

KI SEITZEI

MITZVOS: **DESTINY OR DESTINATION**

Parashas Ki Seitzei is read during Elul, a month which is very much focused on self-reflection and personal preparation for the upcoming High Holidays. Yet despite the spiritual nature of this season, this *parashah* is saturated with a myriad of technical *mitzvos*. Some of them are mentioned here for the first time, while others are repetitions or elaborations of *mitzvos* that had been taught previously. These commandments seem to be completely unrelated to one another, covering a broad spectrum of topics. What follows are a few such examples.

(1) *Shilu'ach HaKan* – the famous, enigmatic *mitzvah* of sending the mother bird from the nest.

כי יקרא קן ציפור לפניך בדרך בכל עץ או על הארץ ... לא תקח האם על הבנים.
שלח תשלח את האם ואת הבנים תקח לך.

If a bird's nest happens to be before you on the road, on any tree, or on the ground ... you shall not take the mother with the

young. You shall surely send away the mother and take the young for yourself.¹

(2) *Hakeim Takim* – laws that enforce responsibility for the property of others under the category of returning lost property.

לא תראה את חמור אחיך או שורו נופלים בדרך והתעלמת מהם הקם תקים עמו.

You shall not see the donkey of your brother or his ox falling on the road and hide yourself from them; you shall surely stand them up, with him.²

(3) *Lo Yavo Amoni* – The prohibition against marrying Ammonites or Moabites, which is one type of the prohibited marriages listed.

לא יבוא עמוני ומואבי בקהל ה' ... על דבר אשר לא קדמו אתכם בלחם ובמים בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים.

An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter the congregation of Hashem ... because of the fact that they did not greet you with bread and water on the road when you were leaving Egypt.³

(4) *Zechiras Miriam* – the remembrance of what Hashem did to Miriam HaNevi'ah, an affliction of *tzara'as* due to *lashon bara*.

זכור את אשר עשה ה' אלוך בדרך במצרים ממצרים.

Remember what Hashem your God did to Miriam on the way, when you were leaving Egypt.⁴

(5) *Zechiras Amalek* – the *mitzvah* to always remember the evil behavior of the arch-enemy Amalek.

זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים.

Remember what Amalek did to you, on the way, when you were leaving Egypt.⁵

¹ *Devarim* 22:6-7.

² *Devarim* 22:4.

³ *Devarim* 23:4-5.

⁴ *Devarim* 24:9.

⁵ *Devarim* 25:17.

Citing the abundance of *mitzvos* listed in this *parashah*, our Sages present a fascinating idea in the *midrash*.⁶ They quote the following verse: כִּי לִוִּית חֵן הֵם לְרֵאשׁוֹךְ וְעֲנֻקִים לְגִרְגֻרוֹתֶיךָ (for they are an adornment of grace for your head and chains⁷ for your neck).⁸ The unusual term לִוִּית (adornment) shares the same word root as לוֹיֵה (accompanying or escorting). Interpreting this verse to refer to *mitzvos*, Rabbi Pinchas ben Chama explains that “in every place that you go, *mitzvos* will accompany you.”

To concretize this concept, the *midrash* mentions several mundane activities and their corresponding *mitzvos*. If one builds a house, he is obligated to put a protective fence on the roof. Placing the door on that house requires a *mezuzah*. When one buys clothing, he must avoid wearing *sha’atnez*. If a farmer works his field, he may not work an ox and donkey together or plant different kinds of seeds together. Even when he harvests his crop, he must leave his forgotten bundles behind for those less fortunate. Furthermore, the *midrash* continues, “Hashem said: even if you are not occupied with anything – you are just walking along the way (מהלך בדרך), *mitzvos* accompany you.” *Mitzvos* permeate all facets of life.

In light of the dominating presence of *mitzvos* in our *parashah* and the thought-provoking commentary of our Sages, we may formulate several questions for discussion. The *midrash* underscores that *mitzvos* “accompany us” in every aspect of our lives. Why do our Sages feel it necessary to list so many examples, and in particular, *mitzvos* that appear to be part of the same process (building a house or working the field)? After providing a detailed

⁶ *Midrash Rabbah* 6:3.

⁷ A decorative chain, like a necklace – see *Shofim* 8:2: מִן הַעֲנֻקוֹת אֲשֶׁר בְּצוּאֵרֵי גַמְלִים (from the chains on the necks of their camels).

