

THE ESSENCE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. The Essence of the Jewish People

The Torah states regarding the kosher species that one is permitted to eat, "Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aaron, saying to them: Speak to the Children of Israel saying: zos ha'chaya - These are the creatures that you may eat from among the animals that are upon the earth." The Torah uses the term "chaya (creature)" to include all kosher species - both domesticated and undomesticated. Normally, the word "chaya" identifies undomesticated species in particular. Why does the Torah choose it in order to identify the kosher species? Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the word "chaya" is derived from the word "chaim," which means "life". The Midrash continues, "Since the Jewish people are attached to G-d and have the capacity to cleave to Him, who is the source of life (chaim), they must be separated from contamination in order to maintain the proper level of spirituality. Hashem only commanded the Jewish people to observe His mitzvos unlike other nations who do not have that capacity to cleave to Him."

The Yalkut cites a verse in Chavakuk, "Hashem evaluated the land..." The Midrash explains, "Hashem evaluated all the nations of the world and did not find any of them qualified to receive the Torah, except for the Jewish people." The Yalkut cites an allegory from Reb Shimon Bar Yochi, which explains the difference between the Jewish people and the nations of the world: "A donkey and a dog were both given loads to carry on their back. The donkey was given five loads while the dog only two. The dog began to bark frantically and one of the two loads was removed from him and given to the donkey. However, the dog continued to bark until his entire load was removed and given to the donkey. So too the nations of the world had said, "Let the Jews assume responsibility for the Seven Noachide Laws."

The Yalkut explains why the Jew is restricted with dietary laws while the non-Jew is not. It is analogous to the doctor who has two sick patients. One patient has the ability to recover while the other is terminally ill. The patient who can recover is prescribed a diet indicating what he is permitted to eat and what he should not eat. However, the doctor allows the terminally ill patient to eat anything that his heart desires because there is no hope for recovery. So too the non-Jew, who has no share in the world to come, is told that all food items are permitted to him. However, the Jew, who is destined for the world to come, is restricted and can only eat species, which conform to G-d's dictate. The Jew has relevance to the world to come while the non-Jew does not.

The Gemara in Tractate Avoda Zorah says that at the end of time G-d will announce to the world that

whoever has a share in Torah should come and receive their reward. All the nations will respond by saying that each of them is deserving for his own contribution to Torah. However, each nation will be rejected because there is no basis for their claim. Ultimately, the nations will lodge a claim against G-d that He favored the Jewish people over them. G-d will respond and refute their claim. However, because they will not feel valued by G-d, He will want to vindicate Himself in their eyes. Therefore, He will present a mitzvah opportunity to the nations of the world in order to be vindicated from their claim, thus, proving to them that there is no basis or consideration for any level of reward. Although the nations of the world have no relevance to chaim (the spiritual realm), nevertheless they were offered the Torah so that they should not have a claim in the future.

Before the giving of the Torah at Sinai all humanity was classified as Noachides, including the Jewish people. Therefore, why did the Jewish people have a relevance to the spirituality of the Torah when the nations of the world did not? The linkage of the Jewish people pre-Sinai can be traced through spiritual genealogy back to our Patriarchs Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. They developed and honed within themselves a spirituality that was unique and special, to the point that they became G-d's representation in this existence. It is because of our Patriarch's attachment to Hashem that we are their spiritual heirs. We find that their spirituality was so advanced that G-d identifies Himself as the G-d of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov.

The Gemara tells us in Tractate Yivamos that there are certain characteristics that are innate in every Jew. On a natural basis, every Jew "has compassion/mercy, shame/conscience, and does acts of loving kindness." These special characteristics were inherited from our Patriarch Avraham who perfected each one of them within himself. Thus, it is not coincidental that the Jewish people chose to accept the Torah unequivocally at Sinai. It was because of spirituality that we had inherited that gave us relevance to that exceptional level of clarity.

Ruth, the Moabite, who converted to be a Jew, is the Matriarch of the Davidic line. Ruth was the daughter of Eglone (the King of Moav). How did he merit having such a special daughter?

