



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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Tamim: Perfection or Naïveté?

I begin this column with two distinct goals in mind. On the one hand, I want to familiarize you with the complexity of a brief verse in this week's Torah portion, *Shoftim* (Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9).

On the other hand, my second goal is to introduce you to the use a rabbi made of this verse in a sermon to his Brooklyn congregation long ago.

I refer to chapter 18, verse 13, a mere five words long in Hebrew: *Tamim tihyeh im HaShem Elokecha*. How to translate this significant teaching, particularly the word *tamim*, has tantalized experts throughout the ages and across the spectrum of Bible readers. Here are some sample translations:

First, two Jewish samples: one reads, "You must be wholehearted with the Lord your God." Another reads, "You must be wholly loyal to the Lord your God."

A standard but non-Jewish translation renders it, "You shall be blameless before the Lord

your God".

My preferred translation, although admittedly not perfect, is that of Rabbi J.H. Hertz, a former Chief Rabbi of the British Empire: "Thou shalt be whole-hearted with the Lord your God." But at the

His translation differs slightly from the first Jewish sample quoted above. Note especially that besides the use of the archaic "Thou shalt" and the hyphen in "whole-hearted", Rabbi Hertz correctly insists upon "**with** the Lord" rather than "**to** the Lord", indicating companionship *with* the Lord rather than subservience *to* Him.

Rabbi Hertz provides us an additional benefit. He includes in his notes the comments of Rashi on this verse: "Walk **with** him whole-heartedly and hope in Him. Pry not into the veiled future but accept whatever befalls you. Then you will be His people and His portion."

There is a subtle, but fundamental, difference between the translations just presented and Rashi's conception of the meaning of the verse. The issue at hand is the meaning of the word *tamim*, a word which has had a colorful history.

In modern Hebrew usage, the words *tam* or *tamim* or *temimut* imply simplemindedness, innocence bordering upon ignorance, or perhaps naïveté. One well known example of this usage is the third son, the *tam*, in the Passover *Haggadah* who comes across as a simpleton who can only utter, "*Mah zot?*", "What's going on?"

Another example is the term used by the

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Simcha ז"ל

המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים

Talmud to describe an ox that's been deemed harmless. It is therefore labeled a *tam*, a naïvely innocent creature.

Many assert that Rashi is defining *tamim* in this sense. He wisely locates our verse in its context in the preceding verses, 9-12. There we find strict prohibitions against following heathen superstitions, black magic, fortune telling, and the conviction that the stars irrevocably determine our destiny.

Rather, as Rashi puts it, "we must trust in Him and not inquire of soothsayers about what our future holds in store. We must accept *b'temimut*, with simplicity and confidence, **'with** the Lord', **with** Him and attached to Him." There is a sense of naïveté, a stance of stubborn refusal to submit to the dark forecasts and fatalistic predictions expounded by pagan cultures. "*Ma zot?*", "What gives with all this nonsense?" asks the *tam*!

The translations that I quoted earlier understand *tam* and *tamim* very differently. They base their translations upon the repeated usage of those terms in the Bible. Noah is described (Genesis 6:9) as a *tamim*; Abraham (Genesis 17:1) is asked to be *tamim*; Jacob in his youth (Genesis 25-27) is an *ish tam*, a mature *tam*; and Job (Job 1:1), is given the title *tam v'yashar*, a sincere *tam*.

Professor Nechama Leibowitz describes the link between these different heroes of the Bible as a *gesher*, a bridge, between them, a common denominator. Ramban is one of the early leaders of the chorus of commentators who therefore define *tam* or *tamim* in accordance with the Aramaic translation of Onkelos, who uses the term *shalem*, complete, total commitment. If I had to render the verse in English in accordance with this approach, I would suggest, "Walk in *complete devotion* **with** the Lord your God".

So far I have outlined my first goal, to convey

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the subtle complexity of the verse and the definition of *tamim*.

Now, on to my second goal.

For this, I must introduce you to an important American rabbinic figure of the mid-twentieth century, Rabbi Nisan Telushkin. He began his rabbinic career in communist Russia. His heroic leadership during that period are topics

**May the Torah learned
from this issue of Torah Tidbits
be לע"נ my father**

**משה בן צבי ז"ל
Moshe Goldstein ז"ל
on his 33rd yahrzeit, 3 Elul**

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Grandsons, great-grandchildren
and great-great-grandchildren**

I reserve for another opportunity. Fortunately, he escaped Russia and came to America. He assumed a pulpit there, in Brooklyn, and soon faced new and different challenges which he met with spiritual fervor and creative skill.

His congregation consisted of Jews who had arrived in the United States as refugees early in the twentieth century. Their Jewish awareness rapidly eroded as they struggled to cope with a new cultural and economic environment.

During my yeshiva years, I was personally privileged to benefit from his tutelage and halachic writings. His masterpiece, entitled *Taharat Mayim*, remains a practical handbook for the construction of *mikvaot*, ritual baths. I knew him as a devout *chasid*, and erudite traditional Talmudic scholar of the first rank. I proudly received *semicha* from him.

Much later, I came across a three-volume collection of his synagogue sermons. It is entitled *HaTorah V'HaOlam* ("Torah and the World"). It was published in 1958, and I discovered it only after I began my own rabbinic career. I continue to cherish it as a model of sermons to inspire an audience with limited Jewish education and Jewish observance. Please recognize that these sermons were delivered in the years prior to the Holocaust, during the Holocaust, and just subsequent to the Holocaust. Orthodox Judaism then was very different from what it is now.

He was able to draw upon the verse we have been discussing and the comments of Rashi on that verse. His homiletic interpretation of those texts markedly differs from the previous discussion. He presents the verse as if it was a message to his audience not to feel inadequate because they were religiously ignorant or insufficiently observant. *Tamim tihyeh* meant "be simple, do your best, be sincere with the little knowledge you have and with the limited

degree of observance of which you are capable." These words of reassurance and encouragement struck home. They remain relevant for those who are imperfect religiously but wish to participate in synagogue life.

For those who are skeptical of this daring homiletic display, Rabbi Telushkin validates it with an array of sources from Psalms, the Talmud and Midrash, and from Kabbalah.

One example is the Psalm 26:1: "Lord, vindicate me for I have walked *b'tumi* (the same root as *tamim*) in all innocence..." The Midrash known as *Sifre* remarks, "He who is a *tam* ranks with King David."

Another example is the statement of Rava in Tractate *Avodah Zara* 19: "A person should always study Torah, even if he will forget it all, and even if he does not understand a word he studied..."

Another statement is by Rabbi Akiva in *Mishnayot Eduyot* 5:6: "Better to be taunted by others as a dunce than to be considered an outlaw by the Lord."

And so forth. A brave man, this Rabbi Telushkin, but one who reached the hearts and souls of his congregants and kept them close to Torah and engaged in good deeds. This approach permeates all three volumes of his remarkable attempt to meet the needs of his people given their circumstances and the times they lived in. ■

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