

*Ki Tavo: Mekayem et Ha-Torah*

## **Reflections on Communal Torah Leadership**

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### *I. Kiyum Ha-Torah: The Culmination of Har Gerizim and Har Eval*

Immediately prior to commencing his terrifying rebuke of the Jewish people, the *tochakha*, Moshe foretells of the covenant which would be ratified in the days of his successor, Joshua, at the twin Samarian mountain site of Gerizim and Eval. Moshe enumerates twelve curses to be pronounced, with corresponding blessings, at this future date. The climax of this list, strikes both a general and specific chord, *arur asher lo yakim et divrei ha'Torah ha'zot la'asot otam*, 'Cursed is the one who does not fulfill the words of this Torah to perform them.' (Deuteronomy 27:26)

Rashi understands the plain meaning of the verse relates to the entire corpus of the Torah. Rashbam, in accordance with his broader understanding of the purpose of the covenant of Har Gerizim and Har Eval, interprets the verse to relate to all spiritual matters that are private, hidden from public view.

And yet, as noted by Ramban, these views suffer from a certain deficiency. The Torah's selection of the word *yakim*, which means both to fulfill and to support, in place of perfectly suitable and more commonly used alternatives, such as *yishmor* or *ya'aseh*, which only connote performance, suggest an alternative understanding of the twelfth and final edict.

## *II. Sustaining Torah*

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Sotah 7:4), referenced by Ramban<sup>1</sup>, suggests that the Torah is cursing one who does not financially support the study of Torah, and conversely, blessing one who does. However, the Sages of the Talmud were far more radical in articulating the message than, I deeply suspect, any of us would dare to be.

'R. Acha said in the name of R. Tanchum son of Chiyah. If one has studied and taught the Torah, guarded and performed the commandments, and was capable of offering financial support for the study of Torah, and did not do so, he is cursed.'

(ad loc.)

The words of the Yerushalmi are utterly shocking. Is it conceivable that one who has learned intensively, taught diligently, performed meticulously, but fallen short in just one way, with respect to supporting the study of Torah according to his means, could be cursed? Apparently so. However startled we are by this Talmudic passage, we ought to be doubly shocked by its continuation, which presents precisely the inverse scenario.

'R. Yirmiyah said in the name of R. Chiyah. One who has *not* studied, nor taught, nor guarded, nor performed, and was not in a financial position to support Torah study, but did so nonetheless, is amongst those who is blessed.'

(ad loc.)

This view certainly reflects the profound self awareness Chazal brought to the vital nature of support for Torah. On the one hand, there is an acknowledgement of the simple reality, *ein kemach, ein Torah*. More broadly, however, in sustaining Torah, and Torah scholars, one not only achieves an instrumental purpose, but an intrinsic one: the mitzvah of cleaving to the Almighty is practically discharged by interacting with, and indeed sustaining, his most faithful earthly ambassadors.

In any case, within this interpretation, we find the obligation which inheres upon the community, and its constituent members, to sustain Torah, and Torah personalities. What is

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<sup>1</sup> We will return to Ramban's own preferred explanation later in the essay.

particularly striking regarding this Yerushalmi is that it contains an inverse and complementary perspective, most forcefully articulated by Ramban, regarding the obligations of Torah leaders to their constituents and communities.

### *III. The Tiered Approach of Ramban*

Ramban, as noted, took issue with Rashi's interpretation of *arur asher lo yakim*. In a breathtaking essay, Ramban, largely operating on the backdrop of the aforementioned Yerushalmi, proffers three perspectives.

First, Ramban notes, the injunction relates not to one who, on account of indolence, weakness or desire, fails to comply with particular obligations, or violates certain prohibitions. Rather, Ramban asserts, one who is not *mekayem* the Torah is one who does not internally affirm, wholeheartedly and unequivocally, the veracity and significance of each and every mitzvah in the Torah. Rather, this individual maintains that the Torah, in part or in whole, is either fallacious, or has lapsed into senescence, and thus has the legal status of a *kofer* or *mored*, a rebel.

Second, Ramban notes, based largely on the view of R. Shimon b. Chalafta, the injunction relates to one in a position to strengthen Torah observance in his community, who fails to do so. Such influence is naturally wielded by certain forms of Batei Din and others in positions of communal authority, but, no less, it may be invested in individuals of unique talents and abilities, blessed with powers of intellect, articulation, and spiritual charisma, capable of shaping and forming communities.

Third, Ramban notes, based on the view of R. Shimon b. Yakim, that this injunction relates to one who does not properly perform the mitzvah of *hagbah*, of lifting and displaying the Torah, so that it might be fully visualized by all men and women present for *keriat ha'Torah*, who will subsequently affirm the veracity of all of its contents.

