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Ki Tavo | Vidui-Confession – Ever Closer to G-d



MESILOT

Pathways to the Soul

Illuminating teachings and insights on the weekly Parsha
of **Rabbi Yoram Michael Abargel Zt"l**

From the weekly lessons of his son
Rabbi Yisrael Abargel Shlita

פרשת כי תבוא | אנגלית

...PATHWAYS TO THE SOUL...

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Parshat Ki Tavo

The Progeny of Laban

In our Parshah, Ki Tavo, the Torah states:

"And you shall speak and say before the L-rd your G-d: 'An Aramean sought to destroy my father' (Deuteronomy 26:5).

Our sages (Rashi on the verse) explain that the "Aramean" here refers to Laban, Jacob's father-in-law, who "sought to uproot everything."

Although he is portrayed here in a negative light, the truth is that he also possessed many merits, for the entire Jewish People eventually emerged from him.

Let us elaborate:

Moses' close disciple and successor, Joshua, proclaimed before the assembled Jewish people: "Thus said the L-rd, G-d of Israel: 'Long ago, your fathers — Terah, father of Abraham and father of Nahor — lived beyond

the River and served other g-ds'" (Joshua 24:2).

The saintly kabbalist R. Shimshon of Ostropoli (Likutei Shoshanim, 24) explains:

Our Sages (Sanhedrin 70a) teach that the Tree of Knowledge was a fig tree.

Just as the root of the primordial sin is represented by the fig, so too the rectification of the world began with four souls alluded to in the word "fig" ('תאנה'): Terah, Abraham, Nahor, and Haran, and it was from these four souls that the People of Israel sprang forth.

We now turn to focus on Laban's lineage and progeny:

Nahor married Milcah (Haran's daughter), and their eight children were: Uz, Buz, Kemuel, Kesed, Chazo, Pildash, Yidlaf, and Bethuel; Bethuel fathered Laban and his sister Rebecca.

Parshat Ki Tavo - The Four Elements of Teshuvah

Rebecca wed Isaac and bore the twins Jacob and Esau.

Laban married two wives: his principal wife bore Leah and Rachel, while his concubine bore him Zilpah and Bilhah.¹

Jacob eventually married all four daughters — Rachel, Leah, Zilpah, Bilhah — and from them emerged the Twelve Tribes.

Thus, from one Laban came four: Rachel, Leah, Zilpah, and Bilhah. And from these four came

twelve — the twelve tribes of Israel.

Yet despite this honorable distinction, he ultimately "lost everything" and earned the title of the one who "sought to uproot everything."

Yet despite his great downfall, he nevertheless merited, and his rectification that is hinted at in our Parshah, as we shall discuss below.

But first, a word about the month of Elul, in which we currently find ourselves.

The Four Elements of Teshuvah

This Shabbat, when we read the Torah portion of Ki Tavo, we usher in the second half of Elul, a month of exceptionally lofty spiritual stature.

Its spiritual greatness derives from the full revelation of the

Divine Attributes of Mercy at this time.²

It is by the means of this attribute of mercy that G-d draws close to every person, opens the gates of repentance, and helps him attain complete teshuvah.

Wellsprings of Wisdom

1. Rashi on the repetition of "My daughters... my daughters" (Genesis 31:50) notes that the phrase appears twice, indicating that Bilhah and Zilpah — Jacob's maidservants — were also Laban's daughters from his concubines.

2. In the year 5330 to Creation, the Arizal, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi,

revealed hidden mysteries unknown even to the angels, and among those secrets, he expounded upon the exalted stature of Elul.

In Sha'ar Ruach HaKodesh (Yichud 16), it is recorded that on Rosh Chodesh Elul (in the year 5331 to Creation), the Arizal said to his holy disciple, Rabbi Chaim Vital:

Parshat Ki Tavo - The Four Elements of Teshuvah

On our part, we must seize this golden opportunity and stir

ourselves to return to G-d with a whole heart.³

~ Wellsprings of Wisdom ~

"Rabbi Chaim, in Elul, the thirteen wellsprings of the Thirteen attributes of the 'Tikkunei Dikna' of Atika open and illuminate our world."

This is because in Elul it arose in His will to create the universe - on the 25th of Elul, the first utterance was declared: 'In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth.'

As the Kabbalist Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Katz writes in Brit Kehunat Olam (Mamar Pituchei Chotam Kodesh, ch. 12):

"Elul corresponds to the primordial will of G-d to create the world; therefore, its days are days of favor, when the source of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy is opened — since in this month of Elul the Divine will to create the world first arose."

3. Rabbi Menachem Ziegelboim, recounts
(Sipur Shel Chag – Rosh Ha-Shanah, p. 14):

It happened in the month of Elul.

Dozens of Jews crowded Berel's tavern. Night had already fallen outside, but inside it was still high noon: horse-traders, cattle-dealers, butchers, hide-peddlers — who was not there?

It was the peak of the annual fair; people had converged from the ends of the country to buy and sell, earning in just a few days handsome profits to last them the whole year.

All day they toiled at business; in the evenings, they sought release in Berel's tavern.

Laughter and idle talk rang out; pitchers of wine and beer were filled and quickly drained.

The room was thick with alcoholic fumes and pipe-smoke; no one remembered it was Elul, a month of divine mercy and repentance.

Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov entered the tavern amid this tumult, and seeing the coarsened Jews, neck-deep in rough livelihoods and roaring with laughter, his heart overflowed with compassion.

He addressed them using terms familiar to them all:

"Tell me, my friends: What is the difference between a good, fast horse and a poor, sluggish one?"

