

BECHUKOSAI

WALKING IN THE WAYS OF HASHEM

Parashas Bechukosai, the final *parashah* of *sefer Vayikra*, begins with two contrasting sections: First there is a list of blessings that the Jewish People will merit for heeding the word of Hashem; prefaced by the following *pasuk*: “*Im bechukosai seileichu* (if you walk in my statutes), *ve’es mitzvotai tishmeru va’asisem osam* (and preserve my commandments and do them).”⁴¹¹ Then comes a *tocheichah* (admonition), which is a warning of punishments that will come upon them if they do not observe the *mitzvos*.

The focus of this chapter is the first phrase – “to walk in my statutes.” The verb “walk” is used symbolically here; obviously, the verse is not referring to physical walking. The *Midrash* clarifies⁴¹² the use of the verb “walking” in regard to keeping *mitzvos* by relating it to a different *pasuk*: “*Chishavti derachai* (I considered my ways), *va’ashivah raglai el eidosecha* (and returned my feet to your testimonies).”⁴¹³ The *Midrash* then relates the following statement of David *HaMelech*: “Every day I decided to go to a specific place, to one place or another. However, my feet brought me to Your synagogues and study halls.” Multiple times, David had intentions to go to a particular place, but then, somehow he would find himself in a *shul* or *beis midrash* instead.

This *midrash* can be utilized as a springboard for defining the concept of “walking in the ways of Hashem.” And, since this *parashah* is always read during *Sefiras Ha’Omer*, it can also lead us to ask what lessons we can glean from this *midrash* that can enhance our *avodas Hashem* during this auspicious time.

Seeing the Light

At the beginning of our *parashah*, the verses describe the bounty and blessing we will enjoy for following Hashem’s commandments. The transition verse between the rewards and the rebukes reads as follows: “*Ani Hashem Elokeichem* (I am Hashem Your G-d), *asher hotzeisi eschem mei’eretz Mitzrayim mibeyos lahem avadim* (who took you out of the Land of Egypt from being slaves), *va’esbbor motos ulchem* (and I broke the pegs of your yoke) *va’oleich eschem komemiyus* (and I led you erect).”⁴¹⁴

Why does the Torah mention “the breaking of the yoke” in *Mitzrayim* here in *sefer Vayikra*, rather than in *sefer Shemos*, where there is the primary description of the Egyptian enslavement period? Furthermore, our Sages state that the verse refers to both past and present, going into the future: Just as Hashem broke the pegs of our yoke in *Mitzrayim*, so too He will relieve our burden in the future *ge’ulah*. This increases our difficulty with the *pasuk*: if the verse is discussing the future *ge’ulah*, why does it mention the experience in *Mitzrayim*?

To explain the expression “pegs of the yoke” we first need some background information about the spiritual experience of redemption. The *Gemara* states⁴¹⁵ that in the future, Hashem will remove the sun from the cover shielding it; *tzaddikim* will be healed by the light that will emerge, and the wicked will be burned by it.

The *Chasam Sofer* understands the sun imagery as symbolic, with the light representing spiritual energy: When *Mashiach* comes,

414 *Vayikra* 26:13.

415 *Nedarim* 8b.

the revelation of spiritual energy in the world will be incredibly strong; only those who are attuned to it will be able to tolerate its intensity. The effects on *tzaddikim* versus *resha'im* will naturally be polar opposites: *Tzaddikim* are those who live constantly in a spiritual reality, even in the present world; they will benefit the most from the awesome revelation of the redemption. *Resha'im* are distant from a spiritual existence in *Olam Hazeib*; therefore, when spiritual energy is released and revealed in the future, it will be so foreign to them, that their souls will not be able to bear it.

