

# UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH G-D

*by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky*

## 1. Fearing G-d, the Foundation of Spiritual Success

The Torah states, "You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your G-d - I am Hashem." What is the specific relevance of fearing G-d to placing a stumbling block before the blind? One would think that the fear of heaven (yiras shamayim) is a fundamental that is imperative to all of the mitzvos of the Torah.

Rashi cites Chazal who explain that "the blind" mentioned in the verse refers to one who is unaware of his situation and is not literally referring to a blind person. The Torah prohibition of placing a stumbling block before the blind is deliberately providing misleading advice to an individual who seeks counsel. For example, one should not advise an individual to sell his field in order to purchase a donkey when unbeknownst to the seller, the advisor purchases the field for self-profit.

The verse concludes, "...you shall fear your G-d - I am Hashem" since one's true intention is not known to anyone other than to himself and to G-d. If ultimately the advice that was given is revealed to be faulty causing the one who is counseled to take a loss, the advisor can claim that he was well intentioned. Therefore, the verse concludes, "...you shall fear your G-d - I am Hashem" because Hashem knows the true intent in one's heart. If one has yiras shamayim then he will not consider taking advantage of another individual when he does not know the pitfalls. Being conscious that Hashem is aware of our motives (whether they are pure or not), one cannot ignore the wrongness of his behavior.

We read in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) that one should pray for the welfare of government. If it were not for the fear of government, people would consume one another "alive" ("one would swallow his fellow alive"). Meaning that without law and order a state of anarchy would develop to the point that people would justify devouring one another alive. How could cultured and ethical people fall to such a barbaric level?

One can justify one's behavior depending on circumstances. If there is no law and order, one could rationalize that stealing or killing is for the sake of "survival of the fittest." It is a question of self-preservation (If I do not kill him, he will kill me.) Thus, one should pray for the welfare of government - and that this state of chaos should never come about. It seems from the passage in Pirkei Avos that even the moral and ethical person only refrains from committing crime because of his fear of

government. How is this possible? Factually speaking, within a civilized society, ethical and moral people respect the law because they recognize the wrongness and the evil in committing the crime. One recognizes the criminality of an action only if it is identified as such. This is only within the context of accountability. If one is accountable for an action which is contrary to the law, there is a recognition that the action is criminal. However, if there is no accountability, then the same action is viewed as survival. There is nothing that cannot be justified.

The safeguard of fear of government is limited only to those areas that are legislated by law. However, secular law does not govern many aspects of one's life. If this is the case, one is subject and vulnerable to justifying many things. How does one contend with the conflicts of interest that would allow these areas to be violated?

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos sets forth the principle of recognizing what is considered inappropriate or even criminal - fear of government. Whenever one has accountability, one puts the infraction in a negative light. Identically, if one has fear of Hashem, which gives an understanding that he is accountable for what he does in his private life, it will cause him to recognize the "wrong" as a transgression. The Mishna in Pirkei Avos tells us that if one considers three things he will not come to sin: "There is a seeing eye, a hearing ear, and all of your actions are recorded in a ledger (of accountability)." This cognizance causes one to focus on accountability; thus, bringing about understanding that the behavior or action is not proper.

If one develops fear of G-d and truly has a sense of accountability, there is nothing within Judaism that will be difficult for him.

## **2. Mercy, the Basis for Atonement**

Chazal tell us that the only Name of G-d that is associated with Korbon (offerings) is the four letter Name of (YKVK) which connotes Midas HaRachamim (Attribute of Mercy). One will never find the appellation of Elokim (which connotes Midas HaDin - Attribute of Justice) associated with Korbon. The reason for this is that the concept of atonement and forgiveness only exists within the context of Midas HaRachamim (Attribute of Mercy). Within the context of Justice, when one sins even inadvertently, one must be punished. Hashem established a spiritual mechanism (Korbon) through which one can be spiritually rehabilitated. The Torah tells that the animal species, which qualify for the Korbon, are the ox, the sheep, and the goat. Why are these the only ones that qualify for sacrifices of atonement?

The Midrash Tanchuma explains that the reason these particular species are considered special is because each of them individually corresponds to one of the Patriarchs - Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. In order for one to be deserving of atonement he must have special merit. Thus, since these species identify with the Patriarchs (who have great merit), each species in its own right atones for the individual who brings it.

The Midrash states that the ox corresponds to Avraham and thus brings about atonement. When the

three angels came to Avraham the Torah tells us that he "ran to the cattle." He ran to slaughter the ox to host his guests. Avraham is the Patriarch who personifies chesed (acts of loving kindness) at the most advanced level. Therefore, when the ox is brought as a sacrifice it is a linkage to Avraham our Patriarch. When the Jew brings the ox for his Korbon, it activates the chesed of Hashem - thus allowing the sinner to be forgiven.