Pinchas the wagon-driver stared, bewildered. "Don't you know?!" he laughed amid his comrades.

"A trained, speedy horse brings a hundred gold pieces or more; a scrawny village nag isn't worth even ten."

Other horse experts who were present added some additional barbs at the stranger's ignorance.

Parshat Ki Tavo - The Four Elements of Teshuvah

The bedrock of teshuvah is solely the recognition of sin and abandoning the wrongdoing.⁴

If one is accustomed to eating forbidden foods or eating without a blessing, he cannot begin the process of teshuvah until he first acknowledges his wrongdoing.

Once he recognizes it, teshuvah proper begins, and is comprised of four parts:

1. Ceasing the sin.

2. Regret for the past misdeeds.

3. Vidui — verbal confession.

4. Finally, a firm resolve to never repeat the sin again.

Hence, teshuvah has two phases: resolving not to repeat sinful behavior in the future,⁵ as well as regretting the past.

And regret itself also unfolds in two forms: regret of the heart

Wellsprings of Wisdom

"Now," pressed the Baal Shem Tov, "answer for me a simple question please: Of what benefit is a swift horse's great speed if it strays off the road? Won't it wander away far more than the cheap, slow nag?"

The dealers fell silent; even they sensed that his words held a weighty idea.

"True," the Tzaddik conceded, "a galloping horse that's off course is no good. But its advantage still remains: once the trained horse returns to the right road, it corrects its error with the same great speed."

"Absolutely! Precisely so!" the crowd called out.

Raising his voice with palpable love for his fellow Jews, the Baal Shem Tov concluded:

"Dear, precious Jews — you are all children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Your lineage is noble; your merit immense. Do not despair. Even if you have strayed from the straight path, do not lose heart.

Though you may have veered and abandoned Torah and mitzvot, the holy spark of G-d lies hidden within you.

Turn back, and with swift, eager strides, you can regain all that you may have lost.

That is the prophet's cry: 'Return, wayward children' (Jeremiah 3:14). Even when you are wayward, you are still His children.

Return — for in Elul, the road to teshuvah stands before you, wide-open."

4. For an expanded discussion, see Chelev Ha'aretz, Part 2, Chapter 7.

5. This is the crux of the task — to stop sinning.

Parshat Ki Tavo - The Four Elements of Teshuvah

Rabbi Zalman Ruderman recounts ('Bein Ha-Dagim La-Zemirot,' 2, p. 54):

Before anyone had heard of him, Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshischa lodged quietly in the town of Shedlitz.

He hid his great scholarship, learning, and devotion, and the townspeople — seeing only a reserved man who never wasted a moment or spoke idly — assumed nothing unusual.

Only the elderly couple who rented him a room sensed his true stature. More than once, they had peered in to find him praying or studying with such ardor that his face seemed to be aflame with holiness.

On many nights they heard him recite the broken tones of Tikkun Chatzot — accompanied by torrents of tears — floating from his room at midnight, yet they kept his secret.

One night, just before midnight, Rabbi Bunim left the study-house to recite Tikkun Chatzot at home. But as he turned a corner, he spotted a figure slipping by.

"Fishel?" he called.

The young man stopped, startled.

Rabbi Bunim knew him from his rare visits to the study-house — he boasted a modern look, distant from the tradition: trimmed sidelocks, shaven beard, a carefully groomed forelock. He now stood tense, eyes darting in the dim light.

"Would you like to come to my house and play some cards?" the rabbi asked.

Fishel stared, bewildered.

"Just a game or two," Rabbi Bunim repeated, pleadingly.

"All right," Fishel muttered, unsure why he had agreed.

Once inside, the rabbi produced a deck and dealt the cards like a practiced player.

They played round after round, and Fishel grew absorbed. Only when dawn's first light seeped through the shutters did Rabbi Bunim toss the cards aside. "Enough for now," he said, and sent Fishel home with parting blessings.

Years later, after the rabbi had moved to Pshischa and his fame spread, the people of Shedlitz began recalling incidents that had hinted to his eventual greatness. The aged landlord, as well, finally felt free to share some of the wonders he had witnessed and the many devoted prayers he had witnessed...

Then, one day, as the townsfolk of Shedlitz praised their former lodger, the wayward Fishel blurted out to the assembled crowd, "That 'great tzaddik' spent an entire night playing cards with me!" and then quickly hurried off.

Most dismissed the rude and insolent remark, except for Leizer, the synagogue caretaker. Leizer knew that although Fishel was frivolous and rebellious, he was not known to speak lies.

When a delegation set out for Pshischa to seek the rabbi's blessing, Leizer joined them, determined to ask about the story.

Parshat Ki Tavo - The Commandment of Bikkurim

and expressed through verbal confession (vidui).

Let us move on to the discussion of this week's Torah portion.

The Commandment of Bikkurim

Our Parshah opens with the mitzvah of bringing the first-fruits to the Temple, a commandment that applies only to landowners in the holy land of Israel.

How it would be fulfilled:

A Jew who grows any of the Seven Species — wheat, barley,⁶ grape, fig, pomegranate, olive, date — stands on guard at the beginning of the season and watches for the very first fruit that blossoms.

Upon spotting this first produce, he ties a reed around it

and declares: “Behold, these are bikkurim fruits.”

Later, when they would be ripe and ready, he places the fruits in a special vessel; the wealthy used gold or silver; the poor, woven baskets.

Representatives from each district would gather in their local capital, camp out in the streets in order to avoid contact with ritual impurities, and cry out at dawn: "Arise, let us ascend to Zion, to the L-rd our G-d" (Jeremiah 31:5).

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Rabbi Simcha Bunim received them warmly, showering upon them blessings that moved them to tears.