The Rambam states that when the *Mashiach* comes, the only pleasures in the world will be spiritual pleasures, namely, benefiting from the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence).⁴¹⁶ Who will thrive on these pleasures? The Ponevizher Rav explains⁴¹⁷ that those who enjoy Torah and *mitzvos* in this world will flourish in the future. They connect with the spiritual pleasure in *Olam Hazeib*, so they will be able to identify it and internalize it in *Olam Haba*. How is this concept relevant to us average individuals? Most of us are neither *tzaddikim* nor *resha'im*. If we seek enjoyment for the soul

to the best of our ability, it will shape our future experience accordingly. For those who make an effort in Torah and *mitzvos* despite the challenges, the spiritual light of the *ge'ulah* will assist them, and acquiring Torah and *mitzvos* will become easier.

We now can understand that Hashem's breaking of the "pegs of the yoke" is not referring to the relief from physical bondage. Our *parashah* is, after all, discussing the rewards for following Hashem's commandments; therefore, this expression must be referring to a different yoke or a different burden. And that assumption would explain why this phrase is mentioned here in *sefer Vayikra*, and not in *Shemos*, where the actual enslavement period is described.

When the Jews left Egypt, they had a great desire to receive the Torah and serve Hashem. Our verse tells us why: "*Va'eshbor motos ulchem* (and I broke the pegs of your yoke)." Hashem

416 Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuvah*, 8:2.

417 As quoted in *Sha'arei Chaim*, p. 133.

reminds us: *When you left Egypt, I prevented you from feeling that being subservient to the Torah will be a crushing burden.* And that is why the Jewish People accepted the Torah eagerly, even though they had only recently been granted their freedom from physical slavery.

How did Hashem break the yoke, this sense of burden? Hashem created a spiritual pleasure for the soul in learning Torah and performing *mitzvos* in this world. This enjoyment neutralized any potential feeling of hardship. Now we can also understand why our verse is referring to the future, when the spiritual light of the *Shechinah* will be revealed. When *Mashiach* comes, there will be a similar breaking of the yoke. We even allude to it in *Birkas Hamazon* (grace after meals): *Harachaman hu yishbor ulainu mei'al tzavareinu* (The Compassionate One will break the yoke [of exile] from our necks). Those who accustom themselves to the spiritual pleasures in this world will enjoy them even more in the future.

This concept of spiritual disposition relates to the reason why many Jews died in the plague of darkness, as opposed to any other plague.⁴¹⁸ Many commentators note that the plague of darkness was actually light. Hashem revealed the *Or Haganuz* (hidden light), which is an extremely intense spiritual energy. The Egyptians who were immersed in *tumah* (spiritual impurity) became blinded by the *Or Haganuz* and experienced a state of darkness. Many Jews at that time, unfortunately, did not desire to be freed or to have a relationship with G-d. These individuals could not handle this spiritual light, since they did not desire it; for them the spiritual light was darkness – they were overwhelmed by the intensity of Hashem's spiritual energy, and died as a result.

To bring all this home to ourselves, to the here-and-now, we need to do an honest self-evaluation: Are we sitting in the dark? Are we enslaved by our physical nature that makes us feel as if Torah and *mitzvos* are a burden? If the honest answer is “yes,” to

418 Rabbi Yehudah Leib Eiger, *Toras Emes*, p. 96.

some degree, then let us ask this most important question: what can we do to help loosen the yoke from upon ourselves?

The answer is in *birkas haTorah* (blessings recited over the Torah). The first part of the *berachah* reads, “*la’asok bedivrei Torah*” – to involve ourselves in the words of Torah. Then we say, “*veha’arev na*” – sweeten for us the words of Your Torah. The order of the *berachah* reveals the chronology. Only after we make an effort to delve into Torah, and show our desire to connect with Hashem, will we taste the sweetness, and enjoy the spiritual pleasures Hashem imbued within it.

To return to the beginning of the *parashah*, Rashi concludes⁴¹⁹ that the words “*bechukosai seileichu*” can only mean toiling in Torah study. The *Gur Aryeh* understands the use of the verb “walking,” which is a laborious activity, as implying the exertion and effort that are required in Torah learning. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein elaborates⁴²⁰ on this *pasuk*, that toiling in Torah means working hard and investing time and effort, thus demonstrating one’s priorities and values. The *yetzer hara* tries to discourage us or divert our energies elsewhere; often it’s that little voice in our head that is telling us to stay in bed and miss the *shiur*.

