
פרשת משפטים

פרק כא פסוק א

וְאֵלֶּה הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר תִּשִׂים לִפְנֵיהֶם:

רש"י

לְכֹד נֹאמַר "אֲשֶׁר תִּשִׂים לִפְנֵיהֶם", כְּשֶׁלֶחַן הָעֶרְוָה וּמוֹכֵן לְאֵכוּל לִפְנֵי הָאָדָם.

Translation:

Therefore it says, "that you shall place before them", like a table that is set and prepared to be eaten from.

Explanation:

Hashem is commanding Moshe regarding the teaching of His laws. He tells Moshe that it is not sufficient to simply teach the laws and repeat the instruction, but he must toil to deeply explain the reasons for the laws as well. Thereby, the student will not only appreciate the law and strive to keep it, but he will also be able to apply this understanding to future lessons. Thus the teacher will not only teach this lesson, but will 'set the table' for all future learning.

Looking in the Pasuk:

From the fact that the פסוק did not say אשר תלמדם, but rather לפניהם, our Musag understands that the Torah was alluding to something more than just teaching. Upon examining the Midrash from which Rashi gleans his comments, it becomes clear that the word לפניהם was the source of our Musag's lesson.

NOTES

In the middle of the 16th Century, in the city of Tsfat, the great Rabbi Yosef Caro completed one of the greatest works of Halacha. He had finished writing the most comprehensive code of practical Jewish Law, which until this day is used as the foundation on which all subsequent Halachik questions would be based. He called his work the שלחן ערוך. This name was based on the הז"ל which is the source of our Musag. As his code sought to clarify the law and make it accessible to the masses, a mission in which he found spectacular success, we consider the title to be prophetically accurate.

Many people therefore understand that the idea behind the שלחן ערוך mentioned in our Musag is to present Torah in an organized fashion, much the same way one 'prepares' the table so that it will be ready for those who wish to eat. However, upon closer examination of Rashi's commentary and his sources, a different understanding comes into focus.

Rashi writes as follows:

אֲשֶׁר תְּשִׁים לְפָנֶיהֶם. אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְמֹשֶׁה, לֹא תַעֲלֶה עַל דַּעְתְּךָ לֵאמֹר אֲשַׁנֶּה לָּהֶם הַפָּרָק וְהַהֲלָכָה בִּי אוֹ גִ' פְּעָמִים עַד שֶׁתֵּהָא קְדוּרָה בְּפִיהֶם כְּמִשְׁנֵתָהּ, וְאֵינִי מְטָרִיחַ עֲצָמִי לְהַבִּינֵם טַעְמֵי הַדָּבָר וּפְרוּשׁוֹ, לְכֹד נֶאֱמַר "אֲשֶׁר תְּשִׁים לְפָנֶיהֶם", כְּשֶׁלַחַן הָעֵרוּךְ וּמוֹכֵן לְאֹכֹל לְפָנֵי הָאָדָם.

The only source from which Rashi would have gleaned the term כשלחן ערוך is the מכילתא which teaches:

רבי עקיבא אומר ואלה המשפטים למה נאמר? לפי שהוא אומר דבר אל בני ישראל ואמרת אליהם, אין לי אלא פעם אחת מנין שנה ושלוש ורבע עד שילמדו, תלמוד לומר ולמדת את בני ישראל¹, יכול למדין ולא שונין, תלמוד לומר שימה בפיהם, יכול שונין ולא יודעין, תלמוד לומר ואלה המשפטים וגו' ערכם לפנייהם כשלחן ערוך כענין שנאמר אתה הראית לדעת.

The מכילתא expands upon the meaning of a שלחן ערוך by breaking down the learning process into four stages:

1. דבר אל בני ישראל, the initial instruction.
2. ולמדת את בני ישראל, repeat the lesson to ensure that the lesson was understood.
3. שימה בפיהם, review to ensure retention and enable immediate retrieval of information².
4. תשים לפנייהם³, teach for deep understanding. While the מכילתא does not clarify what exactly they mean by 'שונין ולא יודעים' - which the תשים לפנייהם comes to correct - there is a second source which clarifies the intent of the מכילתא. The (עירובין נד:) גמרא likewise quotes the teaching of רבי עקיבא in a very similar fashion (even though it does not mention the term שלחן ערוך):

רבי עקיבא אומר מנין שחייב אדם לשנות לתלמידו עד שילמדנו שנאמר ולמדה את בני ישראל. ומנין עד שתהא סדורה בפיהם שנאמר שימה בפיהם. ומנין שחייב להראות לו פנים שנאמר ואלה המשפטים אשר תשים לפנייהם.

