

LIFE AFTER DEATH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

He [Aharon] shall then take the two goats, and stand them before G-d at the Tent of Meeting. Aharon shall place two lots on the two goats, one [marked] "for G-d," and one marked "for Azazel." (Vayikra 16:7-8)

All philosophical discussions aside, the world was made for free-will. From the deepest Kabbalistic secrets of existence to the little microbe floating across the glass slide under a high-power microscope - it all exists for man to have and use his free-will. All the world is a stage for free-will, and Yom Kippur is the day we atone for our sins, that is, our abuse of that free-will.

However, in the above posuk is an important insight into the concept of free-will, and by extension, what goes wrong. It is summed up in the following verse:

The paths of G-d are straight: the Righteous walk them, but the Sinners stumble in them. (Hoshea 14:10)

This explains a peculiar detail about the two goats used on Yom Kippur: they had to be identical. Identical in appearance, but drastically different in how their lives came to an end. The one whose lot was "for G-d" was offered on the altar, as a holy sacrifice to the Master of the Universe, while the other goat, the one upon whom the lot "for Azazel" fell was pushed off a cliff and met with an ignoble end.

However, while the two goats stood there and even after the lots were chosen, they looked the same. Nevertheless, on Yom Kippur, the moment of truth came and the separation was made: this one to G-d and this one to Azazel - the symbol of wasted human potential.

The story of the spies represents a similar idea (Bamidbar 13:1). Twelve spies followed one path, yet only two came back with a positive report, while ten came back with a negative one:

Š The land eats its inhabitants Š (Bamidbar 13:32)

"The Holy One, Blessed is He, did a favor for them, by making them [the inhabitants die and become] involved with their mourning so they wouldn't pay attention to these [the spies]." (Rashi)

The paths of G-d are straight: the Righteous walk them, but the Sinners stumble in them Š

Yehoshua and Caleiv walked the path of G-d, but the other ten spies "stumbled" in it, and, in the end, fell to destruction. It is no different with ALL of humanity, which "walks" one path called "human history," and, it is G-d's history, straight and true. The question is, who is "walking" the "path of G-d," and who is "stumbling" over it - who is walking in the direction of the "cliff," to, G-d forbid, "Azazel" and wasted human potential?

And, just like it was with the spies, it seems to be the same with history. Only two out of twelve spies saw the truth about Eretz Yisroel, a very small minority. Likewise, historically, it has always been only a very small minority who have correctly perceived the events of history and what they represented in terms of Divine Providence and its message for that time, be it a personal message, or a national/international one.

How does one know if he is on the right track, walking the path of G-d and not stumbling all over it in the direction of the destructive cliff? Well, what was the other option? The altar, the base of which was equal to 32 amos by 32 amos - the gematria of the word "leiv," which means "heart." If your heart is given over to G-d, then your lot is "for G-d."

Anyone can live a Judaism that is physically comfortable and agreeable to the Secular and non-Jewish world; it is the self-sacrificing Jew who can do that which the Torah requires, regardless of personal physical needs, and the applause of the outside world.

Shabbos Day:

This shall be an eternal law for you; on the tenth day of the seventh month you must afflict yourselves and refrain from work Š This is because on this day you shall have all your sins atoned, so that you will be cleansed; before G-d you will be cleansed of all your sins. (Vayikra 16:29)

Says the Talmud:

Rebi Yochanan said: Great is teshuvah (repentance) because it brings the redemption, as it says, "A redeemer will come to Tzion, and to those of Ya'akov who repent from willful sin Š" (Yeshayahu 59:20-21). What is the reason why the redeemer came to Tzion? Because, teshuvah was done for the willful sins of Ya'akov Š Reish Lakish said: Great is teshuvah because it transforms willful sins into merits Š (Yoma 86b)

That teshuvah can lead to redemption is not a new idea, but rather, the idea behind the concept of "achishenah" - the bringing of Moshiach early. If at least the majority of the Jewish people would try to do sincere and serious teshuvah, it would be enough of a critical mass to initiate the events that will result in the arrival of Moshiach and the triumph of truth. However, turn culpability into merit? That is a very unusual concept, and not one that can be taken for granted.

To appreciate what this means, we require an analogy.

A car can be used to do mitzvos or sins, but only if it has gasoline. The fuel, like the car itself is neutral, and its net effect on creation will depend upon the moral level of the owner/driver. If the driver is morally responsible, he will drive responsibly and use his car in a responsible way. The exact opposite is true if the driver is not moral.

Likewise, our "cars" (bodies) require "fuel" (Sparks of Holiness) to do anything - good or evil. The only difference is that, unlike gasoline, Sparks of Holiness are not neutral, but holy instead, and a major part of the sin is the impure usage of such holy matter.

However, the Sparks cannot remain in their "unclean" state forever, for, they must return to their source Above, and therefore, require "cleansing." The Kabbalists say that this can be accomplished in one of two ways: Divinely-imposed suffering, or, teshuvah, both of which act like a kind of conceptual mikvah for the Sparks on their way back "home."