The Gemara in Tractate Nazir tells us that Ruth's grandfather Balak had built seven altars on which he had sacrificed forty-nine offerings to G-d. This was done through the instruction of Bilaam (the prophet of the nations of the world) to enable him to curse and destroy the Jewish people. Although the motive for bringing the offerings was to destroy the Jewish people, nevertheless Hashem rewarded Balak with a special descendent, Ruth (who became the grandmother of King David), because the sacrifices were brought to G-d and not to a deity. Ruth's capacity for spirituality did not come to her naturally because she was not a Jewess. It was only because of the actions of her grandfather that she merited having that special ability.

2. Appreciating the Value of Offspring

The Torah in the Portion of Tazria discusses the woman who conceives and gives birth to a male or female child. The Midrash cites an allegory for one to appreciate the process from conception

through pregnancy until the birth of the child. The allegory tells us of one who in secrecy had given a purse filled with silver coins to another for safekeeping. When the owner of the purse returns to claim his purse of coins from the custodian, who was responsible for its safekeeping, he discovers that the purse is no longer filled with silver coins but rather gold coins. The Midrash asks rhetorically, "Is it not logical to say that the one who receives gold coins in the place of silver coins should be beholden to the one who replaced his coins? The same is true with G-d. At the time of conception, the sperm is but an insignificant white droplet. In a concealed location, the droplet fertilizes the ovum and miraculously develops into a fully developed child who appears in full view. Is this not something that is praiseworthy?"

The Midrash is conveying to us that when one has a child he must be appreciative and understand what was given to him in the place of what was invested. It is the equivalent (and even more so) to one who gives silver coins and receives in exchange gold coins. How beholden should one be to Hashem?

Every day upon rising we say, "I gratefully thank You, O living and eternal King, for You have returned my soul within me with compassion - abundant is Your faithfulness." When one makes this declaration upon awakening, does he truly feel beholden to G-d for restoring his soul (bringing him back to life)? Or is it only a perfunctory recitation of words with little meaning. If one were to go to sleep wondering if he would awake, it is assured that he would express this thankfulness with a sense of gratitude. It is only because we take for granted and assume without question that we will awaken. Therefore, there is no sense of gratitude, although in reality, we are aware that we are alive only because of Hashem's Kindness. Similarly, if one would appreciate the miracle of birth, in terms of what G-d had given him, rather than understanding it as a natural process, one would be beholden to great degree.

The Gemara states in Tractate Sanhedrin, "The child brings merit to his father (parents)." Terach, the father of Avraham our Patriarch, was evil and wished destroy his own son Avraham because he rejected paganism. Despite his evil, the Gemara tells us that Terach has a share in the world to come in the merit of his son Avraham.

The Talmud tells us that a father has an obligation to teach his son Torah and to implement those teaching when the son is capable of performing. [When the child reaches the age when he is able to wave the lulav (the four species taken on Sukkos), the father has an obligation to provide the lulav for his child to fulfill this mitzvah.] At the bar mitzvah of one's son, the father recites a blessing at the Torah, "I am absolved from being punished for the sins of my son." Raising a child with proper values and teachings, has infinite value vis-à-vis the parents.

If one's child lives his life in accordance with the Torah, then the child's merits accrue to the parents -even if the parent is personally undeserving (as we see with Avraham and his father Terach). One's gratitude and beholdenness to Hashem must be unlimited because the gift of a child to parents gives

them the opportunity to have unlimited merit accrue on their behalf through their offspring. The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that if a child (as a minor) responds "amen" only one time, it is sufficient to assure the child a place in the world to come. Therefore, the parent is also assured a place in the world to come because of that child.

A non-Jew has an obligation to procreate; however, it is not similar to the obligation of the Jew. The obligation of procreation for the non-Jew is so that the earth should be populated and not remain empty. Yet, the obligation of procreation for the Jew is the mitzvah of "pru u'rvu." Rambam writes that when one fulfills this mitzvah, one should have in mind that he wants to bring forth children who will be tzaddikim (devoutly righteous people).

