

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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This week's Parashah tells us (28:9), "You shall walk in His ways," teaching that a person, through his good deeds, actually can walk in Hashem's footsteps. R' Eliezer Zvi Safran z"l (1830-1898; Komarno Rebbe) observes, though, that most of us don't believe this, that is, we don't believe in our own spiritual potential.

For example, how often do we pray, and, when we see that we aren't answered, we assume that our prayers can't really make a difference? The Ba'al Shem Tov z"l (died 1760) teaches that this is the result of excessive self-deprecation. One must believe that his prayers have untold consequences in the heavens, even if he doesn't see those effects. If one believed this, the Komarno Rebbe adds, how joyously would he pray! How carefully would he pronounce every letter, every syllable!

If one believed that he is (in the words of Bereishit 28:12) "a ladder standing on the ground with its head in the heavens," that every movement, every word, every step and every business deal makes a spiritual impact on the world, he would do them all for the sake of Heaven. Also, the Zohar comments, "If people knew the love with which Hashem loves the Jewish people, they would roar like lions in their eagerness to follow Him."

On the other hand, if one thinks that he can't make a difference, he should know that he is on the road to heresy. If he thinks that way, it's a sign that the Yetzer Ha'ra has succeeded with him and will soon deprive him of life in this world and in the next.

Rather than despair, one can learn from Yaakov, who said (Bereishit 35:5), "I lived with Lavan and I delayed until now." The letters of "Lavan" are the reverse of the letters of "naval" / "degenerate one," a reference to the Yetzer Ha'ra. Why was Yaakov successful in turning around the "naval," and "whitening" it (from "lavan" / "white")? Because "I delayed until now," that is, because he did not expect immediate results from his prayers and Mitzvot, but rather had faith that the results would come with time. (Zekan Beto, p.216)

"You shall come to whomever will be the Kohen in those days, and you shall say to him, 'I declare today to Hashem, your Elokim, that I have come to the Land that Hashem swore to our forefathers to give us'." (26:3)

Rashi z"l comments, citing the Midrash Sifre: "You must declare that you are not ungrateful."

R' Ben Zion Nesher shlita (one of the senior rabbis in Tel Aviv, Israel) asks: At first glance, a person who is ungrateful has a character flaw, while a person who feels and expresses gratitude is "normal." If so, announcing that one is not ungrateful is the equivalent of announcing that one doesn't have a blemish; for example, a broken arm. If so, why should a person declare publicly that he is not ungrateful?

In light of this question, R' Nesher writes, we must reject our initial understanding. Apparently, not being ungrateful is something to be proud of. The reason for this is that being ungrateful is part of the human condition, so that a person who is not ungrateful has lifted himself above the human condition, above nature. Our first ancestor, Adam, was ungrateful, a trait he exhibited when he said (Bereishit 3:12), "The woman that You gave to be with me--she gave me of the tree, and I ate." In effect, Adam rejected all the gifts that Hashem had given him, including a wife, and blamed Hashem for his own (Adam's) downfall.

R' Nesher continues: From the earliest time in Gan Eden, when angels prepared Adam's food, man has lived with the attitude, "It's coming to me!" The Mitzvah of Bikkurim / First Fruits, the subject of the first section of our Parashah (including our verse), is meant to teach a person that nothing is coming to him. After a person toiled in his field, vineyard, or orchard for an entire season, the Torah commands him to give the first fruits to the Kohen, as well as to give other portions to Kohanim, Levi'im and the poor. A person who successfully performs the Mitzvah of Bikkurim can rightly proclaim: "I am not ungrateful!" (Haggadah Shel Pesach Shir Tziyon p.10)

"You have distinguished Hashem today to be Elokim for you, and to walk in His ways, and to observe His decrees, His commandments, and His statutes, and to listen to His voice. And, Hashem has distinguished you today to be for Him a treasured people, as He spoke to you, and to observe all His commandments." (26:17-18)

R' Alexander Ziskind of Horodna z"l (1739-1794; Belarus) comments: Do not think that the Mitzvot are a burden, like a decree that a master imposes on his servants. To the contrary, because of Hashem's immense love for us, He has given us a great, priceless gift. (Yesod V'shoresh Ha'avodah: Introduction)