The sheep corresponds to Yitzchak. At the time of the Akeida (The binding of Yitzhak), the Torah tells us that Avraham "saw the ram (same species as sheep) caught in the thicket," which was sacrificed by Avraham in the place of Yitzchak. Yitzchak who was 37 years old at the time of the Akeida demonstrated a unique act of mesiras nefesh (selfless sacrifice) by allowing himself to be slaughtered as an offering to G-d. Ultimately, the sheep was slaughtered in the place of Yitzchak. The sheep represents the mesiras nefesh that was demonstrated by our Patriarch Yitzchak. Thus when the Jews bring the sheep as a Korbon it activates the Mercy of Hashem to bring about forgiveness.

Yaakov received his father Yitzchak's blessings in the place of his brother Esav (who was the first-born). Yaakov had purchased the birthright from Esav. Because of his advanced age, Yitzchak was not able to see, therefore, he was not able to recognize Yaakov. He was only able to sense his son's presence by touching him. The Torah identifies Esav as a hairy person because he was born with a coat of hair covering his body, which was equivalent to animal hair. Yaakov, on the other hand, is referred to as a person who is "smooth skinned." Yaakov's mother Rivka told him, "bring two goats from the flock so that I could prepare delicacies for your father Yitzchak to his liking (before receiving the blessings)." The hides of the goats were used to cover Yaakov's arms and chest area so that his smooth skin would not be detected when he presented himself before his father. Thus, the goat has relevance to the specialness of Yaakov. How do we understand this?

When Yaakov purchased the birthright from Esav, it was not because he wished to take it for himself and deny his older brother what was rightfully his. Chazal tell us that when the Torah states "Esav returned from the field - tired and weary" it is referring to the transgressing of five cardinal sins (murder, adultery, blasphemy, etc.). The value of the birthright was to be the Kohen (who will be the officiant of G-d in the Temple). The only reason Yaakov purchased the birthright was because Esav was an inappropriate person to perform in a capacity of holiness. It was only to prevent a chilul Hashem (desecration of G-d's Name) that Yaakov took the initiative. There was no self-interest or any other ulterior motive. It was purely for the sake of G-d. Thus, the species of the goat represents Yaakov's selfless dedication to G-d's Glory. Therefore, the bringing of the goat as a Korbon activates the Mercy of Hashem, which allows the person to be forgiven.

When each of these species is brought as an offering, Hashem recalls the specialness of each Patriarch with which they are associated, thus, allowing spiritual reinstatement. It is not because of our own worthiness alone that we achieve atonement.

Satan continuously attempts to bring prosecution upon every individual. How does one guarantee for himself Hashem's boundless Mercy? If a Jew assumes the posture of mesiras nefesh (selfless dedication) to Hashem, it will ward off this prosecution and will atone similarly to the species, which represent the self-sacrifice of the Patriarchs.

### **3. Understanding the Kohen Vis-à-vis Spiritual Impurity**

The Torah tells us that the Kohen (priest) is not permitted to contaminate himself with the dead except for the death of his seven closest relatives (mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister, and wife.) The Torah states, "You shall sanctify him (the Kohen) because he offers the food of your G-d; he shall remain holy to you, for holy am I, Hashem Who sanctifies you..." Meaning, since the Kohen is the only individual qualified to officiate in the Mikdash (Temple); he must remain holy and not allow himself to be contaminated.

The Midrash Tanchuma explains the law of the Kohen with a parable. A butcher had continuous access to the king. The king told him, "I decree that you should not associate yourself with human remains because of your relationship with me. You are constantly in my presence and thus if you are contaminated you will contaminate my palace." Similarly, Hashem decreed that Kohanim are not permitted to contaminate themselves with the dead because they are the only ones qualified to enter into G-d's Sanctuary the Mikdash. The Mikdash is the equivalent of the king's palace. Why is the contamination of the dead so contradictory to entering into G-d's Palace?

The Kohen can only remove the spiritual contamination of the dead (tumas mes) from the individual or the object through the sprinkling of the para aduma (Red Heifer). [The ashes of the Red Heifer were mixed with water.] Without this procedure, one cannot be relieved from this level of contamination. In explaining the para aduma in the Portion of Chukas, Rashi cites Rav Moshe HaDarshon who explains with a parable. The young child of one of the maidservants dirtied the palace of the king. The king commanded the mother of the child to clean up after her child. Identically the para (cow), which is the mother of the calf, was designated by Hashem to cleanse the spiritual contamination that was brought about by its child -the Aigel HaZahav (Golden Calf).

