

THE NEGATIVE SIDE OF INDIVIDUALITY

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. The Negative Side of Individuality

The Torah states, "Hashem spoke to Moshe saying," When you take a census of the Children of Israel according to their numbers, every man shall give Hashem an atonement for his soul when counting them, so that there will not be a plague among them when counting them. This shall they give...a half shekel (Machtzis HaShekel)..." Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the reason the census of the Jewish people was conducted through the medium of the Machtzis HaShekel (half-silver coin) for every male above the age of twenty, rather than simply counting them, was to prevent "a plague" that would be caused by ayin ha'rah (evil eye). Whenever people are counted as individuals, they are subject to ayin ha'rah, which brings about plague. Therefore, the Jewish people needed the Machtzis HaShekel for the purchase of communal offerings for atonement in order to ward off the ayin ha'rah when they were counted.

The blessing that Yosef's children, Menashe and Ephraim, received from their grandfather, Yaakov our Patriarch was, "May you proliferate abundantly like fish in the midst of the land." Chazal explain that the reason Yaakov chose a term which refers to the proliferation of fish rather than simply giving them the blessing to increase abundantly, is for one of two reasons: Firstly, there is nothing comparable to the proliferation of fish. Secondly, since fish are concealed by the water and are not seen by the human eye they are not subject to the evil eye. The blessing to Yosef's children was that they should multiply at an unlimited level and not be susceptible to the evil eye. One could say that the first interpretation of Yaakov's blessing is contingent on the second. This means that the reason they are able to increase in unlimited numbers is that they are not subject to the human eye.

The Torah tells us that when Esav approached Yaakov's family, each of Yaakov's wives came forth and bowed to Esav, followed by their children. However, Yosef went before his mother Rachel to shield her from the gaze of Esav, the rasha (evil person). He did not want him to gaze upon the beauty of his mother. Chazal tell us that because Yosef shielded his mother from the gaze of Esav, he merited the blessing from Yaakov of "Aleí ayin - You are above the eye," meaning that he was not susceptible to the evil eye.

Another reason given by Chazal why Yosef merited the blessing of "Aleí ayin - You are above the eye," was because as the Viceroy of Egypt, he would pass through the city in his chariot and all the women would gaze at his beauty (he was the most handsome man who had ever lived). However, he did not return their gaze. Chazal tell us, "Since his eye did not benefit from anything that was not

his, no eye could affect Yosef's existence."

In order for the ayin ha'rah (evil eye) to effect something the person who is bring it about must have a semblance of an understanding of what he is gazing upon. However, if a person looks upon something and does not perceive or understand what he is seeing, he cannot affect it with the evil eye. This is because what he is affecting, in essence, is not actually what he is seeing. For example, if one gazes upon copper and believes it to be gold, he will not affect it because the item is in fact different from what he believes it to be. Yosef's being was of such a dimension that it could not be comprehended nor understood because of his exceptional ability.

Whatever one could perceive in Yosef was not even close to the reality. Relatively speaking, Yosef was an unlimited person. Furthermore, anything that Yosef associated himself with assumed a similar quality. For example, as we see regarding the gathering of the grain in Egypt. The bounty reached a point that it could no longer be quantified.

The Torah tells us that before the Jewish people entered into the Land of Israel Moshe forewarned them not to be negatively affected by the great bounty that they will have when they settle in the Land. The Torah states, "Take care lest you forget Hashem, your G-d, by not observing His commandments, His Ordinances, and His Decrees, which I commanded you today..." The Torah is warning that one may come to forget Hashem as a result of prosperity. After one has achieved great success he may say, "My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth!" This is something to which every human being is susceptible. When one experiences great success, one wishes to attribute his accomplishments to his own initiative. This will ultimately lead to one's downfall.

By attributing one's success to oneself and not to G-d, he is assuming a position that is quantifiable because he and his success are one in the same. By taking on this persona he is allowing himself to be susceptible to the ayin ha'rah, because he has equated his success to himself. However, if on the other hand one attributes his success to Hashem's blessing, which is unrelated to himself but rather to an unlimited source, he is not subject to the ayin ha'rah. He is not the basis for his success.