Hence, if the Spark after the sin is like a good boy covered in dirt, then, after the teshuvah, the Spark is like the boy all cleaned up, that is, it is a spiritually clean Spark, or, in the words of Reish Lakish, a "merit." And, as a merit, it can now soar Heavenward on behalf of the repentant sinner, and work in his favor in This World, and the Next.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

G-d spoke to Moshe saying, "Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them, 'I am G-d: Do not follow the ways of Egypt where you once lived, nor of Canaan, where I will be bringing you -- do not follow their customs Š' (Vayikra 18:1-4)

This is a difficult mitzvah, because it is so vague, and yet, it is so severe. One wonders that, if the mitzvah were to really be properly fulfilled, whether or not Jews would have to walk around wearing clothes of the third millennia in downtown New York, or wherever they may be found. Some religions, other than Judaism, certainly are accustomed to this path in life, wearing their traditional garb even in the most modern work force, and proud to do so.

To allow non-Jews to set the standard and style of Jewish living is to return back to Egypt, in a strong sense. It is not just a question of what you wear, of how modest or provocative it may be. It is more a question of whether what you choose to wear or how you decide to act is a statement of, "I too can be worldly and fashionable!" -- even if the "dimensions" are halachically permissible.

This is because our lives and how we present ourselves is supposed to be an expression of the direction we take in life. When a person appears modest in dress and modest in attitude, it is clear that the soul plays a strong role in that person's decision-making process; it is revealed to the world that this is a person in pursuit of G-d.

However, the Secular World (at least the fashion-setters) are not driven by an intense longing for spirituality and closeness to G-d. Rather, they are in business to impress, influence, often manipulate, and then make money. It is the "other" option when one is not inclined toward G-d. How can the "fruits" of such an approach to life be "edible" by a G-d-fearing, G-d-pursuing Jew? (The body does not like to hear that, and usually resists such statements with all kinds of justifications Š)

On the heels of this mitzvah is the list of all the forbidden relationships. The Torah is telling us that violations of the spirit of Judaism result in major and catastrophic violations of the "body" of Judaism. It ranges from minor infractions (religious Jews who pursue leniencies in the laws of modesty for superficial, i.e., yetzer hara, reasons) to major infractions (rabbis performing same-gender "marriages," incest, adultery, etc., Rachmanah Litzlan!).

Elsewhere, the Torah warns us:

Š Such will be the internal terror that you will experience and the sights you will see [for straying from Torah]. G-d will bring you back to Egypt in ships (alternately: misery; HaKesav v'HaKabbalah), along the way that I promised you would never see again Š (Devarim 28:67-68)

Could it be that we've boarded the ship and have set sail for Egypt already?

MELAVE MALKAH:

Bless G-d, my soul. Hashem, my G-d, You are very great; You have donned majesty and splendor; cloaked in light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a curtain. (Tehillim 104:1-2)

This psalm is the one recited every Rosh Chodesh since, in verse 19, Dovid HaMelech writes, "He made the moon for festivals Š" (Orach Chaim 423). And this reference is only a continuation of the previous verses, which recount the miracles and wonders of the first six days of creation.

The Midrash points out that, even though this psalm is the 104th in Tehillim, it is the first one to use the term "Halleluy-ah" (Praise G-d). The reason for this, says the Radak, is the previous posuk:

Sinners will cease from the earth, and the wicked will be no more Š (104:35)

And, as it says in Mishlei, "When the wicked perish, there is joyous song!" (Mishlei 11:10).

And, if there is, then there is redemption, COMPLETE redemption, as the following makes clear:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, was about to make Chizkiah the Moshiach and Sannacheriv [who laid siege to Jerusalem], Gog and Magog, when the Attribute of Judgment said before The Holy One, Blessed is He, "Master of the Universe! Dovid, the king of Israel, who recited many songs and praises, You did NOT make Moshiach. Chizkiah, for whom You have performed great miracles, and for which he did not recite song, You want to make Moshiach?!" (Sanhedrin 94a)

So, how could Chizkiah have missed such an opportunity, and how could he have not composed song to G-d for the great miracles he witnessed? Perhaps the answer is in the posuk itself, as related by a Talmudic story:

Once there was a group of thugs in Rebi Meir's neighborhood who used to greatly bother him, and Rebi Meir wanted to pray for their deaths. His wife, Bruria asked him, "How can you? Because it says, 'Sinners will cease Š' (as quoted above)? Does it say 'sinners' (chotim) or 'sins' (chatayim)? Š (Brochos 10a)

In other words, Bruria was admonishing her husband, it is not the death of sinners that G-d desires, but the "death" of their sins; once sins cease, so will the wicked. The Talmud concludes by saying that Rebi Meir prayed for their teshuvah instead, and guess what? They DID teshuvah!

Perhaps that is why Chizkiah HaMelech held back from singing shiros v'tishbachos -- songs and praises. Even though Sannacheriv and his massive army of sinners had been eliminated quickly and quite miraculously, nevertheless, sin itself remained in the world. And, he knew that as long as sin remained, sinners would return in one form or another, in one way or another.

However, what we learn from this story is that every PARTIAL redemption is a step toward COMPLETE redemption. And, as such, it is reason enough to sing song and praise to G-d, a major part of the Haggadah Seder Night. And, as we see from the Talmud, we never know quite just how close the complete redemption might be, and how our songs of praise to G-d may be all that Heaven requires to catalyze that awesome event.

Have a great Shabbos,
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