

THE PITFALLS OF PERFECTION

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Birkas Hamazon - Avoiding the Pitfalls of Perfection

Towards the beginning of Parshas Eikev, Moshe warns the Jews as they stand on the brink of entering Eretz Yisrael to guard the Torah and its laws faithfully. "For [it is because of this that] Hashem is bringing you to a good Land; a Land with streams of water, of springs and underground waters coming forth from valleys and mountains. A land of wheat, barley, grape, fig and pomegranate. A Land of oil-producing olives and date-honey. A Land where you will eat bread without poverty - you will lack nothing there... And you will eat, and be satisfied, and you will bless Hashem your G-d for the good Land He has given you. (8:7-10)" It is from this last verse that we derive the mitzvah (positive commandment) to recite Birkas Hamazon (Grace) after eating an olive-sized portion of bread. While the reason for such a mitzvah is obvious - it forces us to take a moment after each meal and realize we must be thankful for having enough to eat - one may question why the Torah chose to 'bury' this mitzvah in the middle of a protracted discourse about the beauty of Israel and its completeness? In what way is the mitzvah to praise and thank Hashem for our food related to being given Eretz Yisrael?

The holy Maharal (Ohr Chadash) quotes a Midrash (Esther Rabbah 3:13) that extols the virtues of our nation: In Megillas Esther we read that on the seventh day of the Feast of Achashveirosh, when his joy reached its peak, he summoned for Queen Vashti to be brought before him, so that the entire nation may observe her beauty... The Jews, continues the Midrash, also celebrate on their seventh day - Shabbos. Not by occupying themselves with physical beauty and transient pleasures, but rather by singing the beautiful zemiros (songs) of Shabbos, which are full of love and gratitude for their Creator, and by studying Torah.

Why is it that Shabbos is so inextricably linked with song, prayer, and study?

In order to understand this, writes the Maharal, we must first examine the way physical matter functions; this will open for us a window of understanding into the meta-physical. Take the fruit of the tree: As long as it continues to grow, not having reached completion, it flourishes upon its branch. Once, however, it is fully ripe, if not picked and eaten it will begin to rot. If life were a wave, it would begin with a steady uptrend, ultimately reaching a peak, followed immediately by descent, which would conclude with the same state of nothingness from which it began.

The name of the game, then, is to be on the ascending side of the peak. To avoid, to somehow

escape, completion, which must unavoidably lead to downfall. To achieve perpetual growth.

Achashveirosh made the mistake of delighting in his own perfection. He had the perfect life, and the perfect wife - he lacked nothing. It was he who sealed his own fate: On that very night, Vashti was put to death.

This puts Jews, explains Maharal, in an precarious position: Our lives center around the seven-day cycle of the weekdays and their ensuing Shabbos. Shabbos is the culmination, the completion of the cycle - the perfection (tikkun) of the past week. If so, the laws of nature should dictate that after Shabbos - the peak - come decay and decline. How can we enjoy Shabbos to its fullest, yet avoid reaching a climax after which descent must begin?

If we utilize Shabbos not only as a time for lavish meals and hearty naps, but also as an opportunity to celebrate the spiritual aspect of our existence, to learn Torah and sing zemiros, then we attach ourselves to Infinity. While one can eat to the point of satisfaction, and sleep until he can sleep no more (haven't done that in a while mind you), one can never over-praise the Almighty, nor over-study the Torah. By spending a portion of our Shabbos immersed in song and study, we ensure that even on this day of completion and perfection, we remain imperfect and incomplete. We are still on the ascending side of life - still searching for the peak.

What Shabbos is to time, Israel is to space. Shabbos is the perfection of time; Israel is the perfection of space. Where there is perfection, completion, there is decay. How can a Jew live in Israel (as we all hope to be doing soon!), yet remain on the 'departures' floor - not 'arrivals'?

It is this concern, says Rabbi Meir of D'zikov zt"l (Imrei Noam), that the Torah addresses here: For Hashem is bringing you to a good Land; a Land with streams of water, of springs and underground waters coming forth from valleys and mountains... A Land where you will eat bread without poverty - you will lack nothing there! But if we lack nothing - well then, we've made it! We've reached the zenith; it's only downhill from here... But you shall eat, and you shall be satisfied, and you shall bless Hashem your G-d for the good Land He has given you. By taking a sumptuous supper - the perfect meal - and turning it into an opportunity for praise and thanksgiving, we strive for something higher, something unreachable, thereby ensuring our continued growth and ascent.

Who is wise? said the Sages, one who learns from every man (Avos 4:1). He is indeed wise, for he views life as a constant opportunity for growth and learning, thereby justifying his own continued existence. We are taught to constantly strive for character perfection. At the same time, we must realize we will never get there. We embrace every opportunity that arises to learn and grow, forever the seedling in the forest of life.

Have a good Shabbos.

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