CHAPTER 3 - PART 2

by Rabbi David Sykes

Earlier, there was mention of the statement of the Rabbis that David requested of God that the saying of Tehillim be considered by Him like the study of the laws of leprosy and overhangs. And we find in the Gemara that, when Rabbi Akiva expounded words of Aggada (Torah subjects other than Jewish law), Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said to him, "What are you doing near Aggada? Go to the laws of leprosy and overhangs (Chagigah, 14). And the explanation of his words is that Rabbi Akiva, the great scholar of the Mishnah, does not need to involve himself with the study of Aggadah, which does not befit his great ability, and it is better that he involve himself with "leprosy and overhangs", which are difficult and complicated topics that no one else could learn as he could. However, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah also had a deeper intention in his words. As is known, the Rabbis said that anyone who studies the law of a burnt offering is considered as if he sacrificed a burnt offering. This means that, even after the Temple is destroyed and we are no longer able to physically fulfill the commandment to bring sacrifices, it is still possible to fulfill it by studying about it, and it is considered as if we have actually brought the sacrifice. Along these lines, it is possible to say that when a person studies any subject in the Torah, it is as if it has been fulfilled through him. And it is only in this way, through study, that it is possible for every Jew to fulfill the 613 commandments, because, otherwise, there are many commandments that would be impossible to fulfill, such as commandments that pertain only to a Cohen, or the commandments of levirate marriage and Chalizah. It thus emerges that the study of every subject in the Torah results in it being as if the matter studied was fulfilled by us. Further, if illness or trouble is decreed on a person, God forbid, then, through his learning of Torah, particularly a subject close to that trouble, he will certainly merit to prevent the decree from reaching him, and to be saved. "Leprosy and overhangs" are not only difficult Talmudic topics; these laws become relevant mainly when troubles visit a person. Leprosy is a punishment for sins, and the leprous person, or house, or garment, is isolated and locked up; this is nothing other than trouble. Similarly, laws of overhangs involve the ritual impurity contracted by a person who is under the same overhang as a human corpse, God forbid; there is no greater trouble than this. The study of Torah is the remedy and salvation for all troubles, pains, and illnesses. That is why Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said to Rabbi Akiva, "What are you doing near Aggada? Go to the laws of leprosy and overhangs," the difficult topics that not everyone can study, and, through the redemptive merit of your studying them, you will be able to shield and save the entire generation from those illnesses and troubles. Indeed, David, King of Israel, saw that days would come in which the forgetting of Torah would spread, and the shield of Torah, of "leprosy and overhangs", would not stand for Israel, because of the difficulty of its study. He therefore requested of God that the saying

of Tehillim be considered before God like the study of leprosy and overhangs, that it too would bring "healing in its wings" for all those unfortunates who are in trouble, for all those who cry out "Woe," the "Woe" of the prophet Isaiah, the "Woe" of the heart that is overflowing and is sometimes poured out in tears onto the pages of this holy book.

The support that the Book of Tehillim gave to the Jew is expressed in an additional way. This book gave the Jew a feeling of closeness to God and the courage to speak before Him words that only someone who is indeed so close to God, blessed be He, is able to express. The Book of Tehillim does not only provide consolation. It does not only hear the words that come from the heart. It does not only plead in favor of the Jew who is exiled and blown like a leaf in the wind. Rather, like an excellent defense attorney, it also brings up, as it were, "claims" and "legal arguments" to the beloved and near Father, Whose Glory fills the entire earth. Other prophets, or other holy books, engender the feeling in a person that his lot is his fault, that all that comes upon him is because of his heavy sins. They teach about the commandments a person must fulfill and the prohibitions he must not transgress. They clarify with precision the details of the commandments, and then a person becomes aware of how far he is from completely fulfilling the Will of his Creator, how many sins he has intentionally and inadvertently committed, how guilty he is, and what will happen to him if he does not quickly repair what he has done. A Jew then feels in his heart that he has stumbled again, as he has stumbled in the past, and may ask himself what will befall him in the future, if already now things are not so good. In the Book of Tehillim, on the other hand, there is also a completely different note.
