

When he hears the statement of this oath/curse, he will imagine self-blessings, saying, “Peace will be my lot when I shall follow what my thoughts envision, so that the quenched may be added to the thirsty.” (29:18)

The *pasuk* addresses the observant Jew who does not believe that Torah study is an absolute requirement. *Horav Shimon Schwab, zl*, observes that, throughout *Tanach*, thirst is a metaphor for the Jew's desire to learn Torah. Torah is compared to water. The *Navi Yeshayah* (55:1) declares, *Hoi kol tzamei la'mayim*; “Ho, everyone who is thirsty, go to water.” *Chazal* comment, “Water is always a symbol for Torah.”

Having said this, we understand the *pasuk* to be intimating that Hashem will not forgive the fellow who is fully satiated (*ravah*) with his *frumkeit*, *mitzvah* observance, considering himself devout and righteous, reasoning that *b'shrirus leebee eilech*, “I will follow what my thoughts envision.” Sadly, some still believe that constant Torah study is not an absolute requisite of Judaism. These individuals who rely on their *mitzvah* observance – even if it is meticulous --- but ignore the obligation to study Torah whenever possible, are committing an egregious and unpardonable sin.

Our Torah is not just a book of laws. Without Torah, ours is no different than any other religion. They have precepts and rituals – so do we. They, however, have no Torah. Hashem speaks to us through Torah whenever we open a *sefer* and learn. The Torah symbolizes Hashem's relationship with us – His People. No one else, no other religion can make such a claim. Hashem gave **us** the Torah, because he wanted to have His relationship only with us.

In his “Selected Speeches,” *Rav Schwab* cites the well-known *tefillah* composed by *Rav Nechunyah ben Hakanah* which was originally meant to be recited nightly upon leaving the *bais ha'medrash*, but which is instead recited now at the *siyum*, completion of a *meseches*, tractate, of *Talmud*. In this *tefillah* we thank Hashem for allotting our portion to be among the *yoshvei bais hamedrash* and not among the *yoshvei kranos*, those who idle away their time sitting in the corners. *Rashi* explains *yoshvei kranos* as *amei ha'aretz ha'oskim b'sichah*, ignorant people who just converse a lot.

Rav Nechunyah ben Hakanah seems to divide all mankind into two camps: *yoshvei bais ha'medrash* and *yoshvei kranos*. In other words, those who love to learn and to whom Torah study is for them the elixir of life, and those who do not make learning a priority. The *Rav* cites the *Ramban*, who defines *am ha'aretz* as one *she'sonei chochmah*, who hates to learn Torah. On the other hand, he who loves to learn, but, for some reason is unable to, is still considered *m'yoshvei bais ha'medrash*. His identity is *yoshvei bais ha'medrash*. He is included in that august group devoted to Torah learning, whose love of Hashem transcends all else. He may not personally make it to the *bais ha'medrash*, but he sees to it that his children are regular fixtures there, and he

supports those who learn.

On the other hand, says, *Rav Schwab*, there is the world of *Doeg* and *Achitofel*, who are proficient in the entire Torah, yet were such *reshaim*, wicked men, that their lives were cut short. Can we call such contemptible men *yoshvei kranos*? In order to know Torah, they must have spent much time mastering it. Clearly, they attended the *bais ha'medrash*. The *Rav* explains that their Torah study and knowledge was merely superficial – *min ha'safah u'le'chutz*, from their lips outward. True, they went through *shas*, but *shas* did not go through them!

Perhaps we might ratchet this idea up one more notch. Concerning the *pasuk* in *Bereishis* which records the passing of Sarah *Imeinu* (23:1), the *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* notes the true term, *chayei Sarah*, "Sarah's life," as opposed to writing, "The days (or years) of Sarah's life were..." The Torah alludes to an important principle. "The righteous give life to their days. By serving Hashem and investing each day with spirituality, they make their days come alive. *Reshaim*, the wicked, however, their days give them life. Their existence is purely physical, by virtue of the lifespan allotted for them." How do *tzadikim* give life to their days? When they study Torah to the point that they become one with the Torah, they inject spiritual vitality and life into their days.

The *Chazon Ish* writes (*Iggros* 13): "One who merits to acquire *yedios*, knowledge, of Torah, walks among men and (for all intents and purposes) appears to be the same as they are. Veritably, he is an angel who lives among men; his life is one of (spiritual) nobility." Such a person is different; everything about him, his entire demeanor is altered through his devotion to the Torah.

The *menahel*, principal, of a certain school wanted to have one of his students admitted to the famed *Ponovezh Yeshivah*. The *Ponovezher Rav*, *zl*, refused to accept him (for his own reasons). As much as the *menahel* tried to convince the *Rav* to reconsider, it was not happening. This boy would not be attending *Ponovezh*. End of story, until... the family asked *Rav Chaim Kanievsky*, *zl*, to intercede on their behalf. *Rav Chaim* was all of thirty-five years old at the time. He went to the *Ponovezher Rav* and asked him to accept the boy in his *yeshivah*. He was immediately accepted! A number of students (and the *menahel*) asked the *Rav* what had precipitated the change of mind. He replied, "What could I do? The 'Torah itself' asked me to accept the boy. How could I refuse?"

This is how we should view a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, who is wholly devoted to Torah study: one with the Torah. He is transformed into a different entity. I write this during the week of *shivah* for the *Sar HaTorah*, *Horav Chaim Kanievsky*, an individual whose entire life was devoted to Torah study. Nothing else mattered, because nothing else existed. His life was one of *chovos*, debts, obligations, to studying every aspect and nuance of Torah. These *chovos* weighed heavily on his mind. One is astonished at his *sefer ha'yom*, the order of his day. Every minute was accounted for; every minute was dedicated to learning, and covering various aspects of Torah. There are so many stories which relate and describe his total dedication to the Torah. I selected one of many because it captures not only his devotion, but also that of his *Rebbetzin*.

Rav Chaim asked the *Rebbetzin* that whenever she left the apartment, she should lock the door. Many people sought his audience and it disturbed his learning. This was why a specific time was allotted for *Kabbolas Ha'Khal*, when he would listen, speak and offer blessings to those who came to see him. One time, the *Rebbetzin* forgot to lock the door. *Rav* Chaim noticed that it was unlocked, so he locked it. The *Rebbetzin* returned home and saw that the door was locked. Since she had not locked it originally, she did not have a key to open the door.

It was a sweltering, hot day in Bnei Brak. The *Rebbetzin* began to knock, hoping that her husband would hear and let her in. Twenty minutes of knocking and calling passed until finally *Rav* Chaim opened the door and said, "The *Rebbetzin* is not home," and promptly closed the door! The *Rebbetzin* immediately called out, "Chaim, it's me!"

The story was publicized. When one of his aides showed him the written version of the story, *Rav* Chaim wept. "I do not remember the incident, but it is possible that it happened," he said. What occupied *Rav* Chaim that could divert his attention from everything? In another incident, one of *Rav* Chaim's neighbors, himself an outstanding *talmid chacham*, observed that *Rav* Chaim was just not himself. He appeared distressed and frustrated. Obviously, such feelings can take a toll on a person's health. The neighbor asked the *Rebbetzin* what was bothering *Rav* Chaim; how could he alleviate some of his distress? The *Rebbetzin* replied, "My dear *Rav*... two weeks have passed that *Rav* Chaim has been troubled by a question that he has on the *Rambam*, *Hilchos Meilah*. If you can give him an answer, all will be *b'seder*."