

SPEAKING OF PRAISE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d told Moshe, "Speak (emor) to the priests, the descendants of Aharon, and tell them (v'amarta) that none shall defile himself [by contact with the dead] among his people (Vayikra 21:1)

Says the Midrash Tanchuma:

The word "amirah" appears here twice. To what can this be compared? To a royal butcher to whom the king says, "I am decreeing that you should never see a dead body Š because you come and go here Š and you should not defile my palace." Thus, The Holy One, Blessed is He, decreed on the priests who enter the Temple often that they should not become defiled by the dead. (Tanchuma, Emor 1)

It's a nice little analogy, except, questions the Pri Tzaddik (Emor 1), if it is an accurate one too, should not the prohibition exist only during Temple times -- which it does not? Furthermore, how could the priest defile the Temple anyhow, if, halachically, (like any Jew) he wasn't even allowed to enter the Temple during times of spiritual defilement?

It is a good question, but his answer is even better, and will probably change the way most kohanim view themselves, and how they are viewed by the rest of us (no, I am not a kohen Š)

"The answer is based upon what is written in the Midrash Rabbah and Midrash Tehillim (Mizmor 19) with respect to the verse, "The fear of G-d is pure and stands forever Š" Because of the fear that Aharon had before The Holy One, Blessed is He, as it says, "I will give to him fear and he will fear Me." (Malachi 2:5), he merited and was given this parshah, which will never be taken away from him or his descendants ever. Which parshah is this? The one about avoiding contact with the dead, meaning, that most other mitzvos will only apply for the priests while the Temple is standing, but the mitzvah to avoid defilement will continue even then Š" (Pri Tzaddik, Emor, 1)

From there, the Pri Tzaddik proves that G-d, because of Aharon's fear of Him, made a promise to him and all of his descendants after him, that He would always dwell in the PERSONAL Bais HaMikdosh of the kohen -- his own heart -- even after the national Bais HaMikdosh was destroyed. As it says,

I am G-d Who dwells within Israel Š (Bamidbar 35:34)

For, within the heart is the holy Mishkan, and this is the meaning of, "My Mikdosh you shall fear."

And this is the reason why, concludes the Pri Tzaddik, while even today, when the Bais HaMikdosh has yet to be re-built (it should happen soon in our time), that kohen still must be careful not to become defiled by contact with the dead, except for the times it is permitted by the Torah.

Hence, according to this explanation, unlike the rest of us, the kohen still retains much of his sanctity even during non-Temple times. This is even reflected in halachah, where the kohen is often honored at times such as leading the bentching after meals. As well, one is not supposed to ask the kohen to do menial tasks (such as taking out the garbage) Š unless, of course, you happen to be the kohen's parent.

Shabbos Day:

The son of a woman of Israel, who was [also] the son of an Egyptian man, went out among the Children of Israel; the son of the woman of Israel fought with a man of Israel. The son of the woman of Israel uttered the [Tetragrammaton] Name [of G-d] and cursed, and they brought him before Moshe. The name of his mother was Shlomis bas Divri from the tribe of Dan. (Vayikra 24:10-11)

As Rashi points out, the blasphemer was the son of the Egyptian who Moshe killed back in Egypt when he caught him beating a Jew:

He [Moshe] looked this way and that way, and when he saw that no one was there, he smote the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. (Shemos 2:11)

But it was not just any Jew the Egyptian had beaten:

He beat a Jewish man: He lashed him and beat him; he was the husband of Shlomis bas Divri, upon whom he had set his eyes. One night, he made him [the husband] get out of the house, and then he [the Egyptian] returned to her, she thinking it was her husband. The man returned to his house and sensed what had happened, and when the Egyptian realized that he suspected him, he beat him all day. (Rashi)

So, it seems as if this Blasphemer was bad news from the beginning, which raises a question that can apply in many cases throughout history: Was it his fault? Can we expect anything more than a crooked tree from a crooked seed?

