

THE SECRET OF THE SURVIVAL OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE AS THE CHOSEN

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

The Torah states, "Hashem said to Moshe: Say to the Kohanim..." The Midrash cites a verse from Psalms, " King David writes, 'The statements of G'd are statements of purity....' To what is this referring? All the commandments that G'd had given to the Jewish people are for their state of holiness and purity."

Chazal tell us that before Adam had eaten from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, he was able to see from one end of the world to the other because he was the handiwork of G'd. Due to his dimension of holiness there was nothing that was occluded from his vision and understanding. He radiated an exceptional level of holiness. Initially the angels sang the praises of G'd to Adam confusing his radiance with that of G'd Himself. After he had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, death was pronounced upon him and he was driven from the Garden of Eden. His unique dimension of spirituality and radiance was fully compromised. Thus, he was diminished because he introduced evil into himself and existence. Adam had forfeited his stature as the human being who was meant to have an intimate relationship with G'd.

It was not until the Jewish people had accepted the Torah at Sinai that they assumed the stature of Adam before the sin. At Sinai, the Jewish people became G'd's holy people who had the capacity to assume the sanctity and purity that was necessary to maintain a relationship with G'd. Whatever G'd chooses to associate Himself with, assumes a level of sanctity. The Jewish people were able to ascend to this lofty level and thus be qualified to be G'd's people because of what the holy Patriarchs Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov had perfected and infused into their own spirituality.

The Tree of Knowledge is quantified by the Torah as the "Tree of good and evil." Every aspect of evil that exists in the world emanates from the evil that was contained in the fruit of that tree. When Adam ate from the Tree, he brought evil into every aspect of his essence and all creation. In order to counter all the levels of evil that had permeated existence, G'd needed to give the Jewish people Positive and Negative Commandments. The Negative Commandments are to extricate and purge them from evil and the Positive Commandments are to sanctify them, thus qualifying them to cleave to G'd. Without the spiritual mechanisms that were presented to the Jewish people at Sinai, the Jew is no more than an intellectual animal that would be overwhelmed with the impurities of existence. It is only through the performance of the Negative and Positive Commandments that the Jewish people are able to be sanctified and purified in order to fulfill the objective of Creation.

Chazal tell us that the 248 Positive Commandments correspond to the 248 limbs of the human being and the 365 Negative commandments correspond to the 365 arteries and sinews. Meaning, the 613 mitzvos that were given to the Jewish people were intended to address and perfect the ever aspect of their being. Since the essence of man is "evil from the moment that he is cast from the womb of his mother" he needs to engage in the performance of mitzvos in order to sanctify himself. This is the meaning of the words of King David, "The statements of G'd are statements of purity...."

2. The Suppression of the Attribute of Justice

The Torah states, "When an ox or sheep or a goat is born..." These are the only three domesticated species that qualify to be brought as an offering. The Midrash states, "King David writes in Psalms, 'Your righteousness is like the mountains of G'd and Your judgment is as unfathomable as the depths of the water.' To what is 'Your righteousness is like the mountains of G'd...' referring? It is referring to the tzaddikim (devoutly righteous) who are the equivalent of mountains.... To what is 'Your judgment is as unfathomable as the depths' referring? It is referring to the evil. As it states regarding the drowning of the Egyptians, 'The depths of the water engulfed them...' As grass is able to grow upon the mountains so too are the righteous able to generate good deeds. Just as nothing can grow upon the depths of the water so too are the evil do not generate good deeds. Just as the vegetation upon the mountains brings forth fruits that are beneficial so too are the actions of the tzaddikim beneficial to themselves and to others..."

The Midrash continues, "Why do the depths of the waters not engulf and inundate the dry land? It is because the mountains keep the water suppressed so that it should not inundate the word. Similarly, the reason tragedy does not come upon existence is because of the righteous deeds of the tzaddikim..." The world continues to exist because of the good deeds of the tzaddikim. Conversely, the world is threatened by the misdeeds of the evil.