When someone makes an effort to learn, despite all obstacles, Hashem rewards him with spiritual enjoyment. That pleasure, in turn, motivates and inspires the person to strive more in his Torah learning. The cycle of effort and spiritual pleasure is the breaking of the yoke, a relief from the feeling of burden.

Let us focus even closer on the phrase “*motos ulchem*” (pegs of your yoke) to better understand the imagery. In ancient times, a yoke was used to attach a heavy load to the neck of a working animal. A rope would go under the neck of the animal, and be threaded through holes on both sides of a wooden bar that pulled

419 Rashi’s Commentary on *Vayikra* 26:3.

420 Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Darash Moshe*, p. 104.

the load. Rashi defines⁴²¹ the word *motot* as pegs that were inserted into both holes of the yoke, to prevent the rope from slipping. He cites a word in Old French that means “a plug that fills a gap.” In light of this definition, what is the message of the imagery of Hashem breaking the pegs of our yoke? How did Hashem relieve our sense of burden?

The answer is that He did not break the actual yoke; we are, after all, still obligated to serve Hashem through Torah and *mitzvos*, like an animal bound to his load. Breaking the pegs does slacken the grip of the reins around the neck, but the animal only goes free if he consciously pulls out his head. Hashem relieved our sense of oppression and duress: He loosened the grip around our necks. By “removing the plugs,” He opened the channels through which we can connect to Him; He created spiritual enjoyment in Torah and *mitzvos*.

Walking the Walk

Following what was mentioned above, we can recognize the necessity of investing in Torah and *mitzvos*. We need to accustom ourselves to the spiritual pleasure Hashem grants us in this world, so we will be able to bask in this light in the future redemption. Moreover, enjoying the spiritual benefits of Torah learning actually hastens the *ge'ulah*.

Most commentators understand the *kelalos* (curses) described in our *parashah* to be a descriptive prophecy about the *Churban haBayis* (destruction of the Holy Temple). In the *haftarah* for *Shacharis* on *Tishah B'Av*, we read the following verse, which is coming to answer the question as to why the *churban* happened:⁴²² “*Vayomer Hashem* (Hashem said): *al ozvum es Torasi asher nasati lifneihem* (because of their forsaking My Torah that I gave before them), *velo shamu bekoli* (and they did not heed My voice), *velo halchu bah* (lit. and they did not walk in it).” Our Sages

⁴²¹ Rashi's Commentary on *Vayikra* 26:13.

⁴²² *Yirmiyahu* 9:12.

question⁴²³ the meaning of the words “*velo halchu bah*.” What undesirable conduct are these words describing? And they answer: the people did not say *birkas haTorah* before learning.

These words of the *Gemara* seem very strange. How could it be that the *churban* was brought as a punishment for neglecting to say *birkas haTorah*? But let us remember the purpose and power of *berachos* in general. When one makes a *berachah* on food, for example, one is recognizing that one is deriving sustenance from that food. Rabbi Avraham HaLevi Schorr explains⁴²⁴ in this vein, that neglecting to say *birkas haTorah* is an indicator that a person is not getting *chiyus* (energy) from his Torah learning. The generation of the *Churban HaBayis* was negligent in *birkas haTorah* because they were not living for Torah. They did not feel it was the most important thing in life. *VELO HALCHU BA* – they did not walk in it because they were not fueled and sustained by it.

A human being is called a *mehaleich* – he who walks.⁴²⁵ If many creatures on the planet move by walking, why is this title reserved for human beings? Walking is a term that alludes to progress and advancement. Only human beings have the ability to mature and grow spiritually.