⁸ *Mishlei* 1:9.

inventory of examples, why do our Sages emphasize *mitzvos* that arise while being **מהלך בדרך** – that is, those that seem coincidental, such as “if you happen upon a bird’s nest”?

Along with attempting to decipher the details of the *midrash*, it is also important to consider more profound questions such as: **Why** do *mitzvos* escort us in every endeavor? What is Hashem’s intention in designing *mitzvos* to be a constant presence in our daily lives? What deeper meaning may be derived from the phrase **ליות חן הם לראשך** (they are an adornment of grace for your head)? What messages can we glean from the second half of the verse **וענקים לגרוותיך** (and a chain for your neck)? Is there a common thread that runs through the particular sampling of the *mitzvos* listed above?

Accompaniment and Attachment

To address the detailed questions above, we need to begin with a fundamental understanding of *mitzvos* in general. The underlying purpose of observing commandments is to develop a relationship with Hashem. As the Ramchal asserts, human beings were created only so that they should draw close to Hashem.⁹ However, we are physical creatures living in a physical world, and Hashem is not revealed in physical manifestations. His presence and holiness is hidden in this world – hence, the need for *mitzvos*. *Mitzvos* are opportunities to both recognize and reaffirm Hashem’s existence.

Mitzvos bridge the gap between the physical world that we see clearly and the spiritual reality that is obscured from our vision. How so? When Hashem gives a *mitzvah* and requires a particular

⁹ *Derech Hashem*, p. 67.

behavior, He is asking us to carry out His will. By executing His wishes, we accomplish three things: confirmation of the reality of His existence in the world, acknowledgment of His pervasive presence, and demonstration of a willingness to align ourselves with Him. Therefore, every *mitzvah* we perform should bring us closer to God.¹⁰

Closeness to Hashem obviously does not mean physical proximity, but rather intellectual awareness and emotional intimacy. Rabbi Itamar Schwartz points out that the word *mitzvah* is related to the word *tzavta* (bond).¹¹ The value of the *mitzvah* depends on the degree to which it fosters a Divine connection.¹² Rabbi Gedalia Schorr elaborates on this concept of *mitzvos* as opportunities to come close to Hashem.¹³ He notes that in the verse: *אור זרוע לצדיק* (light is sown for the righteous)¹⁴ the verb *זרוע* illustrates that Hashem “plants” his *mitzvos* in the physical world for us.

Light represents Hashem’s *kedushah* (holiness). Through *mitzvos*, this *kedushah* is embedded into tangible, everyday human activity. *Mitzvos* are compared to seeds; Hashem “plants” them into the “ground” (our material environment), after which we water them to foster spiritual growth. *Mitzvos* require not only our compliance, but also our enthusiasm to develop our relationship with Hashem. The *Zohar* expounds that on, a mystical level, the 613 *mitzvos* are 613 “pieces of advice” – extensive and varied guidance for helping us to foster a connection with Hashem.¹⁵

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 73.

¹¹ *BiHavi Mishkan Evneh*, p. 11.

¹² See *Torah Tapestries Shemos, parashas Terumah*.

¹³ *Ohr Gedalyahu*, p. 195.

¹⁴ *Tehillim* 97:11.

¹⁵ As quoted by Rabbi Schorr in *Ohr Gedalyahu*, p. 195.

There is additional meaning behind this imagery of Hashem “planting *mitzvos*.” In the same way that seeds become rooted into the ground, *mitzvos* are embedded into our daily lives. Rabbi Schorr notes that no area of life is devoid of Torah guidelines. This notion echoes the above quoted *midrash*, that *mitzvos* **accompany** every aspect of our existence. Hashem implanted them so that we may develop a relationship with Him.

A key prerequisite to connection is **recognition**. The significant risk of engaging in a physical world is becoming preoccupied with materialism and forgetting about Hashem altogether. The Torah warns us that the lure of prosperity often diminishes consciousness of God. It describes our bountiful food, good houses, abundant cattle and gold and silver, “and everything you have will increase – and your heart will become haughty and you will forget Hashem your God.”¹⁶ To mitigate this tendency, Hashem inserted a spiritual dimension into every physical task we undertake, as described by the verse: *השמר לך פן תשכח את ה' אלוקיך לבלתי שמר מצותיו* (take care lest you forget Hashem your God by not keeping His commandments.)¹⁷ Careful observance of *mitzvos*, therefore, is a constant reminder of Hashem.

