

Parshat Nitzavim 5778

The following is substantially based on the writings of Rabbi Joseph Pearlman.

In chapter 29 verse 28 the Torah states that *“the hidden things are for Hashem our G-d but the revealed things are for us and for our children forever to perform all the words of the Torah”*. There are dots on the Hebrew words lanu ulevaneinu and the ayin of the word ad following, according to our mesorah, which means there are 11 dotted letters.

There are ten instances in the Torah of dots being on words. The chachamim were of divided opinion about their origin. According to one view the dots were given with the Torah at Sinai. In any event they need interpretation.

The general rule, followed by Rashi, is stated by Rabbi Shimon Ben Eleazar, in Bereishis Rabah. If the number of undotted letters exceed the dotted ones, then you expound the undotted letters. If the dotted letters are in the majority, then you explain the dotted letters.

In this instance, we need to understand why this possuk is placed here, following the previous possukim which discuss the destruction and exile which will result from avodoh zoroh?

Rashi explains that the verse is answering the question “How can you punish the community for the sins of the individual since no-one can know the thoughts of his fellow?” Answers the possuk, The secret sins are for Hashem to punish the individual for. However, the revealed sins are for us and our children to eradicate evil from our midst and if we do not, then we will be liable to punishment.

Rashi then goes on to quote from the Gemara in Sanhedrin 43b. This Gemara discusses the case of Achan in sefer Yehoshua. After the battle of Yericho, the Bnei Yisroel were warned not to take from the spoils of the city. The Gemara relates that Hashem told Joshua that someone had breached this edict, He declined to say who it was as He did not want to be ‘a tale bearer’. Joshua therefore cast lots and these pointed to Achan.

Achan said he could not be convicted based on lots – this was not the judicial method which should be used. Joshua asked him not to cast aspersions on the “lot” process as this was to be used for dividing up the land. He asked Achan to confess, which he did and in doing so it became clear that he had committed two similar offences during Moses’ lifetime. If that was so, why had Achan not been punished previously?

In answering this, the Gemara brings a machlokes between Rebbi Yehuda who says that prior to the crossing of the Yarden, the communal responsibility was only for the

revealed sins but after they entered Eretz Yisrael, Klal Yisrael became responsible even for the private sins.

According to Rebbi Yehuda, the dots on the letters have a limiting effect as if to remove those letters completely. In this case, according to Rashi the dots do not relate to the letters they are on, but to the preceding words “lashem elokeinu.” The dots should have appeared on these words, but out of respect to the name of G-d, they were transferred to lanu ulevanenu instead. According to Tosafos this is why the ayin has a dot on it - to make up the number to eleven the same number as Lashem elokeinu. Indeed, Tosafos say, that this is how Rebbi Yehudah derived the fact that the dots should have been on the different words.

Because of the dots in effect being on Hashem’s name the verse should now be understood to read without Hashem’s name and Hanistoros vehaniglos would be understood to mean that the revealed and private sins are for us and our children to be punished.

But if this was always the case then the words Hashem Elokeinu could (and should) have been omitted altogether. We therefore must infer that hanistoros, the private sins, were originally just for Hashem to deal with, and only subsequently, when Bnei Yisroel entered the land, are we all held liable even for those sins.

Rav Nechemyah disagrees with Rebbi Yehudah and says that prior to crossing over the Jordan, there was no communal punishment at all for either the private or public sins and when they entered the land they were punished only for the niglos, the revealed sins, and that this is the opinion Rashi brings on the possuk.

He explains the dots as relating to the actual words they are on and they have this limiting effect to inform us that haniglos are lanu ulevaninu but only sometimes, i.e. after crossing the Jordan.

Tosafos explain that the reason for the eleven dots are a remez, a hint, to the words lashem elokeinu, to show that at some time haniglos were just for Hashem, i.e. before entry to Israel.

We therefore see, from the above that the dots on words in the Torah have a limiting or excluding effect. Silbermann in his appendix to his chumash Rashi on this possuk, states that “The dots placed over letters in the Hebrew text are intended to call the reader’s attention to some teaching contained in the words so marked. What exactly this is must be decided in each particular instance.”