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תשפ״ו

The difference between חזק and הדרן עליך

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Why is it that when we finish a ספר (*book*) of תורה שבכתב (*the Written Torah*), we say חזק חזק ונתחזק, but when we finish a מסכת (*tractate*) of תורה שבעל פה (*the Oral Torah*), we say הדרן עליך והדרך עלן?

If both are celebrations of completion, why don't they sound anything alike?

I think the answer is that they are not really marking the same kind of completion.

A ספר is a very concrete thing. Even the language points in that direction. ספר, מספר (*number*), סופר (*scribe*). It is the world of exactness, of things that can be counted, checked, bounded. A Sefer Torah is not only holy because of what it says. It is holy in its form. Every letter matters. Every word matters. תורה שבכתב comes to us as something fixed. Infinite in depth, yes, but exact in form.

And that already tells you something important. תורה שבכתב belongs first to the ציבור (*community*). It stands before כלל ישראל (*the Jewish people*) as a public inheritance. It is read publicly, heard publicly, encountered publicly. Of course there is also שנים מקרא ואחד תרגום (*twice the Scripture and once the translation*), so the individual also has his own obligation. But that seems to run alongside the communal reading, almost like a private experience of the public encounter.

That is why חזק חזק ונתחזק makes sense.

That is the language of strength. We finished a bounded unit of revelation, and now we need כח (*power*) to remain attached to it. The Torah stands there in its permanence and exactness. We need to incorporate the strength we garnered.

But תורה שבעל פה is different.

Its natural category is not really ספר but סדר (*order*). A סדר is not a thing with fixed edges in the same way. It is an arrangement, a movement, a sequence; it's more alive. This *sugya* opening into the next *sugya*. This משנה only becoming itself once it sits next to another one. תורה שבעל פה lives through order, memory, transmission, and מסורה that links a רבי to his תלמיד.

And because of that, it falls on the יחיד (*individual*) differently. If I do not learn it, review it, struggle with it, and come back to it, then for me it is gone. תורה שבעל פה only really becomes mine through personal acquisition.

That is why when I finish a מסכת, I do not say חזק. I say הדרן עליך.

I will return to you.

That is not just a nice line. That is the whole point. A מסכת is not something I finish and put away. The completion itself creates a new obligation. Now I have to go back.

And I think הדרן means even more than that. It is not only the language of return. It leans into the language of הדר, of הוד והדר (*splendor and majesty*). That feels exactly right for תורה שבעל פה. The beauty of תורה שבעל פה is not just that you got through it once. Its beauty comes out in the return. The first time through, you understand something. The second time, you begin to see its shape. Then something deeper emerges.

And then והדרך עלן adds something deeper still. It returns to me, too. My learning leaves a mark. My questions, my struggles, my חידושים (*novel insights*) become part of the way this מסכת now lives in me. Not that I change the Torah, חס ושלום, but that תורה שבעל פה becomes clothed in the mind and soul of the learner in a way that תורה שבכתב does not.

There are a few ways of illustrating this same distinction.

One way is ספר and סדר.

A ספר is bounded. A סדר is ordered.

A ספר is a thing. A סדר is a movement.

Another way is מידת הדין (*the attribute of exactness / defined measure*) and חסד (*kindness / expansive devotion*). A ספר belongs to the world of form, boundary, precision. A סדר belongs more to the world of unfolding continuity, of one thing opening into another.

Another way is זכר (*male*) and נקיבה (*female*). Not as a sociological statement, חס ושלום, and not as though these categories all collapse into each other. They do not. They are different vantage points. But they point toward the same concept. זכר is the mode of defined outward presence, something that wants to give. נקיבה is the mode of inward reception and development; as a mother gestates a baby in her womb, the נקיבה nurtures, nourishes, and strengthens the life within. A ספר has something more זכרי about it. A סדר has something more נקיבי about it.

And that is not a contradiction. A ספר can be associated with דין from one angle and with זכר from another. Those are not the same category. They are just different ways of looking at the same reality. These are not equations. They are converging lines.

I think the same is true with נצח and הוד.

תורה שבכתב leans toward נצח (*endurance / victorious persistence*). It stands. It remains. That is why משה, who is the giver of תורה שבכתב, belongs here. Through him, Torah enters the world in enduring form.

תורה שבעל פה leans more toward הוד (*splendor / yielded acknowledgment*). Its beauty comes out through reception, response, and return. It does not remain alive by standing unchanged outside of me. It remains alive by being taken in and worked through.

And that is why הדרן matters so much. It is the language of return, but it is also from the world of הוד והדר. The מסכת has a kind of beauty that is not exhausted by finishing it once. Its beauty actually emerges through coming back.

There is maybe another way to feel this. There is an idea said over in the name of the רמב״ן that after שבת we need בשמים (*spices*) because something is lost, but after יום טוב (*festival*) we do not have that need, because the נשמה יתירה (*additional soul*) does not depart in the same fashion. If so,

the comparison may actually be reversed from what one first thinks. הדרן sounds more like מוצאי שבת. I finished the מסכת. I am no longer inside it in the same way. Something has receded, and now I answer that loss by saying: I will return to you. חזק, by contrast, sounds more like an articulation of what has been taken in and can now be carried forward. Not the language of loss, but of strength.

