

GRAND LARCENY

by Nechama Stampler

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For he had given from his offspring to Molech in order to defile My Mikdash and desecrate My holy name.

Rashi: The mikdash that is defiled here means Knesses Yisrael - the Assembly of Israel - which is sanctified to Me.

Gur Aryeh: Rashi tells us that we must understand "mikdash" in this pasuk to mean Knesses Yisrael, because the ordinary understanding of mikdash as the Mishkan or Temple simply cannot apply here. The transgression of Molech does not impact the Temple or detract from its holiness. Therefore, Rashi looks for an alternative understanding of "mikdash," and finds it in the collective identity of Klal Yisrael, which is sanctified (= mikdash) to Hashem.

Ramban explains Knesses Yisrael as the Shechinah. You might ask how the aveirah of an individual can defile the Divine Presence. We can, however, point to a well-known source that illustrates this principle. Chazal tell us ² that one who benefits from this world without making a berachah is as if he "steals from HKBH and from Knesses Yisrael." Ramban indicates that it is the berachah that is stolen from Hashem and Knesses Yisrael. The very purpose of Creation is Man's acknowledgment and recognition that Hashem is our Creator. When we do that through reciting a berachah, we in effect provide a justified place for the Shechinah. The Shechinah, in turn, continues the flow of Divine berachah to Man. When Man does not acknowledge Hashem by reciting a berachah before taking from this world, the Shechinah withdraws to its source in Hashem's full Name.

We could, however, explain very differently. When Man fails to make a berachah, it is the food he eats which he steals, not the berachah. At first this seems unreasonable. While it is technically true that Hashem owns everything by virtue of having created all of existence, upon further thought, we realize that we cannot call this ordinary theft. Hashem has no use and no need for the physical stuff of Creation. What we have "stolen" by illicitly taking without a berachah is no more theft than taking an absolutely worthless item from a human.

While such thinking is tempting, it is inaccurate. Nothing Hashem creates is worthless. To the contrary, all things exist to give honor to Him, by accentuating His greatness. All things, therefore,

are sacred items, playing a role in His service.

We have no trouble recognizing that misappropriating any vessel or sacrificial item in the beis hamikdosh is a serious transgression, because those things are actively employed in Divine service. On the larger scale of things, everything that exists is supposed to play a role in the Divine service, and must be seen as consecrated and holy.

Our difficulty should rather be in understanding why and how we are permitted to take anything from a world in which everything is consecrated to G-d's service. Enjoying anything should be not only theft, but me'ilah, which is theft from the Divine estate.

The answer is that consecrated items can become deconsecrated. Many items in the beis hamikdosh, for example, can lose their holiness designation through a process of redemption. In the greater universe of the general holiness of all things, the process of redemption involves nothing more than reciting a berachah. In reciting the berachah over a food item, it becomes ordinary, profane material that may be enjoyed by Man. Without the berachah, however, we have stolen a valuable, holy object from Hashem.

Just how does a berachah "decommission" the natural holiness of all things? A berachah relates to a different aspect of Hashem (or at least the way humans grasp Him). The holiness of all things stems from the reality that all phenomena are part of Him. All things are within Him; nothing lies outside of Him.

A berachah, however, places Hashem in a different relationship with us. The berachah in a sense creates the space in which there is something apparently outside of Him. When we say that Hashem is baruch, we mean that He stands ready to shower us with berachah, with an abundance of things. This presupposes that there are two entities, rather than one! There is G-d the Giver - but there is also Man the receiver. There cannot be any giving unless there is also receiving. Hashem's giving requires that He reach across from a realm that is close to Him to one in which we reside, with our weaknesses, needs, and the things that fill them. In this realm, there are things not as holy as He - and hence allowable to us for our needs and pleasure.

We have explained so far why the mundane things of this world can be "stolen" from Hashem. We understand their inherent worth - and therefore, their inherent holiness. We have explained how relating to Hashem in reciting a berachah places things in a realm that - from a human standpoint - stands outside the immediacy of Hashem, and thus leaves room for them to be utilized by human beings. The gemara, however, teaches that when we fail to recite a berachah, we steal not only from Hashem, but from Knesses Yisrael as well. How could that be?

To answer that, we must first understand what we mean by Knesses Yisrael. It is the entity in which all of Klal Yisrael is subsumed - not as different parts, all adding up to a large collective, but in an opposite manner. Knesses Yisrael is a single, undivided entity, in which all the components of Klal Yisrael find their source. In a sense, the unity of Knesses Yisrael is to the physical world what the

Unity of G-d is to the spiritual. In the ultimate sense, at the spiritual root of all things, everything - including Knesses Yisrael - is part of the Unity of Hashem. But seen just from the standpoint of the material world, all things are placed under the dominion of Knesses Yisrael. It is the collective receiver of what is given by Hashem the Giver. When we fail to recite a berachah, we ignore the relationship of Giver and receiver which allows things to be treated as properly belonging to the human consumer. We steal from both Giver, and Knesses Yisrael, the receiver.

Sources:

1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Vayikra 20:3; Nesiv HaAvodah chapter 14
 2. Berachos 35B
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