

THE TRUE CONSOLATION PRIZE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

"And I pleaded (vaeschanan) to G-d at that time, saying, 'Eternal G-d, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness ...' " (Devarim 3:23)

"Vaeschanan: All forms of the verb "chanan" signify a gift for free. Although the righteous could claim a reward based upon their good deeds, still, they ask them from G-d as a gift." (Rashi)

At first this reasoning seems backwards, indeed, even verging on being, G-d forbid, chutzpadik! G-d decreed that Moshe would not cross the Jordan River into Israel, as a punishment for striking the rock at Mei Merivah. If anything, this was a time to start justifying one's claim to that which G-d has said "no," which means pointing out all the merits built up. This was not a time to rely upon favors.

Furthermore, asks the Klei Yakar, how could anyone hold their mitzvos before G-d like an unpaid debt? From the moment we are born life is a gift, and G-d keeps giving to us all of our lives. The fact that He will reward us in the end for the good deeds we have done is just another proof of His desire to be kind to us; it will not be because He will actually owe us something.

For this reason, the Klei Yakar wants to interpret Rashi to mean "good deeds" of the future, not from the past. In other words, righteous people consider it a privilege to have mitzvos to fulfill, a favor from G-d to them, not the other way around. However, says the Klei Yakar, when Moshe petitioned G-d to let him into Eretz Yisroel in spite of the decree against him, he could have claimed a "right" to enter based upon his intense desire to perform mitzvos that could only be fulfilled in the land of Israel, like ma'aser (tithes) for example, that is, "Let me into Israel for the good deeds I will perform once I get there!"

However, concludes the Klei Yakar, a humble person such as Moshe would never have spoken about mitzvos he performed, or planned to perform. In humility, Moshe made himself out to be a man with no potential merit, and asked for the gift of entry into Eretz Yisroel, the land he yearned to live on, for free.

However, we know from elsewhere that the word "chayn" also implies more. It was because Noach *"found chayn in the eyes of G-d"* (Bereishis 6:8) that he survived the Great Flood while everyone else at that time perished. At a time of strict judgment such as then, it is not usual for G-d to give out "free

gifts," even to nice people (as Rashi points out in Parashas Bo).

Furthermore, the root of the words "chanukah" and "chinuch," which mean "dedication" and "education" respectively, is the word "chayn." Dedication usually implies the opposite of expecting "handouts," and the basis of Jewish education is to teach children that "according to the effort is the reward" (Pirkei Avos 5:22), not to depend upon free gifts.

Rather, in short, chayn is a word that implies a desire for an intense relationship with G-d (see Parashas Terumah, 5757, Seudah Shlishi). This is what G-d saw in Noach, and this is what Moshe was asking from G-d. "Don't grant me my request because of all the good deeds I have done (according to the Klei Yakar, "will do"). Grant it to me because of the relationship we have, as a function of my love for You, and because it will only help me to increase that love and reveal it." Tzaddikim do not think in terms of good deeds they have done; they only look for more opportunities to come closer to G-d.

Shabbos Day:

Take care of yourself, and guard your soul well. (Devarim 4:9)

Take good care of your souls ... (Devarim 4:15)

Last year we spoke about how this posuk is a source for taking care of one's physical health. The Talmud, however, adds another dimension to this mitzvah.

Our rabbis taught: Once there was a pious individual who, while praying on the road, was met by a prince who saluted him, saying, "Peace be to you!" However, the pious individual did not respond (being in the middle of the Shemoneh Esrai prayer). The prince waited until the end of his prayer, and after he finished, the prince said to him, "Good for nothing! Behold, it is written in your Torah, 'Take care of yourself, and guard your soul well.' It also says, 'Take good care of your souls ...' When I saluted you, why did you not answer me? If I had cut off your head with my sword, who would have avenged you against me?" "Wait!" said the pious individual, "until I will appease you with a few words. If you had been standing before a human king, and someone saluted you, would you have answered him?"

"No ..." the prince answered.

"And if you had, what would [the king] have done do you?"

"He would have certainly had my head cut off with a sword!" replied the prince.

The pious individual then said, "If this is how you would have acted before a mortal king, who is here today and gone tomorrow, how much more so is this the way to behave before the supreme King of

kings, The Holy One, Blessed is He, who lives and endures forever!"

The prince was satisfied [with the explanation], and let the pious individual return home in peace. (Brochos 32b)

The difficulty with having one foot in the spiritual world and one in the physical world, which is the way the Torah Jew seems to live, is that it is very easy for him to lean too much in one direction, and often, in the direction of the physical world. How many times have we sacrificed spiritual opportunities because they seemed physically "harmful"?

