

IS TESHUVA REALLY NECESSARY THIS YEAR?

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Today's Learning:

Ma'asrot 2:5-6

Orach Chaim 158:10-12:2

Daf Yomi: Ta'anit 21

Yerushalmi Yevamot 26

R' Henach Leibowitz shlita (rosh yeshiva of the Chofetz Chaim Yeshiva in New York) taught: The commentators write that after Bnei Yisrael had traveled through the desert for forty years, they reached a level of appreciation of Hashem's kindness greater than the heights they had reached at Har Sinai. They understood that all of their military victories and their miraculous survival in the barren Sinai desert were due to Hashem's generosity. At this point, Hashem sees fit to ask Bnei Yisrael to make a pact that they will not become haughty and somehow credit themselves for all their achievements in the desert.

Why did Hashem choose this occasion to warn them? R' Leibowitz asks. One would think that it would be superfluous at this time since they had such a great appreciation of Hashem's wonders. Wouldn't another time, perhaps when their hakarat hatov/appreciation for the good bestowed upon

them was waning, have been more appropriate?

The Torah is revealing a paradox in human nature: When a person reaches higher levels of spiritual perfection, he must become more vigilant of the tricks and subterfuge of the yetzer hara and not less wary, as one might think.

As we prepare for Rosh Hashanah and reflect upon the past year, we will undoubtedly realize that, at least in some respects, we have grown considerably. The yetzer hara - our constant adversary - will immediately whisper into our ears: "You're OK! Teshuvah isn't really necessary this year." This seems logical, but it's far from the truth. As we grow spiritually, we only become bigger targets for the yetzer hara's missiles. We should not downplay our accomplishments, but we must remember that precisely because of those accomplishments we must continue to be on guard. (Majesty of Man p.279)

"An Aramean 'ovaid' my father and he descended to Egypt . . ." (26:5)

R' Zvi Hirsch Kalischer z"l (1795-1875) writes: The commentators struggled mightily to understand the word "ovaid" because it is an intransitive verb (meaning: "becoming destroyed") used as a transitive verb (apparently meaning: "tried to destroy"). In addition, how does the fact that our father Yaakov descended to Egypt follow from the fact that Lavan the Aramean tried to destroy him?

R' Kalischer answers these questions as follows: The more that two things are unlike, the more each tries to use the other one for its own purposes. For example, he writes, wind can put out a fire, but the wrong "amount" of wind will make a fire worse. This happens because the fire adapts the force (i.e., the wind) that opposes it for its own purposes.

Similarly, man's earthiness ("chomer") and intelligence ("saichel") oppose each other. If the chomer prevails, it takes charge of the saichel, and man becomes less than an animal. After all, how much harm can an animal, who has no saichel, do compared to this person?

The above principle explains why a wicked person attempts to recruit others to his wickedness and why he cannot tolerate the existence of tzaddikim. It is because there are no two forces in the world that are more opposed to each other than kedushah/sanctity, on the one hand, and tum'ah/impurity, on the other. For the same reason, if the tzaddik is not enticed to wickedness, but instead defeats it, he becomes much greater. He literally takes the goodness out of the rasha and makes it his own. This is the meaning of the teaching (Avot 5:2): "Avraham received reward for all of the ten generations that preceded him."

The same thing happened between Yaakov and Lavan. Lavan wanted to draw Yaakov's kedushah towards his own tum'ah. This demonstrates how great is the hatred that tum'ah has for kedushah, for Lavan was willing to destroy his own children and grandchildren in the service of impurity. What happened instead? "Yaakov stole Lavan's heart" (Bereishit 31:20), i.e., he took all that was good from

Lavan and inducted it into the service of kedushah. After this, there was, so-to-speak, nothing left of Lavan.

With this idea, we can understand our verse as follows: "My father" does not refer to Yaakov, as most commentators assume, but to Lavan. He, too, was our ancestor. My father, the verse says, was an Aramean who was "ovaid"/"becoming destroyed" by his encounter with Yaakov. This also explains the continuation of the verse. The reason that Yaakov had to descend to Egypt was to continue the never-ending duel between kedushah and tum'ah. (Sefer Ha'berit)

R' Yaakov Abuchatzairah z"l (Morocco; 19th century) explains the connection between Lavan's aims and Yaakov's descent to Egypt as follows: Lavan saw prophetically that Yaakov's descendants would be prepared by their exile in Egypt to receive the Torah. In his hatred for kedushah, he sought to destroy Yaakov before Yaakov could descend to Egypt. (Bigdei Serad, p.34)

Customs for Parashat Ki Tavo (From Nit'ai Gavriel: Dinei U'Minhagei Yamim Nora'im, ch.4)