If a person’s soul is not “walking,” meaning, if he is not striving to refine his soul, then it is a sign that he is not drawing sustenance from Torah. The word “walking” implies movement from place to place; which is symbolic of Torah study, in which a person advances to more sophisticated levels of comprehension.⁴²⁶ (Indeed, the colloquial term for Jewish law is “*halachah*” – walking!) Hashem’s mission to us is *bechukosai seileichu* – walk in my statutes; we should grow spiritually through toiling in Torah and be sustained by it.

Let us return to our original *midrash* with our new perspective. David *HaMelech* said, “Every day I decided to go to a specific

⁴²³ *Nedarim* 81b.

⁴²⁴ Avraham HaLevi Schorr, *HaLekach VeHaLibuv, Parashas Bechukosai* 5763-5764, p. 127.

⁴²⁵ *ibid*.

⁴²⁶ *Toras Cobanim* 1:2.

place... but my feet brought me to Your synagogues and study halls.” David went to many places, but his feet walked in Torah learning. His spiritual progress, his walking, was fueled by Torah. Our Sages say that one’s Torah study has to be fixed and one’s work – temporary.⁴²⁷ This means that the learning is the focus, and work is just a means. Even when a person is at his occupation, his mind should be on Torah in his every move. *If I do this, will I be transgressing gezeilah? Is this in the category of ribis (taking interest)? Would saying this comment be considered lashon hara?* Torah is not just one part of our day, but rather infused in every moment of our lives.

A woman who is a *ba’alas teshuvah* once related a watershed moment in her life. After a year or so on her path back to Judaism, she stumbled upon an old assignment she had completed for an English class in high school. On the paper, she saw a pencil-traced outline of her hand, in which she had labeled each finger with one aspect of her life. One finger read “family”, another read “school”, another read “music” and one read “Judaism.” As she looked at the picture years later, she realized that Judaism for her was now the entire hand, with all the fingers encompassed within it. *Bechukosai teileichu* – she was ready to walk in Hashem’s ways everywhere she went.

Walking in Hashem’s ways is not exclusively applicable to Torah. Note that David *HaMelech* mentions both “Your synagogues and study halls.” Another way to increase Hashem’s presence in our daily lives is in “Your synagogues” – through *tefillah* (prayer). When we do not walk in Hashem’s ways in all aspects of our lives, symptoms of apathy appear in our *mitzvos* observance, especially in our *tefillah*.

Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus explains⁴²⁸ that the low spiritual state of our generation is a result of mechanical *davening*. We teach children to *daven* through discipline, rather than through a desire to connect to Hashem. We say, “You have to *daven* now,” instead of “We want to talk with Hashem.” On one hand, we are

⁴²⁷ *Sha’arei Chaim*, p. 135.

⁴²⁸ Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus, *Obel Miriam*, p. 36.

very careful with the technical details, the fixed times for this and that etc. While that aspect is important, it has overshadowed the whole purpose of *tefillah* in the first place, which is to have a relationship with Hashem. We are not teaching our children that Hashem is right here at all times, and that our *tefillah* is the way to connect with Him. Rabbi Pincus says our *davening* has become like a cold body that is missing the *chiyus*, the life-force and emotion in the relationship with the Divine.

So how do we put the life-force back into our *davening*? *Yalkut Lekach Tov* recommends⁴²⁹ a simple solution: Ask Hashem for whatever you need. At first glance, this suggestion appears to promote selfish behavior, providing Hashem with a laundry list of all our desires. Upon reflection, we can see that this kind of *tefillah* will involve Hashem in all parts of our lives, not just during the fixed times we need to go to *shul*. If we are walking in Hashem's ways all the time, then even when we need something mundane, we know that it too is in Hashem's hands. *My shoes are much too small. Hashem, please help me find the money to buy new ones.*

The following story illustrates how we can be in constant dialogue with Hashem during the day. A woman was packing to travel out of town, a task that forces one to prioritize one's possessions. This particular woman always made sure to pack slippers; she was a bit fastidious about walking barefoot in general, so slippers were a critical travel item. One time, on the first evening of a trip, she was unpacking her suitcase and realized that she had forgotten to bring them! Needless to say, she was quite distraught. She was so upset, that it inspired her to *daven*: "Hashem, I know I forgot to pack the slippers. You know that it's important to me. Please help me cope with this small inconvenience."