Especially in today's world of modern medicine and psychology. The non-Jewish world is very smart, and getting smarter by the day, but not necessarily wiser. Secular knowledge may be cumulative, but wisdom is a function of something altogether different, as Dovid HaMelech wrote:

The beginning of wisdom is the fear of G-d. (Tehillim 111:10)

For this reason, not everything that the secular world concludes in terms of health precautions is necessarily the health-advice for the Torah Jew. This does not mean that we can ignore the good advice of our doctors in areas that are obviously dangerous to our health. However, what it does mean, and what the above Talmudic story illustrates, is that the physical well-being of the Jew is based more upon our spiritual well-being than actual physical cures.

As we have quoted elsewhere, the book Chovos Levovos ("Duties of the Heart") states: G-d leaves the Jew's fate in the hands of whomever or whatever he trusts in. If it is G-d, then miracles can happen; if it is man's abilities, then it is this, as limited as they may be, that will have to cure the person or make him successful. Yes, there is a mitzvah to use whatever means are physically available to solve one's health problems (within halachic reason, and) when necessary. But this is only after realizing and living with the reality that:

"It is not snakes that kill, but sin that kills." (Brochos 33a)

And that goes for any other danger to human life as well. It is upon such a base of understanding that the physical cure can have its desired effect, or, perhaps, be rendered unnecessary altogether.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Bind [these words] as a sign on your hand, and let them be a sign between your eyes ... (Devarim 11:18)

This posuk refers to the mitzvah incumbent upon men to wear tefillin. When most people think about tefillin, perhaps they think of a boy who has just reached the age of Bar Mitzvah. It is an accepted rite of passage for almost all Jews that a boy who enters "manhood" must do so with his own pair of tefillin. Sadly, in many cases, after "entry" into religious "manhood" the tefillin may be put away for years to come, never to see the light again except on "special" occasions.

Another, more specific image that comes to mind is the black leather boxes and straps themselves. As a scribe once told me, "You won't find leather work like this anywhere in the world!" Made from a single piece of animal skin, each tefillah (singular for tefillin) is the result of treated leather that is then molded into the beautifully architectural black boxes called "Shel Rosh" and "Shel Yad," barely resembling anything leather by the time they are ready to be worn. Include inside each the halachically-beautiful parchments that go into the tefillin, and you have a religious item that can be quite costly. Indeed, tefillin can be purchased upwards of \$1,000 for a single pair!

I didn't realize how unusual tefillin were until one day, while praying in a yeshivah in the Old City, some non-Jews accidentally poked their heads through the front door (they must have thought they had stumbled onto some kind of archeological site). Obviously they had never seen tefillin close up before; the strange look on their faces made me realize for the first time how ritualistic tefillin must appear to the outside world. That day I became very aware for the first time how little I knew about why tefillin are the way we make them, and what they're supposed to accomplish.

Years later, I read that when Ya'akov placed the stick into the ground to cause his flock of sheep to increase in size (Bereishis 30:37), he had created an effect similar to that of wearing tefillin. "How strange," I thought to myself. "What did the stick and the sheep have to do with binding one's strength in the service of G-d?"

It wasn't until many years later that I understood better the significance of Ya'akov's "business venture." According to Kabbalah, the three types of sheep that Ya'akov caused to be produced were called, "Akudim," "Nekudim," and "Berudim," or, ringed, spotted, and flecked (Bereishis 31:10). The Hebrew terms are also the names given to three stages of creation, the first two of which are the main topics of the deepest Kabbalistic literature. Hence, though on the surface Ya'akov was simply (if you can call it simple) increasing his material lot in life, on a far more esoteric level, he was entering into the deepest of spiritual realities, affecting them on levels that, somehow, tefillin are also meant to influence.

This should not surprise those familiar with the Talmud that says that G-d "wears" tefillin (Brochos 6a). In fact, the Talmud states that when Moshe asked G-d, "Let me have a vision of Your Glory ..." (Shemos 33:18), G-d showed Moshe His tefillin knot (Brochos 7a). To see more than this was impossible, as G-d told him, "Because no man can see My face and live." However, the tefillin knot, which is worn on the back of the head, was still an exceptionally high level of spiritual revelation of the light of G-d.