The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that after the Jews had had made their unequivocal acceptance of Torah with the declaration of "Naaseh V'nishma - we will do and then we will listen," they were reinstated to a level of spirituality that had existed before the sin of Adam. Before Adam had partaken of the Tree of Knowledge, there was no death. It was only after Adam had eaten of the Tree that death was decreed upon existence. Similarly, had the Jews not sinned with the Golden Calf, they would have remained at the level of Adam (before the sin) and thus would have not been subject to death. It was only because they succumbed to the Golden calf that death was reintroduced to the Jewish people.

Death vis-à-vis the world at large is rooted in the failing of Adam. Death vis-à-vis the Jewish people (after Sinai) is rooted in the Golden calf. As the Gemara states in Tractate Shabbos, "There is no death

without sin..." Thus, the contamination of the dead represents the most serious breach of relationship with Hashem. It represents the ultimate Chilul Hashem (desecration of G-d's Name). When Adam sinned with the Tree of Knowledge, he was driven out of the Garden of Eden. Because of his spiritual failing, he could not continue to dwell in the proximity of G-d.

The Torah tells us that Hashem commanded the Jewish people by saying, "Make for Me a Mikdash (Sanctuary) so that I may dwell in your midst." Before the sin of Adam, the world had such a level of purity that it was able to accommodate the Presence of Hashem. However, because of Adam's sin, he introduced an impurity, which brought about death into existence and thus G-d's Presence could no longer be associated with physical existence. If the Jewish people had not sinned with the Golden Calf, they themselves would have been the location for the Divine Presence. Because they were spiritually putrefied with idolatry, their presence could no longer accommodate G-d's Presence. The Mishkan was intended to be the pure location within physical existence to accommodate Hashem's Presence. Since the Kohen is the only individual who is qualified to officiate in the Mikdash, he is not permitted to contaminate himself with the dead. Death represents the impurity that prevents G-d's Presence from dwelling within existence.

#### **4. Experiencing the Festivals Properly**

The Torah states, "Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, "Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: Hashem's appointed festivals (moadim) that you are to designate as holy convocations - these are My appointed festivals (moadai)." The common usage of the word moed is used within the context of "time." The Maharal of Prague asks, "Why does the Torah refer to the festivals as moadim and not chagim (festivals)?" He explains that all festivals and holidays that are celebrated by the Jewish people are not merely commemorative of past events but are also re-enactments of those events. The Maharal explains that the word moed vis-à-vis the festivals is derived from the word "V'noadity." As it is stated regarding Moshe, "V'noadity lecha mebein shnei haKeruvim I (Hashem) will meet you (Moshe) between the two Cherubs (on the Holy Ark)." Meaning Hashem will communicate to Moshe from between the Cherubs. The word moed connotes a time of closeness between Hashem and the Jewish people - a time of intimacy. The festivals are times of the year in which Hashem is closer to the Jewish people. Therefore the Torah uses the term moadim rather than chagim (times of celebration) when referring to the festivals.

It is interesting to note that there are two words which refer to "remembering" - "zicherya" and "pikeda." Each of these words connotes different degrees of remembering. We find that regarding Sarah conceiving (after being barren), the Torah states "Vayifkode (pikeda) Hashem es Sarah - and G-d remembered Sarah." In this verse, we see that the word Vayifkode (pikeda) is not simply that G-d remembered Sarah, but He remembered her and acted upon His remembrance to allow her to conceive.

On Rosh Chodesh (which is a semi-Moed for the New Month), we insert a paragraph in our prayers

and mention both expressions of remembering "zicherya" and "pikeda." We say in the Yaaleh V'yavo, "V'Yizocher v'yipakeid - not only should we be remembered but also Hashem should act upon on that remembering." Why only during the moed do we ask Hashem to act upon His remembering? Because Hashem is closer and more intimate with the Jewish people during the moadim and it is the opportune time to beseech Him to act upon His remembrance.

The Torah states, "Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, "Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: Hashem's appointed festivals (moadim) that you are to designate as holy convocations - these are My appointed festivals (moadai)." Meaning, it is only holy convocations that are considered the moadai of Hashem. If these times of celebration are not convocations of holiness, then Hashem has no interest in them. Sforno explains that on the festivals-such as on Shabbos and Yom Kippur, G-d wants the Jew to refrain from ordinary activity. However, one is permitted to engage in food related activities on the festivals coupled with the study of Torah and doing mitzvos. On the festivals one must divide the day "Chatzi Lashem and Chatzi L'chem - half for G-d and half for yourselves." If one's engagement in the festivities of the holiday (such as festive meals) is dedicated for Hashem, they are considered "festivals" that G-d considers His (Moadai). However if one indulges in these festivities purely for one's own physical gratification, then they are not considered His (Moadai). The prophet tells us that Hashem detests and despises celebrations that are purely for the sake of indulgence.