Hashem’s commandments are integral to every human activity, including the separate stages of larger processes. The underlying pattern is that *mitzvos* complement every action in which a substance changes form.¹⁸ Why is this so? When physical matter is altered from its original manifestation, it becomes distanced and disassociated from its source. The transformation process itself diminishes the new version’s likeness to its primal form.

¹⁶ *Devarim* 8:12-14.

¹⁷ *Devarim* 8:11.

¹⁸ *Ohr Gedalyahu*, p. 198.

For example, a loaf of bread bears no resemblance to the stalks of wheat from which it originates.

Similarly, the more intensive our physical involvement in multifaceted processes, the more spiritual reminders we need. It is human nature to believe that any kind of accomplishment is a direct result of our own exertion. The more invested we are in the process, the more we give ourselves credit for the end product.¹⁹ This is why complex activities, such as farming or baking bread, include *mitzvos* at every stage. They serve to remind us that the true Source of our success is Hashem. In this way, *mitzvos* constantly infuse holiness into our physical lives.

Head and Heart

Enlightened with a clearer understanding of the principles behind *mitzvos*, which are to remind us of Hashem's presence and keep us connected to Him, we can more broadly analyze the two parts of our quote from Mishlei – *כי לויית חן הם לראשך וענקים לגרורתך* – (for they are an adornment of grace for your head and a chain for your neck).²⁰

While the word *לויית* is translated as “adornment,” this explanation creates a partially flawed metaphor. The word “adornment” conjures the image of a decorative piece that is worn externally. On the one hand, this analogy makes sense since *mitzvos* escort us wherever we go, as if we are “wearing” them. However, the notion of donning an item externally does not effectively convey the relationship-building aspect of *mitzvos*.

¹⁹ See *Torah Tapestries Bamidbar, parashas Shelach*.

²⁰ *Mishlei* 1:9.

Rabbi Schorr explains that the term *לשון חיבור* is *לוית* – the language of connection.²¹ When Leah gave birth to her third son, she named him Levi with the following explanation: *הפעם ילדה אישי*: *אלו כי ילדתי לו שלשה בנים* (this time my husband **will become attached** to me because I bore him three sons).²² Perhaps this “adornment of grace” is more accurately comparable to wearing a wedding ring, which is more than a decorative piece of jewelry. It symbolizes a relationship defined by an inseparable bond and mutual commitment.

This bond that runs deeper than “wearing *mitzvos*” is also conveyed by the remaining element in the metaphor, *לראשך* (for your head). Why does the verse emphasize the placement on the body where the adornment is worn? The answer is that *mitzvos* are regular reminders to stimulate the intellect (the head) and regulate our consciousness of God. The word *ראש* also means “the beginning.” *Mitzvos* connect a person to his sacred origin, which is Hashem. When we are engaged in complex processes that transform substances into different forms, *mitzvos* remind us of the *ראש* – of the place of origin – reconnecting us to our Creator.²³

The verse calls *mitzvos חן* (grace); Hashem utilizes them to initiate a relationship with us, thereby expressing Divine affection and favor. The word *חן* is similar to the word *חינם* (free, gratis).²⁴ By giving us commandments, Hashem is demonstrating his unconditional love for us by giving us a free gift – an open-ended invitation to connect with Him.

²¹ *Ohr Gedalyahu*, p. 195.

²² *Bereishis* 29:34.

²³ *Ohr Gedalyahu*, p. 198.

²⁴ *Rav Schwab on Prayer*, p. 44.

