

HOW CLOSE IS HASHEM TO US?

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. G-d's Love for the Jewish People

The Torah states that at the end of time the Jewish people will eventually do teshuvah and return to Hashem. As a result of this, Hashem will bring forth great blessing to the Jews and He will, "...return to rejoice (l'sus) over you (the Klal Yisroel) for good, as He rejoiced (sos) over your forefathers, when you listen to the voice of Hashem, your G-d..." The Torah uses the term "sos" to refer to the joy that Hashem will feel at this time. The question is - why does the Torah use the term "sos" rather than "simcha" or many other expressions of rejoicing?

Dovid HaMelech (King David) states in Tehillim (Psalms), "I rejoice (sos) over your words (the Torah) as if I found a large amount of spoils." Dovid HaMelech could have expressed his joy over the Torah and mitzvos with other terms, however, he specifically chose this term. The Vilna Gaon z'tl explains that the word "simcha" indicates joy that is complete, while the term "sos" denotes a happiness that is incomplete. He explains this through a parable:

In order for the king to reward his loyal subject for his service, he allows him to enter into his royal treasury and take whatever his heart desires but only for a period of five minutes. The subject is joyful and thankful that he will be allowed to take whatever he wants from the royal treasury. However, he is also anguished by the time constraint he is given because he understands the opportunity at hand. Similarly, Dovid HaMelech rejoiced over the Torah that he was given because he understood its infinite value. However, at the same time he was distressed by the fact that he was restricted to seventy years and would not be able to partake of this treasure beyond that point.

With this explanation we can understand why the Torah uses the term "sos" to express Hashem's joy and not the term "simcha". Hashem loves the Jewish people to such a degree that even though so much blessing is bestowed upon us, He is pained that He could not give us more. Since Hashem is infinite with no restrictions, He wants to provide us with boundless blessing as well; because of our own limitations, He is unable to do so.

If Hashem loves the Jews to such a degree that it gives him pain not to be able to do more for us, then we should understand that when He denies us His Goodness, it is clearly in our best interest. Now we can somewhat appreciate the idea that because of Hashem's unending love for us that even when we experience a set back in life we can understand that it emanates from His Goodness

and not from vindictiveness. If He could give us more, He would. Therefore, the Mishnah states, "Just as one blesses Hashem for good fortune, he must bless Him for misfortune." Because of his unlimited love for the Jewish people, He does only what is good and necessary for us.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin z'tl asks, if punishment and suffering are necessary as part of the rehabilitative spiritual process (which is only in our best interest), then why should one pray to Hashem to heal him when he becomes ill? Does one ask the doctor to withhold a life-saving procedure when the only road to recovery is through that procedure? If so, then how do we understand the blessing of the Amidah - "Heal us Hashem and allow us to recover"?

Reb Chaim answers that although Hashem brings illness upon a person as part of the rehabilitation of his spirituality (which is a positive thing), Hashem is nevertheless affected by the fact that the Jew is in a state of suffering. It is similar to a parent who needs to assist the doctor when he performs a painful procedure to his child. The parent is joyful that the child will recover through this procedure; however, the parent feels the hurt of his child. Therefore, Reb Chaim explains that if one prays healing because he feels Hashem's pain (as a father to a child - and even to a greater degree) then that feeling itself becomes the rehabilitative process that causes the person to be deserving of recovery. One can only relate to Hashem's pain (when a Jew is in a state of suffering) if one understands to what degree Hashem loves the Jewish people.

2. The Capability of Man

The Torah states, "I call heaven and earth today to bear witness against you: I have placed life and death before you..." The Midrash explains that Moshe is saying to the Klal Yisroel "Heaven and earth were created to accommodate mankind and that they have never deviated from their function. Did one ever plant a wheat kernel and have it grow barley? Heaven and earth are not subject to reward and punishment and yet they do not deviate from the purpose for which they were created. Therefore Klal Yisroel who is rewarded for doing good and punished for doing evil, definitely should not deviate (from the purpose for which they were created)."

Chazal explain that the laws of nature operate in a specific manner because Hashem chose their functions to help mankind to maximize its purpose, which is to choose between good and evil. Just as Hashem created heaven and earth with all the ingredients necessary to help mankind fulfill its purpose, so too did He create the human being with all the capability to fulfill his purpose. What is the purpose of man? - To serve Hashem - to sublimate and subordinate the physical to the spiritual, despite one's inclination for the material. Therefore, man was given the capability to bring about that result.

The Torah tells us that Hashem provides man with all that is necessary to fulfill his purpose; and the mechanism that is needed to succeed and advance spiritually is the Torah itself. Just as the heavy rains pierce the ground to sustain the tree (though its roots) and just as the dew continuously covers the vegetation of the earth to bring about blessing and sustain existence, so too did Hashem give us

the Torah which is the equivalent of both rain and dew to sustain our spirituality.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that the Written Law (Torah Sh'Bichsav) is equivalent to rain because it is tangible as the rain is visible. However, the Oral Law (Torah Sh'Bal Peh), which is communicated verbally, is as unnoticed as the dew when it is falling. Just as Hashem gave rain and the dew to sustain existence so too did He give us the Written and Oral Law to sustain our spiritual existence. Therefore a person cannot say that it is too difficult to do the Will of Hashem, because He provided us with whatever is necessary to bring that about.

Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers) states, "Im ein Kemach, ein Torah (If there is no flour, there is no Torah)." Meaning that one cannot study Torah if he does not have material sustenance; Therefore, Hashem provides it. Otherwise, one can say that he cannot study Torah because of his personal circumstance. However the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains this statement in Pirkei Avos differently - "If there is no flour, it is an indication that there is no Torah." If one toils and does not succeed then it is an indication that he is not pursuing Torah - because if he were, then Hashem would provide for him adequately.

We must be cognizant of events that we experience in our lives. These are indications which give us direction and understanding on whether we are on the proper path or have gone astray. We need to understand why there are difficulties and tragedies on a personal and communal level. If Klal Yisroel is not succeeding spiritually then there is no material success. However if Klal Yisroel, as a whole, is functioning as a spiritual entity, then Hashem will provide whatever material success is needed to accommodate our purpose in existence.

3. Does the Jew Have the Ability to Empower Hashem?

The Torah states, "You have weakened the Rock (referring to Hashem) which gave birth to you, and forgot G-d who brought you forth." There are a number of commentators who explain this verse in many ways. The Sforno explains that the Torah is saying that if the Jew's focus in life is materialism, then his understanding of Hashem, (The Rock), will become weakened because he is distracted from his spirituality.

The Zohar tells us that when Hashem informed the angels that He was going to create man, their response was that man is deficient and not even worth mentioning - because he is prone to fail. Hashem nevertheless created man and punished the angels who opposed this. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that the verse "You have weakened the Rock..." is referring to Hashem's position that man's existence is worthwhile. However, if man fails, then he weakens Hashem's position in his defense.

Rashi on the other hand explains this verse differently. It is referring to the fact that Hashem bestows existence with His blessing; however, if man should fail in the spiritual realm, then Hashem will withhold His blessing because the Jewish people are not deserving. Therefore, the Torah is saying, "You have weakened the Rock..."

When the meraglim (the spies) returned from scouting out the Land of Canaan, they reported that they had seen the decedents of the giants and other untenable situations. They had said that the nations of Canaan "are stronger than Him". Rashi cites Chazal, who explain that the spies were actually saying that the tribes of Canaan were even stronger than Hashem. They believed that Hashem was able to defeat and destroy the Egyptians, but the Canaanites had thirty-one kingdoms and Hashem did not have the power to destroy them. How do we understand this? The spies themselves participated in the Sinai event and prophesized while in an awake state. After understanding the awesomeness and capability of Hashem, how is it possible for them to say that He is not able to defeat thirty-one kingdoms?

Based on Rashi's interpretation of the verse "You have weakened the Rock..." we are able to understand what the spies were saying. Hashem's level of interaction with this existence is based on the Jew's merit. If the Jew adheres to the Torah and does the Will of Hashem then he is deserving of His blessing; however, if the Jew fails and is undeserving, then Hashem withholds His blessing and does not allow the Jew to succeed. Meaning, that Hashem binds Himself to the principle of "reward and punishment". The spies believed that the Jews had sufficient merit to be redeemed from the enslavement of Egypt; however, they believed that they did not have sufficient merit to allow Hashem to bring about the conquest of thirty-one kingdoms of Canaan.

Their understanding was that the infrastructure of "reward and punishment" - the principle of being deserving - was put in place by Hashem to govern existence and was established in a way that even G-d Himself was not able to override the system. However, this was/is not the case. Despite one's unworthiness, if Hashem should choose to interact with existence in a positive manner, then He overrides the system.

The Menorah in the Bais HaMikdash was placed outside of the Holy of Holies, on the other side of the paroches (curtains) which was the separation between the Covered Sanctuary and the Holy of Holies. The Torah states, "the Menorah must be placed outside of the paroches." The Midrash explains that Hashem is actually saying, "You must put the Menorah outside the Holy of Holies (which is the location of the Divine Presence) so that you should not mistakenly think that I need your light." The Midrash continues and says that Moshe asked Hashem, "Why do you want us to kindle the lights of the Menorah since You are the light of the world?" Hashem responded by saying, "The reason I want you to kindle the light is to elevate you in the eyes of the nations of the world - that they should see that I do need your light." It seems that the two statements of Hashem are contradictory. On one hand Hashem says the Menorah must be placed outside of "My location" (the Holy of Holies) to indicate that He does not need our light. On the other hand, His response to Moshe is that in fact He does need our light.

