

COMFORT-ABLE?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Your G-d is a devouring fire, a jealous G-d ... (Devarim 4:24)

Agrippas, the general of Rome, asked Rabban Gamliel: "It is written, 'Your G-d is a devouring fire, a jealous G-d ...' In life, we only find it that a wise man is jealous of another wise man, a strong man of another strong man, a rich man of another rich man ... If G-d is jealous of an idol, the idol must have some power!" Rabban Gamliel answered him, "I will give you a parable. If one who is already married takes a second wife, the former will not be jealous of the new one if the new one is superior to her. However, if the former is superior to latter, then she will be jealous of her." (Avodah Zarah 55a)

This is an interesting discussion in the Talmud, but what are they really arguing about? Are they discussing the supposed powers of idols, or a more general concept: jealousy? From the direction of the dialogue, it seems that the latter issue is the real one.

According to Agrippas, jealousy occurs amongst people of similar abilities. We respect people greater than ourselves, and often shun people of lesser ability. It is people like ourselves that threaten us most, and who often tend to end up with portions that we deem to rightfully belong to us. Therefore, says Agrippas, if G-d is "jealous" of idols, is He not admitting they are like Him?

Rabban Gamliel says, it is not as you say. Jealousy is more a function of having to share with an inferior. People greater than us we respect, and we know they deserve things we don't have. People equal to us in stature also don't invoke feelings of jealousy, perhaps, according to Rabban Gamliel, because we reason, "If I can have such a thing, why can't they?" However, when it comes to "inferiors" (at least people we perceive as being so), we feel a sense of injustice when they enjoy benefits we don't, but must deserve!

The truth is, as the Torah proves over and over again, jealousy usually does take place amongst equals, just as Agrippas said. Kayin was jealous of, and killed his brother Hevel who was, at least, his equal. Eisav was jealous of Ya'akov who was definitely his superior. Rachel and Leah were jealous of each other, and neither was inferior to the other. The brothers were jealous of Yosef, and though they wanted to believe he was their inferior, in their heart-of-hearts, they probably knew he was superior. So what then was Rabban Gamliel trying to teach?

Rabban Gamliel was telling Agrippas, "Don't try to understand G-d by projecting human traits onto Him. His jealousy is not a jealousy of man, for He can give Himself whatever He wants, whenever He wants it. Ultimately speaking, who made the idol, and allows it to appear powerful in the eyes of others? G-d, of course."

Therefore, says Rabban Gamliel, G-d is not jealous of Jewish loyalty to foreign gods as we might be jealous of an equal. What upsets Him is the tremendous waste of energy and time we expend worshipping false gods. What angers G-d is the way that the Jewish people turn to false powers as an excuse to avoid reality, and to permit that which the Torah forbids. What "frustrates" G-d, so-to-speak, is that Jews are prepared to deny the reality of Divine Providence, to ignore the "writing on the wall," and to place false hopes in false powers. It is this that the Torah is warning about when it says, "Your G-d is a devouring fire, a jealous G-d ..."

For this reason, we have to look at our lives, and do a reckoning. We have to see where and when we turn to false beliefs for guidance in life. We have to analyze our lifestyles, and uncover our false assumptions/gods. For, nothing angers G-d more than a wasted life, and the pursuit of false beliefs.

Shabbos Day:

Hear Israel, Hashem our G-d, Hashem is One. And you shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart(s), with all your soul, and with all you possessions ... (Devarim 6:4-5)

These are, without a doubt, the most famous words in Judaism, for they form the basis of the Shema, the Jewish "Creed." How many times have these words been said by how many Jews throughout the three millennia of Jewish history? Even the forefathers knew these words and said them, and they have been the final words on the lips of many a G-d-fearing Jew, during times of peace, and especially during times of horrible persecution.

Nevertheless, the Talmud asks:

Rebi Eliezer said: If it says, "with all your life," why does it say "with all your possessions"? And if it says, "with all your possessions," why does it say, "with all your life." For the person who places higher value on his life than his property, it says, "with all your life." For the person who values his possessions more than his own life, it says, "with all your possessions." (Brochos 61b)

This way, the Talmud is saying, the Torah speaks to all types of Jews, and, from all of them, it has demanded unswerving loyalty to G-d and Torah. However, the Vilna Gaon is still left with a question of his own:

"This is difficult to understand. Is there anyone in the world that loves his money more than his own life? You find people will only sacrifice up until death, because in death there is nothing anyway!"

(Kol Eliyahu, VaEschanan, 103)

For this reason, the Gra explains the Talmud as follows:

"One could say that the explanation is as follows: If a person valued his possessions more than his life, meaning, that he finds it easier to physically do mitzvos than to spend money on mitzvos, because he can overlook physical effort, but not financial loss, then he should be careful not to hold back financially. In other words, Rebi Eliezer is not talking about actual self-sacrifice--just physical exertion versus financial expenditure. This works well with the continuation of the Talmud, since Rebi Akiva adds, 'with all your life' means actually giving one's life up for G-d when necessary. This also explains why, at the time that the Romans were raking his flesh with metal combs, it was difficult for the students, who questioned, 'For things like this you don't have to give up your life in order to sanctify the Name of G-d,' because they held like Rebi Eliezer, who said that it only means to bear the trouble of serving G-d. Thus they asked him [Rebi Akiva], 'To this extent?' to which he answered, 'All of my life I was bothered by this verse,' meaning, 'I hold that it means even surrendering one's life, and now that I can fulfill it, will I not?'"