Yet there is even more that may be gleaned from this *pasuk*. The second half of the verse states: וענקים לגררותיך (and chains for your neck). What dimension of meaning does this phrase add? The English word “chain” is perhaps a faulty translation, because it implies an “imprisoning” quality. The reference to ענקים is not meant to connote constraining, but rather decorative chains. Necklaces are worn to look beautiful, and for that purpose, are noticeable to the public eye. Rashi notes that the term ענק connotes עדי (jewelry), something worn in a visible place.²⁵

Mitzvos improve our outward behavior, our “appearance”. The jewelry metaphor enhances the “wearing” imagery in that *mitzvos* beautify us. Of course, the Torah values inner beauty (character traits – *middos*) over external beauty. “Adorning” therefore should be interpreted metaphorically as exemplifying character traits through one’s behavior. The “jewelry” a person wears is indicative of his attributes, either positive or negative, as illustrated by the verse: לכן ענקתמו גאווה (therefore their necklace is haughtiness).²⁶

What is the significance of the placement of the jewelry on the neck – לגררותיך? Something worn on the neck surrounds the body. This imagery conveys the message that while the chains – the *mitzvos* – are decorative and beautifying, they are also binding in a positive sense. Just as a wedding ring represents commitment and loyalty, the necklace metaphor expresses the all-encompassing aspect of *mitzvos* discussed above.

²⁵ Rashi on *Devarim* 15:14 ה' אלוקיך תתן לו (you shall surely **adorn him** generously from your flocks, from your threshing floor and from your wine pit with which Hashem your God has blessed you, so shall you give him). A master must give generously to his freed slave, so that the abundance of gifts are similar to jewelry in that they are **noticeable to the casual observer**.

²⁶ *Tebillim* 73:6.

The neck connects the head to the body, which symbolizes the joining of one's intellect to one's actions. *Mitzvos* don't just influence the mind (לראשך); they ultimately shape our conduct as well. The Ramchal, in fact, emphasizes that every *mitzvah* is designed to either promote a positive quality or eliminate a negative one.²⁷ *Mitzvos* affect personal refinement, beautifying us by enhancing our good *middos*. That is why, for example, it is preferable to give a small amount of *tzedakah* multiple times rather than a large sum all at once. The amount of money is only the conduit, but the repeated action of giving repeated invariably engenders greater results. Charitable behavior conditions us to be generous people.²⁸

A classic example of a *mitzvah* that defines our character traits is one of the examples discussed above – *shilu'ach hakan* (sending the mother bird from the nest). The Ramban argues against the common assumption that *shilu'ach hakan* is an expression of Hashem's pity on the mother bird. Instead, he asserts that this obligation is intended to influence us to be compassionate and merciful.²⁹

Other *mitzvos* are designed to habituate sensitivity to others: לא תראה את חמור אחיך או שורו נופלים בדרך והתעלמת מהם הקם תקים עמו (you shall not see the donkey of your brother or his ox falling on the road and hide yourself from them; you shall surely stand them up, with him).³⁰ The Torah could have simply stated the obligation to help someone's animal with its overloaded burden. Instead, though, the verse precedes the proactive obligation with a precautionary one – not to hide yourself from them.

²⁷ *Derech Hashem*, p. 67.

²⁸ *Matnas Chaim Kuntreis VeShaveha BiTzedakah*, p. 28. See also *Torah Tapestries Shemos, parashas Terumah*.

²⁹ Ramban on *Devarim* 22:6-7.

³⁰ *Devarim* 22:4.

To help us fulfill the *mitzvah* on an optimal level, the Torah first counteracts the reflexive human behavior to ignore a stranger's distress. Human nature is self-centered. Generally speaking, our default response is whatever makes things easiest or most comfortable. If the Torah had not specifically commanded us to proactively respond, we might casually overlook another's suffering (or, in this case, his animal's suffering) simply out of personal convenience.³¹ Therefore, this *mitzvah* is designed to diminish the negative trait of egotism and promote the positive traits of caring and compassion.

These inner mystical mechanics of this *mitzvah* are actually revealed within the verse itself. Note the seemingly unnecessary words **הקם תקים עמו**. It might seem self-evident that “not ignoring” automatically implies “paying attention” to the animal's suffering, and therefore includes the action of providing assistance as well. If we are obligated to notice that it is falling down, we would obviously be required to help it stand up!

In addition to the seemingly superfluous nature of the phrase, the verb repetition **הקם תקים** is also notable. The *Sefas Emes* offers a novel interpretation: “You shall surely stand them up, **with him**” means that helping another is really helping oneself.³² When you help another stand (**הקם**), then **you rise up with him** (**תקים עמו**), validating the purpose of your existence. When a person offers assistance to another, he develops a greater sense of compassion. Doing a person a favor purifies both the mind and heart of the giver.³³

³¹ See *Torah Tapestries Vayikra, parashas Kedoshim*.

³² *Talelei Oros*, p. 32.