While it seems eminently reasonable that the third interpretation follows logically from the second, in so as the former seems a more specific manifestation of the latter, relating to upholding and inspiring Torah standards in the community, the first interpretation, *ab initio*, seems to be of a different orientation altogether. Indeed, one might even categorize the first

interpretation as diametrically opposite, as it concerns the innermost thoughts and convictions an individual senses with regard to the authenticity of Torah.

And yet, upon further reflection, it strikes me that Ramban's interpretations are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, one might even suggest that the first is a prerequisite for the latter two. Only one who is fully and wholly committed, in body, soul, and mind, to the veracity of Torah, to the eternality of Torah, to the authenticity of Torah, will have both the inner drive as well as capacity to move an entire community towards greater Torah standards.

The enormous and exacting price of engaging in *tzorchei tzibbur* itself, across so many different areas, ensures that nothing short of fierce and unwavering commitment to the urgency of disseminating Torah at the communal level will suffice. Moreover, the sheer fact that people will be moved only by those who are fully committed- *devarim ha'yotzim min ha'lev nichmasim la'lev*- establishes the crucial need for one who fully affirms Torah in his own heart to generate meaningful community response.

As such, while much attention is devoted to the outer trappings of leadership, it would seem that the single greatest factor in identifying and generating successful Torah leaders is something wholly unquantifiable, let alone observable: the degree of inner conviction the individual feels regarding the need for Torah to calibrate and guide all communal norms. This factor alone is the *sine qua non*. All else, as Hillel said in a different context, is but elaboration and commentary, *v'idach peirusha hi*.

#### *IV. A Maimonidean Analogue*

In consideration of this interpretation of Ramban's perspective on the *mekayem ha'Torah*, which posits the sequencing of internal conviction followed by outward exportation, one is struck by an analogue in a celebrated passage within Rambam's literature.

In discussing the cardinal mitzvah of *ahavat Hashem*, which, for Rambam, remains the optimal mode of Divine service, Rambam writes the following:

The third mitzvah is that we are commanded to love G-d (exalted be He), to meditate upon and closely examine His mitzvot, His commandments, and His works, in order to understand Him; and through this understanding to achieve a feeling of ecstasy. This is the goal of the commandment to love G-d. [We can see that meditation is the way to create this feeling of love<sup>1</sup> from] the Sifri: "From the statement, 'You shall love G-d your Lord' , can I know how to love G-d? The Torah therefore says, 'and these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart' ; i.e. that through this [meditation about His commandments] you will understand the nature of 'the One Who spoke, and thereby brought the world into being.' "From this it is clear that meditation will lead to understanding, and then a feeling of enjoyment and love will follow automatically."

In classical Maimonidean formulation, we have the notion of Divine love contingent upon knowledge, *ahava lefi ha'yediah*. To this point, Rambam has focused exclusively upon the individual, whose quest for *ahava*, like the archetype of that virtue, Avraham, requires extensive meditation and contemplation. Indeed, Rambam's own view was that Avraham spent no fewer than thirty seven years contemplating the Divine idea, until arriving at immutable and unshakeable truth.

And then, Rambam, naturally using Avraham as the paradigm, breaks out, and presents the second half of the mitzvah of *ahavat Hashem*:

Our Sages also said that this mitzvah includes calling out to all mankind to serve G-d (exalted be He) and to believe in Him. This is because when you love a person, for example, you praise him and call out to others to draw close to him. So too, if you truly love G-d — through your understanding and realization of His true existence — you will certainly spread this true knowledge that you know to the ignorant and the foolish. [We see that this mitzvah includes spreading love for G-d to others from] the Sifri: " 'You shall love G-d,' i.e. make Him beloved among the creatures as your father Avraham did, as it is written, ' The souls that he made in Charan.' "The meaning of this Sifri: Avraham, as a result of his deep understanding of G-d, acquired love for G-d, as the verse testifies, "Avraham, who loved Me". This powerful love therefore caused him to

call out to all mankind to believe in G-d. So too, you shall love Him to the extent that you draw others to Him.

In Rambam's telling, the Divine lover had but little choice. His overflowing intoxication compelled him to turn outwards, and, like the paragon, Avraham himself, share his vision of the true, the beautiful, and the good with all comers.

While Rambam's perspective is certainly more affective in orientation than Ramban's version of the *mekayem et ha-Torah*, the fundamental parallel is unmistakable. Inner conviction alone precedes, and subsequently catalyzes, communal engagement.