

Parashat Mishpatim 5776, 2016

The Torah is Life!

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains two *pasukim* (verses) that reiterate the prohibition of *avodah zarah* (idol worship) and its practices, the commandment to completely destroy all monuments associated with idol worship and the positive *mitzvah* to worship Hashem:

You shall not prostrate yourself before their gods, and you shall not worship them, and you shall not follow their practices, but you shall tear them down and you shall utterly shatter their monuments. And you shall worship the L-rd, your G-d, and He will bless your food and your drink, and I will remove illness from your midst. (*Sefer Shemot* 23:24-25, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), in his *Commentary on the Torah*, explicated our verses' conceptual underpinning. In doing so, he revealed much regarding the very nature of *avodah zarah*:

The intent of this passage [is dependent upon the notion] that the majority of idol worshippers recognize and know that Hashem, the Honored One, is the G-d of all the gods and the Master of all masters – and their intention, [therefore,] is really not to worship idols at all – it is just that they think that through these different kinds of idol worship they will find success. By way of illustration: There are those that worship the sun because they have found that it rules over their grain, and those that worship the moon since it rules over the springs and the murmuring depths [such as tides] - so, too, in the case of all the heavenly hosts. It is all the more so the case in their minds in regards to the angels, wherein they maintain that there is extra benefit to be derived through their worship, since they are, [in actuality,] honoring the servants of the great G-d.

At this juncture, Nachmanides proceeded to focus upon the meaning of our second *pasuk*:

This is the reason why this text states that it is solely through the worship of the Holy One Blessed be He that one will have success and protection. Moreover, the uprooting of

avodah zarah will not cause injury, but, rather, it will add to their good fortune and blessings. [How so?] For the Holy One Blessed be He will bless your bread – inclusive of all foods that you will eat. In addition, He will bless your water, which is the “father” of all drinks that you will imbibe. This blessing will inhere in them [i.e. food and drink] and be added to them, so that you will have great quantities of them. (Translation and brackets my own)

In contrast to the Ramban, *Talmud Bavli, Baba Metzia* 107b did not emphasize the interrelationship between the verses, and instead, explained the phrase, “And you shall worship the L-rd, your G-d,” at face value, i.e. “worship,” equals “*Kriat Shema v’Tefilah*” (“the recitation of the *Shema* and the *Amidah*”). Moreover, when we carefully examine the *pasuk*, we are immediately struck by a grammatical incongruity, namely, the expression, “you shall worship...” (“*v’avadatem*”) is written in the plural, while “your food,” “your drink” and “your midst” are written in the singular. This naturally leads us to ask, “Why did the Torah mix plural and singular grammatical constructs in the same sentence, instead of limiting itself to one or the other?”

We are fortunate that our question was addressed by one of the great Chasidic masters, Rabbi Tzadok Hakohen Rabinowitz of Lublin *zatzal* (1823-1900), known as the “Pri Tzaddik” after the title of his famous Torah commentary of that name:

We know that “worship of the heart is *Tefilah*,” so, too, *Kriat Shema* has as its point of focus the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven in the heart and mind of each and every soul of the Jewish people. [It is crucial to note that] every individual has a unique manner and approach in their worship [of Hashem]. Therefore, the expression referring to worship of the heart [“*v’avadatem*,”] was written in the plural [indicative of the multiple approaches toward Hashem that are pursued by the Jewish people].

Now that we know that the plural formulation of “*v’avadatem*” is reflective of the multiple ways in which the Jewish people encounter Hashem, we need to turn to the second part of the verse and examine its use of the singular form in its grammatical construction. Once again, Rav Tzadok provides us with a deeply insightful analysis:

Once, however, all the [living] souls have united with the avowed purpose of worshipping His being and essence, may He be blessed, then, everyone will merit the Divine flow of the words of Torah as if they were one entity. Therefore the Torah states, “He will bless your food and your drink,” in the singular – since everyone is as one in the manner in which they will be blessed by the Divine flow of both the Written and Oral Torah. This is the case, since, when taken in tandem, they are called “bread and water” [i.e. the fundamental basis of all life]. (Translation, underlining and brackets my own)

With Hashem’s help, may we join in our worship of Him and be *zocheh* to have a portion in the true food and drink of life – the holy Torah! *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.