³³ As quoted in *Living Jewish* (leaflet); see also earlier, *parashas Devarim*, note 28.

Along these lines, Yaakov Meir Schechter outlines the dual benefit of performing any *mitzvah* of *chesed*. The first element is the actual result of the giving act itself; the giver is granted merit proportional to the amount of benefit to the receiver. This notion is somewhat counterintuitive, as it seems surprising that Hashem awards spiritual gains according to how helpful an act was for the recipient, even if the benefactor exerted minimal effort. This notion is the implication of the verse: **זרעו לכם לצדקה וקצרו לפי חסד** (plant for yourselves in righteousness, and you will reap according to loving-kindness).³⁴ This interpretation reiterates the “planting of *mitzvos*” concept, yet the analogy is slightly different. When we plant the seeds (*mitzvah* of giving), we will harvest **לפי חסד** – according to the *chesed* that is perceived by the beneficiary.³⁵

The second aspect of *chesed* is especially relevant to our discussion. Rabbi Schechter explains that every kind act purifies our souls and helps us overcome our evil inclination. The antidote to self-centeredness is to practice caring behavior. Helping others actually de-programs the reflexive response of turning a blind eye to others’ needs. The Torah obligates us to actively exert effort for another – whether by sending away the mother bird or helping a struggling friend – in order to condition us to feel and express concern for others. The underlying principle of *mitzvos* is that every obligatory behavior fosters a desirable character trait.

Generative through Generations

Mitzvos are behavior directives fashioned to shape both our external behavior and internal attributes. Since character refinement

³⁴ *Hoshea* 10:14.

³⁵ *Nichtan BaSefer*, p. 16.

is our essential life's purpose, Hashem infused our daily lives with countless *mitzvos* to utilize in this task. Acquiring positive *middos*, however, is not solely for our personal benefit, but also for the benefit of our descendants. When *mitzvos* improve our daily conduct, we model Hashem's ideals for our children. Parents' observable behavior exerts an extremely powerful influence on their children. In this way, the character traits we demonstrate are perpetuated through the generations. By contrast, neglecting *mitzvos* or failing to exhibit positive qualities could potentially cut off the spiritual legacy of one's family.

Our behavior and character traits profoundly impact future generations. Carefully observed *mitzvos* simultaneously cultivate positive qualities and mitigate negative ones. Such is the case with the prohibition to marry Ammonites or Moabites. The Torah provides a seemingly baffling reason for disassociating from these two nations in particular: על דבר אשר לא קדמו אתכם בלחם ובמים בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים (because of the fact that they did not greet you with bread and water on the road, when you were leaving Egypt).³⁶

Neglecting to extend hospitality to travelers is certainly discourteous, yet the Torah describes Ammon and Moav's behavior as utterly despicable. The remainder of the verse states, "even their tenth generation shall not enter the congregation of Hashem, to eternity!" Why are these nations' descendants held permanently accountable for what seems to be their ancestors' lack of good manners? What is so contemptible about Ammon and Moav's conduct that mandated a specific *mitzvah* to alienate any of their descendants? Furthermore, what can we learn from this *mitzvah*, which seems so inapplicable and irrelevant to us in modern times?

³⁶ *Devarim* 23:4-5.

Offering basic provisions to travelers was the social norm in the harsh conditions of the desert. However, as the Jewish people left Egypt, Moav was only willing to offer rations for payment, and Ammon even refused to sell anything to them.³⁷ If Moav and Ammon did not extend common courtesy, their conduct was indicative of deeply ingrained selfishness and cruelty in their culture. These qualities represent the antithesis of the human ideal, and it is therefore perilous for these uncivilized people to infiltrate Jewish society.

The danger presented by the nations of Ammon and Moav lies even deeper. We may recall that a familial connection exists between them and the Jewish people. Avraham Avinu's nephew was Lot, who became the father of two boys named Ammon and Moav. Avraham Avinu demonstrated magnanimous loyalty and concern for Lot, saving him from both captivity and destruction in Sodom. Owing Avraham Avinu his very life, Lot should have felt a lifelong debt of gratitude to him.

