FIRST IN THE MIND!

by Rabbi Label Lam

Who can stand confidently on Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment, Rosh Hashana, before the bright and precise light of truth? How can we sing and eat when so much hangs in the balance?

On Rosh Hashana, the Head of the Year, there is no mention in the liturgy of misdeeds of the past. Neither are we being asked to make resolutions about the future. Our sages tell us that at the moment when the Shofar is sounding, a grand review of the troops is sweeping by and the heart of hearts is open for inspection.

Who are we in the existential nausea of the "now", stripped of the resume of the past and without plans for the future? What is the focus of this inspection that so means so much? Rav Dessler writes, "The essence of the man is his "will!" The quality of a person's being is measurable by what he or she really wants!

The Ohr Gedaliahu helps enormously with his profound explanation of the sagely statement, "Nothing stands before the will!" What can it mean? Many things block the will and stand as an impasse to our desires. When we think we can always get what we want, we get frustrated.

He explains that in the arena of action, because our bank accounts and reach are finite, our ability to give and do is by definition limited. In the world of speech, though, I can pledge and thank in the millions and still be considered reasonable. In the context of pure thought, however, we are potentially boundless.

If for a few inspired moments one could be liberated from the limitation of expectation, and concentrate, even briefly, upon an ideal self in a perfected world, then yesterday would cease to be the dictator of tomorrow and last year over this. Change and growth would suddenly become possible and the grant of a contract for a new, more productive year, more justifiable.

If nothing stands before the will/wanting, then we can stand before the keenest eye. In that arena there may be little difference between anyone of us and the greatest people that strode across the planet. We can be included with the Chofetz Chaim, the Vilna Gaon, Avraham or Yitzchak, wanting the best for Hashem's world and its citizens and willing, even if not able, to give it all to make it happen.

In prison, a little more than ten years ago, as a visitor of course, I brought a colleague of mine who travels widely as a guest speaker. Not so surprisingly, the prisoners crave to know what's going on

"out there", as they live somewhat vicariously through the adventures of others.

They nudged the Rabbi with desperation to tell them where he had been recently. He answered glibly, "I was just in the world's largest prison and there I confronted the most fierce warden of them all!" Some started to guess which place and person he was referring to.

After they got quiet again, he told them, "The largest prison in the world is the whole world!" I felt an awkward silence in the room and I glanced up sideways as if to signal that he ought not to continue peddling these soft parables. "All of us would love to go to that prison! Let us go out there!" They chorused.

The second answer shed light on the first and his words became poignantly clear. "Who's the most fierce warden? Myself!" He said. "This guard keeps you from going a few feet to your left and right! This one stops you from getting beyond that point! Who keeps us from going up, from climbing vertically, transcending the confines of place and reaching the fullness of our real potential, even here? Nobody but ourselves."

I know it was ten years ago, plus, because my youngest son was born then a few weeks later. Thirty seconds into the world, I held him for the first time. Maybe it was the foot printing that reminded me and signaled this initial response but the first words that escaped from my mouth at that time was, "Welcome to the prison!"

Here, this lofty soul, bigger than the entire universe, aware of the whole Torah on some sublime level has just been crushed into this tiny body, sans teeth and sans vocabulary. Oy! Oy! Oy! I pray the warden will have mercy.

How's a holy soul to gain wholesome expression in this world? Who's gonna heed the Shofar-like cry when his deepest desires are thwarted and hope is almost expired? In one humble and lucid moment, though, a world of possibility is born, and what may have appeared at first to be a giant prison of sorts can be transformed into an ideal -- but first in the mind.

Good Shabbos!

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