PARSHAS BEHAR & BECHUKOSAI - INVERSE RELATIONSHIPS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Inverse Relationships[1]

If the means of a ger toshav who resides with you become sufficient, and your brother becomes poor with him and he is sold to a ger toshav or to an idol of the family of a ger, after he has been sold, he shall have a redemption.

The inverse symmetry of the relationship is striking. The ger toshav becomes rich; the Jew becomes impoverished. And all this happens before we get to the apparent point of the pasuk, namely that the law provides a possibility of redemption for a Jews sold into servitude!

Rashi, of course, addresses the problem. The crucial components in the relationship are the "with you" and the "with him." They speak of association. The ger toshav's association with the Jew brings blessing and success to him. He climbs an economic rung or two to a point that he is able to think about acquiring some help. The Jew's connection with his non-Jewish acquaintance, on the other hand, results in a downward spiral in his fortunes.

On the face of things, the Torah seems to be telling us that the relationship does wonders for the non-Jewish ger toshav, but is harmful to the Jew. For the ger toshav, the connection can bring him to a higher place; the Jew is dragged down to a lower position.

But why should this be? While this observation seems justified, it lacks internal logic. Material success is not linked to observance of mitzvos between Man and G-d, but to mitzvos between Man and his fellow Man. The change for the better in the position of the non-Jew is easy enough to understand. His relationship with the Jew works to his advantage. He learns from the Jew's ways, and becomes compassionate and altruistic. Perhaps the Torah is telling us that that the Jew too often picks up improper behavior from his new non-Jewish friend, even in matters of interpersonal behavior. As a consequence, he is reduced to poverty. This seems to be in order.

But it very much is not in order. How could it be that the Jew's association with the ger toshav is injurious to him, if that very same non-Jew grows spiritually through the encounter, elevating himself enough to merit the blessing of wealth? Why would it be problematic for the Jew to associate with such an elevated personality?

The answer requires a bit of introduction. Our rishonim often invoke the words chomer/substance and tzurah/form as useful descriptions of the role of different elements of an individual or even a more complex entity. Chomer refers to the "substance" of an object. Sometimes, it refers to the physical material, the raw stuff out of which something is formed. Sometimes, it means the building blocks of a complex, even when not dealing with a physical construct. Tzurah, on the other hand, refers to the design, the organizing principle, the set of instructions that shape the way the chomer takes form. Again, tzurah can provide direction to something physical, or to something conceptual.

We note that all forms (on the scale of domaim/inanimate, tzome'ach/plant, chai/animal, and medaber/human) show a reciprocal relationship between their tzurah and chomer. "Higher" forms become more dependent upon their tzurah. When it is damaged or compromised, the chomer that it is paired with is degraded, and becomes more worthless than the chomer of lesser forms. The substance of a plant that loses its generative ability becomes more degraded than the substance of a rock.

This holds true of the "chomer" of ethereal entities like the different parts of the soul. Where the tzurah of that soul is elevated, its chomer is weakened. It that tzurah is damaged, the entirety of that soul plummets in value and function.

The tzurah of every human being oversees his conduct towards others with civility, propriety and goodness. The tzurah of a Jew, however, incorporates more than that. It also militates towards true avodas Hashem. When that tzurah atrophies or is in part lost, his entire human soul - the "chomer" of that tzurah - becomes unhinged. Because his soul is more unsuited to lowly objects and activities, his neshamah is adversely affected by them. When that happens, even the other elements of his neshamah, like the compassion and caring that are the legacy of the Avos, are lost.

The non-Jew becomes a ger toshav by eschewing idolatry and keeping company with Jews. In the process, he accustoms himself to some of the positive Jewish traits of compassion and kindness. There is sufficient merit in this for him to earn the blessing of wealth. His non-performance of other mitzvos is no barrier to this blessing, and no stain on his neshamah. After all, he is not obligated in other mitzvos, and thus they cause him no harm. On the other hand, the Jew who attaches himself to this same ger toshav learns behaviors that are not impermissible to the ger toshav, but are forbidden to the Jew. When the Jew now acts in a similar manner and eats forbidden foods and the like, he damages his special Jewish tzurah - the penchant for attachment to the Divine and avodas Hashem. As a consequence, the "chomer" of his neshamah - his neshamah as a whole becomes degraded to the extent that he loses his essential humanity, and becomes an evil person. This results in his becoming impoverished.

This reciprocal relationship between different parties manifests itself elsewhere.

"A wicked person desires the trap of the evildoers, but the root of the tzadik will provide[2]." The "wicked person" here is one who is kindly disposed towards other people, despite his wickedness.

When he takes up the company of the "evildoer," i.e. one who is thoroughly evil and unfeeling towards others, the wicked person begins to feel jealous of his friend's ability to trap his victims without compunction or remorse. Gradually, he learns to be cold and cruel to others as well. The tzadik, on the other hand, travels the same road in reverse. If he is by nature a hard, difficult person, he can still reach inside to his root - which is to give to others. Making use of the substantial yiras shomayim that a righteous person possesses, he forces himself to gradually better himself.

Klal Yisrael is likened to a flame: "The house of Yaakov will be fire [3]." The other nations are compared to water: "Woe to the tumult of the many nations, who are as tumultuous as the tumult of the seas[4]." Fire will warm water, while retaining its light, providing that the water is kept somewhat distant and separate. If the water is allowed to spill out over the fire, it will douse the flame, and extinguish its light. When the Jewish people is allowed to come close to the other nations, but the Torah still provides some separation between them, Klal Yisrael successfully "warms" and enlightens them, bringing them to a higher plane. If Klal Yisrael abandons the Torah, the waters of those nations overcome the flame, till it has nothing left to offer. Ironically, the nations, having been elevated by their previous association with the Jewish people, retain that distinction.

Jews, on the other hand, having abandoned their commitment to Torah, lose theirs!

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1. Based on Ha'amek Davar and Harchev Davar, Bamidbar 25:47

2. Mishlei 12:12

3. Ovadiah 1:18

4. Yeshayah 17:12