The Ramban explains that the quality of *hakoras hatov* (lit. recognizing the good) is such an essential character trait that it should have been permanently inherited by Lot's descendants.³⁸ In fact, quite the opposite occurred. Ammon and Moav's inhumanity toward the Jews demonstrated that *hakoras hatov* for Avraham Avinu had not been perpetuated through Lot's generations. If ingratitude is programmed in their DNA, then we must avoid mixing with their genes. Therefore, a two-sided lesson may be gleaned from this seemingly inapplicable *mitzvah*: ingratitude is unacceptable and *hakoras hatov* is eternal.

Avraham Avinu was the paradigm of *chesed*, and thus Lot was partially influenced by his uncle. We see traces of goodness in Lot,

³⁷ See Moshe Rabbeinu's account in *Devarim* 2:28-20.

³⁸ *Da'as Torah*, quoting the Ramban on *Devarim* 23:4-5.

when he offered the visiting angels basic hospitality. However, the Torah reveals the flawed *chesed* of Lot; in his effort to save the angels from the crazed mob, Lot shockingly offered his own daughters in their place! The willingness to sacrifice one's children in order to protect visitors represents a dangerous distortion of Avraham Avinu's *middah* of *chesed*.

The *midrash* relates that Lot's daughters became heirs to his infamous legacy, later emulating a warped manifestation of *chesed*. After the destruction of Sodom, these young women envisioned repopulating society by conceiving children through their drunken father. Of course, the offspring from this repulsive union were two boys, from whom came the notorious nations Ammon and Moav.³⁹ Instead of perpetuating *hakoras batov*, Lot's descendants instead emulated their forefather's twisted permutation of *chesed*. Perhaps the prohibition to mix with these nations teaches us yet another message; altering *mitzvos* (such as *chesed*) according to subjective interpretation is as lethal to future generations as modeling destructive *middos*.

The character traits we demonstrate through our actions, both positive and negative, engrave a lasting impression on our descendants. However, it is also possible for future generations to benefit from an ancestor's objectionable conduct. To err is to be human, and is unavoidable. Our Creator is keenly aware of our frailty, and the Torah does not hide the fallibility of our greatest leaders. Such is the case of Miriam HaNevi'ah, for example, who once spoke disparagingly about her brother Moshe Rabbeinu. She was a prophetess who achieved supreme spiritual heights in her lifetime. Therefore, Hashem held Miriam HaNevi'ah up to a particularly high standard. Despite the fact that her words were spoken discreetly, privately and altruistically, Hashem punished

³⁹ *Midrash Tanchuma*, quoted by *Mikra Kodesh*, p. 171.

her severely with *tzara'as*. How can future generations gain important insight from her wrongdoing?

Miriam HaNevi'ah's mistake is the paradigm behavior to avoid, namely *lashon hara*. Hashem makes an eternal example of her with another *mitzvah* in this *parashah*, that of *zechiras Miriam*: "Remember what Hashem your God did to Miriam."⁴⁰ We are cautioned against negative speech with a *kal vachomer*. If the righteous Miriam HaNevi'ah was punished so severely for such a minor infraction, how much more so are we deserving of punishment for speaking *lashon hara*. Therefore, we have a *mitzvah* of a verbal and mental reminder; we recall her mistake, thereby reminding ourselves to avoid speaking disparagingly about other people. This memory device raises our awareness of God (לראשך – head) and encourages us to change our behavior (לגרוורחך – neck).

The end of this *parashah* presents another *mitzvah* of remembrance. It is an eternal lesson in character development, that of *zechiras Amalek*, to always remember the evil behavior of Amalek: "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you were leaving Egypt."⁴¹ The verses specify the behavior for which Amalek is held accountable: "That he happened upon you on the way, **and he struck those of you who were at the tail end**, all the weaklings at your rear, when you were faint and exhausted, **and he did not fear God.**"⁴² The Torah articulates that Amalek's infamous exploitation of the weak was a brazen demonstration of defiance against Hashem. As such, the *mitzvah* to remember Amalek is intended to cultivate an aversion to this nation's interpersonal conduct (cruelty to others) and their philosophical perspective (denial of God).

⁴⁰ *Devarim* 24:9.

⁴¹ *Devarim* 25:17.

⁴² *Devarim* 25:18.

