



Parashat Balak 5772 - #240

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On the Haftarah... Ethics before Religion

[Michah 5:6-6:8]

The prophet Michah, who lived during a period when ethical ideals were crumbling and idol worship was rampant, called out in a loud voice: There is no religion without ethics! He bitterly lamented the Nation of Israel's abandonment of Hashem, and therefore reproved them and demanded an explanation (ibid. v. 2). If you have a complaint against Hashem, let's hear it! Hashem has only performed goodness for you (ibid. v. 3-4). During the course of our lengthy wanderings, from the time of the Exodus from Egypt until entering the Land of Israel, one had only to open his eyes to "know the righteous acts of Hashem" (ibid. v. 5).

But perhaps what frightened the Nation of Israel was the difficulty of observing the Mitzvot. The prophet therefore explains that Hashem does not demand numerous sacrifices (ibid. v. 6-7). "And what does Hashem seek from you? Only the performance of justice, the love of kindness, and walking humbly with your G-d" (Michah 6:8). At first glance, this seems like a minimal demand, a sort of "religion without religion," a religion of intellect, well-suited for a Reform or Atheistic Jew.

In the book "The Kuzari," written by Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi, the King of Kuzar tried to present Judaism as something other than a passageway to justice and kindness (2, 47). But the Sage responded that ethical behavior precedes Torah (ibid. 48). Thus, Michah's demand is not a preparatory state but in fact the very foundation of Torah.

This recalls the story of the non-Jew who wanted to convert to Judaism on condition that Hillel teaches him the Torah while standing on one foot. This Sage's famous answer is: "What is hateful to you, do not do to others. This is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and learn it" (Shabbat 31a). This man was searching for a broad worldview and a rationalistic view of Judaism. Hillel validated his aspiration by giving him a humanistic view of the Torah, but with the recognition that the next stage requires in-depth learning.

The Torah itself does not immediately present all of the Mitzvot and their details. The Book of Bereshit deals almost exclusively with the ethical behavior of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov without explicitly mentioning Mitzvot. This approach teaches us that proper character traits, especially those related to relationships between people, take precedence over the religious mandates of the Torah. Our Rabbis formulate this ideal as "Proper behavior precedes the Torah" (Vayikra Rabbah 9:3), both on an individual level and on the worldly level.

It says in Pirkei Avot (3:21): "Without proper behavior, there is no Torah," i.e. there is no Torah without ethics. This is like building a structure without first laying a foundation. It will collapse during the first storm. But the opposite sentence is no less true: "Without Torah, there is no proper behavior" (ibid.). Without religion, there is no possibility of true ethical behavior. This is what the Maharal explains in his commentary on Pirkei Avot: Without Mitzvah observance a person is stopped in the middle of the road and his work will remain incomplete. Only through the Torah can a person achieve ethical behavior in its complete form.

Michah therefore warned us that the foundation of every human society must be the ethical relationships between people. Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi stated in the Kuzari (2, 48) that some level of integrity must exist in every society, even among a group of thieves (see the book "The State" of Plato).

But one question still remains: Michah did not live during the birth of the Nation of Israel, when the universal ethical foundation was laid with the introduction of the religion of Israel. Why then is he instructing them to go backwards? We must understand that during Michah's period there was a complete collapse of this foundation. He therefore called upon the Nation to return to its source. Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi (ibid.) explained that the people in this day were lax when it came to the intellectual Mitzvot of proper behavior between people, but strict when it came to Divine Mitzvot such as the sacrificial service. But, as we know, the Divine Torah is only whole when the societal, intellectual law serves as the foundation for the Divine Mitzvot of sacrifices, Shabbat, Brit Milah, etc.

In this spirit, Michah stated: "And what does Hashem seek from you? Only the performance of justice, the love of kindness and walking humbly with your G-d." It is not sufficient for the Nation of Israel to be satisfied with performing justice and kindness, we must also perform the rest of the Mitzvot. The Divine soul which rests within man cannot be filled solely by

ethical and societal sustenance. It aspires to greater heights: to touch the Divine light. And this is only possible when one performs the remaining Mitzvot.

Rav Aviner on...

