

REACHING FOR PERFECTION

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"Go before me, and you will be perfect." (17:1)

Perfection. At its best, it is an elusive goal, driving its pursuer to ever greater heights. At its worst, perfection can become an obsession; an unobtainable target that forever escapes those convinced they can attain it.

What is the Jewish outlook on perfection? In this week's sidrah, Lech Lecha, we read (17:1): "When Avram was ninety-nine years old, Hashem appeared to Avram and said to him, 'I am E-l Shadd-ai; go before Me, and you will be perfect.'" To achieve perfection, it seems, all we have to do is 'go before Hashem.'

How does one "go before Hashem?" The holy Mezritcher Maggid zt"l (Likkutei Torah) explains this as follows: If one is aware and truly believes that Hashem surrounds him and is with him at every moment and in every situation, then he has achieved true perfection. Even if he lapses momentarily in his faith, this person's acute awareness of the pervasive presence of Hashem in his life will invariably lift his spirits, preventing him from falling. Contrary to secular thought, which sees perfection as the control of as many components of life and nature as humanly possible, our concept of perfection is one of genuine awareness *that we are not in control,* and the complete faith that we are never alone, constantly surrounded by the Presence of Hashem Who "fills all worlds and surrounds all worlds."

A misnaged (opponent of the chassidic movement) once encountered an old friend who had already been swayed by the teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov, and had become a disciple of one of the great chassidic leaders of the time. "Tell me," asked the misnaged, "what is so great about your rebbe?"

"My rebbe is so spiritually elevated," said the chassid, "that his mind probes the very thoughts of his disciples."

"You want me to believe that?" - "Sure, try it out, I'll tell what you're thinking."

"Now this," said the misnaged, "I've got to see. Okay, I'm thinking something - now you tell me what I'm thinking."

"You're thinking," said the chassid, "that the Almighty surrounds and permeates all worlds. That His awesome presence is the pervasive force in your life, and that His loving hand never stops guiding

you."

"Ha! I got you -- I wasn't thinking anything of the sort!"

"Well if that's the case," said the chassid, "then you certainly need my rebbe! He will teach you how crucial it is for a Jew to constantly have such thoughts!"

The Maggid quotes a verse from Tehillim (32:10): "He who trusts in Hashem, kindness surrounds him." Upon this verse, Chazal, our Sages comment (Yalkut loc. cit.), "Even a wicked person who trusts in Hashem is surrounded by kindness."

In parshas Va-eschanan, there is a pasuk (verse) that beautifully articulates this concept: "You have been shown in order to know that Hashem, He is G-d; Ein Od Milvado - there is nothing else (other than Him)! (Devarim 4:35)." In his commentary to this verse, Rashi explains that at Mattan Torah, Hashem split open the seven Heavens and the lower realms, and every Jew clearly saw that Hashem is the only Force in the universe. Although the Heavens afterward closed, and the earth returned to its natural order, that revelation left an indelible imprint on the soul of every Jew. It is what makes it feasible for us to see through the workings of nature and its seemingly independent forces, and realize that ultimately, "Ein Od Milvado - there is nothing else other than Him."

The Gemara (Chullin 7b) quotes the statement of Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, that the words "Ein Od Milvado" exclude even the powers of keshafim - sorcery. Once, the Gemara relates, a sorceress tried to take some earth from under Rabbi Chanina's feet, in order to cast a spell over him. "Go ahead," said Rabbi Chanina, "it will do you no good - for it is written, Ein Od Milvado!"

Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner (Nefesh HaChaim 3:12) explains that Rabbi Chanina was not relying on a miracle to save him. Rather, Rabbi Chanina, "had firmly established in his heart the emunah [belief] that there is no other force in the universe other than the will of Hashem. He was so connected in his mind to the Master of all forces that it was clear to him that nothing else has any control or existence at all. With this conviction, he was confident that the forces of sorcery could have no influence over him - unless Hashem so desired." When he declared, "Ein Od Milvado," he was emphasizing the clarity of his perfect faith.

As they say, nobody's perfect. From time to time, we all fail. Perhaps, though, we would be well served to realize that while attaining material perfection is an impossible goal, perfect faith is within our reach. The more we allow the awareness of Hashem to permeate our lives and our thoughts, the closer we come to perfection.

Have a good Shabbos.

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