

STRIVING FOR SIMPLICITY

by Rabbi Label Lam

Moses summoned all of Israel and said to them, "You have seen everything that HASHEM did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to and to all his servants and to all his land- the great trials that your eyes beheld, those great signs and wonders. But HASHEM did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear until this very day. I led you forty years in the Wilderness." (Devarim 29:1-4)

From here we learn that a person does not fully grasp the lessons of his teacher until forty years. (Talmud Avoda Zarah 5B)

Does it really take forty years to understand what the Rebbe is saying? Here's a statement from a great teacher that I've been grappling with for the past ten years. In thirty more years I'll hope to understand what I am about to say.

These words attributed to one of the great ethicists, R. Simcha Zissel, the Alter from Kelm, are certainly not meant to be cute but one cannot fail to be tickled by their inherently paradoxical nature: "The Torah is divided into three portions 1) Simplicity 2) Depth and 3) Simplicity." Two are exactly the same. Why say there are three? What does he mean to say?

Perhaps the key lies in something we recite in anticipation of the new moon in synagogue each month. We express our fervent wishes for, "A life.", amongst many other things, ".filled with Fear of Heaven and fear of sin, a life without embarrassment, a life of wealth and honor, and that we should have love of Torah and Fear of Heaven."

A closer examination of this partial list reveals that two requests are exactly the same, "Yiras Shemaim-Fear of Heaven". The explanation has been offered that there is one brand of "Yiras Shemaim" before "wealth and honor" or prior to "embarrassment" and there is another quality of "Yiras Shemaim" after a taste of either or both.

Similarly perhaps R. Simcha Zissel means to tell us that Torah and life, as a reflection of Torah is perceived in three ways. It's with a pristine naivety that we step into the ocean of most experiences. The child tastes honey when meeting the ALEPH and with the same happy innocence brides and grooms dance through the early years. There's a natural beauty and charm baked into most every beginning. It's in that gaze parents have when they behold the purity of their little ones, and it is reflected in the absolute trust the child grants his mother and father. More than once in history the world has been viewed with eyes fit only for the Garden of Eden. That's the sweet idealism implied

in the first "simplicity".

As we wade deeper into the ocean of those experiences the apparent danger of each wave of difficulty becomes the dominant reality. What attracted us initially is at constant risk of being eclipsed by compounding complexities. Real- founded fears often yield to resentment, as ideal after ideal is shattered on the rocks. "Is this just some cruel joke?" we wonder, as the poison of cynicism begins to sour our memories. That's stage two!

For a set of Shofar blasts to be completed there is a minimal requirement to makes a set of three basic sounds: 1) Straight 2) Broken and 3) Straight. Perhaps the message is, simply, and not so simply, to complete the set - Don't stop in the broken zone and never dream of retreating to "never-never world". Rather, reach for that simplicity that comes after complexity. Know that it exists, and appreciate that it is mandatory to make life whole again.

I once went to ask an old Tzadik about a certain recurring interpersonal problem I was having. He rubbed his heart like he was polishing a diamond and repeated, "Purify our hearts to serve YOU in truth." He then told me, "I have the same problem. I've been working on it for forty years and it's just starting to go away!" At first I felt defeated by his response. What hope is there for me?

Later, though, I experienced a surge of encouragement from his words. I realized that both hard work and patience are required. Yes, it may take forty years or more to grasp what just happened today. The simple fact that we don't understand- right now, and the hope that we might, some day, may be that maturing notion that helps keep us moving forward in life. So it's that last blast that urges us always to keep striving for simplicity.

Have a good Shabbos

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