

ALIVE WITH SPIRITUAL PLEASURE

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

This week's portion opens with a discussion of the laws pertaining to the Jewish soldier whose passions are aroused in battle, impelling him to take a non-Jewish woman from the conquered country as his wife. The Torah prescribes a detailed conversion process concluding with the provision that the captive woman must be granted a month-long bereavement period during which she can mourn for her parents and prepare for her conversion to Judaism.

This Torah portion is always read at the beginning of the month of Elul, the last month of the year during which we prepare for the onset of the new year. The commentaries find an allusion in the Torah reading to the month of Elul; just as the captive woman before conversion utilizes the month to close the books on her past life and idolatrous practices, we, too, in the month of Elul begin the process of introspection. We reflect on the lost opportunities and wayward leanings we succumbed to in the past year, making amends and preparing for a new year of spiritual renewal.

During the month of Elul, in the Yeshiva world, much emphasis is placed on the study of mussar and ethical works. Intense preparations are made for the Day of Judgment and the Days of Awe that follow it. I recall my Elul experiences in Yeshiva as being intense and challenging. The atmosphere was weighted with undercurrents of pressure and solemnity, and the seriousness of this month was felt by all the students.

As I grew older, I realized that much of the pent-up pressure that was applied in the month of Elul in a sense missed its mark. Indeed, Elul is devoted to preparing for the Days of Awe but the period of preparation can-and should be-experienced as an end in itself.

We generally approach Elul as a pathway to an important spiritual destination. If we do things right, we will be able to successfully transition into the new year in an ennobled, more spiritually integrated state. Yet rather than approach Elul as a medium in which we gruelingly take ourselves to task for our shortcomings and strive to improve to merit a favorable judgment on Rosh Hashana, the month of Elul should be experienced as a wondrous period in its own right.

It is a time when we are granted rich opportunities to realign our relationship with Hashem, recognizing that as the Hebrew letters of Elul suggest, "ani l'dodi, v'dodi li, I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me,"

Sure, much of the focus in Elul needs to be devoted to addressing our foibles and past misdemeanors, but rather than self-flagellate over our lapses, the end purpose is better served

when we emphasize not the reformation but the actual process of rekindling our relationship of intimacy with our Creator.

My revered Rebbe, the Slonimer Rebbe shlita, recently met with a great leader of the Lithuanian yeshiva world. The discussion evolved around the different emphasis in avodas Hashem, serving the Creator, in the Chassidic world vis-à-vis the Lithuanian approach.

The great Rosh Yeshiva mentioned the opening words of the Mesilas Yesharim where he famously states that this world is but an anti-chamber to the World to Come, which we are expected to use as a means of preparation to attain our destination in the World of Truth.

The Slonimer Rebbe responded by noting that among Chassidim the primary emphasis is not the World to Come, but this temporary and transient world in which we reside here and now. We were placed here to enjoy and celebrate our relationship with the Divine right now. What Hashem graces us with in the World to Come is not really the objective we should be focusing on.

The preparation itself—the means of getting from point A to point B while fulfilling the will of Hashem every step of the way, is an end goal unto itself. Traversing this world and navigating its challenges and reversals with a positive spirit, while embracing and accepting Hashem's will, is what really counts.

This theme was further brought home to by one of my children with whom I was recently studying. We were discussing a verse at the beginning of Parshas Lech Lecha that describes how Abraham, heeding Hashem's command to leave his land, his relatives and his father's house, picked up and left Chorán for the land of Israel. The Torah makes a point of telling us further on that "They left to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan". (Breishis 12:6)

My son asked why the Torah needs to make the point that "they left to go to the land of Canaan." Isn't it self-evident that if they came to this land, they certainly departed with the intention of getting there?

It occurred to me that the Torah is telling us that Avraham embraced the process of the journey itself, as a prime opportunity to carry out Hashem's will, with the same excitement and love that he experienced upon reaching the land of Canaan.

Applying this to our own life journey, it's undoubtedly important to focus on our ultimate destination in the Afterworld. Yet whether or not we will merit eternal bliss there is not as relevant as whether we live TODAY in spiritual bliss. We would do well to remember this message in the month of Elul. Rather than focusing exclusively on emerging from the Divine judgment triumphantly, let's also enjoy the purifying process that brings us to that point.

Enjoying that process means celebrating the special closeness to Hashem that is Elul's unique gift, and making the most of the month's rich opportunities for spiritual regeneration and realignment with our Divine Source.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos,

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