The answer is - under normal circumstances the world functions within the context of reward and punishment. If we succeed spiritually then Hashem bestows blessing on the world. In other words, our "light" is needed because it determines the level on which the world functions. However, if we

should fail spiritually, then Hashem's blessing is withdrawn and the world is diminished. Seemingly, from this one could believe that the Klal Yisroel empowers Hashem. However, this is not the case because if Hashem chooses to override the system, He is not limited or bound by any criteria. This is indicated by the location of where the Menorah is placed: "it must be outside of the paroches to indicate that I do not need your light. - I am able to bestow blessing, regardless of your unworthiness."

The Torah tells us that there will be peace in the Land when the Klal Yisroel will follow the Statutes of Hashem. Is there no peace today because of the reality of anti-Semitism "Esav sonei l'Yaakov - Esav despises the existence of Yaakov" or is it because the Jewish people are not adhering to the Dictates of the Torah? If the Jewish people were to follow the ways of the Torah, then they would strengthen "the Rock"; however, if we as Jews falter, then He becomes "the Rock that we have weakened".

4. Why is the Jew Held to Such a High Standard - Especially on Rosh Hashanah?

The Mishna in Tractate Rosh Hashanah tells us that a Shofar cannot be made from the horn of a cow. The Gemara explains this by giving two reasons. The first reason is that the horn of a cow is referred to as "keren" and not "Shofar". Secondly, there is a principle "Ein kateigor naaseh sanheigor - that a prosecutor cannot be an advocate." The horn of the cow represents the Golden Calf (Chet Ha'Agle) with which the Jews sinned at Sinai. Anything, which has relevance to the Golden Calf must be avoided at a time when we are in need of an advocate. The cow or gold arouses the most serious level of prosecution against the Klal Yisroel.

On Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol (the High Priest) officiated with two sets of vestments. He would wear the golden ones when he performed the service that was not specific to Yom Kippur. When he performed the service that was particular to Yom Kippur, he wore white vestments. He was not permitted to wear the golden vestments for the Yom Kippur service because he had to enter the Holy of Holies (the location of the Shechina - the Divine Presence) to atone for the Klal Yisroel, and if he wore gold, then he could not function in the capacity of an advocate.

The Gemara asks, since the principle of "a prosecutor cannot be an advocate" has no relevance outside of the location of the Shechina, then why can't we utilize the horn of a cow to fulfill our obligation of Shofar since this mitzvah is also performed outside of the Holy of Holies?

The Gemara answers that when one blows the Shofar it is considered as if he is standing inside the Holy of Holies. How do we understand this? Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment (Yom HaDin). The Midas HaDin (the Attribute of Justice) of G-d is so exacting on this Day that even the angels in heaven tremble from its awesomeness. Midas HaDin subjects all of existence to an exact level of scrutiny.

The Second Bais HaMikdash (the Second Temple), which stood for 420 years, had more than 300 Kohanim Gadolim (High Priests) officiating over this period. However, the First Bais HaMikdash, which

stood for a period of 410 years, had only eleven. The Gemara tells us that if the Kohen Gadol was not fully spiritually qualified, he would expire immediately when he entered into the Holy of Holies. This occurred because being so close to the Shechina (the Divine Presence), if he was not in a perfect state, he would be subject to Midas HaDin. It is evident from this that when Midas HaDin is functioning in its most potent form it is an indication of our close proximity to the Shechina. Therefore, Rosh Hashanah, which is the Yom HaDin (Day of Judgment), is an indication of how close we are to Hashem.

On one hand, the Judgment of Hashem is awesome and fearful, causing the angels in heaven to tremble. However, on the other hand, His closeness to us reveals the degree to which we are valued. Being in such proximity to the Divine Presence on Rosh Hashanah is the equivalent to standing in the Holy of Holies. Therefore, we do not fulfill the mitzvah of Shofar with a cow's horn because the principle of "a prosecutor cannot be an advocate" is in force, just as it was for the Kohen Gadol; This is unlike Yom Kippur, when he was the only one permitted to enter into the Holy of Holies.

It is stated that the Shofar should be taken from a ram because it symbolizes the ultimate submission and sacrifice for Hashem. When Avraham Avinu (Avraham our Patriarch) was told by Hashem to bring his only son (Yitzchak) - who he loved - as a sacrifice, he did not hesitate and immediately embarked on that mission. However, after the binding of Yitzchak, an angel called from heaven and told him not to slaughter his son. At that moment Avraham noticed a ram caught in the thicket and prepared it to be brought as a sacrifice in the place of his son Yitzchak. As a result, Hashem valued the sacrifice of the ram as if Avraham had sacrificed his own son. Therefore, the ram's horn symbolizes the most advanced level of dedication and sacrifice to Hashem.

When Satan, the prosecutor of the Jewish people, begins his prosecution, he is silenced by the sound of the ram's horn because it is the ultimate advocate of the Klal Yisroel.

Understanding the gravity of the Day of Judgment, we must also recognize Hashem's exceptional love for us, which is the basis for the Attribute of Justice. Despite the awesomeness of the day, the Jew must feel fortunate that we are in this situation because of His closeness to us.

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