

WHERE TORAH AND LIFE MEET

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Nitzavim contains a section called Parshas ha-Teshuva, The Chapter of Repentance; so called because in this chapter Moshe encourages Bnei Yisrael (the Children of Israel) by telling them that as far as they may have strayed from the Almighty, hope is never lost, and there is always room for teshuva.

"It will be, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse... then you will take it to heart, among all the nations where Hashem, your G-d, has dispersed you. And you will return to Hashem, your G-d, and listen to His voice... And Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your offspring, to love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul; that you may live." (30:1-6)

This promise - that Hashem will "circumcise," or remove the spiritual impediments from our hearts, thereby stirring within us a great love for Him - while 'heartening,' is problematic. It seems to fly in the face of the famous dictum of Chazal (our Sages) that, Everything is in the hands of G-d, except for the fear of G-d. (Berachos 33b) It is a basic tenet of Jewish belief that while Hashem is in complete control over all that occurs within the physical realm, He does not exercise control over man's free-will, and will not coerce us to choose good over evil. That choice is completely ours, and we will either be rewarded for choosing good, or, G-d forbid, punished for doing bad. So how is it that here the pasuk seems to promise that Hashem is going to "step in" and compel us - and our children - to love Him by "circumcising" our hearts?

A minyan of at least 10 Jewish males have the obligation to pray together. The "call to prayer," as it were, is when the Chazzan calls out: Let us Bless Hashem, Who is blessed. The congregation responds: May Hashem, Who is blessed, be blessed forever and ever. Similarly, when ten males have eaten together, they are lead in a zimun, or "call to bentching," in which the leader recites: Let us bless G-d, from Whom we have partaken. Those present respond: Blessed is G-d, from Whom we have partaken, and in His goodness, He has granted us life.

In a famous comment, the Mishnaic commentary Tosafos Yom Tov (Berachos 7:3) notes a discrepancy between the two declarations: When we call to pray, we do so by invoking the Four Letter Name, Hashem, spelled Yud-Hei-Vav-Hei. But when we call to recite Birkas HaMazon (Grace), we invoke G-d, or Elokeinu. What is the reason for this distinction?

While we are infinitely thankful for Hashem's grace in having given us to eat, we realize that in fact

He must do so. After all, we didn't ask to be born; He created us, and to some extent He is obligated to sustain us. Making sure His creations have what to eat is not an act of compassion, but rather a logical outcome of having put us here in the first place. To allude to this, we invoke the name Elokeinu, which signifies din, or obligation and justice.

Conversely, giving us the Torah and its mitzvos, one of which is the mitzvah to pray, is an act of extreme benevolence and generosity, which Hashem was certainly not "obligated" to do. He did so out of great compassion and love. Thus, when we call to pray, we invoke the name Hashem, which signifies compassion and mercy.

This raises the following question: How far does Hashem's "obligation" to sustain us go? Are we talking about the barest of necessities, or does it also include delicacies and the finer things in life? Logic dictates that the answer to this question differs from person to person. Hashem must give a person whatever he or she absolutely needs to survive. For Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, that was a measure of carob each week. For others, it might include a hearty diet of grains, fruits and vegetables. Whatever we absolutely need is given to us with justice; the rest is compassion.

But what if a person's Yiddishkeit - his connection to Torah and mitzvos - is so critical that it is no less a necessity to him than are his daily bread and water? What if a day without Torah is just as distressing to him than a day without food and drink - and perhaps more so? What if to him the yiras Shamayim (fear of Heaven) of his children is so dear, that were he to see them straying from a Torah life, it would be tantamount to death itself? For such a person, his spiritual sustenance of Torah and mitzvos is just as much a lifeline as are the food he eats and the air he breathes. For him, loving Hashem and the Torah cease to be elements of free-will and compassion; they are every bit as necessary as is his physical well being. And since we are entitled to at least the bare necessities of life, he is entitled to an extra measure of Heavenly providence ensuring that he, and his children, will love Hashem and go in His ways. Anything less would be to deprive him of life itself! (How's that for circumventing free will?!)

This, I once heard, is the meaning of the above pasuk: And Hashem will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your children - He will step in and force you to love Him, seemingly overriding the normal conditions of free will and independent choice. Why? In order that you may live - if Torah and mitzvos are so important to you that without them, life itself has no meaning, then you indeed have the "right" to additional Heavenly assistance and guidance.

We have just passed through what was for many of us the most turbulent and terrifying week of our lives. Certainly, if nothing else, the horrific events of the past few days have exposed the frailty and vulnerability of human life, even as we sit in the steel structures in which we once felt so safe and secure. Perhaps, for some, there has been a rethinking of our priorities: What really matters, and what's just peripheral. What do I really need - and what is life all about?

Hopefully, the answer has been in the form of a strengthening of our commitment to Torah and

mitzvos. It would certainly be a tragedy of its own to allow such events to pass us by in a whirlwind of details, trivia, and media-driven hype, without looking within for some deeper meaning. While there is little we can do to control global events, we are in control of the choices we make, and the priorities we set. As the Shabbos before Rosh Hashana arrives, and we approach a new year, let us focus our own "search lights" within our souls, for there, ultimately, is where our war is to be won

Have a good Shabbos.

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