There is a Positive Commandment to accept upon oneself the yichud (unity) of Hashem twice a day. This is brought about through the recitation of the Shema in the morning and in the evening. The mitzvah of declaring the unity of Hashem is in actuality a declaration that everything emanates from Him because all existence exists only because of His Will. There is nothing in existence that is not directly connected to Hashem. The essence of everything is "echad" which is the concept of unity. If one truly internalizes the reality that his very existence and all he possesses are only because G-d Wills them, then one cannot be affected by the ayin ha'rah.

Torah states in the Book of Devarim (Portion of Ki Savo), "Hashem will remove all illness from you." In Tractate Bava Metzia, Rav explains that this verse is referring to the removal of the ayin ha'rah. When G-d will remove the ayin ha'rah from the Jewish people, they will no longer be subject to illness. The

susceptibility to all illness begins with the evil eye. When will Hashem remove "all illness" (the evil eye)? The Torah states that it will be removed only when the Jewish people observe and study the Torah and walk the proper path. When one lives his life as prescribed by the Torah one understands that everything emanates from Hashem. The Zohar states, "Yisroel, Torah, and Hashem are all intermingled (are one entity)." Thus, if one has an appreciation of this concept that is stated by the Zohar then one will not be susceptible to the ayin ha'rah.

2. The Shabbos Experience

The Torah states, "Hashem said to Moshe saying, "You shall speak to the Children of Israel, saying, However, you must observe My Sabbaths, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations, to know that I am Hashem, Who makes you holy..." Rashi explains in his commentary "a sign between Me and you" means that Shabbos is a sign of greatness which indicates to the nations of the world that Hashem has chosen the Jewish people by giving them His day of rest.

The Gemara in Tractate Beiah says that if one gives a gift, he must inform the recipient who the benefactor is. (Rashi explains the reason for this is to increase love among Jews). The Gemara cites an example of this, which occurred when Hashem told Moshe to tell the Jewish people about the Shabbos. The Gemara states, "I want you to tell the Jewish people that I have a hidden treasure in my treasury which is the Shabbos that I am giving to them." The Gemara asks, "The gift of Shabbos was already transmitted to the Jewish people in Marah (before the giving of the Torah at Sinai) - if so what gift was Hashem referring to when he told Moshe to inform the Jewish people about the Shabbos?" The Gemara answers that the precious gift that G-d was referring to was not the Shabbos itself but the reward that they would merit for observing it. This explanation seems to be difficult to understand because reward is a consequence of every mitzvah and one of the tenets of Jewish belief is the principle of reward and punishment. Therefore, what is so special about the merit of the Shabbos?

The Midrash tells us that every day of the week has its "mate." For example, the mate of the First Day (Sunday) is the Second Day (Monday). The Midrash asks, "What is the mate of Shabbos?" Chazal answer that the Jewish people are its mate. How do we understand this? Shabbos is a day and we are a people. What is the meaning that we are the "counterpart" to the Seventh Day, which is the Shabbos? One may answer that since the Shabbos is a day that is innately holy and the Jewish people are innately holy, then it is logical to say that they are "mates."

The Yalkut says that the Mishkan was a microcosm of creation/existence. Everything that is in existence was reflected in the structure of the Mishkan. The Midrash tells us that Menorah itself (which is a source of light and radiance) corresponds to the Seventh Day of Creation when G-d entered into existence and caused it to radiate. This is represented through the light of the Menorah. The basis for the sanctity of the Shabbos is not that Hashem merely "sanctified" it as one consecrates an offering, but rather, the sanctity of the Shabbos emanates from G-d permeating it

with His Presence.

The Talmud tells us that the Shabbos day is a semblance of the World to Come. The World to Come is a state of being in which one's relationship with G-d is based on his spiritual worthiness. The greater the worthiness the more one is able to cleave to the Omnipotent Being - Hashem Himself. Thus, one who experiences the Shabbos properly experiences a degree of intimacy with Hashem, which is the essence of the World to Come. Shabbos radiates with the same holiness that was present at Sinai. Hashem descends into existence every Shabbos and imbues it with His holiness. With this understanding, we are able to appreciate the meaning of Shabbos being "a sign" between Hashem and the Jewish people so that the world should understand their specialness.