She then took a deep breath, and continued unpacking. Having rarely used this piece of luggage before, she unexpectedly discovered a hidden pocket inside. Curious, she then unzipped the pocket and surprisingly found a pair of her own slippers! She was suddenly reminded of the last time she had used this

⁴²⁹ *Yalkut Lekach Tov, Devarim*, p. 42.

suitcase – for a trip over a year ago. Clearly, she had remembered to pack the slippers for that trip, but had never unpacked them!

To an outsider, this might seem like coincidence, but to her it was a chance to connect with Hashem yet again; it was a sign of Divine Providence, proving to her that Hashem is with her all the time. Hashem is intimately involved in our lives and cares about the little things too. Walk, then, in the ways of Hashem and use every possible opportunity to connect with Him.

Maintaining an awareness of Hashem and focusing on Torah is particularly appropriate for the time of *Sefiras Ha'Omer*. The *Sefer HaChinuch* says⁴³⁰ that the mitzvah of counting the *omer* shows our desire for receiving the Torah on *Shavuos*. Each day of the *omer*, we can demonstrate our eager anticipation for *Matan Torah*. Every time we make the effort, we break the pegs of the yoke and reap more spiritual rewards and deepen the relationship with Hashem.

The imagery associated with the holiday of *Shavuos* is that of a marriage between Hashem and the Jewish People. Rabbi Pincus explores⁴³¹ a deeper understanding of this comparison. There are two stages of marriage: *kiddushin* and *nissu'in* (betrothal and marriage). In the same way, *kabbalas haTorah* has two levels. When we said “*na'aseh venishma* (we will do and we will listen),” we became betrothed to Hashem, so to speak; we showed our acceptance of the obligations, of the do's and the don'ts. The second level of *kabbalas haTorah* is *nissu'in*, when the bride moves into the home of the groom. *Nissu'in* is the building of a personal relationship and the living together every day. Being truly committed to Hashem means more than just following *halachah*;

⁴³⁰ *Mitzvah* 306.

⁴³¹ *Ohel Miriam*, p. 140.

it means moving into Hashem's house by making our homes a place where Hashem resides all the time.

One for All and All for One

Thus far we have addressed one perspective of this *midrash*, of walking in Hashem's ways by keeping Hashem with us at all times. This aspect is expressed in *Sefiras Ha'Omer* when we count the days in eager anticipation for receiving the Torah. The desire for a relationship with the Divine is the side of *Sefiras Ha'Omer* that is *bein adam laMakom* (between man and G-d). Let us now address the interpersonal quality of the *Sefirah* – the *bein adam lachaveiro* (between man and his fellow) and another perspective of this *midrash*.

We observe many customs of semi-mourning between *Pesach* and *Shavuos*, such as not having haircuts and not listening to live music. These practices originate from an infamous case of Divine punishment for the abuse of a *mitzvah bein adam lachaveiro*: *Sefiras Ha'Omer* is a period commemorating the death of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva. Our Sages teach⁴³² us that they were struck with this plague because they did not respect one another. *Sefiras Ha'Omer* has become a time of personal reflection and self-improvement. The word *sefirah* (counting) relates to the word *safir* (sapphire stone). During this time, we work diligently on personal character refinement, to make our soul shine like a sapphire.

This personal spiritual work is critical to our relationships with others. Throughout time, our rabbis have emphasized the importance of the individual. Rav Wolbe elaborates⁴³³ on the *midrash* that says that *Adam HaRishon* was created as a *yachid* (individual) so that each and every one of us can say, "The world was created for me." An individual needs to recognize his significance in the world. Those who do not perceive their

⁴³² *Yevamos* 62b.