1. Ezra ordained that Ki Tavo should be read before Rosh Hashanah in order to usher out the year's curses. [This parashah contains the tochachah/ Moshe's foretelling of the horrible punishments that would befall our nation if we sin.]
2. One should not be called for the aliyah that contains the tochachah if he hates the ba'al koreh or if the ba'al koreh hates him.
3. It is proper that the one who goes up for the tochachah should think repentant thoughts so that his deeds will not awaken Divine judgment against him.
4. In some places, before the reading of the tochachah, the gabbai calls out the verses from Mishlei (3:11-12): "My son, do not despise Hashem's discipline, and do not despise His reproof, for Hashem admonishes the one He loves, and like a father He mollifies the child."
5. In some places, they do not call out: "Ya'amod"/"Arise, so- and-so the son of so-and-so." Rather, they call out: "Arise, whoever wishes." In some places, the person who is called to the tochachah is paid. In some places, the ba'al koreh himself receives the aliyah, and this was the custom of many tzaddikim (including the rebbes of Sanz, Sighet, Munkacz and Lubavitch). If the ba'al koreh is a kohen, the aliyot may be apportioned so that the tochachah will be an eighth aliyah and may be given to a kohen.
6. In some places, the one who receives the aliyah that contains the tochachah does not recite a berachah either before or after. The preceding aliyah ends just prior to the tochachah and the one who receives that aliyah recites the after-berachah. Some wrote harshly against this custom (including R' Shlomo Kluger z"l, R' Eliezer Dovid Gruenwald z"l and R' Moshe Feinstein z"l).

7. It is customary to read the tochachah quickly and in a soft voice. However, one must be careful not to read so quietly that the congregation does not hear, because then the congregation will not fulfill the mitzvah of hearing the Torah reading. Some have the custom to read in a loud voice-- the purpose being to awaken the congregation to repentance.)
8. It is forbidden for the ba'al koreh to have in mind that the tochachah should befall any specific person. Some are careful not to stand directly in front of the ba'al koreh. (The author of the Bnei Yissaschar and his descendants, the Muncaczer Rebbes, insisted that no one stand opposite them when they read the tochachah.) Some also have the custom that the person who received the previous aliyah leaves the bimah before the tochachah is read.

Letters from Our Sages

This week's letter was written by R' Eliezer Zusia Portugal z"l (1898-1982; the "Skulener Rebbe") to a student in Israel. While the letter is undated, it appears to have been written during the winter after the author's arrival in the United States from Romania in 1960. (A biography of the Skulener Rebbe appeared in Hamaayan two weeks ago.)

The letter is printed in Noam Eliezer, Bereishit, No. 42.

I received your letters, and your complaints that I have not written are just. However, my dear . . . , do not accuse me of being lax in respecting others, especially you. Certainly I know that one must be diligent in respecting other people, as Chazal say (Berachot 19b): "Respect for others is very important. Even for stones, the Torah demanded respect" (see Rashi at the end of Parashat Yitro). [Rashi explains that the reason that the altar had a ramp and not stairs is so that the kohanim would not insult the stones by spreading their legs too far apart while ascending to the altar.] This is one of the reasons that we cover the challah on Shabbat . . . so that the challah does not witness its degradation. [According to the usual order of precedence, the berachah on bread should precede the berachah on wine, but on Shabbat we reverse this order.] We see that G-d cares for the honor of inanimate things; certainly for one's friend who is made in the image of G-d. And, since the Torah obligates us to take care with honor of His creations, it is my desire to fulfill that [obligation], especially with regard to the honor of someone who is very beloved to me. I know how hard you worked on my behalf . . . therefore please do not suspect me of intending any insult to you . . .

Although I have no pleasure from the fact that I could not write to you, I do have pleasure from one thing, at least after the fact. That is, that I have seen the good trait that you possess of forgiving your honor. Although I did not write to you or answer you, you went above-and-beyond ("lifnim me'shurat ha'din") and wrote time after time. Therefore I see that you possess the good trait of forgiving your honor. In Ta'anit (25a) our sages taught us the power of this trait,

i.e., that Rabbi Akiva was answered in a time of trouble and drought, and a Heavenly Voice proclaimed that it was because Rabbi Akiva was forgiving. For this reason, the blessing that you conferred upon me means a great deal to me . . .

I recognize that I am obligated to fulfill the words of Chazal, who commented on the verse [Tehilim 150:6], "Let every neshamah/soul praise G-d" - "For every neshimah/breath praise G-d." "Alenu le'shabe'ach la'adon hakol"/We must thank the Master of all that He took us out and saved us from between the lion's teeth. I still remember the narrow room in which I was imprisoned [in Romania] . . . bereft of tzitzit, tefilin or a book. It was almost impossible to think of ever being free. . . I feel in my soul, literally, the power that G-d gave me to live . . .

Sponsored by Dr. and Mrs. Irving Katz on the yahrzeit of father Moshe Aharon ben Menashe Reiss z"l

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