

Sichos
in
English

PARSHAS SHOFTIM

בס"ד

SICHOS IN ENGLISH

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PARSHAS SHOFTIM
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PARSHAS SHOFTIM

I.

On the verse:¹ “Is a man a tree of the field...?” the *Talmud*² reiterates the question asked by the verse and explains:

[The verse states:]¹ “From it, you shall eat; you shall not cut it down. [And the passage continues:]³ “This you shall destroy and cut down.”

What is implied? If a Torah scholar is befitting, “From it, you shall eat” {i.e., “learn from him” (*Rashi*)}; “you shall not cut it down.” If not, “This you shall destroy” {i.e., “turn away from him” (*Rashi*)} “and cut down.”

Explanation is necessary: From the *Talmud*’s reiteration of the question in the verse, it is apparent that the *Talmud* understands that the comparison between a person and a tree is not a mere analogy⁴ from which we can appreciate one (or several) points regarding the qualities and characteristics of a person.

{Were the verse merely comparing people to trees with regard to certain particulars, it would not be in place to ask: “Is a man a tree of the field?”⁵ Certainly there are some particulars

¹ *Devarim* 20:19.

² *Taanis* 7a.

³ *Devarim* 20:20.

⁴ Based on the above, we can appreciate why the *Talmud* does not use the expression “Why was a person described with the analogy of a tree?” although the *Talmud* uses such expressions several times in the same passage with regard to the words of Torah.

⁵ *Rashi* (and similarly, Rabbeinu Gershom) in his commentary to that passage state: “An association is established between a person and a tree of the field... Just as a tree of the field...” It appears that the intent of the *Talmud* is not that a person is a tree, but

in which a person resembles a tree. [Nevertheless, these shared characteristics are not sufficient for a person to be called “a tree of the field.”]”⁶

Instead, the intent is that “a man is a tree of the field.”⁷ A tree expresses (— not only secondary particulars concerning mankind —) but who man is.

{This is also understood from the fact that we do not recite *Tachanun* on Tu BeShvat,⁸ the New Year of the Trees,⁹ and it is Jewish custom to eat fruit to mark this day.¹⁰ (These customs are associated with the verse: “Is a man a tree of the field...?”¹¹)

If a tree were merely an analogy for man, it would not be appropriate to celebrate the trees’ New Year.¹² From the above, it is understood that “a man is a tree of the field”; i.e., trees describe a man’s identity. Hence, the New Year of the Trees is relevant to man.}

that a tree merely is an analogy for a person.* This is somewhat problematic, for what then was the *Talmud’s* original supposition?

* The *Maharsha* in his *Chiddushei Aggados* (and similarly, Rabbeinu Yitzchak Alfasi in his commentary to *Ein Yaakov*) explains that according to the simple meaning of the verse (“Is a man a tree of the field?” as *Rashi* comments in his gloss to the verse), the order of the Hebrew terms should have been rearranged. But from the wording of the *Talmud*, it appears that the question is — as stated above — how can it be said that man is a tree?

6 See for example, *Avos* 3:17. In particular, the details of the analogy are explained in *Sefer HaLikkutim* from the *Tzemach Tzedek*, *erech Etz*, *Sefer HaArachim Chabad*, Vol. I, *erech Adam*, sec. 11, *et al.*

7 See *Rashi*, *Bamidbar* 13:20.

8 *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chayim* 131:6.

9 *Rosh HaShanah* 1:1 (according to the School of Hillel).

10 *Magen Avraham* 131:16; the *HaShlamah* to *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* prepared by Rav Nechemiah of Dubravna 131:8. There are those who follow the custom of reciting passages from the *Tanach* and the *Zohar* {as published in *Pri Etz Hadar* (first printing, Venice 5488)}. I have not, however, seen this practice followed in these countries [i.e., in the Ashkenazic community].

11 See *Likkutei Mahariach*, Vol. III, *Minhagei Shvat* (explaining why we wear holiday clothing on that day), *et al.*

12 Obviously, there is a difference between this celebration and the custom of hanging flowering branches in the synagogues on Shavuot (*Shulchan Aruch HaRav* 494:15).

[Based on the above,] the following questions arise:

a) How is the *Talmud's* question, “Is a man a tree of the field?” answered by the explanation, “If a Torah scholar is befitting”? Seemingly, that is referring merely to an analogy and an analogue. Moreover, it appears to relate to only one dimension [of the relationship]. Thus as a whole, the question remains: “Is a man a tree of the field?”

b) How is it appropriate to describe the advantages possessed by man [— the highest form of life —] through a comparison to a tree, a member of the plant kingdom?

