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# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

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## PARSHAS KI SAVO

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### No Cause for Shame

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There was an interesting enactment mentioned in the Mishnah<sup>1</sup> that related to the bringing of *bikkurim* to the Beis Hamikdash. Part of the mitzvah involves reciting a collection of verses which describe briefly the history of the Jewish people, from their humble origins as slaves in Egypt until this special time when they are in their land.<sup>2</sup> However, as the Mishnah recounts, not everyone who brought the fruits was capable of reciting these verses by themselves, for some of them did not know how to read. In response to this, the *kohanim* were made available for these people so that the *kohen* would say the words and the farmer would repeat after him. The Mishnah continues that, after a while, the Sages instituted that everyone should have a *kohen* say the words before them, regardless of whether or not they could read, so as not to shame those who could not read the words themselves.

The following Mishnah<sup>3</sup> describes the different types of baskets that people used to bring their *bikkurim* in, for the purpose of beautifying the mitzvah. Those who were of means would bring the fruits in baskets made of silver, while those who could not afford such costly vessels brought them in baskets of straw. The question arises: Why do we not find a parallel follow-up enactment, similar to the one mentioned above, namely, that everyone should bring the fruits in a straw basket so as not to embarrass those who did not have silver ones?

By making an enactment in the first case, but not the second, the Sages were communicating a crucial lesson. In stipulating that everyone should have a *kohen* read before him, two things were achieved. Firstly, this spared anyone who did not know how to read any shame while reciting this section. Secondly, it let people know that not knowing how to read Hebrew is something that is worth being ashamed about. This is the beauty of the “non-enactment” regarding the materials for the vessels. No one was spared the shame of not bringing their fruits in a silver basket, to teach us that not having silver baskets is no cause for shame.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Bikkurim 3:7.

2 See Devarim 26:5–10.

3 Ibid. Mishnah 8.

4 Heard from my father, Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, *zt”l*.

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## From Stones to Sefarim

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וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲבְרוּ אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן... וְהִקְמַתְּ לָךְ אֲבָנִים גְּדוֹלוֹת וְשִׁדַּתְּ אֹתָם בְּשִׂיד. וְכָתַבְתָּ  
עֲלֵיהֶן אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת.

*It shall be on the day that you cross the Jordan... you shall set up large stones and you shall coat them with plaster. You shall inscribe on them all the words of this Torah.*<sup>5</sup>

As our verses describe, one of the mitzvos that the Jewish people were commanded to fulfill upon entry into the Land of Israel was the writing of the Torah on a set of stones – an entity which the Abarbanel refers to as “the mezuzah of Eretz Yisrael.” The Talmud<sup>6</sup> records a dispute regarding the order of how this mitzvah was fulfilled. According to R’ Shimon, the stones were first coated with plaster and then the Torah was written on them, while according to R’ Yehuda it was in the reverse: first the Torah was written on the stones and then they were coated. Now, seemingly, the order of the verses themselves confirms R’ Shimon’s understanding, as they first mention the coating and then the writing! Nevertheless, the Gemara explains the basis for R’ Yehuda’s as coming from verse 8 which states, “וְכָתַבְתָּ עַל הָאֲבָנִים” – *you shall write on the stones,*” implying that the writing should take place directly on the stones.

Perhaps we may add that R’ Yehuda’s approach can be supported from within the earlier verses themselves. The Hebrew word for stone, “אבן”, is a feminine noun, as can be seen clearly in verse 2, which uses the feminine adjective “גְּדוֹלוֹת” to describe the large stones upon which the Torah is to be written. Likewise, the description of the writing on the stones uses the feminine form “וְכָתַבְתָּ עֲלֵיהֶן” with a *nun* at the end. However, when it comes to the command to coat the stones, it says, “וְשִׁדַּתְּ אֹתָם” using the masculine *mem*! How can we explain this grammatical anomaly? Why would the verse use a masculine suffix for a feminine noun?

Let us suggest that the answer is based on an idea that we discussed in Parshas Shemos, whereby the Torah will sometimes blend different elements into a word in order to reflect a blended or composite quality within the entity it is describing. Here, too, the word “אבן” itself is feminine. Hence, the stones are described as “גְּדוֹלוֹת” and the writing on them is described as taking place “עֲלֵיהֶן”. However once the Torah has been written on them, these are no longer just stones, for they have now assumed the status of books! The Hebrew word for book, “ספר” is a masculine noun, and hence, having assumed this masculine quality, this essential transition is reflected by the subsequent coating of the stones being described using the masculine form, “וְשִׁדַּתְּ אֹתָם”. All this bears out the order of this mitzvah as understood by R’ Yehuda, namely, that the writing preceded the coating.

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5 Devarim 27:2-3.

6 Sotah 36b.

תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר לֹא עֲבַדְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְטוֹב לֵב לְכַב מְרֹב כָּל

*Because you did not serve Hashem, your God, through joy and goodness of heart, from an abundance of everything (28:47)*

These words, which appear in the middle of the curses of the *Tochachah* in our parsha, are the Torah's explanation as to why those curses will come upon the Jewish people. The common approach to this pasuk is to read the words "you did not serve Hashem, you God, through joy and goodness of heart" as one phrase. In this understanding, the pasuk states although the people are in fact serving Hashem, they are not doing so out of joy; and the message is that even Divine service that is performed, but without joy, is cause for curse and calamity.<sup>7</sup>

However, the Meshech Chochmah takes a different approach. In his understanding, the words "you did not serve Hashem" are a self-contained phrase, and refer to the people actually abandoning Torah and mitzvos. The ensuing words, "through joy and goodness of heart, from an abundance of everything" are stated in explanation as to *why* they abandoned the mitzvos – their focus on attaining happiness through obtaining as much material blessing as they could diverted their attention from serving Hashem. That is cause for calamity.

In fact, the matter goes further. The full tragedy described in this pasuk is that not only is abandoning the mitzvos for the sake of pursuing happiness morally unacceptable, it is also flawed in its own terms, for it reflects an approach to attaining happiness which cannot succeed. The words "through happiness and goodness of heart from an abundance of everything" reflect the belief that happiness will come through amassing many possessions – an endeavor which then enlists all of a person's time and energy. This is a tragic error, for ultimately, happiness comes not from the quantity of things that a person owns, but from a quality that exists within the person himself – the quality of contentment. As Chazal have stated in Pirkei Avos:<sup>8</sup> "Who is rich? He who is happy with his portion." This, then, is the message of the pasuk: Happiness and goodness of heart do not come from having an abundance of everything. Rather, having an abundance of everything comes from happiness and goodness of heart.

Not only will absorbing this basic truth free a person from the endless and futile exercise of amassing more and more wealth, thereby allowing him to devote the time to mitzvos that they deserve, it will also lead him to greater happiness. For the highest level of happiness is when a person realizes that his needs are provided for by Hashem Himself, as the pasuk states earlier in our Parsha:<sup>9</sup> "וְשִׂמְחָתָ בְּכֹל הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְךָ ה'" – אֱלֹהֶיךָ – *And you shall rejoice in all the good that Hashem, your God, has given You.*" The words "That Hashem, your God, has given you" are not there merely for informational value. Awareness that the good one enjoys was provided by Hashem is itself the cause for joy. When a person attains this understanding, the pursuit of happiness at its truest and most profound level will actually strengthen his involvement in Torah and mitzvos, leading him away from a path of calamity – toward the highest blessing.

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<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Rambam, *Hilchos Lulav* 8:8.

<sup>8</sup> 4:1.

<sup>9</sup> 26:11.