

# NEPHESH HACHAIM 1:8

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

## *Nephesh Hachaim 1:8*

1.

R' Chaim offers a rather complex discussion here about the positioning of the Cherubs in the Tabernacle and Holy Temple in order to illustrate his point <sup>1</sup>. Let's follow his reasoning.

Some sages stressed the fact that the two Cherubs faced each other <sup>2</sup> while others stressed the idea that both Cherubs faced the Temple <sup>3</sup>. And others reconciled the difference by saying that the Cherubs did indeed face each other, but only when the Jewish Nation was loyal to G-d <sup>4</sup>, while they faced the Temple walls instead when the Jewish Nation wasn't loyal to Him <sup>5</sup> (see *Baba Batra* 99a).

After noting all that, R' Chaim then refers us to Rashbam's position there <sup>6</sup> that the statement to the effect that they faced each other refers to the Cherubs in Moses' Tabernacle, while the one that says that they faced the Temple instead refers to the Cherubs in Solomon's Temple. Rashbam also asserts that the Cherubs in the Tabernacle were originally configured to stand face to face, but that that configuration miraculously altered itself when the Jewish Nation became disloyal. He also argued that it could be said that they faced somewhat in both directions <sup>7</sup>.

R' Chaim then directs our attention to the comments of *Tosephot* there, who offer that the Cherubs were originally set face to face in line with the fact that the Jewish Nation was indeed loyal to G-d <sup>8</sup>. But, why then were the Cherubs in Solomon's Temple originally set at an angle rather than facing each other, R' Chaim wonders <sup>9</sup>? It's because this last point actually alludes to something else <sup>10</sup>.

2.

The point of the matter is that G-d told us to "not stray from it" (Joshua 1:70) <sup>11</sup>. But how then are we to earn a living if we're never to stop studying Torah? Based on a discussion in *Berachot* (35b), we learn that some would argue that we're indeed to never stray from it while others say that we're to earn a living <sup>12</sup>. Then we're told not to concern ourselves with earning a living since "when the Jewish Nation is loyal to G-d <sup>13</sup>, their work is done by others", while we'll be forced to provide for ourselves if we

*aren't* loyal to G-d that way<sup>14</sup>.

But how then can it be that we'd ever be allowed to earn a living? The point of the matter, R' Chaim indicates, is that if we're forced to earn a living to get by, then we're to still-and-all concentrate on Torah study while we're working<sup>15</sup>.

In any event, while that's true of the majority of people -- who have to work for a living -- those rare individuals who have been chosen by G-d to study Torah all day long may *not* earn a living and thus abandon Torah-study for however long<sup>16</sup>. R' Chaim will now tie this last theme in with the situation of the Cherubs cited above.

3.

It comes to this: one of the Cherubs represents G-d, R' Chaim points out, while the other represents the Jewish Nation. And the degree of devotion that the Jewish Nation showed G-d evidenced itself in the positioning of the Cherubs. For, moment by moment and by miraculous means, they either faced each other straight on, when the Jewish Nation was devoted to Him, or they faced away from each other (either to a certain extent or altogether) when they weren't<sup>17</sup>.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Recall that R' Chaim had discussed G-d's "shadowing" our actions in the last chapter. He'll now discuss a dramatic and physical manifestation of that in the placement and movement of the Cherubs, who represent the relationship between G-d and the Jewish Nation as we'll see, and which was also discussed in the last chapter.

Curiously enough, unlike the previous chapters and most of them to follow, R' Chaim offers *lamdanut* (subtle and close textual analysis) here, rather than enunciate his points outright. It seems that he's actually *hiding* his main point, which a writer would only do either because what he has to say is too much of a secret to state outright, or for one other esoteric reason or another. We'll expand on this in note 17 below.

<sup>2</sup> As it's said, "The Cherubs will face each other" (Exodus 25:20) and "The Cherubs faced each other" (Ibid. 37:9). Significantly, the wording in the Hebrew is that each Cherub will face its *brother*. We'll expand on the significance of this, too, below.

<sup>3</sup> Rather than each other, as it's said, "They stood ... facing the main hall" (2 Chronicles 3:13).

<sup>4</sup> And thus "faced" G-d head on. We'll expand on what "being loyal to G-d" signifies here, too, in note 17 below.

<sup>5</sup> And turned away from Him.

<sup>6</sup> R' Chaim actually directed us to *Rashi's* comments, but as is well known, Rashi's comments to *Baba Batra* ended at p. 29a and were completed by Rashbam.

<sup>7</sup> That is, at a 45 degree angle or so, facing neither the Temple itself nor the other Cherub directly.

We'd suggest then that R' Chaim's point here so far is to underscore just how varied the positioning of the Cherubs could be, depending on our deeds. And that that indicates just how far G-d's manifestation (represented by the Cherubs) could alter, thus "shadowing" our reactions to Him.