Then, just as they were heading to leave, Leizer summoned the courage to repeat Fishel's strange tale.

The others in his party froze, but the rabbi answered calmly, "Fishel spoke the truth. That night, I sensed that fishel was rushing to travel in order to commit a grave sin. Therefore, I invited him to play cards and kept the deck moving and the game flowing until the reckless fire

left his eyes; it was only then that I let him go in peace."

A hush fell over the room.

Rabbi Bunim smiled. “Ah yes,” he said, “that night was a remarkable Tikkun Chatzot.”

6. As is well known, in addition to wheat and barley, the category of grain includes three other species: spelt, oats, and rye.

The Minchat Chinuch (Mitzvah 91) cites a dispute between the Maharsha and Pnei Yehoshua as to whether these too are subject to the mitzvah of Bikkurim, see there.

Parshat Ki Tavo - The Commandment of Bikkurim

An ox with gilded horns and an olive garland led the flute-accompanied procession to Jerusalem, and upon arrival, priests and Levites came out to greet them, and together they entered the Temple Mount.

Each individual entered the courtyard, basket on shoulder, and recited: "I declare today to the L-rd your G-d that I have come to the land which the L-rd swore to our fathers to give us" (Deuteronomy 26:3).

He then handed the basket to a priest, who waved it according to ritual and set the fruits beside the altar.⁷

The priests then ate them; bikkurim are one of the twenty-four priestly gifts.

In concise form, this was how the mitzvah of bringing bikkurim was fulfilled.⁸

One would perform an additional mitzvah, Mikra Bikkurim:⁹

It included a brief historical recitation recounting the Jewish people's story — Laban's persecution, the Jewish people's descent in Egypt ("the Egyptians treated us wickedly," making us sinful like themselves), and the eventual building of the Temple.

Although this is called mikra bikkurim ("recital of bikkurim"), Maimonides labels it with the term Vidui Bikkurim (Bikkurim 3:10):

"It is a positive command to confess in the Sanctuary over the

~ Wellsprings of Wisdom ~

7. Maimonides writes (Bikkurim 3:12):

"One places the basket beside the altar, at the southwest corner, on the south side of that corner."

8. To quote Maimonides, Sefer HaMitzvot, Positive Command 125:

"We are commanded to take the first-fruits and bring them to the Sanctuary, as G-d commanded and said: 'The first of the first-fruits of your soil you shall bring to the

house of the L-rd your G-d' (Exodus 23:19)."

9. In the words of Maimonides, Sefer HaMitzvot, Positive Command 132:

"We have been commanded to recount the beneficences G-d has bestowed upon us and His salvation of us, beginning with our father Jacob and concluding with the Egyptians' enslavement and oppression, and to praise Him for all this and beseech Him to perpetuate his blessing—when one brings the first-fruits."

Parshat Ki Tavo - Concerning 'Eretz' and 'Adamah'

bikkurim, 'I declare today...
'Which You have given me, L-rd.'"

This is striking: vidui is
ordinarily reserved for sins.

Why "confess" over an
exalted mitzvah like bikkurim?

We shall continue and ponder
this further.

Concerning 'Eretz' and 'Adamah'

Our Parshah opens with the
verse:

"And it shall be, when you
come into the land (Ha'aretz) that
the L-rd your G-d is giving you
as an inheritance, and you
possess it and settle in it"

(Deuteronomy 26:1).

Careful reflection shows that
the Torah refers to our world
in general with the term 'Eretz.'
Thus, at the very beginning
of the Torah, it says, "In
the beginning G-d created the
heavens and the earth (Ha'aretz)"
(Genesis 1:1).

Thereafter, in Parshat Bereshit,
the word 'Eretz' appears another
forty-three times.

By contrast, the parallel term
"Adamah" is mentioned for the
first time only on the sixth day of
Creation:

"And every creeping thing that
creeps upon the ground (Ha'adamah)
according to its kind" (ibid., 1:25).

Subsequently, in the second
chapter of Genesis, the word
Adamah appears three more
times, the most famous being:

"Then the L-rd G-d formed
the man, dust from the ground
(Ha'adamah)" (ibid., 2:7).

We see, then, that sometimes
the Torah employs the term 'Eretz',
and at other times 'Adamah.'

The same variation is found in
the words of our Sages, words
we encounter every day.

Thus, the Mishnah (Berachot
6:1) states:

"How does one recite a
blessing over produce? Over the
produce of the ground one says,
'Who creates the fruit of the
Adamah,' except for bread, over

Parshat Ki Tavo - 'Eretz' — A Superior Term

which one says: "Who brings forth bread from 'Ha'aretz.'"

We must understand: "Why does the Torah sometimes use the term 'Eretz' and sometimes Adamah to refer to the earth?"¹⁰

More specifically, in connection to our Parshah, why does the Torah choose the term 'Eretz' in the opening phrase, "And it shall be when you come into the land?"

'Eretz' — A Superior Term

We find the following written by the saintly Rabbi Yosef Chayim, the Ben Ish Chai:¹¹

Over the fruit of the tree, we recite the blessing "Who created the fruit of the tree," and over produce that grows from the ground, we recite the blessing "Who created the fruit of the ground (Ha'adamah)."

Why did the Sages set the wording to be "Who creates the fruit of the Ha'adamah for the ground-produce and not the more common term Ha'aretz?"

One of the reasons offered:

In order to honor bread, which is created from grains and is more distinguished and important than ordinary produce, our Sages reserved the phrase "Who brings

...*~* Wellsprings of Wisdom *~*...

