ON THE "HEEL" OF MOSHIACH, PART II

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

For (aikev)listening to these laws, safeguarding and keeping them, G-d your L-rd will keep in mind the covenant and love with which He made an oath to your fathers. (Devarim 7:12)

The word "aikev" in the first line of this week's parshah (spelled: ayin, kuf, bais), inspires many divrei Torah on the usage of this unusual word. Rashi derives mussar from the usage of this word, whereas the Ba'al HaTurim finds an allusion to the first set of Tablets. However, the following goes much deeper in trying to decipher the message being conveyed by Moshe to all the generations to follow:

Within [the name] "Ya'akov" (yud, ayin, bais, kuf) is the mystery of "Yabok," whose letters (yud, bais, kuf) stand for the words, "ye'anainu v'yom kareinu" ("on that day He will answer us"); the mystery of "Yabok" is very, very deep, because three names [of G-d] numerically equal "Yabok" ... Therefore, it mentions with respect to Avraham, "Because (aikev) Avraham listened to My voice" ... and this is why it is written here, "For listening to these laws ..." (Yalkut Reuveini, Aikev, 2)

Let me explain a little of what is being referring to here.

First of all, the "Yabok" is an eastern tributary of the Jordan, about half-way between the Kinneret and the Dead Sea. What makes this river so significant is that it is in the one that Ya'akov crossed over to enter Eretz Yisroel, after being away from home for 34 years (Bereishis 32:23). And it was the crossing of this river that led to his all-night struggle with the angel of Eisav, and his crucial name change from "Ya'akov" to "Yisroel," the name of the entire Jewish people.

The rabbis teach that Ya'akov's battle through the night symbolized the long exile his descendants would be forced to endure until the time of Moshiach. Hence, the Yabok River is a symbol of confronting exile, and becoming Yisroel symbolized spiritually surviving exile, all of which is an intrinsic part of Ya'akov himself, which is why three out of four letters of his name spell the word "yabok." Hence, "Within [the name] "Ya'akov" is the mystery of "Yabok,"

Now, whenever we refer to "the day" that G-d will answer us, it means "the day," that is, the day that Moshiach will come and reveal himself and redeem the Jewish people. Therefore, again, there is a hint to messianic times in Ya'akov's struggle with the angel of Eisav, and the earning of his identity, "Yisroel"--the struggle of every Jew since.

Interestingly enough, when it comes to Avraham's name change from Avram to Avraham, the Talmud warns us not to revert back to "Avram." However, when it comes to Ya'akov's name change, Yisroel remains interchangeable with Ya'akov (Brochos 13a). Why? Because Avram's transformation to Avraham was completed in his day; however, the struggle to remain Yisroel forever is an ongoing one, fought over the long, arduous exiles we continue to endure, and which threaten our very identity as a nation. It is a struggle that Ya'akov began back at the Yabok River, and one which the last generation before Moshiach will have to complete.

Therefore, the first posuk of this week's parshah can really be read as follows:

For (aikev) struggling throughout exile to maintain your identity of living by Torah and mitzvos, then G-d your L-rd will keep in mind the covenant and love with which He made an oath to your fathers. (Devarim 7:12)

Whether we do or not, either way, the time will come when we will have to confront the "Yabok" of our time, and, on that day, "He will answer us." We are, after all, close to the end of the period referred to by the Talmud as, "The Heels of Moshiach."

Shabbos Day:

And after you have eaten and are satisfied, then bless Hashem, your G-d, for the good land which He has given to you. (Devarim 8:10)

Famous words, that are also found in the third paragraph of Birchas HaMazone, the blessing recited after a bread-meal. Simple words, that tell one that he must be grateful for the gift of life, and all that sustains it. Simple words, that is, until a brilliant rabbi, such as the Shem M'Shmuel, asks an insightful question:

"Why does it say, 'after you have eaten and are satisfied, then bless Hashem, your G-d'? Isn't it enough that we have eaten, that we can then bless Him? The answer is, that, like a child, if the body isn't happy, then the soul can't stay focused to fulfill its mission, which is to praise Hashem (Shem M'Shmuel, Aikev).

