

A SLICE OF TIME WITH HONEY ON THE SIDE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

For most of us, it is very difficult to believe that another whole year has come and gone, and that we are about to stand once again before the King of Kings on Rosh Hashanah this week, b"H (assuming that you are reading this before Rosh Hashanah). Some of us just don't feel ready for Rosh Hashanah, the seven days of Selichos and Tshuva that follow, and then, Yom Kippur. Perhaps this is why the rabbis instituted saying Selichos at least four days in advance of Rosh Hashanah, in order to prime us for those awesome days, ready-or-not.

The truth is, this week's parsha of Shabbos Shuva (named so because of the special Haftarah portion) is also very timely, which presents the shira alluded to at the end of last week's parsha. As we have mentioned before, shira, the Jewish form of song, is the song of the soul ... what one hears when the body is silent. More precisely, shira is what one sings when even the body experiences an exceptionally open revelation of the hand of G-d, and can't help but comment on it.

The shira of Ha'Azinu introduces a very important concept, one that has not been outright alluded to in the past, but one which plays a very important role in understanding what goes wrong in history, and why.

There is a phenomenon (and I call it this, because really, it is not logical or natural) in life whereby people negate the past, at least in terms of any value it may have with regard to the future. When it comes to money and the business world, the opposite is the case: people constantly look at the past and try to glean wisdom from their mistakes and the mistakes of others. Everyone knows that mistakes cost money, and one has to be "on his toes" to maximize success. Yet, when it comes to the lessons of history, people tend to assume that the past was the past-water under the bridge, so-to-speak.

No wonder the Torah advocates:

*Remember the days of the world, and understand the years from generation to generation.
Ask your father and he will tell you, the Elders, and they will inform you. (Devarim 32:7)*

It says something about a society that "commands" people to know world history. Western society

makes it mandatory to learn history somewhat in the early grades, but it is certainly not a crime if you don't. And even what they do teach does not necessarily leave a person feeling morally responsible to his or her society.

The reason is simple. History becomes meaningless if it is simply a driverless "car." The only message it says to a person is, "Watch out! Make sure not to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, or you'll get hit!" This was the kind of lesson one woman drew from her perspective of history's approach to anti-Semitism, and the advice she had for her fellow Jews. She wrote in her college campus newspaper: "If we stop calling ourselves 'Jews,' " she said, "then people will stop hating Jews."

She was certainly not a student of history, and for sure not a student of Jewish history. For, her suggestion was predicated upon one very mistaken point: she assumed that G-d had and has little to do with what happens to the Jewish people throughout history. A quick scan of Jewish history seems to indicate that G-d has had everything to do with our history. ("You can run, but you can't hide" seems to have been written about the Jewish people, and their eternal relationship to G-d.) From the Torah's perspective, the notion of a driverless car when it comes to history is nonsense, and, the truth be known, downright dangerous.

Frighteningly enough, the people who had built Migdol Bavel (Tower of Bavel) had had a similar approach to Divine judgment: 340 years after the Flood, they had built the tower to "hold up the sky," lest it leak and flood the world all over again! Imagine that. Noah and his family was still alive at the time the plans for the Tower had been revealed; Avraham was walking around preaching about G-d's dominion over creation as construction of the Tower began-and these guys are building a tower to make up for nature's shortcomings!

Why?

The answer is very basic. The Talmud tells us that "Everyday the yetzer hara gets up to kill us." (Kiddush 30b). Not a very encouraging thought, is it? As if the streets weren't dangerous enough, the Talmud has to tell us that we go to sleep and wake up with a built-in murderer!!

What the Talmud means is, life is for making free-will moral choices. Moral choice implies that immorality must be a possibility if the choice is going to be a valid one, which means that something within us must relate, on some level, to the wrong thing. We call that "thing" the yetzer hara, and it is his job, so-to-speak, to make the wrong thing appealing enough that we have to consciously choose not to do it. This is why the same Talmud writes that G-d said, "I created the yetzer hara, and I created Torah as its spice ..." (i.e., Torah channels the energy of the yetzer hara in a positive direction).

