

# BACK FROM THE DEAD

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

Toward the beginning of parshas Chukas we have the famous description of the tu'mah (ritual impurity) imparted to one who enters or is present in the same building as a corpse. It begins thus (19:14):

"This is the torah (lesson of) a man who dies in an enclosurement..."

I've left the word torah in lower-case intentionally, because in its literal sense, it doesn't refer to The Torah, but rather is just a noun which means 'lesson' or 'teaching.'

That would be fine, except that we rarely if ever find laws introduced in this manner.

Which leads to the following radical interpretation from Chazal, our Sages (Shabbos 83b):

"This is the Torah. A man dies in an enclosurement..." - The words of Torah only exist by one who 'kills himself' over it.

In its simplest sense, this dictum could be taken literally. Not that one should die over the words of the Torah, but that one should be willing to die for them. In order to succeed in Torah study and true dedication to its laws and mitzvos, one must be willing to give everything away, even one's life. There are of course halachos (laws) which determine whether or not one should sacrifice one's life in order to uphold the Torah in any given circumstance, but conceptually, one must be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the Torah.

Another interpretation, one that takes death less literally, but seems to more accurately represent Chazal's use of dying for the words of the Torah, is that it refers to the sacrifice necessary to cultivate authentic Torah scholarship. There are many who can learn, but to attain the rare and esteemed (but perhaps somewhat overused) title of talmid chacham, a true student of the Torah, entails tremendous self-sacrifice, almost to the point of killing oneself through extreme dedication to both understand the Torah to the depths of one's capacity, and to remember what one has learned long after other students have forgotten. As Chazal say elsewhere (Avos 6), "This is the way of the Torah... you will eat bread and salt, and drink a measure of water, sleep on the earth... and toil in the Torah."

A third explanation makes use of the famous teaching (Avos D'Rabbi Nasan 15), "Repent one day before you die." To which Rabbi Eliezer's students asked the obvious, "But one doesn't know when he'll die?!" To which he responded, "All the more so! Let him repent today, perhaps he will die tomorrow... this way all his days will be with repentance." If one truly knew today were to be his last,

how would he spend it? A healthy dose of this attitude enables one to focus on making the most out of today, without getting bogged down with the always nagging concerns over 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow.'

The holy Tiferes Shlomo zt"l takes this one step further. He begins with the story of Reish Lakish, the famous Amora and brother-in-law of R' Yochanan, who, in the days before he became an outstanding Torah scholar, led a band of marauders. The Midrash (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 43) says that on the very same day that Reish Lakish died, all his old friends - the bandits - passed on too. They met up somewhere on the other side and were shocked to find that while they were apparently destined to suffer intensely for their squandered and evil lives, their one-time friend was being accompanied into the highest heavens where untold award awaits the righteous and pure-hearted.

"Umm... he's one of us!" they protested. To which they were told that, yes, he had once been just like them, and would have met the same fate that they were about to, except that Reish Lakish made drastic changes to his lifestyle, and they didn't. "If so, please," they begged, "give us another chance, and we will dedicate our lives to Torah study and perform all the mitzvos with care. We didn't realize the awesome consequences of our deeds in the eternal life!" Unfortunately, their wish could not be granted. We get once chance, and they squandered it.

Indeed, Chazal (Shabbos 30a) explain the verse, "To the dead, freedom (Tehilim/Psalms 88:6)," to mean, "once one dies, he's free from the mitzvos." It's the world's most pervasive once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Still, imagine, says the Tiferes Shlomo, that you were given the opportunity. After all the procrastination, and slip ups, and missed opportunities, and your time has already expired, and you are finally beginning to understand the meaning of, "I believe, with complete faith, that the Creator, blessed is His name, will give goodly reward to those who perform the mitzvos, and will punish those who transgress them" - like Reish Lakish's hapless chevra - and then the decision is made to give you one more day. How would you spend that day?

This, of course, is a far more powerful exercise even than imagining that today is our last, because it assumes you've already had a preview of what awaits you. Who, better than you, can truly understand the power of a day... an hour... or even a minute on this world. Also, far from the depressing feelings associated with imagining today is our last, this angle allows us to look at today as a bonus - a gift - an opportunity to right some of our wrongs and set our priorities straight one last time.

This is how we should live our days, he says. As if life's already over, and we've been gifted with one more day - today - to repent and repair and get ourselves ready to meet our Maker. To appreciate the gift of life not as a given, but rather as something to be cherished, and utilized to its fullest.

This, he explains, is the meaning of the Mishna (Avos 2): "Don't say, 'When I'll be free, then I will study Torah.' Perhaps you won't be free." We have to realize that a time will come when we'll look back

and say, "If only I could have one more chance..." We do have that chance. Not then. Now.

The word perhaps in the Mishna is shema. Really, though, this isn't negotiable. After the fact we won't get another chance. As Chazal say (Bava Kamma 50a), "Whoever says Hashem overlooks our sins... he will be overlooked." This refers to the afterlife. As long as we're alive, Hashem is ready to overlook everything, if only we return to Him. But blow your chance here, and there's no take-backs. So why does the Mishna, according to the Tiferes Shlomo's interpretation, say perhaps? Shema, perhaps, is spelled shin, mem, alef, whose first letters also spell out the words shama mitzvos ein - there are no more mitzvos to perform over there.

This, he says, is how we can easily fulfil the words of the Talmud (Eiruvim 22a), "Every day the words of Torah shall be to you as if they were brand new." If we consider and appreciate each day as if it were our 'extra day,' we can indeed approach our studies with renewed freshness and enthusiasm each day.

Perhaps this also explains the famous blessing with which the rabbanim would bless each other (Berachos 17a), "Olamcha tir'eh bechayecha, may you see your World (to Come) in this world." Now we know that while the wicked receive any reward coming them on earth, because Hashem doesn't want them to mingle with the righteous in Gan Eden, the righteous don't necessarily receive any reward on this world. To the contrary, their reward is put aside for the eternal life. So why would we bless someone to "see his World - now - on earth?" Perhaps it means that he should merit to internalize the attitude suggested by the Tiferes Shlomo, to treat every day on earth as if he were returning from the 'other side,' having been given the gift of one more day - one more chance to make good on his intentions and serve Hashem in the way he always meant to, but never quite managed to. Have a good Shabbos.

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