The only way a Jew has relevance to this relationship with Hashem is if he observes the Shabbos properly - as a day of rest. If one does not, it is the equivalent of disgracing Hashem's Presence. Engaging in creative activity (any of the 39 classifications of creative activity) on Shabbos is the antithesis of the representation of the essence of the day. The desecration of the Shabbos is a disregard and an affront to G-d Himself and is therefore punishable by death.

On the Shabbos one must light a minimum of two lights, which correspond to the "Zachor (You Shall Remember the Shabbos) and Shamor (You shall observe the Shabbos)" which are found in both sets of Tablets. The kindling of light is in honor of the Shechina (Divine Presence). It is when the Shabbos lights are kindled (which is a representation of the "Zachor and the Shamor") that one becomes a beneficiary of G-d's Presence.

We are now able to understand the Gemara in Beiah, which says that Hashem told Moshe to inform the Jewish people about the merit and reward of the Shabbos. The reward of Shabbos is not something for which one needs to wait to experience in another dimension of time; rather, the Shabbos itself (which is G-d's Presence imbuing existence) is the reward.

3. How Does One Recognize Opportunity?

The Torah tells us that Moshe informed the Klal Yisroel (the Jewish people) that he was going to ascend to heaven to receive the Torah on their behalf and that he would return after forty days. Due to a misunderstanding, the Jewish people miscalculated and believed that Moshe was not meant to return. They thought he had passed away. Because of their sense of insecurity (being left without a leader to guide them), the rabble took the initiative and made a Golden Calf. They said to the Jewish people, "This is your G-d that took you out of Egypt."

At that moment when the Jews engaged in the Chet Ha Agle (sin of the Golden Calf), Hashem said to Moshe, "You must go down because your people who you have taken out from Egypt have become corrupt." Rashi cites Chazal who explain, "You must go down" means that Moshe must descend to a lower status because his only worthiness for that special relationship with G-d was that he represented the Jewish people. Now that the Jewish people themselves were no longer worthy (because of the Golden Calf), Moshe was lowered.

The Midrash explains that the reason Hashem used the term "your people" rather than "My people" is because He is referring to the erev rav - the rabble who were permitted to accompany the Jews out of Egypt as a result of Moshe's consent. This was considered a failing on the part of Moshe because he did not consult with Hashem prior to the Exodus. He justified his decision that it was for the sake of bringing people who were pagans under the wings of the Divine Presence, i.e. conversion. If Moshe could have consulted with G-d beforehand, then why did he not do so?

The Gemara in Tractate Nedarim tells us that one of the reasons the Jewish people were exiled and enslaved in Egypt was because Avraham, our Patriarch, had an opportunity to convert a group of pagans to monotheism and he did not. After Avraham's victory over the four mightiest kings who had taken the Sodomites captive, the King of Sodom approached Avraham and said, "Give me the people and the possessions shall be yours." Avraham's response to the King of Sodom was, "I will not take from you as much as a thread or a bootstrap." At this moment, Avraham, as the victor, had the opportunity to take the people of Sodom and convert them from paganism to monotheism, but he did not. Hashem said to Avraham, "Just as you have allowed these people to remain pagans, and not bring them under the wings of the Divine Presence your children in the future will be put in a situation that will allow them to become pagans." (Measure for measure.)

Moshe, as the Redeemer of the Jewish people, understood that the atonement for the sin of Avraham was finally completed after the 210 years of exile and bondage. Appreciating the initial failing of Avraham that brought about the Egyptian experience, Moshe was not about to repeat the same mistake. Moshe was now in a position to either reject the rabble of Egypt or accept and allow them to become part of a monotheistic people. The obvious choice was to convert them. If Moshe's justification for his decision was so cogent and obviously correct then why did Hashem rebuke him?

