



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY MAY 18, 2010 / ה' סיון תש"ע

PARSHA:

NASO/נשא

SERMON TITLE:

HOW TO BRIBE G-D

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

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Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס זייל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

NASO

HOW TO BRIBE G-D

Over the course of the years, Israel has always enjoyed a preferential relationship with the United States. The American government has always displayed that extra affection—with Arab states complaining that Uncle Sam's relationship with them is not the same as that between Uncle Sam and Israel.

That was the status quo until the newest administration.

It seems that our latest President wants to be more politically correct than presidents in the past, giving equal credence to both sides and perhaps even preferential treatment to Arab states over the Jewish State.

So let's take a look at our Torah portion this week and see what lessons we can take that we might apply to this current state of affairs. But first, let's take a look back at ancient Jewish history.

When the Jewish Nation was exiled from its land to Bavel (Hebrew for Babylon), the custom of the meturgeman arose. A meturgeman, interpreter in Hebrew, would get up in the synagogue each Shabbos after the Torah reading and translate the Torah reading in Aramaic.

Since most Jews born in Bavel did not understand Hebrew and therefore did not understand the Torah, the Sages established the custom of having a translator repeat the Torah reading in their language. In those days, that was the language of Aramaic.

Now, this new custom created a new dilemma in halachah,; What should the translator translate?

Should he translate everything in the Torah? Or are there things that people wouldn't understand properly, making it better to just leave certain parts untranslated?

What would you do? If the decision were up to you, if you could choose what parts of the Torah not to translate to English because they may make people angry and cause the Torah to be disrespected, which parts of the Torah would you choose?

[Interact with crowd]

Some people will tell you that they would skip the Tochachah, the section of curses that we find in the Torah portion of Bechukosai, which we read just a couple of weeks ago.

And indeed, there is an entire deliberation in the Talmud (Tractate Megillah 25b), in which one argument is presented against translating those same curses. As Rashi explains it, “their morale will be weakened when they hear that they will be punished and they will say, ‘Better to enjoy this world wholeheartedly since we’ll ultimately get punished regardless.’” In other words, when people hear about such punishments, they’ll despair and give up on the whole Torah. Nevertheless, the Talmud rules that we do indeed translate the Tochachah.

In another such example, there is a deliberation over translating the saga of Lot and his two daughters. Let’s just say that this saga is not exactly the most honorable one, and maybe not something for kids to hear about in the first place. The Talmud tells us that there was indeed a thought to not translate this story to protect the honor of the “great uncle.” Now, who was Lot’s uncle, the great uncle of Lot’s two daughters? The first Jew, our Patriarch Avraham.

That’s why it’s perhaps better not to translate the story. Still, the final decision was to translate it.

The Sin of the Golden Calf does not do great honor to the Jewish People—worshipping idols a mere 40 days after receiving the Torah. So, to “show concern over Israel’s honor,” the Talmud considers not translating this story—but in the end, the Talmud decides that it is indeed fitting to translate it, so that everyone will know that repentance is possible for every sin. After all, if repentance can work for the Sin of the Golden Calf, certainly it’s possible to repent for anything else.

However, there are indeed things that we really do not translate—for example, the “Story of Reuven.”

We’ve all heard of the four wives of Yaakov: Rochel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah. According to the Torah, Yaakov loved Rochel the most and lived with her in the same tent.

The Torah tells us that after Rochel passed away, Yaakov moved into the tent of his wife Bilhah—but to Reuven, Leah’s firstborn son, this was very painful. Reuven complained that it was enough that his mother Leah had to suffer while her sister

Rochel was alive and Yaakov lived in Rochel's tent—but now that Rochel died, why did Yaakov not move into Leah's tent?

So Reuven got up and took action: He moved his father Yaakov's bed from Bilhah's tent to his mother Leah's tent.

Now, that is how the story actually happened. However, the way the Torah presents it, Reuven doesn't come out looking good. In other words, if one translates the story literally exactly as it is written verbatim in the Torah, people could come to unflattering conclusions about Reuven. Thus, the Mishnah tells us that "the story of Reuven is read but is not translated."