<sup>8</sup> At the time, in the Sinai Desert.

<sup>9</sup> R' Chaim is actually segueing into another point here: about the vital importance of Torah study (which will be expanded upon later, most especially in Gate Four below). We'll see later on how the two themes complement each other.

<sup>10</sup> As will be discussed in Ch. 9 below, in the days of the Tabernacle, the Jewish Nation was miraculously provided with food and drink, but that changed in the days of the Holy Temple (in ancient Israel).

What's to follow *also* isn't preceded by an out and out statement of R' Chaim's point (see end of our footnote 2 above).

<sup>11</sup> I.e., from the Torah, which is to say, from Torah-study, as R' Chaim will point out. See Rambam's *Hilchot Talmud Torah* 3:8-10.

The term "the point of the matter" which R' Chaim himself used here is puzzling, since it implies that what's to follow will explain what preceded it, which it doesn't seem to do!

But as we'll explain below, it *does* explain it, but only on the esoteric level we alluded to in note 1 above.

<sup>12</sup> And thus necessarily set Torah-study aside for a part of the day.

<sup>13</sup> By constantly studying Torah, it's implied.

<sup>14</sup> The idea of things changing depending on whether or not the Jewish Nation is loyal to G-d or not, harkens back to the discussion of the Cherubs above, of course.

We'd thus offer that R' Chaim's point here is that when we're loyal to G-d and "face Him" *in our day and age* just as in the past by engaging in Torah study He "shadows" and "faces us" too, and provides for us.

<sup>15</sup> That is, we're to work with our hands and with the minimum amount of concentration we'd need to do our work, yet we're to concentrate the better part of our minds on Torah matters.

Now, couldn't it be argued that while that was easy enough to live up to in the sort of agrarian-economy-based society that the Talmud is speaking about in which most of the work was labor-intensive and called for little concentration, but that a modern economy would seem to call for a lot more mental concentration? So, is the principle no longer applicable?

But see the Introduction to the esteemed *Chayai Adam* where R' Danzig, its author, who lived in the 19th Century, spoke of always having one Torah thought or another in mind even as he worked for some years in industry. Others can do so, too, then.

<sup>16</sup> See Rambam's *Hilchot Shmitta V'Yovel* 13:12.

R' Chaim offers a footnote of his own here which is likewise an instance of *lamdanut* (see footnote 1 above) rather than of philosophical or ethical insight like his other footnotes. It analyses the verses in the Torah and the Talmudic statements that differentiate between the needs and obligation of the masses versus those of the rare individual when it comes to Torah study.

<sup>17</sup> R' Chaim cites *Yoma* 54a, *Zohar* 3: 152b, 3:59b, and *Zohar Chadash, Teruma* 36a which all illustrate that.

We'll now try to tie in all the points we made above about R' Chaim's hidden point here. The first thing to bring to mind is a statement made by R' Chaim's son, R' Yitzchak, in the latter's introduction to *Nephesh Hachaim*.

"So humble was R' Chaim that he had no compunctions about drawing close to the poor and unlettered, he'd lecture about things that would not only speak to scholars but to those same simple individuals, and he'd somehow purposefully and unpretentiously address both in the course of his public teachings."

Now, one would have to be exceedingly subtle in his choice of words in order to be understood -- *and not misunderstood* -- by either class of listener. And therein lies our argument about what R' Chaim was saying *and not saying* in this curious chapter.

At bottom he's insinuating that *only* "those rare individuals who have been chosen by G-d to study Torah all day long" affect the Cherubs-- and by extension, the entire universe.

Because the mitzvah par excellence is Torah-study, and they alone are the ones who truly engage in it (there will prove to be an even greater narrowing down of the field enunciated in Gate Four, but now isn't the place for that).

The rest of us can certainly study Torah and indeed must, but we're restricted by the need to earn a living (the reader should note that R' Chaim speaks in the text itself as the need to work *only enough*

*to have what to eat*, which very, very few of us manage to restrict ourselves to). While our need to earn a living can be accommodated, too, it's still and all not really the best.

Thus while those in R' Chaim's audience who worked for a living were certainly encouraged to do the best they could and were reminded that they could do a lot, his more sophisticated listeners understood that it was *they alone* who were truly loyal to G-d and thus affecting the Cherubs and the course of the universe. And that they alone are truly G-d's "brother" or partner (see note 2 above).

Hence, that point wasn't expressed outright because it would have discouraged the others, and would seem to demean less than total Torah-study.

See the contemporary Chassidic counterpoint that only *Tzaddikim* (the righteous, learned or otherwise) have the ability to affect such changes. See *Me'or Ainayim*, *Yitro* and *Avodot Yisrael*, *Avot* 4:6.