Initially G'd wanted to bring about existence within the context of the Attribute of Justice. However, because He saw that man was prone to failure, He coalesced His Attribute of Mercy with the Attribute of Justice. Had He not done so, the world would have ceased to exist due to man's spiritual failings. The reason the Attribute of Mercy is in effect and does not allow the Attribute of Justice to be invoked is because of the good deeds of the tzaddikim, thus allowing existence to continue. The tzaddik is not only credited for his good deeds that he had performed, but also he is credited for what he provides for the continuation of existence through the Attribute of Mercy. All the good that is continuously generated in the world is due to the performance of the tzaddik.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin states regarding the rebellious son, "(although the child has just entered into adulthood and is only thirteen years of age) It is better that he should be put to death in a more innocent state rather than in a more guilty state. The death of the evil is beneficial to himself and to the world. Why is this so? It is because when the evil one dies he no longer sins and can no longer bring harm upon the world. However when the tzaddik dies it is not good for him or the world.

It is not good for him because he no longer can generate good deeds and it is not good for the world because his deeds can no longer protect the world. Sleep and wine is good for the evil one. When he sleeps he does not sin. Conversely, sleep and wine are not good for the tzaddikim because when they are in a passive state they are not performing good deeds that benefit themselves and the world....The dispersion of the evil ones is good for them and the world because they cannot gather to encourage and support one another to perpetuate their evil. Conversely, dispersion is not good for the tzaddikim because in that context, they cannot support one another to do good deeds that benefit themselves and the world."

The Gemara in Tractate Succah tells us that if the nations of the world had understood the value of the Temple, they would have encircled and protected it with legions of soldiers. However, they destroyed it. It was because of the seventy bulls that were brought the festival of Succos on behalf of the seventy root nations of the world in the Temple that they received all their sustenance. Thus, the nations of the world were also beneficiaries of the service of the Temple.

It is written, "The tzaddik is the foundation for the existence of the world." It is not only the devoutly righteous who are beneficiaries of their own good deeds, it is also the entire Jewish people and the world that benefit from their accomplishments. The good deeds of the tzaddik prevent the Attribute of Justice from being evoked. Therefore, one must be beholden to the devoutly righteous because it is due to their actions that G'd's Mercy comes upon the world.

3. Seeing the Truth for What it Is

The Torah states, "...When you bring the Thanks Offering (Korban Todah)..." The Torah tells us that when one survives an extraordinary event one must bring a thanks offering to acknowledge that it was only because of G'd's Kindness that he was able to survive. The Mishna tell us that if one returns safely after traversing a desert or from sailing the high seas, or is released from prison, or recovers from a serious illness, or after a woman gives birth, one must acknowledge G'd through the recitation of "ha gomeil" which expresses one's recognition that it was only due to G'd's Will that he is alive.

The Midrash states, "...At the end of time all sacrifices will cease to be, except for the Thanks Offering, which will remain in effect forever. It is because the giving of thanks to G'd will not come to an end. As the Prophet Yirmiyah states , '...All will exclaim, 'G'd is good in His Kindness forever' and bring offerings of thanks in the House of G'd ...' King David writes in Psalms, '...I will pay thanks (in the plural).' We see that the verse expresses thanks in the plural and not the singular. Why is this so? One will bring the Thanks Offering predicated by one's expression of thanks to G'd."

Maharal of Prague in his commentary on the Megillah of Esther cites Chazal who state that Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) can also be interpreted as K' Purim (a day that has a semblance of Purim). Seemingly, one would think that these two days are the antithesis of one another. Yom Kippur is the most solemn day of the year, during which one fasts and is in a state of deprivation in

order to achieve atonement and rehabilitate one's spirituality. In contrast, Purim is a day of rejoicing, and feasting. How could these two days have any degree of similarity? Maharal explains that Yom Kippur is a day in which one is fully focused on repentance and atonement. Because one is removed from all the physical amenities that are normally required, one is able to achieve a level of clarity to understand and appreciate G'd and thus come to a state of remorse and to a commitment to do His Will in the future.

On Purim, the Jewish people also came to a level of exceptional clarity regarding their relationship with G'd. Although they had previously accepted the Torah at Sinai, it was done under duress because G'd had held the mountain over them. He gave them the ultimatum to accept the Torah or be buried under the mountain. However, on Purim, after realizing that G'd has saved them at the last moment from extinction, they reaffirmed their acceptance of the Torah out of love for G'd. They understood that G'd's intervention at that last moment was a demonstration of His unlimited love for them. This is the commonality between Yom Kippur and Purim. On both occasions, the Jewish people are able to achieve a unique level of clarity regarding G'd and His Kindness.