10. On the straightforward level, the Avudraham writes (Hilchot Berachot, Sha'ar 1):

"The great scholar Rabbi Asher of Lunel explained that the Torah's wording is reflected in this blessing: 'To bring forth bread from the earth' 'Aretz' (Psalms 104:14) — hence, in the blessing over bread we say 'Hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz.'"

In the other blessings, too, the Torah's language is adopted, as it says: 'And now, behold, I have brought the first of

the fruit of the ground' 'Adamah' (Deuteronomy 26:2) — therefore, over produce that grows from the soil we say 'Borei pri ha'adamah.'

This answers the difficulty: why here (over bread) we say 'Ha'aretz,' while in the other blessing (over produce) we say 'Adamah' — because such is precisely the wording of the Torah."

11. Ben Ish Chai, First Year, Parshat Pinchas, Halachah 1.

Parshat Ki Tavo - 'Eretz' — A Superior Term

forth bread from the earth (Ha'aretz)” for it alone, while leaving the term 'Ha'adamah' for the blessing over the produce of the soil.

We see in several sources that the term 'Eretz' is more exalted and important than 'Adamah':

A. Eretz is a concept related to ratzon, which is spiritual favor or goodwill.

B. The Torah opens with a verse that uses the term 'Eretz,' and in the narrative of Creation, the term 'Eretz' occurs far more often than Adamah.

C. Moreover, the Divine Name is explicitly linked to the term Eretz, as in the verses: “In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1)

and “On the day that the L-rd G-d made earth and heaven” (ibid. 2:4).

Furthermore, Rabbi Yeshayah Ya'akov HaLevi explains ('Etzei Eden,' opening of Ki Tavo):

When man was created, it is written, "The L-rd, G-d, formed Man from the dust of the ground" (Genesis 2:7), using the term Adamah.

The body is thus coarse matter, hewn from the earth, but Man's chief task is to transform that material quality into spiritual form — the soul — and refine the substance, much in the manner that we find with regard to Moses, Elijah, and the other righteous individuals whose very flesh became refined and purified.¹²

 *Wellsprings of Wisdom* 

12. Concerning this, Rabbi Baruch Lev relates ('Chaim Sheyesh Bahem,' p. 141):

In times gone by, the city of Slonim was energetically alive with disciples who were bound heart and soul to their Rebbe, Rabbi Avraham, the author of Yesod HaAvodah.

A flame of faith burned to the heavens; its embers fed submission to G-d, and its ashes humility and service of the Al-mighty.

Under their Rebbe's inspiration, Shabbats were fiery firmaments, and the weekdays were days of spiritual toil and refinement for a vast following of seekers of G-d.

From all over the land, chassidic ranks converged to bask in the shade of his holiness.

Yet, to everyone's amazement, the Rebbe lifted his eyes to the distance — to what was closest to his heart, the Holy Land.

Parshat Ki Tavo - 'Eretz' — A Superior Term

Earthly matter bears the two similar names: Adamah and Eretz.

The change of term is clarified by the Midrash:¹³ “Why is it called Eretz? Because it desired to fulfill its Creator's will.”

Eretz is so called for its urge to produce fruit, to give forth from itself exactly as the Creator desired.

So too with man: if he refines his material nature and occupies himself with Torah study and the performance of mitzvot — his personal “fruits” — his body rises from the level of Adamah to the level of Eretz, for he indeed hastens to do his Maker's will with desire; and he is then truly called righteous.

— *~ Wellsprings of Wisdom ~* —

“Before the coming of Mashiach,” he declared in his sacred words, “a period of terrible concealment will arrive. My yearning and desire is therefore that a fellowship be established in the Land of Israel, around which people of our persuasion can gather.”

He summoned several of his choicest disciples and sent them to settle in the holy city of Tiberias. From there, they continued their faithful, extraordinary attachment to their Rebbe — “many waters cannot quench love, nor rivers wash it away;” oceans of words cannot define it.

The following tale was told regarding one of those honored chassidim, Rabbi Mordechai Leder, known among the chassidim as Reb Motke:

“Look at Reb Motke!” cried Rabbi Moshe Kliers, wholly beside himself, to Rabbi Avraham Weinberg (also known as the 'Bris Avraham') in the midst of a Friday-night gathering.

“Marvel of marvels — his coat is glowing; a radiant light emanates from it!

We have heard of a luminous light that exudes from rare individuals, but clothes that shine — a coat that radiates with a divine light that proclaims Shabbat?

Wondrous! Truly wondrous...”

As they stood, taking in the wondrous sight, the Bris Avraham perceived Rabbi Moshe Kliers growing ever more shaken.

He stared hard, sweeping his eyes alternately over Reb Motke's shining face as well as his radiant garments, until his whole body seized with trembling awe.

The Bris Avraham would recount the spectacle all of his days: the tremor that overtook Rabbi Moshe, and the light that he sensed gleaming from Reb Motke's garments — “as though a great lamp shone upon the coat,” was how he described that light.

13. Bereshit Rabbah (Parshah 5:8).

Thus, Noah, who stood firm against all of the many trials of the Generation of the Flood, is called righteous; and G-d said to him, “For I have identified you to be righteous” (Genesis 7:1) — the initial letters of these words spelling Eretz (אֶרֶץ - אוֹתָךְ רִאִיתִי צָדִיק).

By contrast, one who does not refine his substance, instead pursuing his bodily cravings, is termed an “Oved Adamah” — a tiller of the ground — because his toil is in the search of enjoyment in this physical world.

Adamah can be read as an acronym of “אֲחֵרֵי דֶרֶךְ מְבוֹא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ” — “following the course of the sun” (Deuteronomy 11:30) — for it alludes to one whose striving is bound to the earthly realm.