This *mitzvah*'s purpose is also conveyed by its placement in the *parashah*. *Zechiras Amalek* immediately follows the laws regarding honest business practices. "A perfect and honest weight shall you have, a perfect and honest measure shall you have."⁴³ One may ask about this curious juxtaposition: What does financial dishonesty have to do with Amalek? A prohibition against cheating appears to be a basic guideline for a civilized society, and not specific to Judaism. The Netziv explains that every *mitzvah*, no matter how seemingly mundane or minute, actually relates to a broader principle of the Torah.⁴⁴ Therefore, civil laws actually affect our relationship with Hashem. In the case of "honest weights and measures" – conducting business with integrity – the *mitzvah* is actually directly linked to *emunas Hashem* (belief in God).

Cheating in business dealings reflects poorly on a person's faith; it demonstrates his uncertainty that Hashem will provide his livelihood. This diminished *emunas Hashem* is the same doubt that is infamously characterized by Amalek; the numerical value of עמלק is the same as that of the word ספק (doubt). The Torah consistently correlates lack of faith and Amalek's attacks, such as the incident of the spies followed by the battle with Amalek.⁴⁵ In *parshas Beshalach* the following two verses are notably juxtaposed: "He called the place *Masah U'Merivah* ... because of their test of Hashem saying, 'Is Hashem among us or not?' Amalek came and battled Israel in *Refidim*."⁴⁶ Thus, in our *parashah*, the *mitzvos* of honest business are immediately followed by *zechiras Amalek*. Financial dishonesty is forbidden not only because it inflicts damage

⁴³ *Devarim* 25:15.

⁴⁴ *Ha'ameik Davar* on *Devarim* 25:17.

⁴⁵ *Bamidbar* 14:45; see *Torah Tapestries Bamidbar, parashas Chukas*.

⁴⁶ *Shemos* 17:7-8.

on others, but because it demonstrates ‘Amalekite doubt’, the weakening of faith in Hashem.

On The Way

Zechiras Amalek presents us with eternal moral guidelines – to shun both his heartless conduct and his heretical philosophy. Yet the *mitzvah* of *zechiras Amalek* bears an even more profound message **זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים אשר קרך בדרך** (remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you were leaving Egypt, that he happened upon you on the way).⁴⁷ The word **בדרך** is noticeably redundant. The Torah highlights a contributing element of Amalek’s contemptible behavior in that it was exhibited **בדרך** – on the way.

Rabbi Menachen BenZion Sacks underscores that Amalek attacked the Jewish nation in order to prevent their advancement.⁴⁸ The *pasuk* repeats the term **בדרך** to emphasize that the Jews were not only **בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים** (leaving Mitzrayim), but they were also **בדרך** – on the way to receive the Torah.⁴⁹ Armed with their cruel battle tactics and Godless ideology, Amalek’s objective was to hinder the Jewish nation’s physical and spiritual progress.

Any kind of influence that harms us along the way by limiting spiritual growth is lethal. Perfecting our character traits and building a relationship with Hashem comprise our ultimate purpose in this world and are thus both lifelong goals. Anything that takes us off course is dangerous, even if it occurs unintentionally. This

⁴⁷ *Devarim* 25:17-18.

⁴⁸ *Menachem Tzion*, p. 451.

⁴⁹ Rabbi Alexander Aryeh Mandelbaum, *MiMa’amakim*, p. 154.

concept is evident in the aforementioned incident with Miriam HaNevi'ah. Therefore, similar phraseology is used with regard to the *mitzvah* of remembering the incident with Miriam HaNevi'ah: **זכור את אשר עשה ה' אלוקיך למרים בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים**.⁵⁰ Furthermore, in the account of the actual incident, the Torah underscores the resultant delay. The people did not travel until Miriam HaNevi'ah was released from her seven-day quarantine.⁵¹ On a deeper level, Rabbi Sacks expounds that the utterance of *lashon hara* by a righteous leader hampered the spiritual progress of the entire people.

Physical and spiritual journeys both require a destination. The Jewish people are traveling from exile to redemption, nationally and individually. *Pirkei Avos* states: "This world is like a vestibule before the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the vestibule so that you may enter the banquet hall."⁵² Thus we see why *mitzvos* accompany us (לוית חן הם) – because life is a spiritual journey. We don't "run into" *mitzvos* like rest stops along the highway. They are the fuel that drives the journey. *Mitzvos* help us remember to look forward, that we are heading to a greater destination. This notion of a journey brings to light another interpretation of a verse cited above: **זרעו לכם לצדקה וקצרו לפי חסד** (plant for yourselves in righteousness, and you will reap according to loving-kindness).⁵³ This world is fertile soil for spiritual growth and preparation for the redemption. If we sow the seeds of *mitzvos* now in our lifetime, then we will harvest the spiritual fruits later in the World to Come.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ *Devarim* 24:9.