Maharal explains that the reason all offerings will be nullified at the end of time except for the thanks offering is because at that time truth will be unobscured. Thus, mankind will understand in retrospect, all events of the past. Mankind will understand and appreciate the Kindness of G'd in every aspect of existence. The Mishna in Tractate Berachos states, "Just as one blesses G'd for the good, so too must one bless Him for the bad (Dayan Ha'emes)." Even when one experiences tragedy one must understand that it is for his ultimate good. This must be acknowledged through a blessing as when one experiences good fortune. Although the text of the blessing for good fortune is not the same as that for tragedy, nevertheless in their essence there is no difference. They are both an acknowledgement that all is for the good. However, at the end of time, when all humanity will be endowed with a unique level of clarity, man will internalize the goodness of every event and thus not cease giving thanks to G'd and actualizing it through the thanks offering.

4. Unification, the Basis for Ascent

The Torah states regarding the festival of Succos, "You shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of the citron..." The Midrash explains, "The verse in Proverbs states, 'Listen My son! Take My mitzvos. My mitzvos should be hidden within you.' What is the meaning of 'Take (for yourself) My mitzvos?' I (G'd) have commanded you in many instances to take for yourselves a number of mitzvos. All these mitzvos were given to bring merit upon you. As it states, 'Take for yourself a Red Heifer...' Do you think that it was for My sake? Rather it is to purify you...It states, 'Take for Me Terumah (a portion)...' This too is for your benefit. It is so that I (the Omnipotent Being and Creator) should dwell in your midst. As it states, 'Make for Me a Sanctuary so that I may dwell amongst you.' It states, 'Take for yourselves pure pressed olive oil to kindle the light...' Do I need your light? Rather it is for protecting your soul. We see that the kindled light is compared to the soul. As it states, 'The flame of G'd is the soul of man...'"

It is interesting to note that the Gemara in Tractate in Bava Basra tells us that the light of the Menorah represents the oral law, which is the elucidation of written law. Thus, the soul of the Jew is invigorated and protected by engaging in Torah study. The Gemara in a number of locations states, "I (G'd) created the evil inclination. I created Torah as its antidote." The evil inclination of man is a natural part of his make-up; however, G'd gave the Jewish people the Torah to enable them to contend with their evil inclination. As King Solomon writes in Proverbs, "Neir mitzvah v'Torah ohr - the mitzvah is fuel and the Torah is the light/illuminator." Through the study of Torah, one gains clarity and thus is not misled and distracted by his evil inclination. Therefore, when G'd commanded the Jewish people to "take pure pressed olive oil..." it was to benefit their soul.

The Midrash continues, "And now I have commanded you to take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of the citron, the branches of date palms, twigs of a plaited tree and brook willows. For what do I need this? It is only to bring merit upon you. Why did G'd specifically choose these four species? One of the species produces fruit, the citron (esrog), which represents the tzaddikim who produce good deeds. The four species represent the four segments of the Jewish people: those who possess Torah and mitzvos, those with Torah and are lacking in mitzvos, those who possess mitzvos and do not have Torah, and those who are devoid of mitzvos and Torah. G'd says, 'You shall make yourselves into one bond that there should not be any blemish among any of My children. If you do as I instruct you, I will elevate you...' We see that if the Jewish people are unified, they will be elevated before G'd.

Rambam explains in the Laws of Repentance that if the majority of one's actions are good deeds, then he is classified as a tzaddik (devoutly righteous). However if the majority of one's actions are misdeeds, then he is classified as evil (rasha). This evaluation of "tzaddik" and "rasha" can only be made by G'd Himself.

It is written, "The tzaddik is the foundation for the existence of the world." If all the segments of the Jewish people are unified with the devoutly righteous, regardless of their number, the profile of that unity identifies with the tzaddik. It is because the accomplishments of the tzaddik overwhelm and overshadow all of the evil that was perpetuated. In contrast, if each segment of Jew is seen as separate and not unified, then each will be seen in its own context. Therefore, by unifying the Jewish people as one group that is represented by the four species on Succos, they will be judged favorably because "there is no impurity among My children."