True, within man, there is also a dimension [comparable to] plant life (as reflected in the growth of one’s hair and nails. But if this is the point, then a) man also possesses a greater quality, the dimension of animal life,¹³ and b) more fundamentally, [although man possesses a plant-like dimension,] this does not represent the unique characteristic of man. How then can we say: “Man is a tree of the field...?”

II.

The unique positive characteristic of the plant kingdom (when compared to the animal kingdom and humans) is expressed by the fact that it does not conceal [its connection to the source of] its true life. Instead (through its roots), it is always connected to its source, the power of growth in the earth that grants it life and makes it grow. [Indeed,] when a plant is uprooted from the ground, it loses [the qualities that distinguish it as] a plant.

An animal and a human need not remain connected to their source at all times. Although they too came into being from the earth — for “everything was formed from earth”¹⁴ — they

¹³ For as is well known, a human includes aspects of all four kingdoms: inanimate matter, plants, animals, and humans. See *Sefer HaArachim*, *loc. cit.*, sec. 7; [*Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. VI, p. 109 ff].

¹⁴ *Koheles* 3:20; *Bereishis Rabbah* 12:11.

are not connected to it at all times.¹⁵ [Similarly, in an individual sense,] after the birth of every animal or human, he is no longer connected to his source ([his mother] who bore him). Even the food on which an animal and a human subsist does not require one to be in constant contact with his source of nurture. Plant life, by contrast, is always connected to the power of growth in the earth.

[We do find a parallel to plant life in the animal kingdom.] Fish must always exist in water, the source of their vitality. If they leave the sea, they die immediately.¹⁶ On the contrary, they seemingly surpass the plant kingdom in this aspect. For their entire being remains encompassed in water, the source of their vitality.

But this reflects precisely the distinction between the two: Even when plants grow and extend far beyond their source in the earth — like trees which grow very high beyond the earth, their source — they still remain connected to their roots in the earth, and through them, to the power of growth in the earth.

Moreover, each particular fish is not connected with its immediate source, [the water in which it was born,] for its individual life-energy. Thus there are fish that wander from rivers to oceans and vice versa. This phenomenon is not found with regard to plant life.

III.

In the above, there is an advantage to trees relative to other

¹⁵ Consider, however, the *adonai hasadeh* (*Kilayim* 8:5) which is described by the *Etz Chayim* (*Shaar* 42) as an intermediate rung between the plant kingdom and the animal kingdom.

¹⁶ See *Avodah Zarah* 3b; *Berachos* 61b.

plant life.¹⁷ Other plants,¹⁸ e.g., grains and vegetables, do not continue to exist (connected to the earth as a plant) from year to year. [Instead,] they wilt and die. Trees, by contrast, produce fruit from year to year. They bear all the climatic changes of summer and winter without ceasing to exist.

Thus trees share a very strong connection to their source of vitality. This endows them with great strength not to be influenced by the fluctuations of the seasons, to continue to exist, and even to grow from year to year.

IV.

Man is “a world in microcosm.”¹⁹ Just as the world at large contains four types of existence: inanimate matter, plants, animals, and humans, so, too, these four types of existence [are paralleled] — in a spiritual sense — within man.²⁰ As is well known,²¹ a person’s emotions represent the plant kingdom within man, for the emotions possess the potential to grow from an underdeveloped stage to a developed stage.

Intellect possesses — in addition to the potential for growth — a parallel to the animal kingdom,²² as expressed in the quality of movement and [the ability to] change from place to place. Just as an animal moves from one place to another, so, too, intellect is not (grounded, i.e.,) defined and confined to a given nature. [On the contrary,] the nature of intellect is to understand a concept

¹⁷ Moreover, the ultimate fulfillment of the growth potential of the plant kingdom is reflected in trees, as *I Melachim* states: “And he spoke to the trees, from the cedar to... the hyssop” (See *Toras Chayim, Bereishis*, the *maamar* entitled *VaYaatzer*, sec. 17).

¹⁸ See the different opinions concerning these matters: *Berachos* 60a ff. and commentaries; *Tur, Shulchan Aruch, Shulchan Aruch HaRav (Orach Chayim 203)*; *Seder Birchas HaNeheinin* 6:6.

¹⁹ *Midrash Tanchuma, Parshas Pekudei*, sec. 3; *Avos DeRabbi Nassan* 31:3, et al.

