



THE PERSON

IN THE PARSHA

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The Walking Tour

I am the type of person who has always believed that the only way to learn about something important is to buy a book about it. For example, it has been my good fortune to have traveled widely in my life and to have visited many interesting cities. Invariably, I bought guidebooks before each such visit, with detailed itineraries describing the “not to be missed” sites in those cities.

Eventually, I learned that there is a much better way to come to know a new city than to read a book about it. It is more interesting, more entertaining, and more inspiring to simply walk around the city aimlessly. I have even stopped buying those books which provide maps of walking tours around the city. Instead I just wander, and have never been disappointed in the process.

The list of cities which I have aimlessly explored has grown quite long over the years. It includes my own native New York, the holy city of Jerusalem, numerous cities in the United States, and several in Europe such as London, Rome and Prague.

Despite the diversity of these cities, I

inevitably end up in one of two destinations: either a used bookstore, or a small park, usually one in which children are playing.

The last time I had this experience, I was quite taken aback and muttered to myself, “I guess my feet take me where my heart wants me to go.”

As soon as those words occurred to me, I realized that they were not my own words at all. Rather, I was preceded in that reaction by two very glorious figures in Jewish history: the great sage Hillel, and no one less than King David. That brings us to this week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Bechukotai* (*Leviticus 26:3-27:34*).

The *parsha* begins: “If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant your rains in their season...”

That is the standard translation of this opening verse. But a more literal translation would begin not, “If you follow My laws,” but rather, “If you walk in My laws.” Most translators understandably choose the word “follow” over the literal “walk” in this context.

But the Midrash takes a different approach. It retains the literal “walk,” and links it to the phrase in *Psalms* 119:59 which reads, “I have considered my ways, and have turned my steps to Your decrees”. After linking the verse in our Torah portion with this verse from *Psalms*, the Midrash continues, putting these words into the mouth of King David: “Master of

**Refuah Shleima to our granddaughter
Hallel Miriam Chana
bat Rivka Nechman Tziona**

the universe, each and every day I would decide to go to such and such a place, or to such and such a dwelling, but my feet would bring me to synagogues and study halls, as it is written: 'I have turned my steps to Your decrees.'"

Long before this Midrash was composed, but long after the life of King David, the rabbinic sage Hillel is recorded by the Talmud to have said, "To the place which I love, that is where my feet guide me." (*Sukkah* 53a)

The lesson is clear. Our unconscious knows our authentic inner preferences very well. So much so that no matter what our conscious plans are, our feet take us to where we really want to be. To take myself as an example, I may have told myself when I visited some new city that I wanted to see its ancient ruins, its museums, its palaces and Houses of Parliament. But my inner self knew better and instructed my feet to direct me to the musty old bookstores where I could browse to my heart's content. Or to off-the-beaten-path, leafy parks where I could observe children at play.

This Midrash understands the opening phrase of our *parsha*, "If you walk in my laws," as indicating the Torah's desire that we internalize God's laws thoroughly so that they become our major purpose in life. Even if we initially define our life's journey in terms of very different goals, God's laws will hopefully become our ultimate destination.

There are numerous other ways suggested by commentaries throughout the ages to understand the literal phrase, "If you walk in

my ways." Indeed, Rabbi Chaim ibn Atar, the great 18th century author of *Ohr HaChaim*, enumerates no less than 42 explanations of the phrase.

Several of his explanations, while not identical to that of our Midrash, are consistent with it and help us understand it more deeply.

For example, he suggests that by using the verb "walk," the Torah is suggesting to us that it is sometimes important in religious life to leave one's familiar environment. One must "walk," embark on a journey to some distant place, in order to fully realize his or her religious mission. It is hard to be innovative, it is hard to change, in the presence of people who have known us all of our lives.

Ohr HaChaim also leaves us with the following profound insight, which the author bases upon a passage in the sourcebook of the Kabbalah, the *Zohar*:

"Animals do not change their nature. They are not 'walkers.' But humans are 'walkers.' We are always changing our habits, 'walking away' from base conduct to noble conduct, and from lower levels of behavior to higher ones. 'Walking,' progressing, is our very essence. 'Walking' distinguishes us from the rest of God's creatures."

The phrase "to walk" is thus a powerful metaphor for who we are. No wonder, then, that this final portion of the *Book of Leviticus* begins with such a choice of words. All of life is a journey, and despite our intentions, we somehow arrive at *Bechukotai*, "My laws," so that we end our journey through this third book of the Bible with these words:

"These are the commandments that the Lord gave Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai." ■

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