

Parshas Chukas 5772

BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS

KNOWING TORAH — TO WHAT EXTENT?

There is an interesting anecdote related by the Brisker Rav concerning two stellar Torah figures — the famed brothers R' Chaim and R' Zalman of Volozhin — who were prime disciples of the venerable Vilna Gaon. R' Chaim Volozhiner is known, amongst other things, for establishing the “Mother of Yeshivos” in Volozhin, upon which all modern-day institutions of higher Talmudic learning are based. His brother is known for his incredible diligence, a major factor to which his extraordinary breadth of Torah knowledge can be attributed. His accomplishments are all the more impressive given the fact that he passed away, unfortunately, at a relatively young age.

CONTEST OF GIANTS

R' Chaim was asked to describe the full extent of R' Zalman's Torah knowledge. He responded that R' Zalman knew the entirety of Torah by heart and was as fluent in this voluminous material as we are in the recitation of the familiar Ashrei prayer. The questioners continued: Surely the accomplishments of the Vilna Gaon — R' Zalman's *rebbe* — must have surpassed those of his disciple. But if R' Zalman knew the entirety of Torah as well as we know Ashrei, in what way could the Gaon's scholarship exceed such a level? To which R' Chaim answered: While we may be able to recite Ashrei by heart with ease, this is only if we go in order — from beginning to end. Trying to recite even the familiar Ashrei *backwards* would be a much more difficult feat. This was the difference between the acumen of R' Zalman and the Vilna Gaon. While R' Zalman knew the entirety of Torah “like Ashrei,” that was only *forwards*. The Gaon knew the entirety of Torah both *frontwards and*

backwards, as well as we could recite Ashrei (in the regular manner).

There is a somewhat puzzling aspect of this assessment. In addition to his outstanding breadth of knowledge, the Vilna Gaon was also renowned for his strenuous efforts in Torah study. Chazal expound the opening section of this week's *parshah* to contain the secret for Torah mastery: through unmitigated toil. In the context of the laws of *tumas ohel* (ritual defilement incurred through association with a corpse), the verse states: “This is the Torah (law): When a man dies in a tent (*Bamidbar 19:14*). The Gemara (*Gittin 57b*) understands in these words a reference to the attainment of Torah itself: אין דברי תורה מתקיימים אלא במי שמתמית — עצמו עליהם שגאמר זאת התורה אדם כי-ימות באהל. “True success in learning Torah can only be achieved by one who ‘kills himself’ over it, as the verse says: ‘This is the (way to achieve in) Torah: When a man dies in the tent (i.e., the “tent” of Torah; a reference to the study hall).’ And the Vilna Gaon personified this virtue. So much of a premium did he place on personal exertion in Torah study that he turned down one of the most wondrous offers ever made to mortal man. The Gaon was approached by Heavenly messengers who offered to reveal to him certain secrets of the Torah, but the Gaon refused; he was interested only in knowledge attained through his own efforts.

The account of the Vilna Gaon's remarkable fluency in Torah, while enlightening, also seems somewhat perplexing. As with all of his achievements in the realm of Torah study, the feat of attaining such a level of fluency both forwards and backwards must have been accomplished through intense and purposeful efforts. In other words, the Gaon must have felt that this was an important goal, so much so that it was worthwhile to expend such efforts on its attainment. Which begs the question: What, exactly, is the specific mitzvah to

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know Torah both forwards and *backwards*?

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R' Berel Povarsky (*Bad Kodesh, Mo'adim, Shavuot*) explains what may have been the impetus for the Gaon's prodigious feat. It is obviously more difficult to recite something backwards than it is to merely say it in the regular forwards manner. However, the difference really only exists when the material is being recited by heart. If the material is being read from print, the difference is much less significant; with all the words in front of one's eyes, does it really require more skill or fluency to read in one direction or the other?

This, then, is the idea behind the Gaon's curious achievement. Regarding Torah teachings, the verse states (*Mishlei 7:3*): "Write them on the tablet of your heart." In other words, the ideal in attainment of Torah knowledge is to reach a level where the words of Torah are in effect inscribed in writing

upon one's being. One's familiarity with Torah could be so great that it would be as if, at all times, the Torah was "written" before him. That is, even in the absence of an actual volume, one could "read" the Torah from the words inscribed on his heart. Once this level is achieved, it follows quite simply that a person's knowledge of Torah would go both forwards and backwards. Since he automatically reads the Torah from a script, it makes no real difference in which direction he views it.

It could be that this sentiment is contained in the words of a well-known teaching of Chazal. The Mishnah in Avos (5:22) states:

בן בג בג אומר, הפך בה והפך בה, דכלא בה. ובה תחזי, וסיב ובלה בה, ומנה לא תזוע, שאין לד מדה טובה הימנה.

"Ben Bag-Bag says: Delve into the Torah, for everything is contained therein. And you should peer at it, and grow old and wither over it, and do not deviate from it — for there is no greater entity than the Torah."

Each part of this Mishnah is really deserving of careful study in its own right; here, we focus on one particular phrase that seems somewhat "eye-catching". The Mishnah is obviously extolling the virtues of Torah study, enjoining one to remain immersed in its study throughout life. What, exactly, is meant by the injunction "to peer at it"? Perhaps we may suggest that the Mishnah is hinting at that quintessential achievement in Torah knowledge. R' Berel explained the basis for the Vilna Gaon's singular fluency as stemming from the notion to "Write them on the tablet of your heart"; that is, to attain such clarity in one's learning that the words are practically etched in the mind's eye. This is a level upon which we may set our sights: knowing the Torah's teachings so well that at all times we may simply "peer at" and "read" the sacred words from the tomes written on our souls.

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