²⁰ See the sources cited in fn. 13.

²¹ *Torah Or*, p. 4a; see the sources cited in *Sefer HaArachim*, loc. cit.

²² See *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. VI, p. 155 (and p. 113).

(not as one desires it to be, but) as it is. And thus [a person who follows his intellect] proceeds and changes his [emotional] place, sometimes tending to kindness, sometimes tending to severity, according to his understanding]. With regard to one matter, his intellect may dictate that kindness is appropriate, and with regard to another, he may tend toward severity.

With regard to emotions, by contrast, (as they exist in and of themselves, [i.e., without considering how they are influenced by intellect,]) they are defined by their nature; the attribute of kindness remains (as it exists independently) confined to that emotional thrust. Similarly, the attribute of severity remains in its natural thrust. [The emotions merely] grow from an underdeveloped stage to a developed stage [but do not change their fundamental tendency].

V.

Just as in the macrocosm, the world at large, where the plant kingdom possesses an advantage in always being connected to its source, so, too, the “plant” element of man’s personality, emotions, possesses an advantage over intellect, for [the emotions] are constantly connected to their source, the inner dimension of a person’s soul.

This is also the reason²³ that emotions possess such strong power, to the extent that it is very difficult to have them change their “place” (as explained above with regard to trees). When a person is kind by nature, it is very difficult for him to change and become a person whose emotions are characterized by severity. (And the opposite is also true.)

{It is possible, although it is not common or prevalent, for a person to use his mind to overcome his natural emotional

²³ See the *maamar* entitled *Vehaaretz Hoyisa*, *Sefer HaMaamarim* 5568, Vol. I and Vol. II; *Toras Chayim, Bereishis*, p. 11d ff.; the series of *maamarim* entitled *BeShaah SheHikdimu*, 5672, Vol. I, secs. 251-252; the *maamar* entitled *Lehavin Inyan Tainas HaMiraglim*, 5715.

tendencies to such an extent that he can transform them from bad to good.²⁴ To cite a parallel with regard to trees: at times, through taking extra effort to uproot a tree from its place and plant it in another place, the tree will grow in the new place and, at times, flourish better and stronger than in its first place.]²⁵

This itself explains the reason why intellect is not confined to a person's natural tendency. (As we see, a person can understand and comprehend²⁶ concepts that run contrary to his natural tendency.) For intellect (which corresponds to animal life) is not — in a revealed manner — connected to the source of one's soul [to the same degree as emotions are],²⁷ {as animal life in the world at large does not require a (constant) connection to its source}.

24 It is explained in several sources that through a prominent expression of intellect (*gadlos hamochin*), the nature of one's emotional characteristics are transformed (see *Torah Or, Hosafos*, p. 107d ff.; *Derech Mitzvosecha*, p. 84a; *Or HaTorah, Mishpatim*, p. 1134; the *maamar* entitled *BeYom HaShemini Atzeres*, 6665; the series of *maamarim* entitled *BeShaah SheHikdimu, 5672*, Vol. III, p. 1231ff., (where it is explained that this results from a prominent expression of *Chochmah*).

In this context, note also the adage, "The entire purpose of *Chassidus* is to change the nature of one's emotional characteristics" (see *Kesser Shem Tov*, sec. 24; *Likkutei Dibburim*, Vol. I, p. 56a; *Sefer HaMaamarim Kuntreisim*, Vol. II, p. 321b). See also the series of *maamarim* entitled *BeShaah SheHikdimu, 5672*, Vol. I, the conclusion of sec. 258 which states that even the quality of *Chochmah* "causes (only) a weakening [of the natural thrust] of the emotions. Nevertheless, the emotions as they are in their essential state do not change."

25 As our Sages (*Shmos Rabbah* 44:1) state with regard to a vine: "When its owners desire to improve it... they uproot it from its natural place, replant it elsewhere, and it is improved." See also *Bereishis Rabbah* 15:1; *Zohar*, II, 167 (explained in *Or HaTorah, Bereishis*, p. 45b ff.).

26 See *Tanya*, ch. 5.

27 See the series of *maamarim* entitled *BeShaah SheHikdimu, 5672*, Vol. I, *loc. cit.*, which states with regard to *Chochmah*: "*Chochmah* is the expression of the essence in an attribute which is outside the essence, while the emotions are the revelation of the essence." [Trans. Note: The implication is that although *Chochmah* is a distinct attribute, the fundamental simplicity of the essence is revealed within it. Nevertheless, since it is a distinct attribute, it does not reveal the unique power of the essence. That finds expression in the emotions.]

