

Dear Friends: Concentration on Torah is of course difficult to come by this week, and the images of total destruction in the is weeks parshah are almost too much to bear. Nonetheless, it is our responsibility to continue – as best we can – our efforts to pour meaning into this world even as others do their best to remove it.

For members of the minyan – I intend to speak about this week’s tragedy following kiddush this Shabbat.

Parashat Nitzavim offers an account of a covenant-entering ceremony between the Jews and G-d. Apparently to justify the necessity for (another) such ceremony, the Torah informs us that the Jews have been exposed to the distasteful temptations of pagan culture, and thus in particular a public, communal oath-taking is necessary to weed out the disloyal. The oath includes the acceptance of extremely severe punishment for transgression of its terms.

In 29:18, however, we are told that some of the disloyal may take the oath with reservations, thinking “I will have peace, (even) if I follow the (sinful) dictates of my heart, *lemaan sefot haravah et hatsemeiah*.” We will focus on the meaning of that last phrase. (Note that R. Kaplan’s *The Living Torah* provides a nice brief summary of translation options.)

Introductory note: *Ravah* here literally means “having sufficient water”, and *tsemeiah* means thirsty.

Interpretation of the phrase as a whole revolves around three intertwined questions:

- 1) What does *sefot* mean?
- 2) Does *et* here serve as the direct object marker – i.e., we should translate as “so that the *ravah* can *sefot* the *tsemeiah* – or as a preposition – “so that he can *sefot* the *ravah* together with the *tsemeiah*?
- 3) Is *lemaan* a continuation of the thoughts, or an explication of the intentions, of the disloyal – in other words, the disloyal want *sefot haravah et hatsemeiah* – or Mosheh’s statement of the consequences of their thoughts – i.e., *sefot haravah et hatsemeiah* is a disaster?

Having answered these questions, one can decide what metaphor is expressed by the phrase as a whole. Time and space forbid a comprehensive survey, and I have found any number of the commentators on this phrase impenetrable.

Ibn Ezra notes that Yeshayah 30:1 contains the phrase “*lemaan sefot chatat al chatat*”. That phrase seems clearly to be a reflection of sinner’s intentions, and to mean “in order to add sin to sin”. Assuming that the phrases are parallel, we would be justified in concluding that *sefot* here also means to add, and that the phrase describes the thoughts of the disloyal. This is also supported by the use of *lemaan*, which seems always to introduce a desired consequence (cf. *yaan*).

We might go further and argue that the verse in Yeshayah is a deliberate allusion to Devarim. In that case it seems likely that *ravah* and *tsemeiah* each represent a type of sin. Rashbam, for instance, thinks that *tsemeiah* represents sins committed out of physical desire, whereas *ravah* refers to sins committed solely to rebel against G-d.

Seforno translates “so as to add the sated to the ranks of the thirsty”. For him, the sated are the wicked, who surrender to physical needs, while the thirsty are the ascetic righteous. The disloyal think that by concealing their reservations they will successfully add themselves (infiltrate?) to the community of the righteous.

Rav Yehudah on Sanhedrin 76b states in the name of Rav that this phrase refers to those who marry young men to old women and old men to girls, as well as to those who return lost objects to gentiles. It seems clear that the sated refer to the elderly and the thirsty to the young, but the referents with regard to the third case are unclear. Rashi translates *sefot* as “to connect”, and argues that in all three cases one is connecting those with strong physical desires (young people, gentiles) to those without (old people, Jews). However, he realizes that this fails to explain why returning lost objects to gentiles is censured. He thus states that doing so implies that one returns objects to Jews out of an ethical imperative rather than out of a sense of commandedness, which denigrates the commandment. (Note that this Rashi should perhaps be connected to another peculiar statement of Rashi (Rosh HaShannah 28a) regarding commandments, that they were given as “a yoke on our necks” and not in any way for our benefit. Each of these statements seems to express an extreme and ultimately untenable position; I’d like to hear comments and suggestions regarding them.)

The Iyun Yaakov suggests a different common denominator. He argues that in all three cases the intent of the actor is positive – one marries young men and women off to prevent them from sinning, and returns lost objects to sanctify Hashem’s Name and to avoid deriving benefit from another’s property w/o permission. However, here in each case the consequences are negative – the marriages arouse desire without sating it, and the return encourages the gentile to thank his gods,

thereby violating the prohibition against idolatry. (In this view the stricture would only apply to idolators. Meiri's position, which is generally followed nowadays with my enthusiastic support, is that the stricture only applies to the uncivilized, and that in any event where the custom is for Gentiles to return lost objects to Jews one should or must reciprocate.) It is difficult to fit this interpretation into the context of Devarim, although see Netziv's noble attempt.