Moshe and Avraham's situations cannot be compared. When Hashem chastised Avraham for missing the opportunity to convert the Sodomites to monotheism, the Jewish people did not yet exist. It was a time when the world was totally paganistic. Thus, there was no justification for Avraham not to convert these people to monotheism. However, regarding the rabble of Egypt, their conversion to monotheism as part of the Jewish people would introduce a foreign element that could undermine the spirituality of the Klal Yisroel. Therefore, Moshe's choice without consulting with Hashem was considered a failing. This is why Hashem refers to the rabble as, "your people" to indicate that Moshe carries the full responsibility for their behavior.

From Moshe's failing, we are able to understand that regardless of how valuable it is to influence others in a positive manner ...

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... we be to consult with Torah sages before making decisions that could affect the spirituality of our family and community.

4. How is One Endowed with Torah Knowledge?

The Torah tells us that Moshe Rabbeinu ascended to heaven for forty days and forty nights to receive the Torah. Moshe was taught the Torah in its entirety by Hashem during this period. Scripture tells us regarding the Torah, "There is no end to the breadth and depth of Torah." Midrash tells us that during this forty-day period Hashem would teach Moshe the Torah in its entirety every day. At the end of each day, Moshe would forget all that Hashem had taught him. This process was repeated consecutively for thirty-nine days. On the fortieth day, Moshe retained the Torah that He was taught. What lesson is Hashem teaching Moshe through this forty-day process of learning and forgetting? If G-d had wanted Moshe to retain the Torah in its entirety, he would have been able to so.

We find the number forty reoccurring continuously throughout the Torah. The number forty signifies the completion of a process. For example, at the time of the Great Flood, the Torah tells us that it rained for forty days and nights. Only after forty days when the mountain peaks were seen did Noah send out the raven to see if the world was habitable. The Jewish people wandered in the desert for a period of forty years before entering into the Promised Land. It is a forty-day process from the time of conception for life to begin. Identically, only after a forty-day study period was Moshe able to retain the Torah that was taught to him by G-d. What was the significance of Moshe's forgetting the Torah for thirty-nine consecutive days and retaining it only after the fortieth? G-d should have taught Moshe the Torah in its entirety over the forty-day period.

The Gemara in Tractate Nedarim tells us based on a verse in the Torah, "The Torah itself is a gift of G-d." In other words, the Torah is a gift from G-d to the Jewish people. The Gemara asks - why did the most profound and momentous event in history, the giving of the Torah, take place in a location of total desolation - the desert? One would think that such an important occasion would have taken place on a grander and a more aesthetically pleasing location. Why did G-d choose the desert?

The Gemara explains that in order for one to be worthy of receiving and comprehending Hashem's gift - the Torah. One must allow himself to become as "desolate" as the desert. Meaning, one must be agreeable to negating himself and selflessly dedicating himself to its study. One must assume the characteristic of humility. If one is able to achieve this level of humility and self-negation then one is worthy of receiving Hashem's gift - the Torah. One's innate intelligence and ability are not the primary consideration in one's ability to achieve the spiritual grasp of Torah. The Torah is a gift of G-d and not merely a process of accumulating information based on one's intellect. The Torah itself is a spiritual entity; it is G-d's Wisdom. Therefore, its acquisition is contingent on one's spiritual level.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (The Ethics of Our Fathers) tells us, that there are forty-eight criteria that must be met for one to become a "vessel" that has the capacity to acquire and retain the Torah. This again reiterates the fact that understanding and retention of Torah is not determined by one's intellectual capacity but rather it is a gift of G-d that is only granted to one who is spiritually worthy.

The Gemara in Tractate Megillah states that if one says that he has toiled in Torah and has "found it"

(the understanding of what he was studying) he is to be believed. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin z'tl points out that the Gemara should have used the term "understood" rather than "found." Why does the Gemara use the term "found?" He answers that the understanding of the Torah is not solely an intellectual process but rather a gift endowed to the person who toils sufficiently. This was the lesson that was taught to Moshe during his forty-day stay in heaven.

5. How Does one Merit G-d's Protection

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos, (Ethics of Our Fathers), states "The world stands on three principles: Torah (Torah study), Avodah (Offerings/tefillah), and Gemilas Chasadim (acts of loving kindness)."