However, without Torah, the yetzer hara has free reign to call the shots, which leads to certain spiritual death. And, as the Torah warns in this week's parsha, if you look at history carefully through G-d's "eyes," you can see how societies that have been built upon cornerstones set by the yetzer hara fall soon enough, and leave very little trace that they ever existed in any meaningful way.

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure all this out, says Moshe Rabbeinu. You just have to be willing to take the lessons of the past to heart, to recognize them for the Divine Providence they represent, and to act accordingly. It is the only way to guarantee that you will be one of the fortunate few to bear witness to history, and not the other way around.

Shabbos Day:

This Sunday (October 5) will fall the Fast of Gedalia (usually the first day after Rosh Hashanah, but since this year that day is Shabbos, the fast is pushed off until Sunday).

The fast day was instituted to recall the assassination of Gedalia ben Achikam at the hands of Yishmael ben Netaniah, who had been instigated by the king of Ammon. As a result of the assassination, the final vestiges of Jewish autonomy after the Babylonian conquest (423 BCE) were destroyed, thousands of Jews were slaughtered, and the remaining Jews were driven into exile.

As the history goes, after Nebuchadnetzar, the then king of Babylonian had destroyed the first Temple and had exiled the people to his land, he had allowed an impoverished remnant to remain in the land with Gedalia as their governor. Many Jews who had previously fled to other neighboring countries because of the initial attack returned to the territory of Yehudah and tended the fields and vineyards returned to them by the king of Babylonia. They were able to enjoy a period of peace after their original suffering.

However, jealous of and hostile to the Jewish remnant, the king of Ammon sent Yishmael ben Netaniah to assassinate Gedalia, who had received the former cordially in the town of Mitzpeh—despite advance warnings of his guest's diabolical plans. Gedalia had not wanted to accept what he thought had been loшон hara (derogatory speech) about his guest, and instead had chosen to act as if he knew nothing. His righteousness cost him his life, and the Talmud comments: it may have been wrong to speak and listen to loшон hara, but there was nothing wrong in exercising a little caution in any case.

After Gedalia was murdered, the remaining Jews, in fear of the revenge of the king of Babylonia fled to Egypt, and the land thus fulfilled the prophecy that it would one day lie uninhabited and fallow. The fast day itself was established to remind us that the death of the righteous is likened to the burning of the Temple, for which a fast day was also established.

However, if the Fast of Gedalia teaches us anything, it is how petty feelings of jealousy and hatred "cut our noses off to spite our faces." We had been decimated by the Babylonians, and rightly so, according to how abusive the pre-Destruction generations had lived. Yet, in spite of all this, G-d, in His infinite mercy, left a "seed" behind that could have flowered and saved us from complete and

utter exile.

What did we do? For selfish reasons, we threw it back in G-d's face saying, "We may not get away with this, nor benefit from our actions, but at least they won't either." It's the Philistinian point of view all over again (Samson tore down the walls of the Philistine building, crushing everyone inside while taking his own life).

On Yom Kippur, the rabbis point out that we don't wear shoes because on that day we are supposed to be like angels-and angels don't wear shoes. However, a second reason the rabbis give for not wearing shoes is far more down to earth; it is to remind us that Yosef's brothers had sold him for shoes ... for shoes!! ... and look what we went through and where we ended up in the end!

In fact, the Ten Martyrs, whom we read about during the Yom Kippur Mussaf service, were still paying the price for Yosef's brothers' mistake. The truth is, so are we ... and so will we pay for that mistake until Moshiach comes. For, the same flaw that sent the brothers off in the wrong direction continues to infect our perspective of reality, making us petty and willing to die for mundane matters, while overlooking the issues that count the most.

In essence, this is really the underlying root of all the transgressions we beat our chests about on Yom Kippur. As we learn in many places, sin is not so much a question of what, as it is one of when, and we make a mistake about the "when" at times that we lose sight of our priorities and what matters most in life. Even Gedalia's trait of completely overlooking the evil report about his murderer was enviable, but misplaced at the moment, and his death and fast day remind us that, when it comes to living a completely Torah life, it is not just important to know what to do, but when and how as well.