Rashi on the גמרא explains:

להראות לו פנים: ללמדו, לכת טעם בדבריו בכל אשר יוכל, ולא יאמר כך שמעתי, הן אתה הטעם מעצמך... אשר תשים לפנייהם, ולא כתיב אשר תלמדם, כריך אתה לסדר ולקום לפנייהם טעם המיישגב תלמודם.

Rashi's commentary on our פסוק thus is based on the מכילתא, but he also utilizes the גמרא to explain that when the מכילתא uses the term יודעים and כשלחן ערוך they are referring to deep understanding of the law. That is to say, it is not sufficient to know what the law says, but one must also know the reasons and logic behind the law. This is precisely what Rashi writes in his commentary; לְהַבִּינֵם וּפְרוּשׁוֹ.

¹ ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת ולמדה את בני ישראל שימה בפיהם... (דברים לא:יט)

² There is a disagreement among commentators if Rashi learned the lesson of שלחן ערוך from the word תשים or from the word לפנייהם. It is clear from the wording of the מכילתא that the latter opinion is correct, as the word תשים only refers to retention of knowledge.

It is thus clear that the term כשלחן ערוך does not mean to organize knowledge but to deepen it. It is not sufficient that one knows what the law says, even if he knows it clearly, he must also be taught to understand why the law is such.

While the idea conveyed by our Musag is fairly easy to comprehend, it is difficult to understand what the term כשלחן ערוך comes to add. Why use this term to illustrate the need to add depth of understanding to the learning experience? Additionally problematic is Rashi's commentary which begins with a conversation that Hashem is having with Moshe regarding educational methodology:

אָמַר לוֹ הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְמִשְׁחָה, לֹא תַעֲלֶה עַל דַּעְתְּךָ לֵאמֹר אֲשַׁנֶּה לָהֶם הַפֶּרֶק וְהַלְכָה בִּי אוֹ גִּי פְעָמִים עַד שִׁתְּהֵא סְדוּרָה בְּפִיָּהֶם כְּמִשְׁנֵתָהּ, וְאֵינִי מְטַרִיחַ עֲצָמִי לְהַבִּינֵם טַעְמֵי הַדָּבָר וּפְרוּשׁוֹ .

It should be abundantly clear that Rashi does not make things up. And yet, in this conversation, Hashem is telling Moshe not to be lazy – לא תעלה על דעתך...איני מטריח עצמי – and not to entertain the thought that he could simply review the lesson without providing depth and understanding. Why, we wonder, would Hashem think that Moshe would entertain such thoughts? What did Moshe ever do that would lead Hashem to believe that He must warn Moshe?

To explain, we turn our attention to another episode in the Torah in which Moshe was criticized for the fashion in which he dealt with בני ישראל. I refer to the middle of פרק יח where יתרו reprimands Moshe for the judicial system he has established. In our essay on that episode,⁴ we explained that Moshe was attempting to assume multiple roles, something יתרו correctly assumed could not be done. One reason was that the role of a judge simply was too difficult to allow for successful undertaking of any other endeavor.

There was, however, another reason that Moshe could not adequately undertake all three roles. In truth it was not only the all-consuming role of judge that precluded the successful completion of the tasks, but there was an even more compelling reason for יתרו to criticize his son in law. The reason is contained in a peculiar phrase found in כ פסוק, where יתרו advises Moshe:

וְהִזְהַרְתָּ אֹתָהֶם אֶת־הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת־הַתּוֹרָה וְהוֹדַעְתָּ לָהֶם אֶת־הַדְּרָגָה יִלְכוּ בָּהּ וְאֶת־הַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּן:

