

The CHASSIDUS PERSPECTIVE with Reb Yoel Kahn

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FROM CHES TO HEI

Parshas Vayakhel begins with the command to refrain from forbidden work on Shabbos. The Gemara states that there are 39 types of forbidden work, and learns this from the opening verse of the *parshah*, "*Eileh hadevarim*—there are the things that Hashem has commanded to do." The word *eileh* (אלה) has the numerical value of 36; the word *devarim* adds another two, as it is written in the plural; and the *hei* at the beginning (*hadevarim*) adds one more, totaling 39.

This is the way the number of *melachos* is derived in the Bavli. In Yerushalmi, by contrast, it is learnt from the word *eileh* itself: since the letters *hei* and *ches* are interchangeable, it is as if the word is written with a *ches*, giving us the numerical value of 39.

This is difficult to understand. When we say that *hei* and *ches* are interchangeable, it is because there are certain areas in which they share a common denominator. In those areas, it is understood that they can be exchanged. However, with regard to their *numerical value*, there are certainly *not* alike: *hei* equals five, while *ches* equals eight. How can these letters be exchanged to create a different *gematriya*?

ARROGANCE VS. BITTUL

We find the letters *hei* and *ches* playing a role in a different area—in the words *chametz* and *matzah*. Both words possess the letters *mem* and *tzaddik*, but they differ with regard to the third letter: *chametz* has a *ches*, while *matzah* has a *hei*.

What is the difference between *chametz* and *matzah*?

As is known, *matzah*, which is thin, represents humility and *bittul*, while *chametz*, which rises, symbolizes arrogance and *yeshus*. *Chametz* possesses the same ingredients as *matzah*, yet it swells and expands. Similarly, a *baal gaavah* doesn't necessarily possess additional qualities and talents, yet he is haughty and arrogant.

Haughtiness is the source of all evil characteristics. This explains

an interesting terminology used in Gemara. When Chazal want to describe someone who deviated from the correct path, the word used is *hechmitz* ("he turned sour"). The reason why *chametz* is used is because it is arrogance that leads to all other negative traits.

Matzah, by contrast, represents someone with *bittul*. Such a person won't be jealous of what others have—just because someone else has something, why should he have it too? Even if thoughts of jealousy do surface, he will immediately yield

and won't act upon his desires. But a *baal gaavah's* thought process is just the opposite: How can it be that the other has something that he does not? He must have it too!

In addition to the fact that arrogance leads to sin, it also prevents the sinner from repenting.

When a person has *bittul*, he will be overcome by remorse over the fact that he transgressed and will mend

his ways. But if he is arrogant, he will never concede that *he* made a mistake. Either he will convince himself that it wasn't wrong, or he will find any and every type of excuse to shift the blame from himself and place it on someone else. There is no way he can accept the fact that *he* is to blame. And since he will not find himself at fault, it will be very difficult for him to do *teshuvah*.

THE SECOND OPENING

The difference between the spelling of *chametz* and *matzah* is that *chametz* includes a *ches* while *matzah* has a *hei*. These two letters similarly signify arrogance and *bittul*.

Both a *ches* and a *hei* possess three lines: one on top and one on either side. The difference is that while a *ches* only has one opening on the bottom, a *hei* has a second opening, between the left leg and the top line.

The Gemara states that the bottom opening, which exists in both letters, represents the doorway to sin—*lapesach*

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chatah rovetz ("sin crouches at the opening"). The left opening, which exists only in the *hei*, represents the doorway to repentance.

The *hei*, the person with *bittul*, may also stumble; but if he does, he will recognize his misdeed and make his way to the second opening—he will do *teshuvah*. By contrast, when the arrogant *ches* sins, there is no opening for *teshuvah*, because he will not allow himself to see his errors.

WHY MUST WE WORK?

Let's return to the 39 *melachos*.

The Gemara derives which *melachos* are forbidden from the Mishkan (based on the fact that the two topics appear alongside each other in Parshas Vayakhel). Any type of work performed in the Mishkan is considered a *melachah*, while those which were not done there are not.

Everything in Torah is exact. If the *melachos* are derived from the Mishkan, there must be an association between the two. What is the connection between them?

The *melachos* are the categories of work we must do to earn a living (as we are enjoined not to rely on miracles, and we must create a vessel for *parnassah*). However, a Jew must realize that the *melachos* are not merely methods of making a *parnassah*. Why indeed did Hashem make the world in such a way that we must work to earn a livelihood? Because He wants us to make a Mishkan for Him. He wants us to bring His presence not only into our spiritual pursuits, but even into our mundane activities—our plowing and sowing, our buying and selling—by doing these actions *leshem shamayim*.

Why did Hashem make the world in such a way that we must work to earn a livelihood?

When a Jew performs the 39 *melachos*, they are infused with *bittul*—with the recognition that it is Hashem who gives a Jew *parnassah*, and that he must make a Mishkan for Hashem by doing them *leshem shamayim* (for example, to give *tzedakah* and to be able to study Torah with peace of mind).

However, this is only the way these *melachos* appear once the Jew enters the scene. Before that, the *melachos* are mundane and coarse.

Take, for example, a non-Jew who is doing these very *melachos*. He lacks this feeling of submission, and presumes that his success is the result of his own know-how and business acumen. Instead of *bittul*, the *melachos* are blown up with arrogance and *yeshus*.

It follows that the task of a Jew is to take the 39 *melachos*, which on their own are a *ches*, and transform them into a *hei*.

This is why there are 39 *melachos*, corresponding to the word *eileh* as if it were written with a *ches*, while in actuality *eileh* is written with a

hei. The *ches* and *hei* are interchangeable, meaning that it is up to us to transform the coarseness of the *melachos* into *bittul* and convert them into a Mishkan for Hashem.

For further study, see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 1, pp. 129–132.

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