Seudah Shlishi:

What would Rosh Hashanah be without apple and honey? Well, for one thing, less fun and less sweet.

Many people know that we dip apple in the honey on Rosh Hashanah to symbolize our desire for a sweet, new year. We even say so at the time of dipping and eating (see the ArtScroll Machzor for the different foods to be eaten prior to the meal as "segulos," and the special prayers that accompany them). However, few people know how deep the apple in the honey is supposed to go (philosophically, that is).

In the Zohar, the Jewish people are compared to "apples" that hang on a tree that alludes to G-d Himself, reminding us of the intimate relationship that exists between us and our Creator. The honey itself alludes to Torah, as the verse says:

Sweetness drops from your lips, O bride; honey and milk are under your tongue ... (Shir HaShirim 4:11)

"Sweetness drops from your lips, O bride ..." in discoursing upon Torah (Rashi) "... honey and milk are under your tongue ..." This refers to the secrets of Torah (Divrei Yehuda)

According to the Pri Tzaddik (Rosh Hashanah), dipping the apple in the honey alludes to our desire to renew our understanding of Torah, but on an even deeper level. The apple, which is sweet to begin with, is immersed in the honey, which is sweeter yet, to symbolize how the Jew who immerses himself in Torah can make an already "sweet" life even sweeter. And, as the Divrei Yehuda points out, the deeper the "immersion," the deeper the understanding, and the deeper the serenity in life. Who could transgress further when life itself becomes so sweet?

After all, transgression is also a function of a sense of discontentment. Physically content people are often righteous people, and vice versa. People who feel that they have to always get ahead materialistically, and feel the pressure if they ease up for a moment to focus on more spiritual matters are often slaves to their desires, and will have great difficulty in not bending the "rules" to make things work out the way they feel they need them to work out.

The apple in the honey is supposed to remind the Jew that contentment lies not in the realm of the physical, but in the realm of the spiritual. Knowing this, and living by this for the Jew, is the difference between being an "apple" that remains "attached" to the tree, and alive, and one that becomes, G-d forbid, severed from the tree, and ...

Melave Malkah:

Not all of Rosh Hashanah, the Aseres Yemai Tshuva (Ten Days of Repentance), and Yom Kippur is fire-and-brimstone. There is a far more upbeat side to all of this, and that is, going home.

No, not just returning home from yeshiva or college to your parent's home for the holiday and great Yom Tov food. Going home in this sense means using Rosh Hashanah as a chance to become "true to thine own self."

What I mean by this is, everyone has shtik. You know, that kind of presence we try to create with respect to how we are perceived by the outside world. Everyone acts a little bit in life, for whatever the reason, though we may barely be conscious of it anymore (it's like going out on a shidduch, when you may act the way you'd like to be perceived, but not necessarily the way you actually are presently).

And so what's wrong with a little shtik? Well, for one, we know it's not us, at least on some level.

Deep inside our heart of hearts, we know what we really think about, and what really matters most to us. And one thing bothers us more than anything else, even more than not being the person we long to be, and that's faking it. As many a person has pointed out before: there is great comfort in being the real you, even if the real you is not what you ought to be.

Rosh Hashanah, the Aseres Yemai Tshuva, and Yom Kippur, are times to confront the real You, to assess what you like about yourself and to analyze what you don't. Being real with yourself is the first stage to self-improvement; people who pretend to be things they're not end up never being that which they are, and that which they are not. And in the words of one philosopher: People wrapped up in themselves make small packages!

It is the egocentric misguided human being who fashions himself to be G-d's gift to man. However, it is the down-to-earth, self-honest human being, who sees himself for what he is, who uses the good to help improve the not-so-good, who ends up becoming man's gift to G-d.

Can you think of any nicer way to spend the birthday of creation?

Have a great Shabbos Shuva,
Chasiva v'Chasima Tova
Pinchas Winston

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