The Shem M'Shmuel is teaching us a few things here. The first lesson is that it is enough that we have food at all that we must bless G-d; satiation is a bonus. In fact, we see this idea in the first paragraph of "bentching," where we thank G-d for his extra-kindness (chayn), His kindness (chesed), and His mercy (rachamim).

What is the difference between the three? Though we may believe to the contrary, the truth is, the fact that G-d created us does not obligate Him to sustain us. That He does provide us with food is a function of His mercy, not because it is our constitutional right. That is the level of "rachamim."

"Chesed" means that the food is accessible. Mercy is responsible for the existence of food, but what if that food were three feet under ice in the Arctic Circle? Would we have any other choice but to spend whatever time and energy necessary to get to that food, if that is all that would keep us alive? But that is not the way it is, for, G-d's chesed makes food conveniently available, even in your own backyard if you so choose!

However, need that accessible food look and taste good? No--even chesed doesn't demand that. That "extra mile" that G-d goes to not only sustain us, and to not only make our sustenance convenient, but to even make an orange and apple look and smell wonderful, and taste even better, is a function of "chayn," of G-d's love for His creation.

But why? Because, as the Shem M'Shmuel points out, the purpose of our being here is to sing praise of G-d. Not that He needs our praises, mind you, but rather, because we need to praise Him! Praising others means being appreciative of their being, and being appreciative of their being means being sensitive to life and all aspects of it, and that is godly. And being godly is what we're here to achieve, for, as the Ramchal explains:

"G-d's purpose in creation was to bestow of His good to another ... Since G-d desired to bestow good, a partial good would not be sufficient. The good that He bestows would have to be the ultimate good that His handiwork could accept. G-d alone, however, is the only true good, and therefore His beneficent desire would not be satisfied unless it could bestow that very good, namely the true perfect good that exists in His intrinsic nature ... His wisdom therefore decreed that the nature of His true benefaction be His giving created things the opportunity to attach themselves to Him to the greatest degree possible. Man was therefore created with both a yetzer tov and a yetzer hara. He has the power to incline himself in whichever direction he desires ... The Highest Wisdom decreed that man should consist of two opposites. These are his pure spiritual soul and his unenlightened physical body. Each one is drawn toward its nature, so that the body inclines toward the material, while the soul leans toward the spiritual. The two are then in a constant state of battle ... (Derech Hashem 1:2:1-1:3:2)

When the yetzer hara wins the battle, and man pursues physicality, then he moves away from G-d and godliness. However, when the soul wins the battle, and man moves towards spirituality, then he becomes godly, and further attached to G-d, so-to-speak. Better resembling His Creator, he becomes more attached to Him, and the pleasure is sublime and unbounded.

However, like in all battles, be they physical or spiritual, a good "commander" must have good strategies, and it is no different when battling the body and its drives (note: the root of the Hebrew word for "war"--milchamah--is the Hebrew word for "bread"--lechem, because it symbolizes the essential battle in life). If we satisfy the body, the Torah is telling us by including the concept of "satiation" (according to the Shem M'Shmuel), then the two of them together can sing praise to G-d with a full heart. Because, everyone knows that a happy body is a singing body. And, a singing body

will direct that praise to G-d when the body understands that the source of its satiation is the Source of all true satiation, G-d Himself. And, as the Talmud teaches:

One who sings song in This World, will merit to sing song in the World-to-Come. (Sanhedrin 91b)

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Now, Israel, what does Hashem your G-d, ask of you, but to fear Hashem your G-d and to walk in His ways ... (Devarim 10:12)

The issue of fear of G-d is one of the most discussed in the world of Torah. And it should be, because, as Moshe says, this is what G-d is really asking of us.

