

Parschas Bechukosai 5771

NO FREE RIDES RESPECTFULLY DECLINED

Every serious student of Talmud dreams of attaining a high-level *chavrusa* (study partner). Imagine being approached by a *malach* (angel) who offers to learn with you! What better way to plumb the depths of a *sugya* (topic) than with an individual who possesses such “inside” knowledge? Yet, such an offer actually was made to the pious Vilna Gaon – and he turned it down! As his disciple R’ Chaim Volozhiner relates (*Introduction to Bi’ur HaGra on Safra D’znuyusa*), there were many occasions when *maggidim* (Heavenly messengers) would approach the Gaon, offering to reveal Torah secrets to him. But the Gaon was not interested. He had no desire for revelations through “middlemen,” for which he himself had expended no effort. He was concerned only with Torah insights achieved through his own toil.

This attribute is one of the hallmarks of this week’s *parshah*, which begins with a long list of blessings. The rewards are granted on condition, though: **אם בְּחֻקְתֵי תֵלְכוּ** – “If you walk in my statutes,” (*Vayikra* 26:3). Rashi interprets the intent of this directive: **שֶׁתְּהִי עִמָּלִים בְּתוֹרָה** – “That you should toil in Torah (study).”

This notion is developed further in the Mishnah in Avos (4:10), which states:

אם בטלת מן התורה, גש לך בטלים הרבה כנגדך; ואם עמלת בתורה, גש לו שכר הרבה לתן לך.

“If you have abstained from Torah study, there are many idlers to rise up against you; but if you have toiled in Torah study, He (Hashem) will grant you abundant reward.”

The Tosfos Yom Tov points to the precise language of the Mishnah’s final clause: It does not state, “If you have

learned (much) Torah,” but, rather, “If you have *toiled* in the Torah.” This is because the reward does not come on account of the amount covered or achieved. The Mishnah puts a premium on the effort invested, which is the major factor in determining the magnitude of his deed and the reward he deserves.

The Bartenura adds his own observation: When speaking of the results of neglecting Torah study, the Mishnah portrays a fitting punishment. Having idled himself during time he could have been learning, he will meet his retribution at the hand of other idlers – such as the nefarious types who hang around street corners. The nature of the reward for one who did spend his time learning, however, is of a much different quality. Whereas the punishment for neglecting Torah study is meted out through intermediaries – idle ruffians or wild animals – the reward for toiling in Torah comes directly from the Source. As the Mishnah states: “If you have toiled in Torah study, *He* (Hashem) will grant you abundant reward.”

This notion dovetails nicely with the Gaon’s sentiment. He eschewed revelations granted through celestial messengers, achievements that did not come through his own efforts. Rather, he sought only Torah knowledge that came as a result of one’s own sweat. He viewed the insight achieved after such toil as being granted directly from Hashem as a reward for his labors.

NOT IMPRESSED

R’ Meshulam Igra was one of the towering giants of the eighteenth-century Torah world, renowned especially for his genius and erudition. He was once approached by two individuals who were visiting his town of Tismanitz. The two presented R’ Meshulam with a certain legal matter in

זכור נשמת ציפא רבקה בת ברוך ע"ה

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
אלחנן בן לייבל ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives
to arrange Torah study on behalf of his neshamah.

which they were involved, hoping he would provide a ruling to resolve their situation. As it turned out, the matter was extremely complex and required further research, so R' Meshulam directed the pair to return the following day to receive his final decision. However, the two had to return to their native city right away, and decided between themselves to simply present the question to the *rav* of their own town upon their return.

The local *rav* – while a scholar in his own right – did not “hold a candle” to the venerated R' Meshulam. It seemed certain that such a complicated affair would be totally out of his league. Nevertheless, when the questioners presented their issue to him, something strange happened. Asking to be excused for a moment, the *rav* left the room. He returned a short while later and proceeded to deliver a ruling. The pair was quite pleased with the resolution. It was later revealed that the *rav* had uncovered in just a short time the very answer that the erudite R' Meshulam had to toil over

for a full day!

When word of this reached R' Meshulam, he was astonished. He felt he just had to meet the hitherto unknown *rav* of this nondescript town, who must be some hidden, brilliant wonder! R' Meshulam did not travel there out of any sense of envy or personal humiliation. He truly felt that this individual must be one of the up-and-coming leaders of the generation, and he desired to make his acquaintance and learn from him.

With great anticipation and awe, R' Meshulam presented himself to this mystery *rav*. He immediately sought to clarify his perplexity and asked the *rav* to explain how he was able to so quickly get to the bottom of such an involved and thorny issue.

“Let me tell you what happened,” the *rav* explained. “When the issue was first brought to my attention, I had absolutely no idea what to answer. My congregants are not so learned, and I thought they might not appreciate the complexity of this issue. I feared that if I delayed my response, they might conclude that their *rav* is simply unqualified. So I excused myself, went into a different room and poured my heart out to Hashem. In tearful supplication, I beseeched Him to enlighten me in this instance. And a miracle happened. As soon as I concluded my prayer, I randomly selected a *sefer*, looked inside, and – to my amazement – the entire issue, including the answer, was all spelled out right there! My prayer had been answered!”

Upon hearing this account, R' Meshulam's demeanor suddenly changed. At the *rav*'s look of surprise, R' Meshulam explained the reason for his disappointment. “To cry – well, I could do that, too! Only that which is achieved through sweat and hard work is worthwhile!” (*She'al Avicha V'yagedcha*, vol. 1, p. 147-148).

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