

אַרְח וּדְרֵךְ

In the Zohar, Parashat Vayakhel (Shemot), Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai drashes two psukim from Mishlei. The first, 4:18, opens וְאַרְחַ צְדִיקִים כְּאוֹר נֶגַה - The path of tsadikim is as shining light. The next verse, 4:19, opens דֶּרֶךְ רָשָׁעִים כְּאֶפְלָה - the way of the wicked is as darkness.

Rashbi understands these two psukim as juxtaposing the concepts אַרְח or path and דֶּרֶךְ or way. אַרְח and דֶּרֶךְ. A דֶּרֶךְ is a way of the many. In terms of Torah learning, a דֶּרֶךְ is something well known and familiar to all who live a Torah life, like the simple meaning of the Chumash or a basic halacha. A דֶּרֶךְ isn't bad, but since its open to anybody in the public sphere, it can be used wrongly. Thus the pasuk says דֶּרֶךְ רָשָׁעִים כְּאֶפְלָה, the way of the wicked is as darkness. While it can be good, it can also be bad.

An אַרְח as in אַרְחַ צְדִיקִים, the path of the righteous, is different. An אַרְח is always new, its never been walked before. In terms of Torah learning, an אַרְח is a chiddush, and innovation, an insight into the meanings underlining the simple meaning of the Chumash or a basic halacha. The אַרְח is always new because such an insight into the Torah is always also an insight into oneself. Only when one's soul is, as it were, open may one find oneself walking along an אַרְח. An אַרְח is in a sense a state where one's self is saturated with Torah so that the Torah is revealed through one's particular identity.

Rashbi stresses that there can be an אַרְח in the middle of a דֶּרֶךְ. This is because the Torah may reveal a new meaning to a talmid who approaches her with an open soul even regarding a pasuk that every child knows. If the lover of Torah is open and sensitive, any דֶּרֶךְ can also be an אַרְח.

And when an אֶרַח is revealed, so too is another meaning of the word אֶרַח: אֹרַח – a guest or visitor. And the visitor is of course the Shechinah, the presence of Hashem. In the new meanings of Torah revealed to the receiving soul the presence of the Shechinah is felt.

Melila Helner-Eshed brings this drasha by Rashbi as a paradigm for how the Zohar approaches Torah. But I think it is also very much a paradigm for what it means to learn Torah here at the Yeshivah, also.

At the Yeshivah we all start learning the דֶּרֶךְ, the way of the many. You can't skip straight to the אֶרַח, the original and personal insight. First you need to learn the common ways.

There's something a bit paradoxical about the necessity of walking down the דֶּרֶךְ before being able to access the אֶרַח. That's because sometimes learning the דֶּרֶךְ is a real challenge precisely because it means a partial surrender of one's own individuality. In order to receive the Torah, the talmid must partially surrender his or herself to Torah. This means struggling with ancient languages and world-views. It can mean hard work and self denial. But first and foremost it means opening one's identity itself, allowing for the possibility that Talmud Torah will transform who I am and what my values are. I imagine that everybody who spent a year at the Yeshiva has tasted a bit of this experience.

But it is just this partial surrender, just this opening up, which opens up the Torah herself. That's the meaning of what Rashbi said about the אֶרַח. When the soul of the learner is ready to receive the Torah, so too the Torah is ready to receive the soul of the learner. That's why it's the open soul, the partially surrendered identity, which is granted access to the אֶרַח, to the never before treaded path that reveals what Torah has to say individually to you.

Lastly, Rashbi said that on this path, this אֶרֶץ, waits an אֹרֶחַ, a visitor, the Shechinah. The Shechinah is not the transcendent aspect of Hashem that the Rambam focuses on, but rather the immanent and intimate aspect of Hashem dwelling in each generation of Israel. Since the Shechinah dwells within us, Her image is partially our own. But She reflects back to us not simply who we are, but who we might be. The image of the Shechinah is what we might look like if we were truly transformed by Torah. Since the אֶרֶץ is the place held by one who *opens oneself to the transformative power of Torah*, and thus it is there where the אֹרֶחַ, the Shechinah, *reveals Her face*.

By Shaiya Rothberg

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