

Studying the Weekly Torah Portion Through a Mussar Lens

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Parshat Terumah- Exodus 25:1 – 27:19

Teaching from Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv,¹ the Alter of Kelm

(as rendered in *Chochmat HaMatzpun*² and *Beyt Kelm*)

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

The One Above spoke to Moses, saying:

דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ־לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנוּ לְבָבוֹ תִקְחוּ אֶת־תְּרוּמָתִי:

Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves them. (Exodus 25:1-2)

[Exodus 25:2] instructs us: accept gifts from every person whose heart so moves them. That is, do not take [the gifts] forcibly. [Could it be] that after all the goodness they have received from the One Above . . . [an individual] who would not desire to give a half-*shekel* so that the Presence of the Holy One might dwell in their midst? . . .

The Holy One desires to dwell in their midst, and this cannot happen save for the exalted and refined qualities of the Holy One. One of these is true goodness (*hatavah amitit*) which arises as a result of the offering and *hesed* granted those who have been created, without any other intention whatsoever. The *Mishkan* itself must reflect the exalted and refined qualities of the Holy One, [even as it should be] a reflection of [the Israelites efforts at] walking in God's ways, being like God. As a result of [the efforts of Israel], God will dwell in their midst.

¹ Simcha Zissel Ziv Broide (1824-98) or the Alter of Kelm (the Elder of Kelm), was one of the foremost students of Rav Yisrael Salanter and one of the early leaders of the Mussar movement. He is best known as the founder and director of the Kelm Talmud Torah.

² This teaching from the Alter of Kelm is rendered in *Chochmat HaMatzpun*, (volume 6, pages 1-3) edited by Rav Moshe Igbui. Bits and pieces are found throughout *Beyt Kelm*, which also gathers teachings from the Alter and his primary students.

Hence, each person was commanded to bring what their heart is moved to bring [as a freewill offering.] This offering must be given without any thought whatsoever of receiving a reward [in return. The offering comes as a response] to the will of the One Above, and for no other reason. This is what Rabbi Yochanan meant when he taught (in *Talmud Berachot 17a*): “Happy is the one who grew up in Torah, whose labor is in Torah, who gives pleasure to their Creator.” [We also learn this] from *Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabbah 3* which speaks of King Solomon’s building of the Temple in Jerusalem. The intention of those who gave voluntarily should be that their gift comes as an offering of love, with no expectation of receiving anything in return.

Knowing that we were created in the image of the One Above (*Tzelem Elohim*), we should strive emulate the Holy One’s exalted and refined Divine qualities. This is the goal towards which we should direct our vision, and which we should strive to actualize [through our words and deeds.] A *maskil* (an enlightened person) will understand that the essence of what is demanded of us as human beings: that we strive to emulate the exalted qualities of the One Above, even if our [human] nature keeps us distant [from achieving this.]

This is hinted at in *Midrash Tanna D’Bei Eliyahu 25* where we learn that every person must critically examine their *mitzvah* performance by asking themselves: “When will I attain the level of serving God demonstrated by the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob [and our matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.].?” The obligation for *hishtadlut* (sincere effort) should lead us [to work] to slowly change our nature [from that which is not yet good] towards the good [following the model of the Holy One’s exalted qualities.]

In *Midrash Shemot Rabbah 33:1*, we are taught by an analogy for the call, “you shall accept gifts for Me.” (Exodus 25:2.) The *Midrash* teaches that this is similar to a King who had an only daughter. Another came and took her, seeking to bring her back to his land in order to marry her. [Her father] said to the man, ‘My daughter, whom I have given to you, is my only one. I cannot bear to separate from her. Yet, to tell you that you cannot take her is also impossible, since she is your wife. Do me this for me, everywhere you go, make me a small room [*kiton*], so that I can live with you, for I cannot leave my daughter.’ So said God to the Israelites: ‘I have given you the Torah. I cannot bear to separate from her, and to tell you not to take her is also impossible. Rather, everywhere you go make me a house so that I can live within it’ as it is said “And make me a sanctuary” (Exodus 25:8) . . . 1

All human matters go from *koach* (potential) to *po-eyl* (action) because of two causes:

- on strength of the *seichel* (intellect),
- and by means of the strength of the *nefesh* (soul.)