Rabbi Shteinman's Novel Insight

We have written many times before that a human being is built of five strata, ranked in ascending order: action, speech, thought, feeling, and intellect.

In addition to these, there also

With this, we can understand the opening verse of our Parshah:

“It shall be, when you come to the land (‘eretz’) that the L-rd your G-d is giving you as an inheritance, and you possess it and settle in it” (Deuteronomy 26:1).

The term “It shall be” (וְהָיָה) denotes a cause for joy, and joy has many levels; the perfect level of joy is reached only upon attaining the level of “Ha'aretz,” when the body has been wholly refined; one then merits to experience joy in its truest sense.

Thus, the various terms relate properly to each other and refer to a high level of spiritual achievement.

Before we proceed further, we pause for a moment.

exists the person's “image,” a person's outward appearance.

For some reason, often, when a person is stirred to repent and return to Judaism, the focus is placed upon the three outer strata

— action, speech, and thought
— and the two inner and principal ones: emotion and intellect, remain ignored.

In such a case, however, not only is one's repentance incomplete — for these, too, are a part of him — but one forfeits the chance to attain true purity, for “the essence of purity lies in refined emotions.”

Let us bring an excerpt from 'Chakima D'Yehudaei — Rav Aharon Yehudah Leib Shteinman (p. 499):

A certain Torah scholar once entered Rav Shteinman's room and discussed with him a passage of the Talmud.

When they had completed their analysis, the scholar asked permission to pose a question.

“Please, my son, ask,” Rav Aharon-Leib replied, his face lit with the joy of a mitzvah.

The scholar said: “While the people of Israel were in Egypt, they did not change their names, their language, or their dress.

Usually, when people decline spiritually, they change their clothing first, yet the Jewish people changed nothing. That suggests they remained on a high level. How, then, does this accord with the statement that they sank to the forty-nine gates of impurity?”

If you have ever seen a thin hand — skin stretched like a thin film over bone — you will understand what followed. That hand began to tap the table: a hand seasoned in battle.

At first, Rav Aharon-Leib rapped with all five fingers — with measured, thoughtful taps.

Then he bent slightly toward the table, pondering, and then struck it forcefully with the palm of his hand, and said resolutely:

“Do you imagine that the 'forty-nine gates of impurity' refer to this or that specific sin?

The forty-nine gates of impurity refer to character traits — evil emotions.

There may be Jews of lofty stature, who, in their emotions,

Parshat Ki Tavo - The Intellect — Root of Emotion

may belong to the forty-nine gates of impurity.

The Torah scholar could hardly believe his ears.

"Is it possible," he blurted out, "that in the realm of emotions one can descend to such great depths of defilement — all the way to the bowels of Gehinnom, impurity within impurity? Is that really the

meaning of the forty-nine gates the Jews were sunk into in Egypt?"

"Yes indeed, in fact, it happens every single day. Every single day," Rav Aharon-Leib answered — and said no more, as if to say: Is this a novelty or news to anyone? It is, unfortunately, the daily reality for many individuals.

The Intellect — Root of Emotion

As noted above, emotion is a rung below and a subsidiary of the intellect, in which it is rooted.

A person's life largely unfolds on the plane of feeling: There his spiritual rises and falls occur, there his dormant powers may blossom for good — or languish in boredom and ruin.

The only way to reach the root and transform one's feelings is through the intellect:

When a Jew contemplates a matter that touches upon his emotions — with deep thought, again and again — the understanding seeps into the heart and alters it, whether

for the better or for the worse:

If one studies the works of Mussar and Chasidut, the emotions are ennobled, becoming refined, vibrant, and joyful.

But if, G-d forbid, one absorbs into their mind, matters of "foreign wisdoms," the emotions sour; a person grows to be selfish, morose, and mean-spirited.

With this in mind, return to the verse:

"And it shall be, when you come to the land that the L-rd your G-d is giving you as an inheritance, and you possess it and settle in it" (Deuteronomy 26:1).

Parshat Ki Tavo - Laban's Scheme

The goal is to merit to arrive in the “land,” 'Eretz' — that is, at a genuine will, a true desire to do G-d's will.

And as the well-known rule states: "Nothing can stand in the way of will;" if we truly will it, we succeed.

The only problem that remains is a possible lack of will, and the way to awaken one's will is precisely by intellectual contemplation and deep reflection — in Mussar and Chasidic teachings.

It is then that one reaches the spiritual level of "Eretz," the innate will to run and do G-d's will.

Laban's Scheme

In the Passover Haggadah we expound the passage of the Torah “An Aramean sought to destroy my father” (Deuteronomy 26:5):

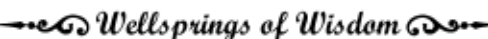
“Go out and learn what Laban the Aramean attempted to do to our father Jacob. Pharaoh decreed only against the males, but Laban sought to uproot everything.”

Laban strove to penetrate Jacob's intellect and to imprint his own warped mindset within it, and had he succeeded, there would never have grown to be a nation called Israel.

Rabbi Tzvi Shpitz explains:¹⁴

Laban possessed very great spiritual stature; some of his proper practices are even codified in Jewish law for posterity. Throughout the narrative regarding his life, his faith in G-d is conspicuous — although he owned teraphim, G-d's name flowed freely and naturally from his lips: “Come, blessed in the name of G-d” (Genesis 24:31); “The matter stems from G-d” (ibid. 24:50); “I have divined, and G-d has blessed me because of you” (ibid. 30:27).

Yet despite these virtues he remained far from holiness,



14. 'Mishpetei HaTorah' (Parshat Vayetze, p. 87).

