

NEPHESH HACHAIM 1:9

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

1.

Following through on the discussion of the previous chapter, R' Chaim contrasts the situation of the generation that dwelt in the Sinai Desert ¹ with that of those who lived in King Solomon's time ² in terms of their need to earn a living or not ³.

He offers that those Jews who merited living in the Sinai Desert who were sustained each and every day on manna from Heaven ⁴ and whose clothing never moldered ⁵ had absolutely no need to earn a living ⁶.

They thus served G-d completely, truly, and in awe, and dwelt wholeheartedly and exclusively upon Torah study and Divine service day and night, and had to do nothing whatsoever to earn a living. They thus embodied the statement of our sages that "the Torah was given exclusively to those who ate manna" (*Michilta, Bishalach* 17).

And as a consequence, the Cherubs that functioned in their generation faced each other completely, given that the people themselves "faced" G-d all of the time, and He likewise "faced" them.

2.

Those who lived in King Solomon's time, on the other hand, needed to earn something of a living to get by.

And in fact it was R' Yishmael's position that most of us are to earn a living. After all, isn't it said in *Pirkei Avot* (2:2) that Torah study *along with a career* was the best situation, and doesn't *Pirkei Avot* describe the path to *piety* rather than just what's required (see *Bava Kama* 30a) ⁷? The one stipulation though, as was pointed out in the previous chapter, was that one is to dwell upon and study Torah while working.

And so the Cherubs in the Holy Temple there and then were turned somewhat to the side rather than facing each other, though they looked lovingly upon each other and embraced ⁸. And that was in order to indicate just how beloved the people were by G-d, given that their situation embodied

what His intentions for most of us are ⁹.

Why, though, did *both* of those Cherubs turn somewhat to the side? Shouldn't the one that represented G-d have faced forward ¹⁰?

The point of the matter as we'd said is that G-d's interconnections with the universe itself, the forces and designs behind it, and His own providence of it, all depends on the degree of the promptings of our actions. And He either favors us or not according to those actions. Thus the Cherub that represented Him turned somewhat away from the one that represented us ¹¹.

3.

And so at the time of the crossing of the Red Sea Moses was reprimanded by G-d for praying to Him to see to it that they would all cross it safely when He should have been addressing the people's own trust in G-d's promise that they would (see Exodus 14:15). G-d's point was that if they strongly believed in and trusted in the fact that He would split the sea before their eyes as they courageously approached it, that that itself would have stimulated things in the heavens above to have the sea split miraculously ¹².

For something else miraculous happened there, R' Chaim points out. The Egyptian horses chasing after them were miraculously able to take charge of the chariots and their drivers ¹³. And he makes the point that this is analogous to our being able to "take charge" of G-d's connections to this world through our good deeds ¹⁴.

Footnotes:

¹I.e., who dwelt with the Tabernacle in its midst.

²I.e., who dwelt with the Holy Temple in its midst.

³Note that the generation of the desert not only singularly lived in the shadow of the Tabernacle and didn't need to earn a living -- they were also freed from slavery, crossed the Red Sea, and also received the Torah at Mount Sinai. Note then the rarity of such a generation! Why doesn't R' Chaim cite all of that?

We contend it's because he's well aware that the reader knows those things, but that R' Chaim is subtly allowing us to recognize for ourselves the point we made in note 17 of the previous chapter: that only those of such a rare generation -- and rare individuals like them throughout the ages who can concentrate on Torah study all of the time -- are the ones who have mastery of the Divine powers focused on in the previous chapters.

⁴R' Chaim also depicted them as having "eaten from a grand table", an expression typically used to refer to *Cohanim* who would eat from the sacrifices offered on the Altar (see *Beitzah* 21a for example). By doing this R' Chaim is again underscoring just how unique such individuals were.

⁵See Deuteronomy 8:4.

⁶R' Chaim purposely refers to them at the beginning of the paragraph as having *merited* their fortunate situation to once again underscore their unique and privileged status (see Rambam's *Hilchot Shmitta V'Yovel* 13:12 as cited in note 16 of the previous chapter).

⁷Piety actually isn't the highest goal. See the *Beraita* upon which *Messilat Yesharim* is based and elsewhere for higher spiritual levels. This again alludes to the point that only those who learn Torah all of the time -- and who thus achieve even greater levels than piety -- fulfill G-d's will most especially. "Torah study along with a career" is the best situation for the rest of us.

⁸R' Chaim cites 1 Kings 7:36 for an illustration of that phenomenon.

⁹As opposed to His intentions for those who are able to concentrate on Torah study exclusively.

R' Chaim adds that while this depiction follows R' Yishmael's opinion, it was R' Shimon Bar Yochai's opinion that the Cherubs should have actually faced each other, given the people's way of life.

¹⁰That is, shouldn't the Cherub that represented the Jewish Nation have remained facing the one that represented G-d while the latter would have turned somewhat away from them?

¹¹R' Chaim's recondite point once again here is that only those who didn't then and don't now need to earn a living, and spend all of their time studying Torah have such power; only *their* actions and way of life affected the heavens to an ultimate degree. And that's why the Cherub representing G-d in Solomon's time -- when the people had to earn a living -- turned somewhat away.

R' Chaim offers an insight here in his own footnote into a statement made by *Tosephot* in *Shabbat* 88a.

¹²See 3:12 below for another instance of instigating a miracle through sure faith.

Several students of R' Chaim (including R' Yaakov Meir Yeshurun, R' Yaakov Zundel of Salant, and others) cited their teacher's contention that trust in G-d alone can have Him alter the workings of the world (see *Keter Rosh* p. 567-5789).

¹³See *Shemot Rabbah* 23 and *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 1:50.

¹⁴We contend that the use of the term "And so" at the beginning of this section indicates that R'

Chaim is about to wrap things up -- and to thus reiterate the point we've been making.

For one thing, we have the specific statement here that the people crossing the Red Sea -- *the very ones who were to dwell in the desert and study Torah all day long* -- were capable of stimulating things "in the heavens above" (by their sure faith and trust), unlike others.

And for another, in his commentary to Song of Songs 1:9 (cited here in the text), R' Chaim likens the Jewish Nation to the hub of a (chariot) wheel, which while small compared to the rest of the wheel nonetheless *controls* it, to the small Jewish Nation which likewise controls the world -- thanks to our Torah-study and performance of mitzvot.

His contention here is that even though the Jewish Nation is a small entity, still and all, it -- *and specifically the small number of us who study Torah all of the time without earning a living, like those who crossed the Red Sea and dwelt in the Sinai Desert* -- are the true power-source of the universe.

See 1:21 below for another discussion of exceedingly rare individuals alone affecting changes to Heaven and earth.

Not to make too much of the point, it's important to note that R' Chaim's perspective about the centrality of Torah-study is entirely opposite to that of the early Chassidim who were contemporary with him. (See the Introduction, note 3 to Chapter 1:2, and note 4 to 1:4 above with reference to R' and the early Chassidic Movement.)

In distinct contrast to what we contend R' Chaim is alluding to here and in the previous chapter that only those who constantly study Torah and perform mitzvot affect great and fundamental spiritual changes in the universe, the Ba'al Shem Tov taught that the same vitally important spiritual phenomena can be brought about *by proper eating and drinking, and other material acts* rather than exclusively through Torah study and the performance of mitzvot (see *Toldot Yaakov Yoseph, Parshiot Bereishit* and *Bo*)!

It could in fact be said that R' Chaim has been arguing against such a point of view here, and was doing so discreetly so as not to discourage people who are not privileged to study Torah constantly whom Chassidim were drawing into their midst.