Rov S.R. Hirsch finds the wording וְהִזְהַרְתָּ אֹתָהֶם (instead of וְהִזְהַרְתָּ אוֹתָם) to be without parallel in all of Tanach. He writes:

This is the only occasion where הִזְהִיר occurs with a double accusative. It is used either by itself as וְהִזְהִיר אֶת הָעָם or as in לְהִזְהִיר רִשְׁעֵי מַדְרֵגוֹ, and in both cases it means to warn... On the other hand זָהַר quite definitely means light, luster, brightness and הִזְהִיר to spread light, וְהַמְשַׁכִּילִים יִזְהִירוּ כֹזֵהר הַרְקִיעַ. So הִזְהִיר must mean to light up an object for somebody which otherwise he would not have seen. Hence also in the double accusative, to cause an object to receive rays of light and to cause these rays to fall in the eyes of someone. So here it would mean: Cause the Law and the Teaching to shine clearly and brightly into their eyes and make them so important to them that they guard themselves against transgressing them.

Thus, one who truly wishes to teach must not merely convey the lessons but must illuminate them. He must teach them in a fashion whereby they will have an everlasting impact upon his students. יתרו realized that this role was one that Moshe could best fulfill. He was the one who received the Torah directly from Hashem, and was thus best suited to become not only מִשְׁחָה but מִשְׁחָה רַבִּינוּ. He, more than any other, experienced the fire of Sinai, the fire of passion and illumination, in which Hashem gave the Torah to His people. He therefore must be the model of how Torah is to be taught for all time. This, claimed יתרו, was also an all-encompassing role, and should never be compromised with the undertaking of any other obligation⁵.

Rashi's commentary here reflects the above warning. Hashem is not telling Moshe not to be lazy, but rather not to become preoccupied with other pursuits. One who truly wishes to educate must

⁴ See the essay on the Musag כל הדין דין אמת.

⁵ All מחנכים should take heed of Rov Hirsch's words, for in them is contained the essence of what makes a teacher truly successful.

focus on nothing else, for a true educator realizes that simply repeating the lesson, even multiple times, only assures that the student will be able to repeat that which he has been taught. However, the ability of the student to repeat the lesson must not be the goal of the educator. Such teaching will not achieve the goal of והזרתם, of having the teaching “shine clearly and brightly into their eyes and make them so important to them that they guard themselves against transgressing them.” To achieve this, the teacher must invest tremendous effort – ישריה את עצמו – to ensure that the lesson becomes more than a teaching moment, but rather becomes an educational experience that will impact the life of a child. והזרתם can only be accomplished by delving deeply into the reasons for the teaching, by fully engaging the student’s intellect; only then will the eyes of the students become illuminated by the light of understanding.

However, I believe the benefit of such teaching goes beyond ensuring that the student realizes how important the lesson is. When the student deeply understands that which has been taught, he gains a tool through which he might understand further. He may now apply this understanding to new situations and new teachings. He now possesses new means to understand all of Hashem’s world and all of His Torah.

I believe this is what the מכילתא meant by a שלחן ערוך. It is not about the look of an orderly table, but rather in that it enables one to eat. For this reason, Rashi, when quoting the מכילתא, added the words ומוכן לאכול לפני האדם. In effect, by stressing reasons and understanding into our teaching methodology, the educator enables, and literally ‘sets the table’, for all future learning and understanding.

In effect, this type of education stresses thinking, not just remembering. It builds the intellect so that the student can become an independent and creative learner in his or her own right. The fact that our Musag is learned from the word לפניהם⁶ in the פסוק speaks to this educational ideal: true education is not achieved by placing the knowledge *in* them, but *before* them. The model educator thus provides the students with the thinking skills necessary for them to decipher the complex world of ideas that stands before them. This ideal is beautifully conveyed in the פסוק brought at the end of the מכילתא לדעת: הראית אתה אתה הראית לדעת: מכילתא. These words may be translated as ‘you have been shown how to know’. What an incredibly appropriate summation of what the role of an educator should be.

Questions for Further Thought:

- a. Think about the way you learn things. Do you find that when you are given reasons for the things you are taught they become more meaningful to you?
- b. How should we relate to מצות for which we do not have reasons?

⁶ See footnote #2