VI.

Based on the above, we can understand the meaning of the verse: “Is a man a tree of a field?” A man is “a tree of the field” (as explained in sec. 1) because his emotions,²⁸ the dimension within him that parallels plant life, express (his source), the inner dimension of his soul, in a revealed manner.

For that reason, man’s essential task in Divine service does (not primarily involve intellectual challenges, but fundamentally,) the refinement and polishing of the emotions.²⁹ For the refinement of the emotions affects the inner dimensions of the soul. Therefore it is this Divine service that brings a person to his personal fulfillment. Indeed, even a person’s intellectual fulfillment (“And you shall know...”)³⁰ is accomplished through bringing about change within his emotions (“and you shall take it to heart...”).

For this reason,³¹ the *Talmud* explains the concept of a person being identified with a tree with the guidance: “If a Torah scholar is befitting, ‘From it, you shall eat.’” “Befitting” implies that the Torah scholar possesses not only the qualities of intellect (study), but also that his intellect affects his emotions and causes him to conduct himself in a “befitting” manner.

From such a Torah scholar one should “eat,” i.e., study, for “a man is a tree of the field.” When is one truly human (and thus a

28 See the series of *maamarim* entitled *BeShaah SheHikdimu*, 5672, Vol. III, p. 1221: “In general, a person can be identified through his emotions, for ‘a man is a tree of the field.’”

29 See the *maamar* entitled *Al Totzar es Moab* by the Mittlerer Rebbe (*Kehot* 5736), p. 6ff.; *Sefer HaMaamarim* 5565, Vol. II, p. 802ff., et al. See also the *maamar* entitled *Ein HaKadosh Baruch Hu Ba*, 5685 (*Sefer HaMaamarim Kuntreisim*, Vol. III), sec. 2; the *maamar* entitled *Vayisa Aharon*, 5694 (*Sefer HaMaamarim Kuntreisim*, Vol. II), sec. 1; et al. See also the adage quoted in fn. 24.

30 *Devarim* 4:39.

31 With regard to the ensuing concepts, see *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. IV, p. 1115ff.

person from whom one would desire to learn)? When one is a tree, i.e., when one's emotions are as they should be.³²

VII.

Just as the above applies with regard to every individual, it also applies to the Jewish people as a whole. All of the Jews stem from the three Patriarchs: Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and are constantly connected with the Patriarchs. On the verse:³³ “From the peaks of boulders, I see him,” *Rashi* comments: “I gaze at their heads, at the beginning of their roots,³⁴ and I see them [i.e., the Jewish people] strongly based... because of the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs.”

How is the connection between every Jew and the three Patriarchs expressed? Not (as prominently) through the quality of intellect, but through the quality of emotion. As is well known,³⁵ the three Patriarchs personify the three qualities of love, fear, and mercy (which represent, in a general sense, the totality of our emotional potential³⁶). They endow their descendants for all time

32 See the use of this expression in *Kesubos* 67a with regard to giving charity {which expresses the quality of kindness, the attribute that accompanies all other attributes — *Likkutei Torah, Devarim*, p. 76b, (*Pri Etz Chayim, Shaar Chag HaSukkos*, ch. 1; *Meorei Or, Os Yud*, 8, et al.)}.

33 *Bamidbar* 23:9.

34 See *Yeshayahu* 27:6: “It will come that Yaakov will root...”

35 See *Torah Or*, the beginning of *Parshas Va'eira*; the *maamar* entitled *Va'eira* (*Sefer HaMaamarim* 5562, *loc. cit.*); et al. See also *Tanya*, ch. 18ff.

36 See *Tanya*, ch. 3; **Torah Or*, p. 1b; *Sefer HaMaamarim* 5562, *loc. cit.*, *Or HaTorah, Parshas Behaaloscha*, p. 321, *Vayikra*, Vol. III, p. 862.

Similar concepts are explained with regard to the use of the term חר as an acronym for *Chessed* (kindness), *Din* (judgment), and *Rachamim* (mercy). (See *Meorei Or, erech Cheder* 8:7, commentary *Yair Nasiv*). *Likkutei Torah, Vayikra*, p. 2d, *Bamidbar*, pp. 44a, 71b; *Sefer HaLikkutim, erech Cheder*.

* *Tanya, loc. cit.*, states: “The other emotional qualities are all branches of awe and love,” [and it mentions only] the expressions of kindness and severity. {This version is present in all texts of *Tanya* (Vol. I).} The passage from *Or HaTorah, Parshas Vayikra*,

with these emotional qualities. Thus “within every person, at all times,” there exists an [emotional] counterpart of the Patriarchs.