Parshat Ki Tavo - Laban's Scheme

eternally branded as “Laban the Deceiver.”

Why is this so?

Because Laban's falsehoods donned a cloak that they did not deserve.

Deceit was his very essence, even as he presented himself externally as blandly “white,” smooth, and innocent.

There is an ordinary kind of trickery — meant to dupe, to steal the minds of others, and to mask qualms of conscience.

Such a person uses deception, not as an ideology but as a tool to reach and attain some goal.

Laban, by contrast, elevated deception into a full-blown system and a way of life.

In his eyes the crooked path was his truth, while Jacob's truthful path was crookedness.

This inversion — erasing the boundary between truth and falsehood — poses a most singular and destructive danger.

The verses of the Torah reveal

this throughout Laban's conduct:

After Jacob labored seven whole years in the hope of marrying Rachel, Laban gave him Leah instead, and when Jacob protested, Laban replied with sanctimonious precision: “Such is not done in our place, to give the younger before the elder” (Genesis 29:26).

Meaning to say: In our locale, care for another's feelings reigns supreme; it is unacceptable to cause pain to our fellowman.

The emphasis is on “our locale” — unlike you, Jacob, who comes from a land that neglects interpersonal ethics (among other things, hinting at Jacob's taking of the blessings and deceiving his father Isaac).

In our place, Laban insisted, such things are simply not done.

In this way, with one 'pious' sentence Laban turned Jacob from being a victim into a culprit, and painted himself — from an unjust and immoral scoundrel — into the paragon of truth, fairness, and righteousness.

The Root of Misfortune — The Evil Eye

The root of Laban's failure was a distorted mindset, one that is termed by our Sages as an “evil eye.”

Let us elaborate further:

After Man and his wife Eve sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the Torah says:

“The eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; they sewed fig-leaves and made themselves girdles” (Genesis 3:7).

Rashi comments:

“Their eyes were opened’ — the verse speaks of understanding, not literal sight, that they gained, and as the end of the verse proves.”

Rabbi Nathan of Breslov writes in explanation:¹⁵

"An 'Evil eye' also refers to corrupt forms of wisdom that

lead to heresy and unbelief, for those who possess the evil eye, refuse to humble themselves, to narrow their own intellect before our holy Forefathers and Rabbis, and to rely on them and accept their teachings.

Moreover, they are begrudging toward all those who follow our holy forefathers' path and strengthen themselves with the anticipation of the World-to-Come.

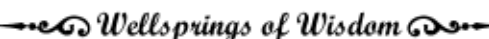
Those who worship foreign g-ds, continually provoke the Jewish people and view them with an evil eye, and a measure of their 'evil eye' filters down to affect even the Jews themselves in many forms.”

Laban's intellect was so twisted that he descended to have an evil eye and kept sliding downward until he possessed a perfection in this lowly character trait.

Jacob's Success Despite The Odds

Here we must reflect back to Parshat Vayetze where we

learned about how Jacob came to Haran, to Laban's house, and



15. Likutei Halachot (Blessings over Visions and Other Specific Blessings, 5:12).

Parshat Ki Tavo - Jacob's Success Despite The Odds

asked to marry Laban's daughter Rachel.

Laban looks him over and asks: “And what dowry have you brought?”

“Well then,” continued Laban, “since you did arrive here poor and penniless, I am willing to accept your seven years of labor in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage.”

But Jacob, well aware of his future father-in-law's craftiness, insisted: We are speaking of Rachel, not Leah; Rachel your daughter, not some other girl called Rachel; and lest you change your daughters' names — my intent is specifically to marry your younger daughter.

Laban agreed to the terms, and a deal was struck.

For seven years, Jacob tended Laban's flocks with utmost devotion, by day and by night, in heat and frost.

At the end of the seven years, he demands his due — yet Laban deceived him and gave him Leah.

Jacob demanded Rachel, as promised, and Laban responded: If you want Rachel, work another seven years for me.

Jacob agreed and served with the same faithfulness as he had before.

During those years, ten sons were born to him, and at the conclusion of fourteen years of labor, his son Joseph was born.

When Joseph was born, Jacob said to his father-in-law: Know, sir, that I have no wish to leave your house without your permission, therefore I ask of you: Send me off, that I may return to my place and my land. Let me take my wives and children — whom I earned by fourteen years of toil, for no one knows better than you how faithfully I have served you.

Rabbi Meir Lamberski describes Laban's reaction ('Al HaParshah,' Parshat Vayetze, p. 174):

Laban refuses Jacob's request and says: “I have divined by every means — by teraphim, by augury of serpents — and it is clear that a special blessing rests

Parshat Ki Tavo - Jacob's Success Despite The Odds

on my possessions since you came to me.

You are a righteous man; even sons were born to me only after your arrival, until then I had only daughters.

Therefore,” Laban continues, “I am prepared to pay you whatever wages you set, provided that you remain with me — so that the blessing accompanying you remains by me.”

Jacob answered: I will serve you for sheep that I will receive as my wages.

Let us write in the contract: Every lamb and goat that is speckled (small white points), spotted (large patches), and every brown sheep shall be removed from your flock.

Henceforth, any kid or lamb born speckled, spotted, or brown will be mine, and all of the rest will be yours. I shall continue to pasture the flock with the same devotion as till now.

“And my righteousness will testify for me tomorrow, when you come regarding my wages

before you: every goat with me that is not speckled or spotted, and every sheep that is not brown, shall be regarded as stolen by me” (Genesis 30:33).

Laban agreed to these terms that were unfavorable to Jacob.