However, in spite of this profound and insightful answer, perhaps there is more to learn, by asking why the order of the three phases is reversed. For, as a progression from the least personal to the most personal, it should really state: with all your possessions, with all your heart, and with all your life. Why is the last phrase not the first one?

I have no source to say this, but I would like to suggest the following. The Talmud states (Sanhedrin 97a) that there are three distinct period of history that make up a total of 6,000 years: 2,000 years of spiritual desolation, 2,000 years of Torah dissemination, and 2,000 years of Moshiach's coming. Could it be that the three phrases of the Shema correspond to these periods of time?

After all, since Torah was not given until the year 2,448/1313 BCE, the test of man during the first 2,000 years was really one of loyalty--a heart-issue. The question then was, would man stay loyal to his Creator, or would he pursue false idols instead. He may, like Avraham, be willing to die for G-d and truth, but it wasn't commanded of him, not yet. This was the period, therefore, perhaps, of "with all your heart."

However, in the second period of history, the Torah was given and the Jewish people were officially formed as a Torah-nation. That included an official life of mitzvos, one of which is to sanctify the Holy Name of G-d through life and, if necessary, through death.

Tragically, from 1313 BCE onward until the year 239 BCE (4,000 from creation), it has been exile and persecution for religious reasons most of the way through. It didn't end with the year 239 BCE, that is for certain. However, certainly the period of time up until the deaths of the famous "Ten Martyrs," who died at the hands of the Romans, was a unique period of mesiros nefesh--self-sacrifice. Could this have been the period of, "with all your life"?

Now, in our period of 2,000 years, at the end of the last one called, "The Heels of Moshiach," it is clear that Jews are not being forced to give up their lives for Judaism, for Torah, and for Eretz Yisroel--just their possessions. Well, not all of them, but enough of them that many simply turn their backs on Torah and their ancestors, for the sake of a more physical, more comfortable lifestyle. Could it be that we are the generation that corresponds to the phrase, "with all your possessions."

As I said earlier, I have not seen this written down in any book, nor have I heard a rabbi of authority expound this. Nevertheless, it does seem to echo a historical pattern, and perhaps, it is a good reason to sit down and seriously contemplate what the Shema is saying to each and every one of us, so close to the end of history.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

I pleaded with G-d at that time, saying, "G-d, You have begun to show me Your greatness and Your strong hand. What G-d in Heaven and on earth is there that can do as You have done with Your strength?! Please, let me pass over (eb'rah) and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, the good mountain, and the Lebanon ..." (Devarim 3:23-24)

There are many commentaries on these verses, and many versions of why Moshe was so insistent on crossing the Jordan River and entering Eretz Canaan. This is one of them:

"The settling of Eretz Yisroel is equal to all the mitzvos, and it is written in Sefer HaChinuch, 'I was asleep, but my heart was awake (Hebrew: ayin-raish)' (Shir HaShirim 5:2), because when I am in the exile of Edom, then I will be sleeping from 270 (raish-ayin) mitzvos. The seven rabbinical mitzvos with the 270 mitzvos equal "eb'rah" (aleph, ayin, bais, raish, heh). This is why Moshe pleaded to enter Eretz Yisroel, [the settling of] which is equal to all the mitzvos, as it says, 'Please, let me pass over ...' meaning, 'Now that I am outside the land, I only have "eb'rah" mitzvos. However, once I see the land, I will be able to do all the mitzvos.'." (Yalkut Reuvaini, VaEschanan, 95)

The truth is, the gematria of the word "e'brah" is 278, not 277, unless, of course, we are dealing with the kollel gematria (a common form of gematria) in which case, one is added for the word itself. This idea is consistent with the Kli Yekar on the first posuk of this week's parshah, which says that Moshe wanted to cross the river into Eretz Yisroel in order to be able to perform all the mitzvos that can only be performed in Eretz Yisroel.

However, what is more significant, perhaps, is that the Midrash places Eretz Yisroel on one side of the scale balancing out all the rest of the mitzvos of the Torah on the other side of the scale. Furthermore, the Midrash talks about a "sleep" that will overtake the Jews living outside the land, during the final exile of Edom, in which we are close to the end. (This probably accounts for the recent trend of a lack of desire to live in Eretz Yisroel, amongst all groups of Jews.)

Moshe Rabbeinu understood all of this, and probably wanted to rectify it, not just for himself, but for

all the generations to come. For, as history has proven, there is nothing worse than a "sleeping" Jew, philosophically-speaking, of course. And for the "sleeping" Jew, there is nothing worse than a Divine wake-up call, as the these three weeks, and Tisha B'Av, come to remind us.