The explanation [of this concept] is that an inheritance reflects a connection with the essence of the person bestowing the inheritance and his heir.³⁷ Therefore, the inheritance that the Patriarchs endowed their descendants is not very closely tied to their intellectual level and their comprehension of G-dliness (for example, Avraham is identified with “intellect that is hidden from all conception”³⁸ [and few of us share that degree of understanding]). For on a revealed level, intellect does not have (such a powerful) connection with the essence and the inner dimension that is transferred through inheritance.

[What is our spiritual inheritance from the Patriarchs?] It is the connection with their Divine service in the emotions: love, fear, and mercy. For the nature of their emotions is associated with the essence of the soul.

cited above, however, states: “*Netzach, Hod, and Yesod* are branches of *Chessed, Gevurah, and Tiferes...* as stated in *Tanya*, ch. 3: ‘The other emotional qualities are all branches of awe and love.’ [*Tiferes* is not mentioned, because *Tanya, loc. cit.*] does not more than explain that there are essential elements and extensions of the emotional qualities.”

{*Tanya*, ch. 46 (p. 65b) states: “The 248 limbs are divided into three attributes: right (identified with kindness), left (identified with severity), and the center (identified with mercy). They are represented by the two arms and the trunk.” Similar concepts are found in other sources. These sources (or at least most of them), however, place the (primary) emphasis on the three vectors (but in each vector, there is the fundamental thrust, its interrelation to the level above it, and its interrelation to the level below it.)}

37 See *Tzafnas Paneiach* (Vol. I, Responsum 118, *et al.*) which explains that the heir is [a continuation of] the existence of the person whose inheritance he receives.

38 *Torah Or*, the beginning of *Parshas Lech Lecha*.

It can be said that even on the level where the Patriarchs are identified with *Chochmah, Binah, and Daas* [see *Or HaTorah, Parshas Lech Lecha* (Vol. IV), p. 690b]; see also *Toras Chayim, Lech Lecha*, p. 84d ff., which explains that the Patriarchs represent the three vectors *Chochmah-Chessed-Netzach, Binah-Gevurah-Hod, and Daas-Tiferes-Yesod*}, this refers to their source and not to their fundamental thrust. This is not the place for discussion of the matter.

VIII.

Among the lessons that we can derive from the above: Every Jew's source of vitality is the Torah, as we say,³⁹ "They [the Torah's precepts] are our life." Nevertheless, most people's lives are structured ([and this is acceptable even] according to the Torah's dictates) in a manner that those "whose occupation is the Torah" are few. [Indeed,] *yoshvei ohel*, individuals who dwell tranquilly in the tents of Torah [are small in number]. Instead of being "fish in the sea," which are always connected to their source of vitality,⁴⁰ [our people] by and large involve themselves in worldly matters, [and with those activities] carry out the mission to make a dwelling for Him on this mortal plane.

[In such a situation,] we must remember that "man is a tree of the field." A Jew must continuously be connected to the source of his vitality: the life-energy of the Torah and its *mitzvos* that he received while dwelling in the tents of the Torah before the time came for him to go out and pursue his livelihood.⁴¹ [The experience of those years] must remain constant for him to the extent that at present, he is connected to that time. It is not that he must have the feeling that he once studied in a *cheder* or in a *yeshivah* and he remembers now what he then felt and did. Instead, he must feel connected to that time at present. In the here and now, he should feel that this is his life-energy and this constitutes his being.

Simultaneously, the Torah scholars must know that Torah study alone is insufficient. For intellect alone allows for the possibility of fluctuation. [With Torah study alone] there is no certainty that after one leaves the "tents of Torah" he will remain

³⁹ [Evening service, daily liturgy.]

⁴⁰ See the sources cited in fn. 16.

⁴¹ I.e., the age of 20 (*Avos* 5:22); see the Alter Rebbe's *Hilchos Talmud Torah* 3:1 (and the *Kuntreis Acharon* to that law).

connected to the Torah as is befitting. Only when the study is “taken to heart” is the Torah so engraved within the person that he will not change. Regardless of the situation in which he will find himself, he will remain connected to the source of the waters of life, the Torah and its *mitzvos*.

(Adapted from *Sichos Motzaei Shabbos Parshas Va'eira*, 5739;
Sichos Shabbos Parshas Beshalach, 5740)