The Midrash is only addressing the level of gratitude that one should have simply for being given a fully developed child, who came into existence from an insignificant droplet of semen. However, one's debt of gratitude is endlessly greater when one understands the value that children contribute on a spiritual plane.

3. What is the Essence of Man?

Dovid (King David) states in Tehillim (Psalms), "After and before I was developed/formed..." The Midrash explains the word "after" is referring to the creation of man, which occurred after all other living species. Although sequentially, man came about at the end of creation, regarding punishment, he is the first to be punished because he is culpable for his behavior. If a person succeeds in life by following the way of Torah then he did precede all creation. As it is stated in the Torah, "The spirit of G-d hovered over the water." Chazal explain that "the spirit" is referring to the neshama (soul) which pre-existed physical existence. However if a person does not succeed in life because he rejected the path of the Torah, indulging in physicality as a totally physical being, then it is said to him, "the flea preceded you." Meaning, the person who did not fulfill the purpose of his essence has less prominence (vis-à-vis physical existence) than the flea because the flea preceded him in the order of creation. Since G-d created the flea before man, it is evident that He valued it on a physical basis more than man. How do we understand this?

It is stated in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers), "If one (continuously) considers three things he will never come to sin: from where do you come, to where you are going, and before whom you will stand and be judged." "From where do you come" refers to the fact that man emanates from "a droplet of putrid semen." "To where you are going" refers to the ultimate end of every person -to a location of dust and maggots. "Before whom you will stand and be judged" refers to the day of reckoning when one will stand before Hashem, King of King and be judged for all of one's actions (there is nothing forgotten or overlooked). If one considers these matters continuously, he will never sin.

Why does the Mishna use the term "putrid" vis-à-vis the droplet of semen? Usually, putrid refers to something that is decaying, which is not the case regarding the semen since it develops into a child.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that there was a discussion between Reb Yehudah HaNasi (Judah the Prince) and Antoninus (the Roman Emperor). Antoninus asked Reb Yehudah HaNasi, "When does the neshama enter into the child? Is it at the time of conception or the time of formation (forty days later)?" Reb Yehudah HaNasi responded that the neshama enters the child at the time of formation. To this Antoninus responded, "How could that be? We know that if a piece of meat is left unattended for three days it will become putrid. Identically if the semen is not infused with the soul immediately it will become putrid and no life could emanate from it." Reb Yehudah HaNasi acknowledged the position of Antoninus. Now we can understand why the Mishna refers to the droplet as "putrid" rather than only as "a droplet" when it mentions man's origination.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos is communicating that the human being is not merely a physical being to indulge in physicality. If one would take the position that his function and purpose is purely physical then there is no need for a soul (neshama). If this is the case, then the droplet of semen through which he was conceived should have putrefied and not brought about life- as Antoninus responded to Reb Yehudah. Thus if a man considers from where he emanates, he must acknowledge and understand that his mission is one of a spiritual nature. If one fully understands and internalizes this fact, in addition to the other two mentioned in the Mishna, he will not come to sin.

All physical existence (even the flea) was created before man. However, since all existence was created only as a means to accommodate man's spirituality, being created last only magnifies the prominence of the human being. Rabbeinu Bachya explains that just as one first prepares the blue print to build a house and only after it is fully built according to design is it occupied by its owner, so too Hashem created all existence and only introduced man into it when it was ready to accommodate his needs. This is only the case if man utilizes existence as G-d had intended it to be utilized. However if one lives his life as a purely physical being, not valuing his spirituality, then the flea, which preceded man (sequentially) indicates that it has greater value. Man is only the most valuable component of creation if he functions as he was intended to - as a spiritual being.