So maybe that is the difference.

By תורה שבכתב, the question is whether we have incorporated the strength we received from it into our lives.

By תורה שבעל פה, the question is whether we will return to what we have now taken into ourselves. As תורה שבעל פה is owned by man, we determine it, we bring it into existence, and we ultimately decide on the הלכה.

That is why the formulas sound so different.

חזק חזק ונתחזק is the language of carrying fixed revelation.

הדרן עליך והדרך עלן is the language of personal return, of beauty discovered in reentry, of Torah that now lives in me and therefore demands that I go back.

And maybe that is not only an explanation. Maybe it is also מוסר (*ethical teaching*).

Because תורה שבעל פה is not something we get credit for once we "finish" it. If we do not return to it, it is lost. Maybe not lost from the world. But lost from us.

And that is not just a nice thought. חז״ל in Pirkei Avos 3:8 speak very sharply about forgetting one's learning through neglect, and the Rambam writes in הלכות תלמוד תורה א:י that a person is obligated to learn until the day he dies, adding: "וכל זמן שלא יעסוק בלימוד הוא שוכח."

That means הדרן עליך is more than a beautiful line. It is almost an obligation. I will return to you, because I am not allowed to let this תורה simply drift away from me.

A מסכת only becomes mine if I go back to it, if I give myself over to it, if I let it shape me enough that my own questions, my own effort, and my own חידושים become part of the way it now lives in me.

That is part of our עבודה (*service*). Not only to learn, but to be מהדר in our return. To go back again. To leave our imprint on the מסכת. To have our own קנין התורה (*acquisition of Torah*). Not because we are trying to impose ourselves on תורה, חס ושלום, but because תורה שבעל פה is only fully alive when it is received deeply enough to become personal.

Maybe that is the real meaning of הדרן עליך והדרך עלן. Not just that I will come back to the מסכת, but that I am willing to belong to it enough that it comes back with me, too.

If we learn that way, if each of us returns that way, if each of us gives ourselves over to תורה until it becomes our own true קנין, then together we are not only completing מסכתות. We are building the living תורה of ישראל.

And in that זכות (*merit*), may we be זוכה together to bring משיח (*the Messiah*) במהרה בימינו (*speedily in our days*).

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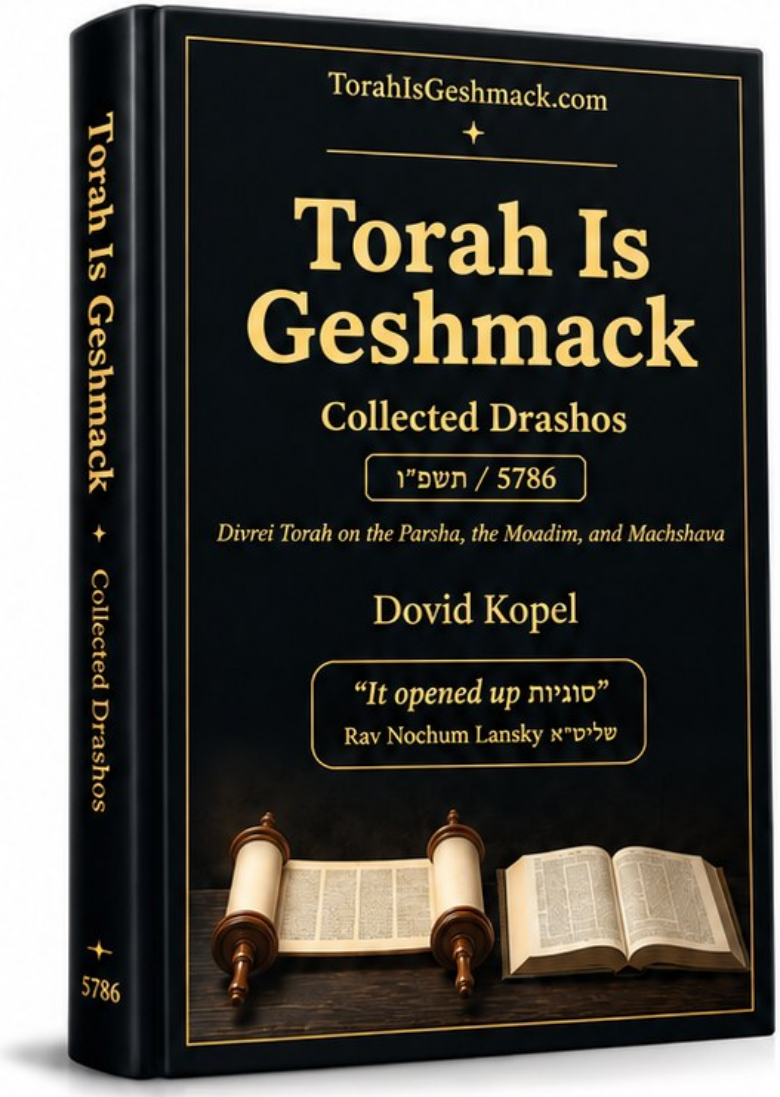
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