Immediately after fixing the wages, Laban walks through the flocks and pulls out every streaked and spotted he-goat, every speckled and spotted she-goat — and even (contrary to their agreement) any animal with the slightest white marking, as well as all the brown sheep. By seizing every animal with a white or brown tint he eliminates all chance that lambs fitting Jacob's share will be born.

Jacob, perceiving this scheme, fought back.

Knowing the power of holy thoughts and the power of vision in pivotal moments, he took fresh rods of poplar, almond, and plain wood during the breeding season, and he peeled white streaks in them, and set them in the watering troughs.

Parshat Ki Tavo - The Tannaitic Sage Who Challenged the Satan

When the flocks came to drink, they gazed upon the rods; consequently they bore their young with white markings — streaked, speckled, and spotted.

Yet Laban was relentless; each time that he sensed Jacob's explosive degree of success, he panicked and changed the terms of their deal — all to make Jacob lose.

Meanwhile, Laban's sons — Jacob's brothers-in-law — begin maligning Jacob, claiming that he was stealing their inheritance.

Jacob's suffering intensified, and after twenty years in Laban's house, Jacob rose up one day and fled.

Let us now revisit the verse spoken six years earlier, when the contract was sealed:

“And my righteousness will testify for me tomorrow, when you come regarding my wages before you: every goat with me that is not speckled or spotted, and every sheep that is not brown, shall be regarded as stolen by me” (Genesis 30:33).

Jacob was telling Laban:

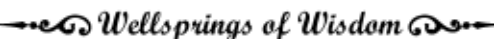
I know that your spiritual malaise is beyond hope; your intellect is sunk into the impurity of deceit.

I expect to have no easy life with you; but the time will come — “tomorrow” — when you will merit to have your mind straightened, and as the opening of Parshat Ki Tavo explains, you will then reach your complete rectification.

The Tannaitic Sage Who Challenged the Satan

One of the companions of Rabbi Judah HaNasi, the sage who compiled the Mishnah at the turn of the second century, was a sage named Plimo.

Plimo is mentioned several times in the Talmud, and in tractate Kiddushin (page 81a) we find the following account:¹⁶



16. Excerpted from 'B'Darkei Avoteinu' (Yamim Nora'im, p. 158).

Parshat Ki Tavo - The Tannaitic Sage Who Challenged the Satan

Plimo, the righteous and pious sage that he was, attained such wondrous heights in piety and saintliness that he utterly subdued the evil inclination. He sensed that he had mastered his evil impulses and feared them no longer.

Indeed, Plimo went so far as to taunt the Satan: daily he would proclaim, “A dart in your eye, Satan; I fear you not at all.”

But the Satan is tireless; he rests neither day nor night until he finds some way to trip a Jew into sin — or at the very least to spoil one's mitzvah or befuddle a Jew's mind, even once.

On the eve of Yom Kippur, the Satan disguised himself as a beggar, knocking at Plimo's door.

The family was seated at the final meal before the fast, and one of the household members opened the door and handed the pauper a loaf of bread.

The beggar was unsatisfied: “On a day like this, when everyone sits inside, shall I eat outside?”

The family therefore invited him indoors and set a meal for him on a small table.

Still the pauper grumbled: “Why should everyone eat together, while I eat alone?” Upon his complaints, they cleared a place for him at the main table.

The Satan, in his beggar's garb, now began to behave offensively, revolting all who were present.

At first they ignored him, but eventually, when it became intolerable, they politely asked him to conduct himself properly.

The pauper asked for a cup — and when they offered him one — he spat into it.

Once again they reproved him, whereupon the pauper rose and collapsed to the floor as though dead.

From the nearby street, the cry rang out: “Plimo has killed a man!”

Not waiting for the Roman police patrol to arrive, Plimo fled.

Parshat Ki Tavo - Circles Close

The Satan was still not finished. In yet another guise, he followed Plimo to his hiding place and again fell before his feet as if dead.

Plimo was deeply anguished, two such painful incidents in a single day — on the eve of the holiest day of Yom Kippur?!

Had he sinned so grievously in the past year?

Seeing Plimo's great distress, the Satan revealed himself and

asked, "Why do you taunt me every day?"

The righteous Plimo answered, "Because I have always triumphed over all of your dirty tricks."

"Do know, Plimo," replied the Satan, "that this is not the proper way to act. Only G-d, my Maker, may rebuke me, as it is written: 'May G-d rebuke you, Satan' (Zechariah 3:2)."

Plimo was able to peacefully return home to receive the sanctity of the day in calm and serenity.

Circles Close

When the great Kabbalist Rabbi Menachem Azariah of Fano studied this Gemara, it was revealed to him from Heaven that Plimo was a spark of Laban, and that Plimo spiritually perfected and rectified him.

He writes (Gilgulei Neshamot, 'Plimo'):

"It is already widely known that Lavan has the same letters and represents the same spiritual aspect as Naval — both were miserly —

and now they were both rectified and came to the world in reincarnation as the pious Plimo.

The Satan came to entrap him, to see whether the righteous man would again cling to his former degree of miserliness; he appeared as a pauper and did what he did, to see whether he would be driven away.

Plimo was accustomed to say, 'A dart in the eye of the Satan,' for he recognized his own worth

and declared: Let the Satan no longer entice me; I am firm in my traits of generosity.

Because Laban had once pained Jacob and caused him great anguish by pursuing him, he therefore now came to cause Plimo anguish in return.” See there further about this subject at length.

Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh writes similarly:¹⁷

Laban's sin sprang from a very fundamental flaw.

Laban sinned through narrow-minded envy — through miserliness.

This evil trait — which in Laban, as in every miser, had become a habit hardened into second nature — has its roots in the mind: behind it lurks an awareness that there is no need to give to another.