4. The Human Being - a Composite of Physical and Spiritual

The Torah tells us that the Kohen is the only person qualified for evaluating lesions and determining whether they are leprous or not. The pronouncement of the Kohen of either "tamei - contaminated" or "tahor- pure" determines the status of that individual. If the Kohen pronounces the person as contaminated then he is classified as a leper and must be sent out of all the camps of Israel. He must remain there in a solitary state and is not permitted to interact with other individuals. In order for the leper to be reinstated into the camp of Israel, the lesion must heal and only then can the Kohen pronounce him as "pure" to be reinstated. The Gemara tells us that the cause of tzaras (leprosy) is lashon hara (evil speech).

The Commentators explain that the leprosy discussed in the Torah is not the degenerative disease that we know as leprosy, but rather it is a lesion of a particular color that develops on the skin. The

leprosy discussed in the Torah no longer exists. It is interesting to note that the Gemara in Tractate Shabbos states, "There is no death without sin." Meaning, spiritual deficiencies manifest themselves in the degeneration of one's physical well-being. This is true regarding every sin except for lashon hara, which does not cause a breakdown of the physical but only a discoloration of the skin. When the tzaras lesion develops it is a confirmation from G-d that this person has failed in the area of lashon hara. Why should the sin of lashon hara manifest itself differently than other spiritual failings?

The Gemara in Tractate Taanis tells us that at the end of time the animals of the forest will put the snake on trial. They will say in an accusatory manner to the snake, "The lion tramples its prey and devours it to satisfy its hunger. The bear kills its prey and takes it back to its den to devour it. Each creature kills and devours its prey to satisfy its hunger and maintain its existence; however, you (the snake) bite your victim and slither away without necessarily consuming it. What benefit do you have from victimizing your victim?" The snake responds, "Why should I be more culpable than man who speaks lashon hara?" The person who speaks lashon hara also victimizes his victim without having any physical benefit. The snake continues by saying, "Why should I be vilified more than the human being? Why is my failing greater than his?" Why is the need to satisfy one's desire to speak lashon hara any less than a need to want to satisfy his physical desire?

A human being is a composite of the physical and the spiritual. The body represents the animal. All the animalistic drives emanate from the physicality of the human being. The soul (neshama) is the spirituality of the human being. The neshama has no interest in anything unless it has some relevance to spirituality. Therefore, when one fails spiritually and sins, it is attributed to the physicality of the person - not the spirituality. The claim the animals of the forest against the snake was that its need is not found within the animal makeup. The animal drive has relevance only to satisfy a physical need - not some other level of satisfaction. Thus, the snake's desire to bite its victim and slither off without having any physical benefit is an anathema. It is something that is intrinsically evil. We can understand the snake's response to be, "I am no more culpable than the human being who speaks lashon hara, which does not emanate from his physicality, because it is something that has no relevance to the animal."

Since lashon hara does not emanate from the physical (animalistic) need, its consequences do not manifest themselves in a typically physical nature. Thus, the lesion is not something that is degenerative, but rather it is only an indicator that there is a serious spiritual deficiency. The Gemara in Tractate Taanis tells us that Torah itself can be either a "Potion of Life" or a "Potion of Death". If one studies the Torah for its own sake (l'shma) it is a life potion. On the other hand if one studies the Torah not for its own sake (as Tosfos explains with an evil or sinister intent to undermine another), then it is a death potion. Torah studied with the sinister intent has a commonality with lashon hara. Just as lashon hara does not emanate from the physical but rather from something inherently evil in the person, identically Torah studied with a sinister intent is unrelated to the physical but emanates from the same evil within the person.

If one would recognize his own failings, he would not speak negatively about another individual. The only reason one does speak lashon hara is because he does not appreciate and understand to what degree he himself is flawed. As a spiritual being, a person does focus on the positive aspects of another. When one speaks lashon hara it impacts most seriously on his spirituality as we explained because of where it emanates from - he must be sent out of all the camps. He only returns and is reinstated when he reflects and introspects regarding his failings.