The force which deters the [efforts of the] soul is not changed by the power of the intellect. For example, when a person desires to eat, that [desire] is not changed by means of the intellect, which might not agree that it is time to eat. We can see this with all of our *middot*. Only after [sincere] effort [meaning action] will one arrive at an impression on the *seichel* and [then this will] become second nature . . .

We learn in [*Talmud Pesachim* 50b] that “**Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: A person should always engage in Torah study and performance of mitzvot, even if he does so not for their own sake, as through the performance of mitzvot not for their own sake, one gains understanding and comes to perform them for their own sake.**”

After a person adjusts their behavior according to the teachings of Torah, they will surely not desire to make an [inadvertent] error or [allow] their intellect to be mistaken and fail to see the *emet/truth*. And over time, one comes to see the *emet/truth* through the eyes of their *seichel*. This is [what we call] gaining understanding and coming to perform them for their own sake [even though they did start out to accomplish something ‘for its own sake.’]” Our *middot* assist us in this . . .

[We learn from our Sages] that the angel sin heaven did not want the Torah to be revealed to human beings.

A person needs to expressly [work] at aligning their *seichel* and their tangible actions [in life.] But this is not an easy matter. We can learn about this from *Talmud Yoma* 72b where we are taught [about the verse from our portion], “**From within and from without you shall cover it**” (Exodus 25:11). **Rava said:** This alludes to the idea that **any Torah scholar whose inside is not like his outside, i.e., whose outward expression of righteousness is insincere, is not to be considered a Torah scholar.**”

From this we must learn that it takes effort to bring our inner being (*seichel* and *nefesh*) into alignment which that which appears outwardly – namely our words and deeds.

Additional texts:

#1 – from the portion – Exodus 25:8, 10-11

וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם:

And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. (Exodus 25:8)

וַעֲשׂוּ אֲרוֹן עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים אַמְתִּים וְחֹצֵי אֲרָפֹו וְאֹמֶה וְחֹצֵי רְחִבּוֹ וְאֹמֶה וְחֹצֵי קִמְתּוֹ:

They shall make an ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high. (Exodus 25:10)

וְצָפִיתָ אֹתוֹ זָהָב טָהוֹר מִבַּיִת וּמִחוּץ תִּצְפֶּנּוּ וְעָשִׂיתָ עָלָיו זָר זָהָב סָבִיב:

Overlay it with pure gold—overlay it inside and out—and make upon it a gold molding round about. (Exodus 25:11)

#2 -- *Shenei Luchot HaBerit*,³ *Torah Shebikhtav, Terumah, Derekh Chayim 6*

From the inside and the outside you shall overlay it." This is an allusion to the Torah student whose interior should match his exterior, i.e. he should not pretend to be pious when in truth he is not.

#3 -- Alan Morinis and Rabbi Avi Fertig (The Mussar Institute)

Rav Yisrael Salanter defines *emet*/truth as when something follows the path for which it was intended without veering to either side. Similarly, Rav Shlomo Wolbe writes, "The most basic parameter of truth is consistency. Truth requires not only that there be no discrepancy between knowledge and awareness on one hand, and reality on the other hand— but also that there be no contradictions within a person's essential nature." When a life is consistent and has integrity, then it can express truth.

³ Written by Rabbi Isaiah HaLevi Horovitz (c.1555-1630), *Shney Luchot HaBrit (Shelah)* is a commentary on the Torah. The work contains a chapter for each weekly Torah portion. The author lists the commandments found in each portion and explains their stated and hidden meanings. He also explains ethical and moral teachings of the Torah.

The path of consistency and integrity must lead us to stand others on truth. We are called to bring others to their truth, to allow them to realize their potential, to enable each individual to live with consistency and integrity as the *Tzelem Elohim* [divine image] that God has fashioned him or her to be.