On a moed, a time of intimacy and closeness with G-d, one rejoices and celebrates to express his cognizance and awareness that he is re-experiencing that special moment that took place in the past. However, if one experiences the festival as a time to merely indulge and satisfy one's physical desire, he is ignoring G-d's Presence and the value of the moment and thus, behaving in the most disrespectful manner. Imagine the scenario if someone has a uniquely special guest in his home and does not even acknowledge his presence because he is preoccupied with indulging in his own physical pursuits. It would be considered the ultimate disrespect.

Since Hashem is closest to the Jewish people on the moadim, one must have a cognizance of His Presence and act accordingly. The Jew is engulfed in Kiddusha (holiness) during the festival. Thus one must comport himself in a manner which infuses his physical activity with spirituality. "Chatzi Lashem and Chatzi L'chem - half for G-d and half for yourselves" does not mean that half of one's days should be devoted to Hashem and the other half completely for oneself, but rather all of our activities should be infused with spirituality. Only then does Hashem consider it "My Festivals (Moadai)."

## **5. The Importance of Perception**

The Torah tells us that the Kohen (priest) is only permitted to contaminate himself with the death of his seven closest relatives. Sforno in his commentary explains that the Kohen has a special status among the Jewish people because he is the one who is responsible to give understanding and guidance vis-à-vis Torah Judaism to the Jewish people. As it is stated in Malachi, "The lips of the

Kohen are the keepers of the daas (wisdom - i.e. Torah) ... one should seek Torah from his mouth." Thus, Sforno says that in order for the Kohen to be effective in his role as the repository and disseminator of Torah for the Jewish people, he must carry himself in a princely manner. Therefore, he is not permitted to contaminate himself with the dead (as a non-Kohen can) so that he can maintain his special status in the eyes of the people. Only when the Kohen is perceived as a special person will he be sought out for his guidance.

Sforno concludes that the eulogizing and burying of the dead is a demonstration of honor to them. Thus, it is understandable why there is a differentiation between the Kohen contaminating himself with his seven closest relatives and anyone else. The Kohen tending to the burial needs of his closest relations will not diminish his status in the eyes of the people because that involvement is attending to his own honor and need.

Rambam in Hilchos Talmud Torah (Laws pertaining to Torah study) rules, based on the verse (which is stated in the first paragraph of the Shema), "V'shenantam l'vanecha - you shall teach it to your sons ...," that every chacham (who has the ability to teach Torah) is obligated to teach the child of his fellow Jew." Rambam explains that the term "sons" does not mean one's son but rather one's students (talmidim). Why does the Torah use the word "sons" when it actually means "students"? Evidently, the Torah is telling us that the proper transmission of Torah between teacher and student can only be brought about effectively when the dedication of the rebbe (teacher) to the student is no less than the father's dedication to his own child.

It also states that a rebbe should not joke in the presence of his students. A student should not be present when the rebbe is eating, taking a hair cut, or is in the bathhouse. Rambam explains that the reason for this is if the student sees the rebbe engaged in mundane activities, which are common to the student (as well as others), the rebbe will be perceived in an ordinary context. It will undermine the reverent view that the talmid has of his rebbe. Of course, it is understood (even by the student) that the rebbe's needs are human. However, when they are "seen" by the student, it is a diminishment. Thus, the rebbe (as the Kohen) must conduct himself in a princely manner vis-à-vis his students.

The Gemara in Tractate Taanis tells us that the Jewish people were faced with a serious drought. The elders of Israel approached Chonie HaMagil, who had a special and intimate relationship with G-d, to beseech Him for rain. Chonie dug a circular depression and stood within it. He said, "Hashem we need rain." Immediately small droplets of rain began to fall. Seeing that this drizzle was not sufficient for their needs, Chonie stated, "Hashem, do You think that these droplets will solve our problem? We need substantial rain!" Immediately the skies opened and the rain began to fall in torrents. When Chonie saw this, he said, "Hashem, I did not ask for a deluge. Give us rains of blessing." The rain began to fall at a sufficient level. After this exchange with Hashem, Chonie HaMagil received a message from Reb Shimon Ben Shetach (one of the leading Sages of the Jewish people and the head of the Sanhedrin (High Court of Israel)) stating, "If you were not Chonie, we would have

excommunicated you for speaking to Hashem in such an inappropriate manner. However, since your relationship with G-d is as that of a son to his father you will not be excommunicated." A child, because of his relationship with his father, speaks to him in the most informal way.