⁴³³ Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur*, p. 414.

inherent worth develop low self-esteem and cannot bear solitude. Such a person can not stand being in his own presence and neither can he stand being in the presence of G-d, since he deems himself unlikeable even by his Creator.⁴³⁴

Each of us was created with a unique mission and a custom-designed set of tools with which to fulfill that mission. According to Rabbi Pincus,⁴³⁵ the real holiness and beauty of a person can only be revealed when he is singular, alone and communicating only with himself. His unique G-dliness cannot shine forth when he is in the context of – and subject to – the influence of others around him. The process of counting the *Omer* allows us to refine our individuality through a cathartic spiritual process.

We cannot underestimate the value of a person who is strong from within to the point of being free from outside influences. The sign of a person who is secure in his individuality is his superior ability to keep a secret,⁴³⁶ for an individual who knows how to engage in inner conversation with himself has no urge to reveal information to others.

Lag Ba'Omer, a highlight of the *Sefiras Ha'Omer* period of strengthening the individual, marks the passing of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. The *Zohar* describes how, when Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai came to reveal the inner mystical meanings of the Torah, he understood that it could only be heard by those who could keep a secret. He quoted the *pasuk*, “*Holeich rachil megaleh sod* (he who reveals secrets is a tale-bearer), *vene'eman ru'ach mechaseh davar* (but the faithful of spirit conceals a matter.)”⁴³⁷ Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai asked why the verse says “*holeich rachil* (going around tale-bearing),” and not “*ish rachil* (a tale-bearing person).” The

434 Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, *Let Us Make Man*, p. 34.

435 Rabbi Shimshon Pincus, *Tiferes Shimshon, Bereishis*, p. 186.

436 *ibid.*

437 *Mishlei* 11:13

verse focuses on the contrast between the soul of the tale-bearer and the soul of the trustworthy one. The tale-bearer's *ru'ach* (spirit/soul) is moving around, unsettled and insecure. A trustworthy person is secure within himself as an individual; he does not need validation from others.

The ability to keep a secret is a sign of personal greatness. The *Midrash* comments⁴³⁸ on the following words⁴³⁹ “*matzasi David avdi* (I have found David my servant),” and asks, “Where did I find him? In Sodom.” This is referring to David *HaMelech*'s lineage from Ruth, who was a Moabite; Moav was a product from the incident with Lot and his daughters.⁴⁴⁰ Why does the Torah want to emphasize David's less-than illustrious background? Why is Lot given honorable mention?

Surprisingly, Lot had a spark of greatness that was passed down to David *HaMelech*: Lot knew how to keep a secret. When Avraham and Sarah descended to *Mitzrayim*, Avraham told Pharaoh that she was his sister. Although Lot was a *rasha* (wicked person), his one redeeming quality was a strong one, and he indeed kept their secret. Lot had a spark of *kedushah*, an aspect of inner equilibrium that allowed him to be secure within himself as an individual.

Our rabbis emphasize the importance and uniqueness of individuals. Each of us has a special combination of strengths and weaknesses that is not replicated in anyone else. *Rabbeinu* Yonah recommends⁴⁴¹ that each person identify his natural tendency and use it to excel in one character trait. We have limited resources and energy; we should dedicate them to one area of personal achievement.

438 *Bereishis Rabbah*, 41:4.

439 *Tehillim* 89:21.

440 See *Bereishis* 19:33.

441 As quoted by Rabbi Mordechai Miller, *The Sabbath Shiur*, p. 206.

As such, the following challenge arises: A person who has a strong trait has difficulty tolerating a person who is strong in the opposite trait. One who naturally excels in a particular area cannot understand or relate to one who is weak in that area. A punctual person says: *How come she's always late? How hard is it to come on time?* A person who is good with numbers says: *Why can he not do those math problems? Long division is easy!* Furthermore, *Rabbeinu* Yonah's recommendation seems to encourage our differences and widen the gap between people. Strengthening our individuality seems to cause more division and dissension. Was not this the cause of the death of Rabbi Akiva's students – the lack of respect between them?

