

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

VAYIKRA

TZAV

SHEMINI

TAZRIA

METZORA

ACHREI MOT

KEDOSHIM

EMOR

BEHAR

BECHUKOTAI

BECHUKOTAI

WALKING THE

PATH OF HOLINESS

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As the Torah approaches the end of the Book of Leviticus, it dedicates several chapters to a description of the rewards for observing God's commandments, and the punishments that will befall us should we choose to disregard them. The Torah begins this section with the famous line, *'im bechukkotai telechu*'.¹ Most translate this phrase as, 'if you will follow My decrees'. However, the word *telechu* comes from the Hebrew root *halach*, which means walk, and therefore this perplexing phrase could be translated literally as, 'if you will walk with My decrees'.

The Midrash interprets this verse by referring us to a different verse, in the Book of Psalms. King David says, 'I considered my ways, and I returned my feet to your testimonies.'² The midrash explains that King David says to God, 'Master of the Universe! Every day, I think

things over, and decide to go to such and such place...But my feet keep returning me to synagogues and to houses of learning.'³ On a simple level, King David seems to be saying that each day he ponders where to go, but no matter what destination he decides upon, his feet always end up leading him to a synagogue or a house of learning, places of holiness.

The *Sefat Emet*, however, has a novel approach to this midrash. Everything in the world contains the same inherent Godly spark. **In some places this holiness is more apparent, whilst in others it is more obscure.**⁴

Therefore, according to the *Sefat Emet*, King David is saying that despite the fact that during each day he may go to a number of different places, wherever he goes, even if it is to the most mundane destination, he encounters the Divine Presence to the same extent that he would

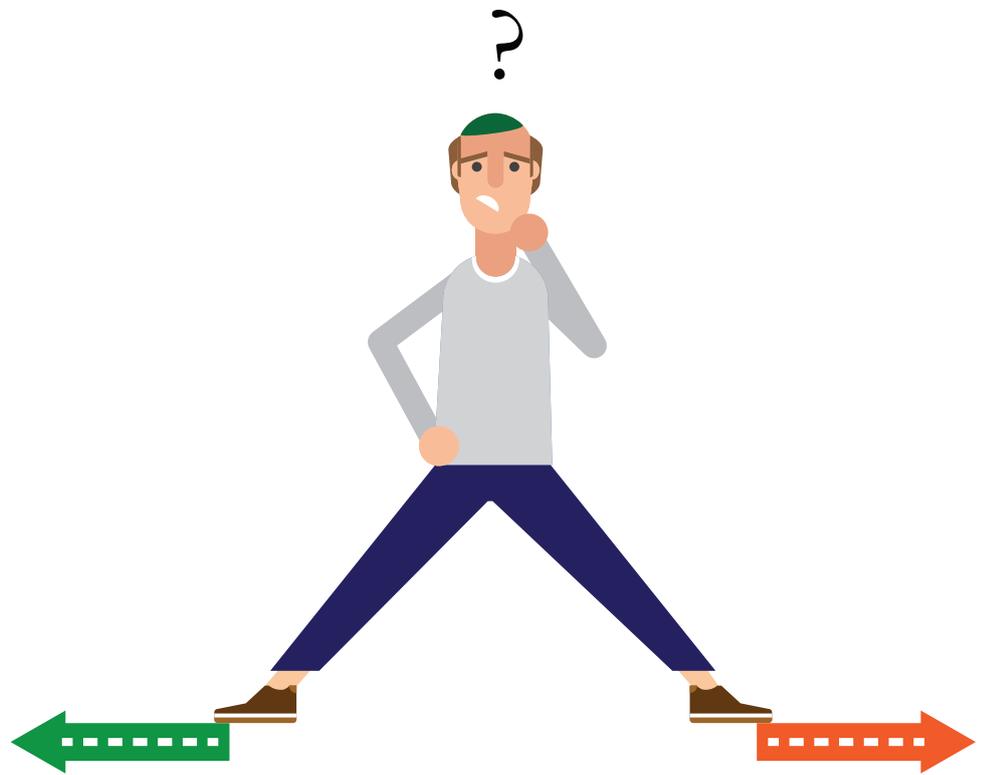
were he in a synagogue or place of study. In other words, the world's inner reality is identical everywhere. There is a wellspring of spirituality lurking beneath the surface of every moment and every place. Sometimes it is more easily accessible, and at other times it requires more effort to dig deep enough to reach it.

Our challenge in life is to tap into this source of infinite holiness that is present in all our endeavours and in every place. It is often thought that learning Torah and praying, in contrast to the rest of our mundane daily activities, are two of the only ways to connect with God. According to the above explanation of the midrash, however, we can and should strive to attain a connection with the Divine Presence everywhere. Godliness can be seen in almost everything, from admiring a sunset at the beach, for example, to listening to the laughter of

children as they play. **Through paying attention to the beautiful details that exist in God's masterpiece of a world, we can elevate the spiritual level of our existence to one that is not restricted to the hallways of the study house or the benches of the synagogue.**

This point is clearly illustrated through a famous story told of Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, the great nineteenth-century leader of German Jewry, who once travelled to Switzerland by foot in order to see the Alps. When his students tried to dissuade him from travelling so far, Rabbi Hirsch explained to them, "When I come before God, I will have to answer for many things. But what will I tell Him when He asks me, "Have you seen My Alps?"

God created a beautiful world for His creations to encounter and enjoy. **It is incumbent upon all of us to seek out the spiritual threads that are woven within every element of the world,** as it says in *Deuteronomy*, "And you shall seek the Lord thy God; and you shall find Him, if you search after Him with all your heart and with all your soul."⁵ Every place that we go to, and every endeavour upon which we embark, contains a divine spark waiting to be tapped into. In that context we can understand why the entire set of Jewish laws and practices are called halacha - a term that uses that same root, *halach*, walk. The Jewish laws and practices are far more than a system of rules. Rather, they represent an entire way of life, geared towards elevating all that we do and everywhere we go to a higher spiritual level, and serving



as a constant reminder of our relationship with the Divine. Thus every encounter affords us with an opportunity to fulfil the opening phrase of this portion of the Torah, allowing us to find holiness everywhere if we 'walk' with God's decrees.

As Jews, our religious experience should not be simply confined to the synagogue. Rather, we must delve into every situation armed with the knowledge that **we have the potential to tap into the infinite wellsprings of holiness that underpin our existence.**

Notes

¹Leviticus 26:3. ²Psalms 119:59.

³Leviticus Rabba 35:1.

⁴Sefat Emet, *Bechukkotai* 1. ⁵Deuteronomy 4:29.

In honour of a speedy and complete recovery for our precious daughter
Lital Gila bat Renana Yael
מוקדש לרפואתה השלמה
והמהירה של ביתינו היקרה
ליטל גילה בת רננה יעל

Parasha Fact:

One of the blessings given in this week's parasha reads: "Five of you will chase away a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase away ten thousand!". How fortunate we are to have witnessed this in our days in the modern State of Israel.

Next week in Bamidbar:

In our constant drive towards spiritual growth and fulfilment, it could be assumed that we are trying to emulate angels, those ultimate celestial beings who dwell in the proximity of the Divine Presence. However, the brief waving of flags at the foot of Mount Sinai teaches us an important distinction between angels and humans that offers us an insight into our tremendous potential to soar to even greater heights than the holy angels.