5. The Consequence of Recognizing One's Failing

The Torah states regarding the person who develops a lesion resembling that of leprosy, "The Kohen must see him..." Sforno explains in his commentary that the contaminated or pure status of the mitzora can only come about through the pronouncement of the Kohen. The qualification of the Kohen is based on a verse in Malachi, "The lips of the Kohen are the keepers of the daas (wisdom/Torah)." After the Kohen pronounces the individual as tamei (contaminated), he instructs the leper how to introspect and reflect on his behavior because tzaras (leprosy) only comes about because of a spiritual failing. The Kohen instructs him to pray that his teshuvah (repentance) should be received by G-d and the Kohen will pray on his behalf as well. The Talmud tells us that tzaras is a "Mizbeach kapara - an altar of atonement." The state of leprosy sensitizes the person to appreciate his failing and make the proper corrections. When the individual is pronounced a leper, he is sent outside of all the camps.

After the person is pronounced to be a leper and is sent out of all the camps, the Torah states, "And the person with tzaras in whom there is the affliction - his garments shall be torn, the hair on his head shall be unshorn, and he shall cloak himself up to his lips; he is to call out "Contaminated! Contaminated!" Rashi explains that he must conduct himself as one who is in a state of mourning. The leper becomes a pariah and is not permitted to return to the camp until his recovery. This entire process is to cause the leper to appreciate the wrong that he has done and to allow him to atone for it.

The Chofetz Chaim writes in his work Shmiras HaLashon (Guarding One's Tongue), that when Moshe was engaged in dialogue with G-d at the burning bush, he had said regarding the Jewish people, "They will not listen to me. They will not believe me." Hashem said to Moshe to throw his staff on the ground and it became a snake. Then Moshe was told to put his hand onto his chest area and it became leprous. The symbolism of the snake and the leprosy was to communicate to Moshe that firstly he assumed the posture of the snake by speaking lashon hara against the Jewish people. Secondly, his hand becoming leprous demonstrated that tzaras is the consequence of speaking lashon hara.

The Chofetz Chaim explains that Hashem said to Moshe to take hold of the tail of the snake, and Moshe did so immediately. When Moshe took hold of its tail, the snake reverted into a staff. Usually taking hold of the tail of a snake leaves one more susceptible for being bitten; however, Moshe took

hold of the tail without hesitation. Moshe did so because he fully appreciated and understood that he had sinned by speaking lashon hara, thus he wished to atone immediately. Because he fully recognized his failing he was not bitten by the snake, rather it reverted back to a staff - indicating that he had been atoned. The Chofetz Chaim concludes based on this that recognition and admission of one's spiritual failing is in itself a basis for atonement.

We find this also to be the case regarding the brothers of Yosef. The Torah tells us that Yosef's brothers realized that their difficulties in Egypt were not due to the accusations of the Viceroy of Egypt but to Hashem meting out Justice for their past spiritual failing. Initially when they had sold their brother Yosef into slavery they were convinced that they had acted correctly. However, their difficulties in Egypt caused them to realize their misconception. This realization was their atonement.

The way one silences prosecution (from satan) is to acknowledge one's guilt. If the prosecutor is prosecuting and one admits his own guilt, the prosecutor has no reason to prosecute any longer. Judgment comes about because of prosecution.

The Rabbis legislated that whenever (G-d forbid) tragedies come upon a Jew, he must say the blessing of, "Baruch Dayan HaEmes - Blessed is the True Judge!" One must understand that his difficulties are not because of physical matters, economic conditions, or anything other than G-d's Judgment because of his own spiritual failing. When one declares "Baruch Dayan HaEmes," he is acknowledging that Judgment of G-d is truthful and is thereby admitting his failing. If a person truly internalized this fact he would silence prosecution against him and be atoned. This is similar to the leper introspecting and thus recognizing his failing through the instruction of the Kohen. The Rabbis understood the value of acknowledging this reality. Therefore, they enacted the recitation of "Baruch Dayan HaEmes."

Thus, if one experiences difficulties, the sooner he acknowledges and recognizes the basis for his problem, the sooner he will recover. It is the recognition of the problem that initiates the rehabilitation. Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky and **Torah.org**.

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