As we sit on the floor (or low seats) this Tisha B'Av (you may be reading this after Tisha B'Av, but it went out before Tisha B'Av--the message is the same in any case), we should think about our lives, not just in the context of our immediate vicinity, but in the context of all of Jewish history. We should think hard, and ask ourselves important questions, such as,

"Where am I going in life, and what does my plan have to do with the overall goals of the Jewish people, and G-d's master plan for creation? Philosophically-speaking, am I asleep, or awake?"

The answers to these questions might be a little jolting for some, since many are not used to looking at their lives in this manner. However, it might lead some to wake up to Jewish history, and avoid the need for harsh forms of Divine Providence.

Melave Malkah:

"If only their hearts would always remain this way, where they are in such awe of Me. They would then keep all My commandments for all time, so that it would go well with them and their children forever."
(Devarim 5:26)

This Shabbos is "Shabbos Nachamu," the first of seven "Shabbatot of consolation." Spiritually and emotionally drained from Tisha B'Av and its long history of destructive effects, we are in need of serious consolation. All of the haftaros for the next seven weeks have been specifically chosen to convey this sentiment to all generations of Jews, until the real consolation of the Final Redemption will actually occur.

To understand the nature of the consolation, you have to first understand the nature of the loss. Tisha B'Av was about more than the destruction of the holy Temple, the House of G-d. It was about more than the fall of Beitar, and the horrible massacre that followed. It is even about more than the untold amount of Jewish blood that has flowed through the streets of just about every nation that we have ever crossed paths with, throughout our long, arduous journey to Yemos HaMoshiach.

Tisha B'Av is about terrible, and needless self-destruction.

It is always amazing how many people, when examining a Jewish history stained with blood can see only an angry G-d. In the "early days," the love of G-d for His children, was manifest. He talks to Avraham, and takes council with him. Yitzchak, Avraham's son, is saved from death and blessed with a long life. Ya'akov has troubles, but G-d is there each time to shore him up and blesses him with a large, successful family.

Egyptian slavery was a painful period of time, but a limited one. It ended with a great redemption after only 210 years (the actual enslavement lasted only 116 years), and G-d carried us "on eagles' wings" for decades. He spoke with us and personally advised us for the next 1,000 years through the fantastic and supernatural medium of prophecy.

But then, prophecy ended, and G-d went into "hiding"; the Divine lines of communication were shut down, and we were banished from our land, not once, not twice, but three times altogether. We have never recovered since. We are still, as a nation, broken up and spread all over the world, and spiritually "bleeding" with the help of an exceedingly high rate of assimilation and inter-marriage.

If you were G-d, would you want such children back?

Tisha B'Av says, one would think not. Shabbos Nachamu says, yes. For, as the posuk above says, G-d is our Father-in-Heaven who lives to love His children. He is not an angry G-d, but a G-d that displays anger when the children need to see it. He is not a jealous G-d, but a G-d that displays jealousy when His children need to experience it--for their sake, and not for His.

However, as the above posuk, and the following weeks of haftaros make clear, He is truly and sincerely a loving G-d, in spite of all that He has allowed us, His treasured nation, to live through. He lives, so-to-speak, to give us good, and made us for that very reason. However, like all children, we do our best to make sure He can't, and then can't understand why He won't.

Here is the consolation: In spite of the fact that we have given G-d plenty of reason to completely turn His back on us, and abandon us in a world that sees little, if no purpose for a Jewish people, He will not. Tisha B'Av tells us that we, on so many occasions, have rejected G-d and have rejected His good. His is always in response to ours. Shabbos Nachamu, on the other hand, promises us that, in spite of all of this, the relationship is not over. In fact, it will never be over; as soon as we decide to regain that awe of G-d and become intensely loyal to Him, we will see just how far that promise and relationship actually go.

Dovid HaMelech understood this, and wrote Tehillim to express it to all the generations that followed him. From Tehillim, one would never know just how difficult Dovid HaMelech's life was. And, if one had suffered as Dovid HaMelech had suffered, he would never, without a doubt, have written Tehillim--love songs to G-d. This is why the saying of Tehillim, particularly in groups and at the same time (though the books can be divided up amongst individuals), plays such a major role in bringing a peaceful redemption.

That was Dovid HaMelech's main strength, and why, in spite of his errors, he remained to be king of Israel, and the "father" of the Moshiach: He was able to see past the "veil" of the suffering in his own life, and in the life his people, and see the "heart" of G-d. He understood G-d's true sentiment and desire to give good to His people:

"If only their hearts would always remain this way, where they are in such awe of Me. They would

then keep all My commandments for all time, so that it would go well with them and their children forever." (Devarim 5:26)

As we enter the period of Elul, of which the rabbis teach is a time when G-d's love is more manifest, may we merit to see the Final Redemption of the Jewish people, an end to all sorrows, and the ultimate Father-and-Child reunion.

Have a great Shabbos,
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