Learning Tanach with Emunah

[Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah – Chukat 5772 – translated by R. Blumberg]

Question: Various Rabbis, and all sorts of researchers, have different interpretations of the Tanach. What's wrong with having teachers share them all? Why must they conclude that there is only one truth? What could be better than presenting all of the possibilities and then allowing the students to select those that best suit them?

Answer: Our Education Ministry is not meant to be a supermarket of ideas. Rather, upon it rests the enormous responsibility of fostering the purity and holiness of our precious Jewish children. It must therefore follow the tried-and-true path, and not follow alien pathways, however prominent the personages who suggest alternative approaches. We must follow only the guidance of our holy Torah: "Follow the majority," both as far as following the majority opinion amongst Rabbis, and as far as following those who Rabbis possess the most Torah wisdom (Choshen Mishpat 25:2; Rama). Most of our great Sages absolutely reject the idea of introducing secular approaches, let alone heretical ideas, into the holy study of Tanach. Rather, the task is to foster the fear of G-d, and to view the giants of the Tanach with reverence. Moreover, study of Tanach must be based not just on the ideas of contemporary Rabbis, but on the ideas of the Sages down through the generations, who are infinitely greater.

Question: We want Tanach to be relevant to the students so that they feel an attachment to it. So why not create new interpretations that make the text relevant for the student?

Answer: Then the student isn't studying Tanach - he's studying himself. Relevance? Certainly! But relevance to what? To the supreme image of G-d in man? To the specialness of the Jewish soul? Or to man's lowly passions?

Here I shall enlist the words of Rabbi Yehuda Léon Askénazi, from his Sefer Perurim MeShulchan Gavoha (p. 23):

What is 'Parshanut' (Exegesis of Tanach)?

There are two approaches to how to interpret the Tanach:

1. In the first approach, the commentator holds that the text has no logical meaning. He therefore advances his own interpretation in order to infuse the text with meaning it never possessed in the first place. Ultimately, however, this involves forcing the commentator's thoughts onto the text. That is not the traditional approach.

2. According to the traditional definition, "Parshanut" involves transmitting to the student the tradition that has been preserved in the Jewish memory but that has been lost to many. It transmits a fundamental approach without which there is no possibility of understanding a thing. In the general culture, the academic ground rule of exegesis is that the text has no meaning per se, other than that affixed to it by the commentator. The traditional definition, however, is that the text being learned cannot be understood by any except those who, in advance, have absorbed deep into their psyches the culture suited and relevant to that text. People tend to think that exegetical works which spring up around the original increase wisdom and knowledge. In their view, modern man knows more than his predecessors, and a plethora of books is a sign of an increase in knowledge compared to the original. That idea is illusionary. In the traditional approach, precisely the opposite is the case: Because we know less, we need more books...

The Text of the Tanach Teaches us.

It is the text of the Tanach which teaches Us. We do not put words in its mouth. The Tanach teaches us ideas that we could never attain solely with our own thoughts and morality. The

Tanach always transcends the absolute ability of the human intellect. The moment you understand this, you discover the proper approach to Torah study: The verse teaches us. It informs us of what we must know, and not the opposite - that I fill in its words. Thus, if there is a disagreement between the reader and the verse, the reader must be aware in advance that the verse is right. As long as he does not understand how it is right, he hasn't understood a thing.

I believe I have explained this point sufficiently. Even so, I shall quote from the Talmud on this topic: A wise man once spoke of how much he had learned from his teachers: 'Much Torah have I learned from them, but what I learned, compared to what they possess, cannot even be likened to what a dog could lap out of the sea' (Sanhedrin 68a). I don't know if you understand this parable, but you must realize that this is the meaning of Torah learning.

Stories of Rabbenu –

Our Rabbi, Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah Ha-Cohain Kook

The Study of Emunah (Jewish Faith)

The Talmud tells us that one of the questions a person is asked on his day of judgment is, "Did you carry out your business matters faithfully (i.e. honestly)?" Our Rabbi would interpret this figuratively to mean: "Did you busy yourself with faith (i.e. did you study Jewish faith)?" Regarding another of these questions, "Did you anxiously await the Redemption?" he would bring the words of the Ran (Rabbenu Nissim), "Did you anxiously await the fulfillment of the words of the Prophets in your days?"

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