



Does it make sense to work hard? There is a certain logic in relaxing, coasting, and procrastinating. A biological argument can be made in favor of conserving physical energy. There is also a degree of inertia assisting us to remain in a restful state without having to exert ourselves. This is particularly so when there is no immediate benefit to leaving the state of comfort. Why put in effort when we could just take it easy?

Dr. Angela Duckworth, a psychologist from the University of Pennsylvania, defines grit “as perseverance and passion for long-term goals.” It entails “working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress.” From a certain perspective, being gritty doesn’t make sense. Why would someone work strenuously towards a goal and invest so much effort into doing something even though it is so difficult? If things are hard and a person doesn’t see immediate success, it is natural and perhaps even smart, for someone to give up and move on to something else.

Parshat Bechukotai delineates rewards and punishments related to the service of G-d. Rewards in the form of rain, sustenance, security, and the resting of the Divine Presence can be attained by following G-d’s laws (*bechukotai teileichu*), protecting his commandments (*mitzvotai tishmoru*), and performing them (*ve-asitem otam*). At first glance, the *pasuk* seems redundant. The same broad message (follow G-d’s commandments) is stated in three synonymous ways. However, with the assumption that the Torah does not repeat itself for the sake of poetic embellishments, the *Sifra*, quoted by Rashi, assumes that each of these three components allude to different aspects of following *mitzvot*. Following G-d’s laws (*bechukotai teileichu*) cannot just mean doing the *mitzvot*, because that is explicit in the last part of the *pasuk* – “and perform them” (*ve-asitem otam*). Rather, following G-d’s laws (*bechukotai teileichu*) is an allusion to the concept of toiling in the learning of Torah (*teheyu ameilim ba-Torah*).

Later commentators present many questions and interpretations to try and understand the depth of this *Midrash*. In fact, the Ohr HaChaim presents forty-two different explanations of these few words. For the present discussion, one question stands out. In many contexts the word *bechukotai* references the category of *mitzvot* that don't seem to make any sense. The *mitzvah* of *Parah Adumah* (*Bemidbar* 19) is the quintessential *chok*. We don't grasp its meaning or significance, yet we follow it anyway because it is the word of G-d. If we understand *bechukotai* here as a *mitzvah* that doesn't have a rational basis and that it is referring to laboring in the study of Torah, the question becomes - does it not make sense to work hard while learning?

Viewed from a short-term perspective, toiling in Torah is a *chok*. It doesn't make sense to invest so much cognitive energy into something that is so difficult and whose positive results may not be immediately apparent. If I force myself to focus after a long day of exhausting work, I may not see the blessings which G-d promises right away. The rain may not fall as I open the book, I may not feel secure from my enemies as I start reading, and I may not even feel the Divine Presence as I turn page after page. Even more frustrating, I may not even see success in my learning! It makes sense to stop. It makes sense to give up. It makes sense to go to sleep. But we learn anyway, because it is a *chok*.

And even though it doesn't make sense in the short-term, there is a long-term reward. Dr. Duckworth's research demonstrates that people who are gritty tend to be more successful at academic and professional accomplishments over time. As a consequence, she suggests that schools invest resources into teaching children how to be grittier. As is apparent from this *Midrash*, grittiness has been essential to Torah education for millennia. We push, we toil, and we labor even when it doesn't make sense and we trust in the long-term reward that G-d promises us if we follow this essential *chok*.

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