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos explains that the three daily prayer services (shacharis, mincha, aarvis) correspond to the daily communal offerings (timeedim) that were brought in the Temple. Shacharis (the morning prayer service) corresponds to the tamid shel shachar (the morning communal offering). Mincha (the afternoon prayer service) corresponds to the tamid shel bein ha'arbaim (the communal afternoon offering). Aarvis (the evening prayer service) corresponds to the burning of the fats and the limbs that were burnt on the altar at night.

Today that we no longer have the Bais HaMikdash to offer the communal sacrifices, tefillah (prayer) is equivalent to the Avodah of the Temple. We read in Shema, "You shall serve Hashem b'chol l'vavchem (with all your heart)." The Gemara asks, "What is the service of the heart? - It is tefillah (prayer)." Even though the Bais HaMikdash was available for all nations to come and pray, and is referred to as "a house of prayer for all nations," nevertheless, the power of the Jewish people is derived through their verbal expression, which is tefillah, and the study of Torah. The Torah states, "Ha kol kol Yaakov v'ha yadayim yidei Esav (the voice is the voice of Yaakov, the hands are the hands of Esav)." Yitzhak our Patriarch had given this blessing to his son Yaakov. "The voice of Yaakov" is referring to Torah study and tefillah, which is an expression of the "voice." Chazal explain that as long as the Jewish people engage with their "voice," as the "voice" of Yaakov, (symbolic of Torah study), and then the hands will not be the hands of Esav. Meaning, that Esav will not have the ability to dominate, detract, or threaten the Jewish people. However, if the Jews do not properly utilize their voice for Torah study and tefillah, then the hands will be the hands of Esav. Meaning we will fall victim to the oppression and cruelty of Esav - G-d forbid.

In these difficult times, every Jew needs to understand his ability to affect the world. The tefillos (prayers) of the Jewish people are essential and offer greater protection than the weaponry. If G-d is responds to our beseeching and watches over us, we have nothing to fear. The Gemara in Tractate Bava Basra tells us that if a community needs to build a wall to protect its city, the Torah sages of that community are not obligated to participate financially. The Talmud cites a verse to support this position, which states, "The Torah itself is the wall." Meaning, one who possesses Torah is protected. The security of the Jewish people is the study of Torah.

The opening blessings of the Amidah (silent prayer) are those of praise. In the first blessing, we

identify Hashem as "The G-d of Avraham, G-d of Yitzchak, and G-d of Yaakov; the great, the mighty, and the awesome...etc." In addition, we say, "Who recalls the kindness of the Patriarchs..." Meaning Hashem is not only identified as "the great, mighty, etc." but is also the One who remembers the kindness of the Patriarchs "and brings a Redeemer to their children's children, for His Name's sake, with love." Just as He is great, mighty, and awesome, He is the One who brings the Redeemer to the Jewish people. This not a prediction of the future but refers to one of the characteristics of G-d.

We say in Ashrei (Psalm 145), "Hashem protects those who love Him; but all the wicked He will destroy." If the verse concludes - that Hashem will destroy the wicked - should it not have begun with Hashem will protect the righteous? This is not the case. Instead, it begins - Hashem protects the ones who love him. When a person "loves" he is motivated by his love and not because he is obligated. The only one who merits Hashem's protection is the one who loves Hashem.

However, if someone does not have that innate feeling of love towards G-d, how does he achieve it? In the Laws of the Foundation of Torah, Ramban states that there is a Positive Commandment to love G-d and asks - if one does not have that feeling of love how does one come to that level? He states, that if a person recognizes the awesomeness of G-d through seeing his creation, he will be overwhelmed. This will generate within him a sense of love. Regardless of all that we have, when we see our own limitations in terms of security and material things, we begin to realize that everything is in the hands of G-d. If one understands and appreciates that he is a beneficiary of G-d's goodness, this realization will also generate a sense of love out of seeing His concern for us; thus, we will merit His protection. As King David says in psalms - "G-d protects those who love him." our relationship is eternal because He initially demonstrated His love and affection for us. Copyright © =Year by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky and Torah.org

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