The core of the problem is our perspective. We are egocentric by nature, so we tend to view others only in comparison to ourselves. If we shift our vantage point, we can focus on others' strengths, rather than on their weaknesses. Of course, our first instinct is to be critical of others. But if we turn that critical eye on ourselves, we can identify our own shortcomings, and from that place of humility view others in the context of their own expertise. As mentioned above, the advantage of having strength as an individual is the reflective solitude; it enables a person to admit his flaws. We then can recognize forms of greatness in others that we do not possess, and gain respect for their achievements.

The shift in perspective allows us to see how we all complement each other. Our uniqueness should unite us, not divide us. Rabbi Wolbe compares⁴⁴² each unique individual to a leaf on the branch of a tree. When we have excelled as individuals, we can then see ourselves as a necessary part of a larger picture, and fit into the *klal*. We cannot view people as factory products of a cookie-cutter society. When each person is fulfilling his personalized Divine mission in life, he can fit his unique piece into the larger puzzle of the Jewish People. Rabbi Tatz explains⁴⁴³ the

⁴⁴² *Alei Shur*, p. 418.

⁴⁴³ Rabbi Akiva Tatz, *Worldmask*, p. 79.

following paradox: it is by achieving our ultimate uniqueness and individuality that we are able to fit seamlessly into the universal picture.

This concept about individuality and *klal* relates to *Matan Torah*. We desire a close relationship with Hashem, as we alluded to in the marriage parallel earlier; and this relationship is experienced both as individuals and a collective. When Hashem's voice emanated from Har Sinai, each person heard it according to what he could personally internalize.⁴⁴⁴ Rabbi Yochanan says that the voice was actually split into seven voices which then become seventy languages.⁴⁴⁵ On one level, we can understand this statement to mean that everyone heard his own language, and absorbed the Divine revelation in a personalized way. But what do the numbers represent?

Seven is the largest prime number less than ten; it is the biggest number without factors. Rabbi Friedlander explains that since six are the sides of a cube, seven represents multiple parts beyond a whole.⁴⁴⁶ Ten represents individuals creating a group; ten men joining together form a new collective, a *minyán*. If you take seven, representing individuals, and multiply it by ten, representing the *klal*, you get seventy. Our uniqueness is magnified by the power of ten when we bring it to the *klal*. The Torah was given to us as individuals who also fit perfectly together as a whole. Our relationship with Hashem is both personal and collective.

Personal perfection is powerless when it stands in isolation. This is where the students of Rabbi Akiva faltered. They were giants in Torah learning, each unique in his own personal greatness. But they failed, on their lofty level, to recognize and respect the greatness of each other. They did not see themselves as one part of a greater whole.

Let us see how this idea fits into our original *midrash*. Every day David *HaMelech* decided to go to specific and individual places

⁴⁴⁴ *The Sabbath Shiur*, p. 209.

⁴⁴⁵ *Shemos Rabbah* 5:9.

⁴⁴⁶ See *Torah Tapestries, Shemos*, p. 54.

– to one person’s home and another person’s workplace. We know that David *HaMelech* inherited the spark of *kedushah* that was buried within Lot. He had the ability to keep a secret, because he was secure in his own individuality. He strove to reach greater and greater personal spiritual heights. “However, my feet brought me to Your synagogues and study halls.” David *HaMelech* kept being led back to the places where people gather as a community. His personal perfection could only be attained when he joined together with others.

The two messages of our *midrash* are the two messages of *Sefiras Ha’Omer*. We can walk with Hashem everywhere we go, and eagerly count each day approaching *Matan Torah*, maintaining a personal relationship with Hashem in every aspect of our lives. And, at the same time, we can strive for character refinement while recognizing the achievements of others around us. We can find our niche in the community and offer our unique talents for the benefit of the Jewish People. May we always strive – both as individuals and as a community – to walk in Hashem’s ways.