As we have mentioned before, the Mesillos Yesharim ("Path of the Just," Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto) explains that fear of G-d is basically two concepts: fear of punishment for going against the will of G-d, and, a feeling of awe in G-d's presence, evoked by contemplating G-d's greatness and our own lowliness; the latter is the ultimate level.

Interestingly enough, in the above verse, the Ba'al HaTurim finds reference to a halachah that, seemingly, has as much to do with fear of G-d as any other halachic matter. The verse itself contains 99 letters, but can be said to contain 100 letters when the word "ask" (shoel) is written as it should be written, that is, with its "vav." Hence, says the Ba'al HaTurim, a Torah reference to the rabbinical ordinance (established by King David) to recite 100 blessings daily (Menachos 43b).

What is the special connection?

As the Nefesh HaChaim teaches in the Second "Gate," the concept behind a blessing is to draw down spiritual light from Above into our very mundane, physical world, in order to make the presence of G-d more "palpable" in creation. This is how we elevate creation and make it "holy to G-d," and become closer to Him.

Many think that we make a blessing, for example over food, in order to gain Divine permission to eat. And this is correct, because the Talmud says that one who eats food or enjoys any part of This World without making the appropriate blessing is like one who has stolen and benefited from Divine property (Brochos 35a)--a serious violation!

However, the deeper explanation is that one eats an apple, for example, in order to make a blessing! This is because the purpose of creation is not to eat, but to increase awareness of G-d's providence in creation, and it is the blessing, not the food, that does this best. When we make blessings, especially with the proper understanding of their words, and with the appropriate level of intention, our words become spiritual "conduits" for the Divine light that brings blessing to us and the world around us! (You can even bring blessing to someone who is miles away when doing a mitzvah on his or her behalf, or when making a blessing with the intention that another should spiritually benefit as

well.)

Therefore, the Ba'al HaTurim's connection between the mitzvah to fear G-d and the rabbinical one to make 100 blessings daily is quite appropriate (not that the Ba'al HaTurim needs our approval). For, the words, "yireh Shamayim" (fear of Heaven), literally mean the "seeing of Heaven," an euphemism for G-d Himself. And, the point of the 100 blessings is to make the hand of G-d far more apparent in every day life. They are one and the same idea.

(Why "100" blessings? That is a more Kabbalistic matter, beyond the scope of this parshah sheet ...)

Melave Malkah:

Since Tehillim has always been an important element in bringing about both personal and national redemption from times of trouble, the Melave Malkah component on this parshah sheet, from this point onward, will focus on this area of Torah.

The praises of the man are that he did not walk in the counsel of the evil, did not stand in the path of the sinful, and did not sit in the session of scorners. (Tehillim 1:1)

Some verses of Tehillim need more explanation than others. However, though Rashi and the Metzudos render the first word differently than at other times, still, the message is quite clear. A large part of spiritually surviving This World and making it to the next one is not getting involved with the wrong people and the wrong things.

In fact, even though we have been given 248 Positive Commandments by which to live, and for which we will have to answer at the End-of-Days (at least those that were relevant to us and our station in life), that is not the way it was for the First Man. In fact, all he had to do was "nothing," and we would all be sitting in Gan Aiden to this very day, and forever.

In other words, Adam's test was not to do something, as in a Positive Commandment, but to abstain from doing something, namely, the eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. However, that must have been some free-will choice, because the gezillion free-choices mankind has made since then, and continues to make, are all to rectify his mistake!

However, the lesson remains the same for all generations. So many difficult choices we find ourselves making in life are just the end result of not being careful about the direction our lives were taking, by not avoiding situations rather than by actively creating them. Too many times we make hard, moral choices because we weren't previously careful about the world we were creating, or allowed to be created, around us.

Dovid HaMelech's first piece of Tehillim-advice is, look around you. Take a hard, critical look at your spiritual environment, and distinguish between those people and situations that encourage spiritual

growth, and those that stunt it. The negative effect of the latter may be subtle and slow, but know that it will end up causing you to compromise on important moral issues, and in the end, this will speak badly about you before the Judge of Judges, G-d Himself.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston
