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## Grit and Torah

Does it make sense to work hard? There is a certain logic in relaxing, coasting, and procrastinating. A biological argument can be made in favor of conserving physical energy. There is also a degree of inertia assisting us to remain in a restful state without having to exert ourselves. This is particularly so when there is no immediate benefit to leaving the state of comfort. Why put in effort when we could just take it easy?

Dr. Angela Duckworth, a psychologist from the University of Pennsylvania, defines grit “as perseverance and passion for long-term goals.” It entails “working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress.” From a certain perspective, being gritty doesn’t

make sense. Why would someone work strenuously towards a goal and invest so much effort into doing something even though it is so difficult? If things are hard and a person doesn’t see immediate success, it is natural and perhaps even smart, for someone to give up and move on to something else.

This week’s Torah portion delineates rewards and punishments related to the service of God. Rewards in the form of rain, sustenance, security, and the resting of the Divine Presence can be attained by following God’s laws (*bechukotai teileichu*), protecting his commandments (*mitzvotai tishmoru*), and performing them (*ve-asitem otam*). At first glance, the *pasuk* seems redundant. The same broad message (follow G-d’s commandments) is stated in three synonymous ways. However, with the assumption that the Torah does not repeat itself for the sake of poetic embellishments, the *Sifra*, quoted by Rashi, assumes that each of these three components allude to different aspects of following *mitzvot*. Following God’s laws (*bechukotai teileichu*) cannot just mean doing the *mitzvot*, because that is explicit in the last part of the *pasuk* – “and perform them” (*ve-asitem otam*). Rather, following God’s laws (*bechukotai teileichu*) is an allusion to the concept of toiling in the learning of Torah (*teheyu ameilim ba-Torah*).

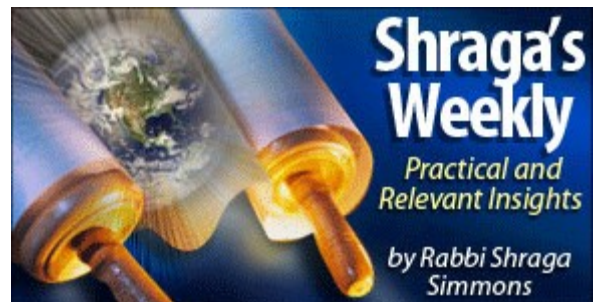
Later commentators present many questions and interpretations to try and understand the depth of this *Midrash*. In fact, the Ohr HaChaim presents 42 different explanations of these few words. For the present discussion, one question stands

out. In many contexts the word *bechukotai* references the category of commandments that don't seem to make any sense. The *mitzvah* of the Red Heifer (*Bemidbar* 19) is the quintessential *chok*, a *mitzvah* that is supra-rational. We don't grasp its full meaning or significance, yet we follow it anyway because it is the word of God. If we understand *bechukotai* here as a *mitzvah* that doesn't have a rational basis and that it is referring to laboring in the study of Torah, the question becomes - does it not make sense to work hard while learning?

Viewed from a short-term perspective, toiling in Torah is a *chok*. It doesn't make sense to invest so much cognitive energy into something that is so difficult and whose positive results may not be immediately apparent. If I force myself to focus after a long day of exhausting work, I may not see the blessings which God promises right away. The rain may not fall as I open the book, I may not feel secure from my enemies as I start reading, and I may not even feel the Divine Presence as I turn page after page. Even more frustrating, I may not even see success in my learning! It makes sense to stop. It makes sense to give up. It makes sense to go to sleep. But we learn anyway, because it is a *chok*.

And even though it doesn't make sense in the short-term, there is a long-term reward. Dr. Duckworth's research demonstrates that people who are gritty tend to be more successful at academic and professional accomplishments over time. As a consequence, she suggests that schools invest resources into teaching children how to be grittier. As is apparent from this

*Midrash*, grittiness has been essential to Torah education for millennia. We push, we toil, and we labor even when it doesn't make sense and we trust in the long-term reward that God promises us if we follow this essential *chok*.



## Why Things Happen

The beginning of this week's Parsha describes the specific cause-and-effect of human actions. *"If you follow the laws, then you will have abundance ... but if you break the covenant, you will have distress..."*

The idea that "choices are meaningful" is so basic to Judaism that it is expressed in the very first verse of the Bible: "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth."

There are two ways to understand the origins of life: Either it is random, or by design.

What are the implications of this argument?

If world is an accident, then I am too. There's no purpose to my creation, no "consciousness" behind it. In the beginning, when the gasses were swirling, was there such a thing as good or evil? Obviously not. Was there good and evil when the amoebas first formed? Obviously not.

In a random world, there is no hierarchy of values. A human's life is no more valuable than a dog's. Should I save my drowning dog before the drowning stranger? Would it be morally acceptable to label a race of people sub-human and kill them all?

Fortunately there's another approach. Nearly 4,000 years ago, a boy named Abraham, son of an idol-maker, meditated on the wonders of nature. He observed the sun as a perfect time-keeper, heat-producer, and water-evaporator that drives the world's ecosystem. He marveled at the symmetry of a flower and the purity of water; of the attractive smell and color of an orange with its protective coating and sections ready to share. He reasoned: The world is perfect in design. Logic dictates there must be a Designer.

Thus Abraham became the first Jew.

### **Soul Perfection**

The Jewish perspective is that the world is here by design. Which leads us to the next question: Why are we here?

We are here for a purpose.

Before a person is born, his soul – non-physical and eternal – is living in a "world of souls." The soul is quite content there, spending its days doing typical "soul" things – like basking in the radiance of God's spiritual light, for example.

But then one day the soul gets a tap on the shoulder. "It's time for you to go down into the physical world, to be placed into the body of a human." Why? Because the soul, as-yet imperfect, needs to refine itself through encountering and surmounting

challenges.

These challenges come in the form of specific events which modify our behavior in the area where our soul needs its "*tikkun*," rectification. These events are not random; rather, they are instructive. Which means there is a deep connection between the event and the message it contains.

The task of life? To discover that connection, and grow from it.

I would like to share a personal example.

I attended a prominent university, and one of my prized possessions was a coffee mug that bore the school's insignia. Years later, while working at an office, I would proudly carry my mug each day to get coffee. Then one day, a huge gust of wind blew through the window near my desk, knocking my mug to the floor and shattering it into a hundred pieces. My first thought was: "I'll call my old roommate and ask him to send me a new mug."

Then I forced myself to ask a deeper question: Why did this happen? Did this contain a message for my spiritual growth?

Through introspection, I realized that every day, while carrying my mug through the office, I would hold it proudly aloft, relishing in the special status I imagined it conferred. Now I knew why the cup broke. I needed to rid myself of this foolish arrogance. It took those shattering shards to wake me up.

Sometimes the connection is not so obvious, and we have to work hard to discover it. We may not even always be successful in making the connection. But whatever the outcome, one thing is for sure:

We cannot lose. The process of introspection is bound to reveal tremendous insight and growth.

Which reminds me of a story:

A man was running to catch a bus, but he arrived a moment too late, only to see the bus pulling away. Despondent, he turned to a sagely looking man and asked, "Why did this happen to me?"

"I don't know," replied the man, "but you've got another 15 minutes to think about it."

### **Intensifying the Message**

Discerning the message only works to the extent that our eyes are open to see it.

We can choose to ignore the message as well.

One time I was eating pizza with a friend who weighed 400 pounds. The next thing I know, my friend started choking. Before I could respond, a third man jumped up and performed the Heimlich maneuver. Out of his mouth popped a wad of dough the size of a baseball. At which point the big guy calmly picked up the wad of dough, placed it in the garbage next to him, and went on eating as if nothing had happened.

Ignoring the message, however, doesn't make the problem go away. On the contrary, the wake-up calls become more intense. In describing a spiritual malady called Tzara'as, the Talmud explains that initially, warning signs appear on a person's house. If one does not heed the sign, the spots move a bit closer - to the clothes. Once again, only if the message is not received do the spots appear on the body

itself.

A doctor will tell you the same thing: If you have a pain, don't ignore it. It is there for a reason and you have to face it. Get treatment.

The end of the story with my overweight friend? A few months later, he slipped and broke his hip. Another message, this time more intense. When I went to visit him in the hospital, he said flatly, "I'm thinking of going on a diet."

### **Countering the Natural Drive**

Every test, every challenge, is tailor-made for our specific set of circumstances and station in life. The whole point is to awaken us from apathy and slumber, and to encourage the soul rectification that we came here to do.

Granted, sometimes the test is fiercely difficult. But as difficult as it may seem, it reveals a deeper purpose in the overall scheme of life. That ordeal has the power to lift a person to become wiser, stronger, and more compassionate.

Think of an athlete, a world-class high-jumper. When the coach raises the bar, is he trying to make life difficult - or is he drawing out the athlete's true potential? Of course the coach wants the athlete to succeed! And if he's a good coach, he knows the precise time and amount to raise the bar. Granted, the athlete might fail to clear the height. But the coach knows that with the right concentration and effort, he will succeed.



The Bible tells us that Abraham was the master of kindness – his tent was open on all four sides to welcome guests. Kindness is wonderful, but too much can be overbearing and smothering. That's why Abraham was given 10 difficult tests – which all addressed his ability to go against his natural drive for kindness. He was told to send his son Ishmael out of the house, to bind his son Isaac on the altar, etc. Abraham had to conquer his natural tendencies – in order to balance his personality and become truly great.

God does not challenge us with trivialities. He challenges us only to grow. Imbalance in one area will trigger a challenge to modify that trait.

The whole concept of mitzvot is that they are actions which work against our nature. I don't need a mitzvah to breathe, because I'm going to do it anyway. But since I may have a tendency to hoard money, the Torah asks me to re-dispense 10 percent of my income to charity. If everyone gladly gave away money voluntarily, the Torah wouldn't need to tell us to do so. All the mitzvot direct our growth, building our weakness into strength.

It is an axiom of Jewish thought that God does not give us a test greater than we can handle. This is illustrated in a grammatical principle of the Hebrew language itself, where the command form of a verb is the same as the future tense. Within the command itself comes the strength to actualize it.

### Applying the Principle

Rabbi Akiva Tatz tells the following story:

Imagine you wake up in the morning to the ringing of an alarm clock. You reach to turn it off, knocking it onto the floor and shattering the clock. You grudgingly swing your feet off the bed and set them with a startle onto the cold floor. You get up, take two steps and stub your toe, in the process banging your head on a cabinet door. Thirty seconds in, and it's already an exasperating day.

Now imagine that the previous night, before heading off to bed, you check your email to find the following:

"Tomorrow morning you will knock your alarm clock onto the floor, shattering it. Then your feet will hit the cold floor, after which you will stub your toe and bang your head. This is all just a challenge of patience and self-control. Love, God."

What will be your reaction now?

Of course, such an email would remove the element of "free choice challenge." In real life, we use these tools to focus and rise to the occasion:

1. Look for the Big Picture. If things seem unfair and unjust, remember that we see only a tiny slice of reality. Many factors enter the equation before we arrive on the scene, and many resolutions will come after we're gone. That is why the Torah (Leviticus 19:32) commands us to respect older people: The greater perspective of events over time produces a deeper understanding of

- the grand eternal plan.
2. Train yourself to ask: "What is this teaching me?" Find someone you trust, and ask for their perspective on whatever issues you're grappling with. Ultimately, we will never know for sure if we've hit upon the "ultimate" reason. But asking the question is always the first step.
  3. When something "bad" happens, try saying: "This must be for the best." Did you lose your job? A better one is waiting. If God sent the challenge, it by definition must be good. Think about your own life, and where you grew the most - from the easy times, or from the difficult times?
  4. Capture your moments of clarity. I keep a notebook to write down insights I've discovered through startling events. It's a great tool for refocusing during times when things get tough.

Life is not about suffering. Life is about growth and making the change we were put here to make. Challenges will happen. That we cannot change, because that is our reason for being. What we can change is our attitude. Will we view difficulties as a nuisance, or as a message? Let's make the most of it. We have nothing to lose, and everything to gain.



## Coincidence or the Hand of God?

The Book of Leviticus ends with a somber warning. God admonishes us to beware of the terrible fate that will befall us if we abandon His covenant. One word that stands out in the *parashah* is repeated again and again: "*keri* (casualness)," [1] an attitude that implies lack of causality, coincidence. The Torah warns us that our undoing will come about as a result of *keri*, a feeling that everything that befalls us is *happenstance* - merely an accident of fate.

Maimonides taught that when suffering is visited upon us, we are commanded to cry out and awaken our people by sounding the *shofar*. Everyone must be alerted to examine his or her life and commit to greater adherence to Torah and mitzvos. Most significantly, Maimonides warned that to regard tragedies as natural happenings - the way the world does - is to be guilty of cruelty.

At first glance, it is difficult to understand why Maimonides chose the term "*cruelty*" to describe those who view tribulations as "natural occurrences." We may regard such people as being guilty of apathy, obtuseness, or blindness, but why *cruelty*?

The answer is simple. If we regard our pain and suffering as mere coincidences, we will feel no motivation to examine our lives, abandon our old ways, and change. So yes, such an attitude is cruel, for *it invites additional misfortune upon ourselves and others*.

Thus, when we obstinately refuse to see Divine Providence in our daily lives, when we believe that things happen simply because they "happen to happen," we allow the suffering to continue unabated and we create a wall between ourselves and our Heavenly Father. So yes, it's cruelty to relegate God's wake-up call to "*keri*" - mere coincidence.

## Rediscovering Yourself

At the end of the *parashah*, after enumerating all the calamities that will befall us, God makes a promise: "And I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember ...."[2] This declaration is an eternal guarantee that no matter what, we, the Jewish people, will be redeemed in the merit of our Patriarchs.

There is one aspect of this covenant, however, that is rather puzzling. Why the reverse order? Why commence with Jacob? Why not commence with Abraham?

At the opening of the *parashah*, when we are warned about the terrible curses that will befall us if we abandon the covenant, we are also told how it could have happened that we, the People of the Book, the nation who stood at Sinai and heard the

voice of God, could have forgotten our Divine calling. Those curses are given in seven ascending steps of severity, corresponding to the people's continuing failure to take the punishments to heart and learn from them to repent.

To be sure, no Jew ever woke up one morning and suddenly decided, "I will forsake my Jewish faith." It is a slow, seven-step process and our *parashah* delineates it. The *first* step is the cessation of Torah study. The *second* is laxness in Torah observance, the *third* is mockery of those who do observe the commandments he abandoned, etc. One erosion leads to another until it culminates in the *seventh* and the covenant is forsaken. It is as a consequence of this abandonment that the "*curses*" befall us.

How do we redeem ourselves?

The answer is simple: Reverse the process, as Hashem reversed the names of the Patriarchs; reclaim that first step - Torah study - and the rest will follow.

## Three Pillars

There are three pillars upon which our faith stands: Torah, *Avodah* (service, sacrifice), and *Gemilas Chassadim*. Each of our Patriarchs personified one of these pillars. Abraham represents loving-kindness; Isaac, service and sacrifice; and Jacob, Torah. And because the tragic process of Jewish defection commences with the abandonment of Torah, the revitalization of Jewish life must commence with the re-acceptance of Torah as symbolized by Jacob. And so it is that God's promise in

this instance is given by mentioning the names of the Patriarchs in reverse order.

## The Way to Study Torah

The opening verse of this *parashah* commences with "In My statutes you shall *walk* ...." The use of the word "walk" is rather odd. It would seem to be more appropriate to use the verb *observe* or *study*. But the Torah is teaching is how to safeguard our spiritual lives and preserve our *Yiddishe neshamos*.

*Walking* connotes constant movement, teaching us that we never graduate from Torah study; as long as we are alive, we must continue to delve into its deep secrets. Our Sages further explain that this "walking" implies "*ameilus* - toiling in Torah," putting heart and soul into our study, for it is only when we study and teach with passion, with every fiber of our beings, that we will reap the full benefits of this toil.

*Walking* also implies that we Jews are charged with the imperative of following the well-trodden path of our ancestors, for it is only by following their path that we can be true to our calling, our mission.

1. Num. 26:27 *et al.*
2. Ibid. 26:42.

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