' Itzele Peterberger, a prime disciple of the famed Torah giant R' Yisrael Salanter, explains (*Introduction to Pri Yitzchak*) that there are two principal ways to achieve success in Torah learning. On the one hand, Torah is compared to a business acquisition, as the verse says כִּי לָקַח טוֹב נָתַתִּי לָכֶם ("For I have given you a good purchase") (*Mishlei* 4:2). In this respect, the old adage of "You get what you pay for" is very applicable. The more toil an individual devotes toward gaining mastery in Torah, the more he will achieve. Of course, intelligence would play a significant role, as the combination of brain power and sincere effort will yield substantial results and help the Torah student attain great wisdom and clarity.

There exists, however, another aspect of Torah achievement, wherein a person can merit

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understanding and proficiency well beyond his actual capabilities. This is the Torah that Chazal compared to a "present," as opposed to a "purchase." Not that it is necessarily free, for this method of Torah acquisition also requires much initiative from the individual. When Chazal call this type of Torah achievement a "gift," they are referring to the level of accomplishment. One who merits this gift will be able to attain a level of expertise in Torah that far surpasses his inherent abilities.

It is for this reason that even someone born with less than exemplary intellectual prowess can be transformed into a *Recanati*. And even if we may not merit an actual encounter with a celestial messenger, it is still possible for each and every Yid to receive this gift. One need only know how – which we will discuss next week, *im yirtzeh* Hashem.

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