Regarding the relationship between a rebbe and his talmid, which the Torah expresses as being similar to that of a father and son, we learn that the rebbe must present himself in such a manner to evoke the utmost respect and reverence. Seemingly the relationship between son and father is one of formality and not as is indicated from the exchange between Shimon Ben Shetach and Chonie. How do we reconcile this contradiction?

A father acts selflessly on behalf of his child because of his special love and concern and thus provides all of his needs. The Torah, by equating the student to the "son" vis-à-vis the rebbe, it is similarly telling us that a rebbe must act in a selfless manner vis-à-vis his students. The model of father to son set forth by the Torah is only regarding the rebbe's selfless dedication to the student. It has no relevance to the student's relationship to the rebbe. The Torah does not say that the student should interact with the rebbe as a son interacts with a father.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that when the son of Raban Gamliel (the Prince of the Jewish people) became ill, he went to ask Reb Chanina Ben Dosa to pray for his son's recovery. Raban Gamliel's wife was taken aback by this request. She asked him, "Are you not as great as Reb Chanina Ben Dosa? Why could you not pray on behalf of our son yourself?" Raban Gamliel responded, "It is true that I am greater than Reb Chanina Ben Dosa regarding Torah; however, there is a difference between my relationship with G-d and his relationship with G-d. My relationship with G-d is that of a minister to the king (who does not have continuous access to the king). However Reb Chanina Ben Dosa is like the servant vis-à-vis a master - who can continuously come before the king without any prior arrangements."

It is interesting to note that there are three classifications of relationships, which we have discussed. Chonie HaMagil's relationship with Hashem was like that of a son to a father. Reb Chanina Ben Dosa's relationship with Hashem was that of a servant to a master, while Raban Gamliel's relationship with Hashem was that of a minister to a king. What are the differences between these relationships?

Chonie was permitted to speak to Hashem in a manner that would have been considered inappropriate for anyone other than himself because his relationship with Hashem was that of a son to a father. Because a child sees his father in every context of behavior (even in his most private moments), it creates a familiarity and closeness between the child and the parent. Thus, the interaction between the child and his father (even in the most informal manner) is acceptable to the father. Chonie HaMagil was at a level where he continuously saw the Hand of Hashem at every moment of his existence. Even the most natural act (which is repeated continuously) such as the rising of and setting of the sun or one's mere ability to function as a healthy human being, he saw as



the Hand of Hashem. There was no moment in his life that he did not see Hashem. This is no less than the child who continuously sees his parent in every aspect of life. Since there was never a moment that Chonie was distant from Hashem it was not inappropriate for him to address Him in the manner that he had.

Reb Chanina Ben Dosa's relationship with Hashem was that of a servant to a master. A servant is one who has negated his entire being and is dedicated only to serving the master. Because Reb Chanina Ben Dosa was totally dedicated to serving his master - Hashem, entering into His Presence is not seen as an infringement. This is why Reb Chanina Ben Dosa had greater access to Hashem than Raban Gamliel who was the Prince of Israel.

Raban Gamliel identified his relationship with G-d as a "minister to the king." Since he was the Prince of Israel, it was necessary for him to present himself in a manner, which would bring about an aura - so that he should be effective as the leader. Because Raban Gamliel had to focus on his self-image (although it was for the sake of Hashem), it created a degree of distance which did not allow him to have the same access as Reb Chanina Ben Dosa. Thus, he asked Reb Chanina Ben Dosa to pray for the recovery of his son.

We address Hashem in our prayers as "Aveinu - our Father" and "Malkeinu - our King." Regarding asking G-d for forgiveness for our inadvertent transgressions, we address Him with appellation of Aveinu (our Father). A child, because of the nature of the relationship with his father, does not deliberately act in a manner that would be hurtful to the parent. However when requesting forgiveness for deliberate sins, we address Hashem in a more distant and formal manner as "Malkeinu - our King."

If one attempts to see the Hand of Hashem continuously in his life, then he will have to assume a relationship with G-d as a son to a father. However the more one has a sense of "self" (that is detached from Hashem's Presence) he will not have the same level of access to Hashem.

---

Copyright © 2003 by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Kalatsky is the founder of the [Yad Avraham Institute](#), a New York-based learning center whose mission is to disseminate Torah to Jews of all backgrounds and walks of life.