

Parshat Tetzaveh 5779

Rabbeinu Bechaye (11th century, Spain) opens his commentary on each Parasha by quoting a verse from Sefer Mishlei, thereby connecting the wisdom of Shlomo Hamelech with themes from the week. For Parashat Tetzaveh, Rabbeinu Bachaye quotes a verse from Mishlei whose first two words allude to the very beginning and also the ending of the Parasha:

שָׁמֶן וְקִטְרֹת יִשְׂמַח-לֵב וּמִתְק רֵעֵהוּ מֵעֵצַת-נֶפֶשׁ. (כז:ט)

Oil and incense gladden the heart, and the sweetness of a friend is better than one's own counsel (27:9).

Parashat Tetzaveh opens with the mitzvah to take pure, pressed olive oil for the Ner Tamid. After then instructing the details of Cohen Gadol's garments and the inauguration rituals for the Mishkan, the Parasha ends with the mitzvah to construct the incense altar.

The mastery of Rabbeinu Bechaye is that by drawing the connection between a Pasuk in Mishlei and our Parasha, he enriches our understanding of both texts. This is not mere wordplay, but rather there are deeper themes in Mishlei that he wants to teach us, and he thereby shows us the interconnectivity of Torah. His opening sentence after quoting the Pasuk from Mishlei seems quite surprising: "Shlomo Hamelech warns with this verse that one should have compassion on the stranger (גר) who has been exiled from his place and land of origin ... as it says (quoting Parashat Mishpatim from two weeks ago) 'do not wrong the stranger' and 'you shall not oppress the stranger'". The theme of treating strangers (not literally converts) is hardly an obvious theme of this week's reading, and he therefore succeeds in grabbing our attention with this rhetorical opening to his introduction.

Rabbeinu Bechaye goes on to explain that Shlomo Hamelech is telling us that we should do two things to strangers – ensure provision of sufficient food, and treat them with decency and kindness. At this point, he quotes the preceding verse in Mishlei that makes the context clear: "Like a bird wandering from its nest, so is a man wandering from his place." Thus, a displaced person is akin to a bird that has left his nest, and the words that directly follow – "oil and incense" – are a metaphor for food, as food is cooked on fire that may burn from oil, and the smoke from the cooking food is like incense. And so, providing food is a way of "gladdening the heart" of the stranger.

Rabbeinu Bechaye also understands the second half of the verse from Mishlei non-literally. "The sweetness of a friend" indicates that you should sweeten and soften your words and be pleasant towards the stranger, in addition to providing material benefits of food. Rather than explaining מֵעֵצַת נֶפֶשׁ as meaning literally that friendship is "better than one's counsel", he explains the words to mean that the sweetness of friendship should be from the advice of one's mind as genuine love, and not insincere flattery. Thus treating strangers kindly involves supporting them with personal and loving advice offered in friendship.

Turning to the theme of the Mishkan, he goes on to suggest that just as "oil and incense" warm the heart of a stranger, so we are to understand that the oil of the menorah lit at the time of the incense offering brings joy to Hashem's heart. The construction of the Mishkan is compared with the creation of the world, and so just as Hashem rejoices at the creation of the world (Tehillim 103:31 – יְהִי כְבוֹד ה' לְעוֹלָם – ישמח ה' במעשיו), so Hashem rejoices here in the oil and incense at the conclusion of constructing the Mishkan – another way of understanding of the Pasuk in Mishlei – "oil and incense gladden the heart".

In further parallel between the Mishkan and the creation of the world, just as Hashem leaves the creation of Adam, who will recognise Him and serve Him, until the last day of creation, so too, after the end of the description of the Mishkan, we learn about the Cohen Gadol who will serve Hashem inside it.

It is noteworthy that Rabbeinu Bachaye compares the sanctification of the Mishkan by oil and incense to the act of kindness of feeding the stranger who is lost and displaced like a bird from his nest. Thus, the paradigm for drawing the Shechina into this world through the vessel of the Mishkan is the act of doing kindness to the poor, and the joy brought to Hashem by the oil and incense in the Mishkan is to be understood as comparable to the simple and personal joy of the poor person being fed and supported. This also means that feeding displaced strangers and the poor is an act that can be compared to serving Hashem.

The powerful message of Rabbeinu Bechaye is perhaps that we should recall the humility in Hashem in coming close to dwell among Bnei Yisrael, if they are so worthy, through the Mishkan. With this ethical and moral emphasis, we are also reminded that building the Mishkan is not an end in itself, but is rather the means provided to Bnei Yisrael to serve G-d and bring His presence into this world to dwell amongst them in the wilderness.