5. The Two Mourning Periods on the Jewish Calendar

The Torah tells us that there is a mitzvah to count the days of the Omer from the second day of Passover until the festival of Shavuos. The Omer period is a time of mourning, during which one does not engage in celebration. The Gemara in Tractate Yevamos tells us that between the festival of Passover and Shavuos, 24,000 students of Rebbe Akiva passed away in a plague. They died over a 33-day period. Because of the magnitude of tragedy to the Jewish people, to have lost the

greatest Torah sages in a single period of time, it is the custom of Jews to observe a partial mourning period during the Omer that does not allow celebration.

There is another period of mourning, that is observed by the Jewish people for three weeks. It begins from the seventeenth day of the month of Tamuz and culminates with the ninth of the month of Av (Tisha B'Av). The week during which the ninth of Av occurs was legislated by Chazal to be a time of intense mourning to commemorate the destruction of the Holy Temples. We see that of the two periods of mourning on the Jewish Calendar are related to either the destruction of the Temple or the passing of the 24,000 Torah sages. There are no other times during the year that are periods of mourning, regardless of the tragedies that have occurred. Evidently, it is the loss of the Temple or the destruction of Torah which calls for grieving.

We conclude the Amidah (Silent Prayer), "May it be Your Will...that the Holy Temple be rebuilt, speedily in our days. Grant us our share in Your Torah, and may we serve You there with reverence as days of old..." From this request it seems that there is a connection and commonality between the Temple and Torah. The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that since the time of the destruction of the Temple, G'd's only location in the world is "within the four cubits of Halacha (normative Jewish law)." Meaning, the study hall in which people are engaged in studying Torah in a manner that leads to practical application/elucidation of the Law, is the location of His Presence, similar to that of the Holy of Holies in the Temple. The rabbis of the Talmud, Amoraim, would pray in the same location that they had studied because it was the location of the Divine Presence.

When Rebbe Akiva's students perished, it was the equivalent of the Temple being destroyed because it was due to their Torah study that the Divine Presence had a location in the world. After their death, G'd's Presence, relatively speaking, was removed from this existence. Although we no longer have the Temple, which was a unique level of intimacy with G'd we still have the four cubits of Halacha to retain His Presence.

The Gemara explains that the reason all the students of Rebbe Akiva passed away in such a short period of time was that "They did not afford one another a sufficient level of respect." The students of Rebbe Akiva were the most advanced Torah sages of that generation. Thus, it is not possible to even consider that they were disrespectful to one another. In addition, had Rebbe Akiva noticed any inappropriate behavior among his students he would have rebuked them. Evidently, their failing was at a level of subtlety that even Rebbe Akiva was not able to detect it.

Each of the students of Rebbe Akiva had a unique dimension of Torah scholarship. There were slight shades of differences between each of them. When one accords respect to a Torah sage it must be appropriate to the individual's level of Torah. The Torah Sages neither addressed or acknowledged the subtle differences of greatness between them. However, Rebbe Akiva's students did not address these subtle differences. They treated each other with the same level of respect, which was not sufficient. Why were the students of Rebbe Akiva held to such a standard of liability for a

seemingly minor infraction? The Gemara tells us that G'd's exactness with the devoutly righteous is to the degree of a hairbreadth. When the tzaddik deviates as much as an iota then G'd will exact punishment upon him.

The Gemara tells us that after the 24,000 students of Rebbe Akiva passed away the world was desolate and devoid of Torah. Given this level of tragedy, how do we understand that celebration is permitted from the 33rd day onward? One would think that a greater degree of grieving should commence after this period, when the tragedy is truly felt. It is true that the loss of Torah scholarship at this unique and advanced level was truly worthy of grieving; however, the focus of the mourning period is to acknowledge and commemorate the desecration of G'd's Name. G'd had unleashed His Judgment upon the most spiritually advanced. The perception of this tragedy is the most exaggerated level of the desecration of His Name. When Torah sages and scholars are seen in a negative light by the world, it is considered a desecration of G'd's Name. Text Copyright © 2012 by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky and **Torah.org**.

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.