#4 -- Let Us Make Adam in Our Image" - Midrash Genesis Rabbah 8:5

Rav Shimon said: When the Holy One was about to create Human Beings (*Ha-Adam*), the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and companies, some of them saying, "Let them be created," while others urged, "Let them not be created." Thus, it is written, "Love and truth fought each other, righteousness and peace combated each other" (Psalm 85:11).

Love said, "Let them be created because they will perform acts of love."
Truth said, "Let them not be created because they will be full of falsehood."
Righteousness said, "Let them be created because they will do righteous deeds."
Peace said, "Let them not be created because they will cause endless strife."

What did the Holy One do? God took Truth and cast him to the ground, as is said: "You cast truth to the ground" (Daniel 8:12).

The ministering angels dared say to the Holy One: "Master of the Universe: why do You humiliate Your seal, let Truth arise from the earth." Hence it is written: "Let truth grow from the earth" (Psalm 85:12).

The elder Rav Huna of Tzipppori said: While the ministering angels were conferring and disputing with one another, the Holy One created *Ha-Adam* and then said: "What are you conferring about, the human has already made (*ne'esah*)."

#5 -- Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler⁴ - Clinging to truth in following the ways of God.

Concerning the attribute of truth, we find in the writings of Rabbeinu Yonah (*Pirkei Avot*, end of Chapter 1) that "one must walk in the ways of God, which are all true, as it is written, "You shall walk in His ways" (Deuteronomy 28:9).

⁴ Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler (1892–1953) was a rabbi, Talmudic scholar, and Jewish philosopher of the 20th century. He is best known for being the *mashgiach ruchani* ("spiritual counselor") of the Ponevezh yeshiva in Israel and through collections of his writings published posthumously by his pupils.

The Sages therefore taught that one should be wary of speaking a falsehood even in the most trivial matters ... For one who becomes accustomed to speaking falsehoods in matters that neither cause him benefit nor detriment, will eventually come to lie concerning important matters, and he will not be able to speak the truth since he has become accustomed to speaking falsehood. I.e., even when there is no proscription on lying, nonetheless the obligation of “walking in His ways” requires a person to refrain from anything that contravenes the attribute of truth.

#6 – Rabbi Joseph Meszler⁵ – from *The Mussar Torah Commentary*⁶ – page 120-1 – *N’divut—Generosity: “Let a Generous Spirit Sustain Me” (Psalm 51:14)*

Our portion indicates that each of us has unique gifts of the heart to give. The Torah describes the construction of the Arki of the Covenant in detail, and we read that the Ark needed to have gold *mi-bayit u-mi-chutz*, inside and out” (Exodus 25:11). Rava in the Talmud reads this symbolically and likens each person to the Ark. (*Yoma 72b*) Figuratively speaking, we are supposed to produce our personal gold “inside and out” as well. This might mean taking what is in our heart “on our inside” and giving it to others “on the outside.”

Some Additional Resources for “Mussar Torah Study” available in Translation:

- Block, Barry (editor) *The Mussar Torah Commentary: A Spiritual Path to Living a Meaningful and Ethical Life*
Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2019
- Dessler, Eliyahu *Strive for Truth – volumes 5-6*
Feldheim Publishers, 1999
- Finkel, Avraham Shmuel *Pathways of Mussar (Teachings from the Alter of Slabodka) – Adir Press, 2014*
- Lopian, Reb Eliyahu *Lev Eliyahu*
Goldberg Press, 1975
- *Sparks of Slabodka on the Parsha*
- Wolbe, Shlomo *Rav Wolbe on Chumash (2 volumes)*
Artscroll/Mesorah, 2014 and 2016

⁵ Rabbi Joseph Meszler has been the spiritual leader of Temple Sinai of Sharon, MA for over 10 years. Rabbi Meszler is an author of many books including, *Facing Illness Finding God (Jewish Lights)*; and *Soul Searching: Lessons from Bachya Ibn Pakuda*.

⁶ Published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2019