

CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 21: THE STORY OF LIFE

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Yaakov said, this world is like an entrance chamber before the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the entrance chamber so that you may enter the banquet hall.

This mishna puts the world into its proper perspective -- a perspective we cannot deny yet which rarely enters our everyday thoughts. The commentator Rashi explains it simply: Life is the waiting room to meet the King. During our lifetimes, our sole thoughts should be directed towards that imminent and glorious meeting. While waiting to meet and impress a flesh and blood king, we would be straightening our clothes and fixing our hair to be sure we present ourselves as best we can. So too, says Rashi, our lives must be spent in preparation and anticipation of our meeting with the King of kings: in good deeds and repentance.

The concept of an entrance hall is apt. We typically think of a waiting room as a necessary evil -- a place to read a magazine and otherwise "kill" time while waiting for the "real thing" to begin. This world is of course far more: we spend our lives here **preparing** for that meeting with the King. Yet the image of a waiting room carries with it a great lesson. Our true purpose of existence is closeness to G-d. This world can never be seen as an ends in itself -- no matter how moral, meaningful and G-dly our lives are. Although as I've written many times, Judaism is not an otherworldly religion -- directing us to ignore our needs in this world and practice self-flagellation, at the same time neither can this world be seen as a place of true nirvana. "Virtue is its own reward" contains a great nugget of truth to be sure, but let's face it, a world of virtue only goes so far. Ultimately, it will pale before the true and everlasting reward of the faithful in the World to Come.

The Talmud expresses this similarly: "There is no reward [for good deeds] in this world" (Hullin 142a). Virtuous living is rewarding to be sure -- far more than the loose and unbridled life -- but this world is only the preparatory phase. The only bliss we can ever truly hope to achieve will be after 120.

There is a second great lesson contained in R. Yaakov's words, one which should greatly alter our attitude towards this world. Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, known author and lecturer, once explained with the following illustration: Scenario #1: You are a new employee, first day on the job. Your new boss is pestering and annoying you to no end -- with poorly-defined tasks, outbursts, criticism, provocation. Your attitude: "What do I need this for? This is unbearable! Why did I take this stupid job? Who needs it?" The type of anger and frustration many of us are unfortunately all too familiar with.

Scenario #2: The exact same as scenario #1, with one crucial difference: A new coworker quietly

comes over to you at the start of the day with the following warning: "The position this company actually wants to fill is that of vice president. It is a top position, one of the most pivotal, influential and high-paying in the company. However, it carries with it a lot of pressure. The owners are looking for a person who has what it takes to handle the kind of pressure, frustration, deadlines and juggling of responsibilities it will entail. Today they will be checking you out to see if you can remain cool and composed under those types of circumstances."

Hmmm... VP? The position you've been dreaming of climbing to ever since you embarked on your career? What will your response be to the provocations and intimidation of your new boss be now? Eager anticipation! "Lay it on me! Let me show what I'm made of! This is my big chance!"

This is the story of life.

Life is full of frustrations, annoyances and disturbances which interfere with the "plans" we waste our time formulating. This is the nature of the world. It is not without purpose. We often, however, compound our problems with our own frustrations. We see them as unwelcome nuisances, "ruining" our lives and serving no purpose. If not for them we could **enjoy** ourselves and live our lives the way we're **supposed** to. We even wax theological about our problems: "G-d, why **me**? Why do You visit upon me misfortune? (We all suffer from the Job complex now and then. Yes, no one else suffers as I do. **They** all have it easy. I'm the only one in the world with back problems, hair loss, domestic problems, etc. ;-) I'm basically a good person! Why can't I be left alone? Do You really dislike me so much?!"

(Just to complete a thought I began above, we tend to see our own problems as so much worse than our neighbor's. Of course your back problem is worse than your neighbor's vision problem because it's **your** back that hurts! We should keep in mind, however, what we say in Yiddish -- everyone has his own peckle (package). Not only does your neighbor have his or her own, but at least you can rest assured yours are tailor-made for you. Someone else's, even if they don't seem half so bad, are not what G-d in His infinite wisdom decrees for your own spiritual growth.)

But with such speech and such thoughts, we miss the basic nature -- in fact the purpose -- of life. G-d does not smite us; He challenges us. Our lives are a preparation. They refine, toughen and purify us for our ultimate meeting. When G-d fills our lives with sadness and frustration, He is testing us and allowing us to realize our potential for good. We must accept, bear patiently, and turn to G-d with our prayers. In testing us, G-d is showing that He cares about us and is interested in our growth. We must in turn show G-d we understand He is the source of our suffering and we are prepared to use it in the manner He wishes.

In the story of Genesis, the Serpent, for tempting Man to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, was smitten by G-d with the following curse (among others): "Dirt you shall eat all the days of your life" (Genesis 3:14). (The zoological equivalent may be that snakes -- the physical remnant of the primordial Serpent -- do not chew and "enjoy" their food. They swallow smaller (and larger) animals whole and

are thus denied any pleasure that may be involved in the eating process.) R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, one of the great Chassidic masters of 19th Century Poland (known after his work S'fas Emes), asked: What kind of curse is that? If serpents really eat dirt then they have nothing to worry about! They can find food wherever they go!

The S'fas Emes answered that there is no greater curse than to have G-d give you a life's supply of food. It is G-d's way of saying "I want to have nothing to do with you so long as you live. Here, take all the food and everything you need for the rest of your life. And don't you ever come back to Me for seconds." This is a rejection of the most tragic kind. A person who is given everything he or she wants, who never has to struggle, suffer -- or pray -- is at an insurmountable distance from G-d. Life without suffering is life without meaning. When we suffer, it is not because G-d hates us -- and certainly not because He has forgotten us. It is because He loves us. And this is something I think we all know in our hearts. And through the tough love of which life is so full, we can bear, accept and even enjoy this world, seeing it as the entrance-way to that grand and glorious Banquet.

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