"Hashem, your Elokim, will make you supreme over all the nations of the earth." (28:1)

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (Maharal of Prague; died 1609) records the following discussion that he had with a gentile:

Gentile: How can you Jews claim to be a great nation when you always aspire to cause harm; worse yet, not to those who do not share your faith, but rather to your fellow Jews? Does not the Torah say (Vayikra 19:18), "You shall love your fellow as yourself"? Do you perhaps interpret this as applying only to someone who is "as yourself," i.e., on your level, and, since, each of you thinks he is on a higher level than the next Jew, there is no Mitzvah to love him?

Maharal: The fact that each Jew does not love every other Jew is the essence of our exile. Hashem dispersed us throughout the world, and that necessitates that we also be distanced in our hearts. Were it not so, we would seek each other out like lost brothers and, so-to-speak, foil Hashem's plan that we be dispersed throughout the nations. If each of us rejoiced at the success of every other Jew, would that be a dispersion? There would be no greater connection than that!

Gentile: That would be a plausible explanation, if not for the fact that the Jewish People seem to have a predisposition to fight with each other. Yaakov's sons were jealous of their brother, Korach was jealous of Aharon, etc.

Maharal: The Satan works harder to destroy a complete structure than to further demolish a demolished structure. The Jewish People are the one nation of the one G-d, and the Satan attempts to destroy that oneness. The nations of the world are many, and they worship many gods, so the Satan leaves them alone. This also is why the Satan worked so hard in the past to entice the Jewish People away from the one G-d, to idolatry.

Gentile: You are trying to turn the Jewish People's worshiping idols into a praise and to justify one bad trait -- dissension among the Jewish People -- using another bad trait -- idolatry!

Maharal: Certainly it is a bad trait to build oneself up at the expense of another. However, such behavior by a Jew is not a sign of a bad nature. To the contrary, it is a reflection of the greatness to which a Jew is predisposed, as our verse states: "Hashem, your Elokim, will make you supreme . . ." It is true that this greatness sometimes manifests itself in a bad way, but the source is a holy one. You do not find that peasants are jealous of princes. Only great warriors are jealous of other great warriors, and only wise men are jealous of other wise men. This is a characteristic of elevated people, except that some people take it too far. (Netzach Yisrael ch.25)

Teshuvah

R' Moshe Zvi Neriah z"l (1913-1995; rosh yeshiva in Kfar Ha'roeh, Israel, and one of the early leaders of the Bnei Akiva youth movement) writes:

The various thoughts of teshuvah that pass through a person's mind make him think that he has

already repaired what needs to be repaired. In reality, however, we all know that there is a wide gulf between thought and deed.

How then can a person know where he stands? How can one know if any change has really occurred within him? If we were dealing with empirical facts, it would be easy enough, but we are not. Our relationship with G-d is necessarily abstract, for He has no body and no form of a body (paraphrasing one of Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith).

The answer, R' Neriah writes, is that the barometer of where one stands in his relationship with Hashem is where he stands in his relationship with his fellows. If one wants to know how he is doing with respect to "I have placed G-d before me always" (Tehilim 16:8), let him look at how he is doing with respect to "Love your fellow as yourself" (Vayikra 19:18).

Why is this so? R' Neriah explains that all sins come from one of two sources, either because one does not see Hashem, or because he does see himself, i.e., his selfish interests and desires control him. Instead of applying "Ain od milvado" / "There is nothing besides Him" to Hashem, one applies it to himself.

Seeing Hashem is very difficult, but not "seeing" oneself is somewhat easier. One does this by beginning to notice those around him, by thinking of the needs of others and giving in, by understanding, giving of oneself, and feeling love. When a person becomes accustomed to these practices, he gradually ceases to worship his personal avodah zarah / idolatry, i.e., himself. In turn, when he is faced with a sin against G-d, it is easier to overcome that temptation as well.

Perhaps, R' Neriah concludes, this is what Rabbi Akiva was referring to when he said, "'Love your fellow as yourself' is the major principle in the Torah." (Me'orot Neriah: Elul V'Tishrei p.23)