What is all of this supposed to mean? The answer to that question is beyond the scope of this essay, but can be understood as one learns more of G-d's Torah. However, one thing is for certain: like the rest of Torah and mitzvos, nothing is only what it appears to be on the surface. We live in two overlapping realities: the finite, limited reality of the body, and the infinite, unlimited reality of the soul, and somehow tefillin is an important bridge between the two. By donning tefillin, a person does

far more than fulfill a mitzvah whose reason may seem strange and archaic to the unlearned; by wearing tefillin, a Jewish male "rides" a "vehicle" that has the potential to traverse the gap between the mundane physical world and the most sublime spiritual reality (something that women, apparently, don't require tefillin to achieve).

This only serves to highlight how mournful it is that, of all the mitzvos still performed today, tefillin is one lacking its due respect. Our lifestyles today have limited our praying time, and the pressures of daily life distract us even at times we'd like to be free of the physical world. After millennia in exile, we are a tired people, and this is evident by the speed at which we don and remove our tefillin. What kind of effect on creation can our tefillin have, if this is the way we treat this mitzvah?

By virtue of the holiness of tefillin and the effect they can have on creation (not to mention on our own spiritual awareness), we are obligated to investigate, to the best of our ability, what it is we are "slipping on" and off each day. We learn from Ya'akov that the proper application of the concept of tefillin, among other things, can miraculously effect our livelihoods. The stories abound of Jews of yesteryear, whose respect for tefillin caused them to tremble with respect while wearing them, miraculously survived with limited involvement in the working world.

Perhaps the improper wearing of tefillin is also what stands between us and our Father in heaven, and the redemption for which we have longed for so many, and often painful, generations. After all, from the Talmud it seems that the relationship we have as a people with G-d is symbolized by tefillin:

"Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak asked Rav Chiyah bar Avin: What is written in the tefillin of the Master-of-the-World? He answered him, 'Who is like My nation Israel, a unique nation on earth ...' (Brochos 6a)

Perhaps it was this that I came to sense way back when on the day that "stranger" reacted to the black box on my arm and my head, that fateful morning in the Old City.

Melave Malkah:

"Console, console My people, says your G-d ..." (Yishaya 40:1)

Thus begins this week's Haftorah, which, traditionally, follows the week in which Tisha B'Av falls. This Shabbos is thus called, "Shabbos Nachamu," the "Shabbos of Consolation," meant as a consolation for the mourning of Tisha B'Av. This theme will continue throughout the upcoming weeks as well.

The words are G-d's command to His prophets, to tell the people of the eventual redemption, which may come early if we merit it, or by the last possible time if we don't (Malbim). But come it will, whether we believe it or not, whether we have the patience to wait for it or we don't.

The question is, how could we possibly merit the geulah early? In every generation there are tzaddikim who uphold Torah, but they always seem to be in the minority, and G-d deals with us based upon what the majority of the nation is doing (Pri Tzaddik, Vaeschanan, 17). Today, how many millions of Jews have drifted so far from Torah that they now have little or no respect for Torah and those who uphold it?

For this reason, says the Pri Tzaddik, the prophet said:

A voice calls, *"In the desert, clear the way of the L-rd, straighten out in the wilderness, a highway for our G-d."* (Yishaya 40:3)

The voice referred to, says the Pri Tzaddik, is a Bas Kol (Heavenly Voice) that goes out every day. It is the thoughts of teshuvah that emanate from every Jewish soul as it contemplates and wonders what its purpose is in life, and its intended direction. This may not be a voice that we can hear with our own ears, and often its manifestation is not visible to our physical eyes. However, it is a voice that G-d can hear, and at the right time, it will become a voice that all of us will be able to hear as well.

This may be hard to believe, but as someone who has been in outreach for over a decade now, I can personally testify to the dramatic transformations of Jews whom, I had thought at first encounter, were not relevant to complete teshuvah. Everything about them, at least externally, had suggested that they had become so inundated by secularism that even their "pintele Neshamah," G-d forbid, remained unreachable.

But it hadn't disappeared. It had merely been muffled, and given the right moment and the right rabbi, the questions poured out as it became clearer to me that the person before me was really only in search of his self, his Jewish self. It was amazing how many questions, important questions about life, poured out, like a well-spring that had built up pressure below the earth's surface. For me personally and for others who have spoken of similar encounters, such experiences offer great consolation when fighting what feels like a terrible uphill battle against assimilation and intermarriage.

As we turn the corner once again from the tragedies of the infamous ninth day of Av and point our sights in the direction of Rosh Hashanah and national teshuvah, may we merit to be consoled as a nation, and to hear the collective Jewish voice go out as we "pave" the "highway for our G-d" right across our Jewish hearts.

Have a great, consoling Shabbos,

Pinchas Winston