Chasidic teaching explains that this stance is called self-justification ('hitzadkut').

Self-justification is the very opposite of tzedakah.

Tzedakah is an admission that what is given to the poor is rightfully theirs; there is no longer any place for the original assumption that the money belongs most fittingly with me. On the contrary, fortunate am I to have been entrusted as the guardian of this deposit.

Intellect is, after all, objective, and therefore it stands in the way of the illusion of the “I,” as though I am entitled to special privileges and am unique among humankind. Therefore, in order to placate the intellect and remove the obstacle, the soul begins to manufacture one justification after another, all aimed at sustaining the “I” in its exalted status and proving that it is indeed essentially different from everyone around it — and therefore deserving of special treatment.

This consciousness of self-justification also shields the person from the rebuke of Heaven;

Parshat Ki Tavo - The Shattering of the “I”

even before G-d he senses that justice is on his side, as though he occupies a position of superiority before the Al-mighty; he cannot accept the thought that he owes anything to anyone, or that he is guilty for having done anything.

In short: narrow-eyed envy is born of a person placing himself at the center and viewing their whole environment, including G-d, as indebted to and revolving around him.

The Shattering of the “I”

We asked at the outset: Why does Maimonides call the recitation of the Bikkurim verses “Viddui Bikkurim” (confession of the first-fruits), when confession is said over sins, while bringing the first-fruits is in fact a positive and joyous mitzvah?

The answer is this:

Once a person refines his intellect through study of the inner part of the Torah and G-dly wisdom, the feeling of “I” within him begins to be purified.

Plimo, as a reincarnation of those who stumbled with this spiritual malady, not only withstood this test; he was confident from the outset that he would overcome the Satan — the very Satan who mocks the ability of feeling the plight of the destitute.

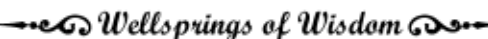
Plimo crushed this spiritual foe, achieving absolute victory.

Let us now return to the first question we asked.

He then extricates himself from his prior feeling of self-centeredness and stinginess and starts to see reality truthfully. He then realizes that, relative to his soul's capacities, he could have performed the mitzvot far better; consequently he must repent for what he could have done but did not do.

As Rabbi Ben-Zion Rabinowitz writes:¹⁸

“A person must know that he is obligated to repent and to



Parshat Ki Tavo - The Shattering of the "I"

examine even the good deeds he has done.

This is the meaning of the confession uttered by the bringer of Bikkurim, in humility and lowliness, when one scrutinizes his mitzvot and good acts, and how he performed them.

This remarkable novelty is learned from Parshat Bikkurim: just as there is confession for transgressions, and confession rectifies them, so too one must repent for their mitzvot and good deeds and confess that they did not perform them properly; and it is through this that they are corrected.

This is the purpose of the declaration to the priest — 'the priest who will be in those days,'

meaning the priest and Jewish leader of his own time — to help him realize that his mitzvot and good deeds were not properly fulfilled, so that they may be repaired and elevated as a pleasing aroma to G-d, like offerings.

In the confession of the Bikkurim, one says: 'An Aramean sought to destroy my father, and he went down to Egypt' (Deuteronomy 26:5) — meaning one's confession must include contemplation upon how he has performed the commandments and to measure his deeds against those of the holy Patriarchs who endured many hardships and sufferings, yet clung faithfully to G-d and became a large and prosperous nation."¹⁹

~ Wellsprings of Wisdom ~

19. To add further insight: the Lubavitcher Rebbe writes (Likkutei Sichot, vol. 5, p. 396) that whenever a person ascends in spirituality, his prior level is deemed to be considered a sin — in the sense of a deficiency — as in the verse, "And I and my son Solomon shall be sinners" (I Kings 1:21).

This "sin" is not only because a more complete service is now demanded of

him, such that if he were to perform the commandments with the same enthusiasm and intent as before, they would no longer be complete.

Beyond that, even the commandments he already fulfilled are now diminished in their perfection and rendered deficient ("sins") relative to his present level, and so forth — see there for more details.

Parshat Ki Tavo - The Shattering of the "I"

Repentance for good deeds is solely done by the Jewish people, who are never complacent with their own degree of righteousness, but who continually probe their actions and find them wanting,

and in need of improvement; among the nations of the world, such a quality is virtually unknown.

G-d, who is comparable to Your people, Israel ? !



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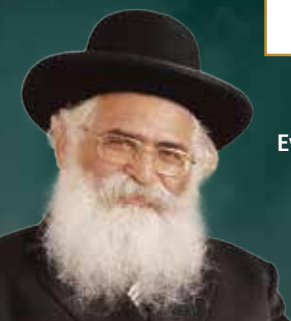


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Miami	7:10 pm	8:01 pm	8:39 pm
Los Angeles	6:46 pm	7:40 pm	8:14 pm
Montreal	6:53 pm	7:53 pm	8:21 pm
Toronto	7:15 pm	8:14 pm	8:43 pm
London	7:03 pm	8:09 pm	8:32 pm
Jerusalem	6:33 pm	7:22 pm	8:07 pm
Tel Aviv	6:30 pm	7:20 pm	8:05 pm
Haifa	6:30 pm	7:22 pm	8:07 pm
Be'er Sheva	6:30 pm	7:22 pm	8:06 pm

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*He is a great and all-powerful
king. Can a mere mortal being
fathom defying His will?!*

*Against his peers one would
not consider being so defiant,
how much more so against the
omniscient and omnipotent
G-d.*

*Dwelling upon these matters
will cause a person to
have shame and refrain
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