⁵¹ *Bamidbar* 12:15.

⁵² *Pirkei Avos* 4:16.

⁵³ *Hoshea* 10:14.

⁵⁴ *Ethics from Sinai*, vol. 2, p. 146.

The term **בדרך** implies that the journey is laden with purpose and meaning. However, *mitzvos* are not only the path to a destination, but the **destination itself**. This concept is particularly evident in Torah's presentation of sending the mother bird and helping another's fallen animal. Noting that these seemingly unrelated *mitzvos* are listed in immediate succession, the Ibn Ezra makes the following note: **נסמכה זאת הפרשה בעבור הדרך** (this [*mitzvah*] is juxtaposed to this *parashah* because of 'the journey').⁵⁵ The simple interpretation is that both verses use the word **בדרך** to highlight scenarios that seem to be incidental: **כי יקרא קן ציפור לפניך בדרך** and **לא תראה את חמור אחיך או שורו נופלים בדרך**. However, we may interpret this comment to mean that *mitzvos* are **בעבור הדרך** – both the purpose and the journey itself.

Mitzvos are not just **ליות חן הם לראשך** – to accompany us as part of our preparation process for the future. *Mitzvos* are also **וענקים לגרורותיך** – to beautify us right now. The neck is its own entity, not just a connector between the head and the body. So too the purification process itself is valuable. This notion may be found in the Torah's account of Hashem's punishment of Adam HaRishon, when the Torah states: "Accursed is the ground because of you."⁵⁶ Why is the ground punished for the sin of man? Rashi notes a nuance in the wording of the verses describing the creation of fruit trees.⁵⁷ Hashem stated that the earth should bring forth **עץ פרי** (fruit trees), and the following verse reads that the earth brought forth **עץ עושה פרי** (fruit-bearing trees). The taste of the tree and the fruit were intended to be identical, and the ground was held accountable for producing trees that did not taste the same as its fruit.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ibn Ezra on *Devarim* 22:6.

⁵⁶ *Bereishis* 3:17.

⁵⁷ Rashi on *Bereishis* 1:11.

⁵⁸ *Torah Temimah* on *Bereishis* 3:17; *Yerushalmi Kil'ayim* 1:7.

Why was this punishable behavior? What do we learn from this? The word *ta'am* translates as both 'taste' and 'meaning'. The earth's mistake was valuing the end result more than the means. The process (the tree) should bear the same meaning and significance as the product (the fruit).

In today's world, we often move in such a rush that we sacrifice the opportunity of the moment. In the world of education, students at times only want to learn information that they need for an exam. They often forget that learning is for much more than passing a test; it's **בעבור הדרך** – for the journey of life.

Each *mitzvah* "happens" along the way as an opportunity to learn and grow in that moment. We can hear this message in the verse: "For He is our God, and we are the flock He pastures and the sheep in His charge – **today!** If we but heed His call."⁵⁹ A fundamental tool in spiritual growth is focusing on **today** – the present moment.⁶⁰ While it is important to keep our sights on the final destination, it is equally crucial to focus on the significance of each *mitzvah* along the way.

The central aim of *mitzvos* is to develop a strong and meaningful relationship with Hashem. They serve as regular reminders of Hashem's presence in our daily physical lives, particularly as our involvement with the material world becomes intensive and we risk losing sight of the Source. We wear *mitzvos* and they accompany us everywhere we go (**כי לרית חן הם לראשך**). Like jewelry, optimally observed *mitzvos* beautify us (**וענקים לגרגורתיך**); they obligate specific behaviors that cultivate constructive attributes and diminish negative ones. *Parashas Ki Seitzei* is laden with *mitzvos*

⁵⁹ *Tehillim* 95:7.

⁶⁰ *Tehillim Treasury*, p. 176.

because they are the tools for when you go out on your way (כי תצא). They are also for the path of life (בעבור הדרך); both the tree and fruit taste sweet. May we reap the fruits of the journey laden with *mitzvos*.