And there are many similar stories that are read but not translated, with the understanding that these stories are not very flattering and that it's better to leave them be.

But there is one exception to this rule: Something very positive, but something which the Mishnah tells us to not translate regardless. And we find this exception in this week's parshah.

In the Torah portion of Naso, we learn about the Birkas Kohanim, the Priestly Blessing, among the most important blessings in the Torah and possibly the most important of all.

G-d commanded the Kohanim to bestow the Birkas Kohanim upon the Jewish Nation. But it's not just the Kohanim who convey this blessing: Many Jews follow the custom of blessing their children every Friday night with the words of the Birkas Kohanim blessing. Many of you may even know the words of the Birkas Kohanim by heart and say it every day.

Nevertheless, the Mishnah tells us that Birkas Kohanim is to be recited, but not translated.

Now, we could understand why we would not want to translate curses—but what's wrong with blessings?

At the end of Birkas Kohanim, the verse in the original Hebrew states, "Yisa Hashem Panav ailecha v'yaseim l'cha shalom," which means, "May G-d lift His face unto you and bestow upon you peace." But what does "lift His face" mean?

It means that G-d displays a preferential relationship to the Jewish Nation—His Face lights up to them and He is prepared to "turn a blind eye" to their sins, like a worker in

the workplace: The boss can either relate to him strictly by the book, or he can give his worker a knowing smile and wink and treat him better than the other workers in the workplace.

And this is the problem with the blessing: It tells us that the Jewish Nation indeed has a preferential treatment from the Creator of the Universe that is better than all other nations.

Indeed, the Talmud tells us (Tractate Rosh Hashanah 17b) that this complaint was actually used by a wealthy convert to Judaism: “Bloria the Convert asked Rabban Gamliel, ‘It says in the Torah that G-d “does not lift His Face”—but it also says, “G-d will lift His Face unto you”!’

This convert was a scholar, and she pointed out that these two verses contradict each other. One verse states, “G-d does not lift His face and does not take bribes,” meaning that all are equal before the law and that G-d favors no man—but in Birkas Kohanim we say, “G-d will lift His Face unto you,” meaning that G-d indeed does play favorites!

The verse “and does not take bribes” is also contradicted by another verse in Proverbs (17:13), which states the complete opposite: “And He takes bribes from the pockets of sinners.” So what’s going on here? Does G-d take bribes or not?

So Rabbi Yosi the Kohen answered her: “One verse refers to sins between Man and G-d, and other refers to sins between Man and his fellow man.” If a man sins against his friend, G-d will not give in to you until you beg your friend’s forgiveness. You can’t steal a man’s money and then give it charity. In such a case, G-d doesn’t take bribes. There are no shortcuts. You need to go give the money back.

But with sins between Man and G-d, then you can definitely make a deal with G-d: Repentance, prayer and a little charity close the deal. As the verse in the Book of Daniel (2:25) states, “Cast off your sin with charity.” In such a case, G-d really does give the Jewish Nation a special relationship; G-d really does light up His face to them, with them receiving a preferential relationship that is more than all other nations of the world.

And since there are people who would not understand these fine differences, it’s better to not translate Birkas Kohanim.

The Talmud (Tractate Brachos 58a) further says: “The Kingdom of Earth is like the Kingdom of Heaven”—meaning that whatever mode your government assumes is a reflection of whatever mode Heaven is currently assuming. In plain English, that

means that whatever the government does is just a political symptom of a deeper spiritual cause.

To explain by way of analogy, if a good student in school suddenly starts behaving erratically, you immediately ask whether there's something going on at home, because such behavior stems from something much deeper.

And this is true for the United States as well: If Israel has suddenly lost its preferential relationship with the United States here on this earth, it's a sure sign that we must strengthen our preferential treatment from G-d. We need to bribe G-d a little bit.

And how do we do that? How does a human being bribe G-d? The Midrash responds: "With repentance and good deeds." And when we strengthen our special relationship with the "Kingdom of Heaven," this will express itself through the "Kingdom of Earth," the world's powers—even the United States will seek the welfare of the Land of Israel and the People of Israel.

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