

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



KI TAVO

Look at Me!

Nu? What's your HASHKAFA? That question is a request for someone to reveal their world view or philosophy of life, politics or religion. The term HASHKAFA for Weltanshaung became popular in Jewish writing during the period of the HASKALA, the so called 'enlightenment' (1770-1880). Today, I think it's used mostly in religious circles to define ourselves or the 'other'. But it really comes from the word HASHKIFA ('look down', reminiscent of Les Mis) in this week's Torah reading (D'varim 26:15), where it is an appeal to God: Look down from Your heavenly abode.

Normally, our attitude about God's looking at us is akin to that of Nathan Lane ('Don't look at me. I'm hideous', and, later, Seinfeld's Kramer). Generally, we're afraid that close scrutiny will reveal our spiritual shortcomings. Indeed, other Biblical uses of the term are negative, and scary. Sisera's mother NISHKAFA ('looks down') from her latticed window expecting her famous son who never appears (Shoftim 5:28), and Yirmiyahu warns: Disaster looks down (NISHKAFA, perhaps 'looms') from the North (6:1).

The first use of the term is when the Angels who had visited Avraham went on their way to S'dom. From the Judean Hills, where Avraham lived, towards S'dom and the Dead Sea is a steep downward journey. As they set out on their descent the verse says, 'The men set off and looked down (VAYASHKIFU) toward S'dom (B'reishit 18:16), and we know that they planned no pleasantries for S'dom.

This root also has a place in Hebrew architecture. When in Sefer Sh'mot (12:7), our ancestors were told to place the blood of the KORBAN PESACH on their doorways, they are told: And take from the blood and place it on the two posts (MEZUZOT) and the lintel (MASHKOF) of the house in which they are to eat it (KORBAN PESACH).

The commentaries explain the MASHKOF in two ways:

1. The beam over the door which looks over the dwelling, and
2. The beam that gets smacked when the door closes. These are the two ideas generally assumed to be contained in the root HASHKEF:

1. A scenic overview, and
2. A thumping.

So, why do we implore God to look down upon us and bless us. Aren't we afraid God will look us over and

decide to wallop us? Remember, later in this parsha we have the TOCHACHA, 52 verses of truly horrendous punishments. Maybe God should inspect someone else.

Rashi jumps in immediately with the most famous approach to this conundrum: Wherever the HIF'IL form of SHIN-KUF-PEI occurs in the Scriptures, it denotes taking notice for the purpose of bringing evil, except here (D'varim 26:15), for so great is the power of giving to the poor that it changes God's anger into mercy.

In other words, our context softens God's glare. Our verse appears at the end of the ceremony for giving the MA'ASER (tithe) to the needy. We're like the child who finally knows how to ride a bike or throw a curveball, and calls to a proud parent: Mom, Dad - look at this!

Cool! The Netziv adds: In this case, the word is used to show how great is the strength of people who take MA'ASROT that they can turn negative into positive, which would be lost if the verse used the word HIBITU (an ordinary term for 'look').

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch adds: HASHKIFA means to turn Your sight which examines downwards concerning our deeds. Therefore, our Sages say: Come and see the power of performing a Mitzva, that every

HASHKAFA in the Torah refers to curse, but this instance is an expression of blessing! This is different from the normal ideal of the Jewish life; here we sanctify the life of the senses (pleasure). All spirituality is based upon the question: Can a person within his pleasures be able to stand before God, and His Sanctuary... We find that essentially one's pleasure should come from ethical behavior and the sanctification of Divine service. When one sanctifies even his sensual activities one becomes a vehicle (MERKAVA) for the Spirit of God. Only when a Jew reaches this level is he able to draw upon the Truth from the well of pure spirit embodied in the Torah!

All of this is indeed wonderful! So wonderful, in fact, that this idea has been incorporated into the central prayer of Rosh HaShana davening. During our longest silent devotion (AMIDA) of the year, namely Rosh HaShana Musaf, our Sages have built in three parts: MALCHIYOT (God's Kingship), ZICHRONOT (God's perfect memory and record of our behavior), and SHOFAROT (God's remarkable appearances in history, especially the ones still to come).

In that middle section, we begin with trepidation over the reality that: Under Your gaze all hidden things are revealed and the multitude of

mysteries since the beginning of Creation, for there is no forgetfulness before Your Throne of Honor, and nothing is hidden from Your eyes.

But at the end, we're all: Hey, look me over! We say: Let the image of the AKEIDA be present before You, and Blessed are You, HaShem, Who remembers the Covenant!

Standing in shul together and praying for God's bounty, compassion and love, we remember, too. And what do we remember? The Patriarchs were great, and God loved them. As their children and heirs, God loves us, too. A pretty good idea to keep in mind over the High Holidays.

Just one last idea to remember during this difficult period for our beloved Medina. Rav Soloveitchik gave a fascinating take on HASHKIFA. He described Jewish history as a ZIG-ZAG pattern: First Avraham had no son, then God gives him a son, and then asks for the son back. And Moshe is given the Tablets, then breaks the Tablets, then reproduces the Tablets, and finally survives another 40 days of uncertainty and suffering at the top of the Mountain. The term HASHKIFA describes the ZIG-ZAG!

God, since October 7th, we've experienced a lot of ZIG. Isn't it time for some ZAG? God, please, look at us! 