So, the Arizal explains what is going on behind the scenes here, which helps with the unusual language of the posuk as well ("son of a woman of Israel," "man of Israel," etc.). Apparently, according to the Arizal, the Egyptian was the reincarnation of the evil part of Kayin, and when the posuk refers to the son as the "son of an Egyptian man," it is indicating that this evil went from father to son.

Therefore, he cursed the Jew in this week's parshah using the Name of G-d, because:

And he smote the Egyptian ... With what did he [Moshe] kill him? The rabbis say that he mentioned the [42-letter] Name [of G-d] and killed him. (Shemos Rabbah, 1:29; Zohar, Emor 106a)

Wait -- the drama does not end there. As we know from so many other places, Moshe himself was the reincarnation of Hevel, Kayin's brother whom he murdered. How fitting it is, then, that Moshe was in a position to rectify history and carry out the capital punishment of the Egyptian, or rather, Kayin reincarnated.

And why did Kayin kill Hevel in the first place? The Midrash speaks of Kayin's jealousy of his brother, and jealousy is always a powerful motive for killing. However, though the possukim in Bereishis (4:5-8) seems to indicate that Kayin's jealousy was purely over Divine acceptance of his brother's sacrifice, and Divine rejection of his own offering, the Midrash, as always, adds other crucial information:

An additional twin sister was born with Hevel. This one [Kayin] said, "I will take her because I am the firstborn." This one said, "I will take her because she was born with me." For this reason, it says, "And Kayin arose upon Hevel his brother and killed him." (Bereishis Rabbah 22:7)

In other words, the real source of jealousy was over Hevel's additional twin sister (Kayin was also born with a twin sister). And therefore, to be consistent with all that the Arizal has revealed so far, and to make the circle complete, who must have Shlomis bas Divri have been for the Egyptian to specifically want her?

That's right -- the reincarnation of Hevel's additional twin sister!

Hence, among the many lessons that can be learned from all of this is, when people find themselves in pivotal historical positions, they have to wonder what is really going on -- behind the scenes. Our bodies we recognize, but our souls are mysterious entities that remain so for most of us, at least most of our lives.

But you never know, and because it is so hard to know, we have to try and rise above our slices of time and look at our lives, the lives of our leaders, and the "life" of our nation in a larger historical context. One person's PERSONAL vendetta against Torah and those who uphold her can be history's way of setting that soul up for its tikun -- either the hard, destructive way, or, through eventual teshuvah:

... He [Caesar] sent Niron upon them [the Jewish people]. When he arrived there, he shot an arrow to the East, and it landed in Jerusalem; to the west, and it went and landed in Jerusalem; to all four Heavenly directions, and it went and landed in Jerusalem. He said to a child, "Tell me a posuk," and he recited, "I have given my revenge through Edom (Rome, in this case) at the hand of the Children of Israel." (Yechezkel 25:). So he said, "Evidently, The Holy One, Blessed is He, wants to destroy His House [the Temple] and wants to 'clean' His hands through the perpetrator!" So, instead, he deserted

and went and converted [to Judaism], and from him came [the great] Rebi Meir! (Gittin 56a)

What a bizarre ending to an already bizarre story. Nebuchadnetzar, at the time of the destruction of the First Temple, had similar foretellings of success, but read the signs differently. Rather than retreat, Nebuchadnetzar, like so many other anti-Semites of the past and present, took Jewish vulnerability as an invitation to successfully attack! Niron not only didn't attack, but, he went and joined the ranks of the vulnerable, an act that, in the eyes of many, would be called "suicidal"!

However, a small piece of information at the end of the story puts matters into perspective: from him came Rebi Meir! Rebi Meir?! The great Rebi Meir?! The one of whom the Talmud says was such a deep thinker that the greatest of his generation could barely fathom his thoughts?

And to think -- all because a few arrows persisted upon landing in Jerusalem!

Fascinatingly, the gematria of "Niron" (50+10+200+6+50) is equal to 316. The gematria of "Meir" (which means to "emanate light"; 40+1+10+200) is 251. The difference between the two is 65, the numerical value of "Adon-ai," the name of G-d that alludes to His working in history behind the scenes, and "Hallel," which reveals G-d's hiddenness in history, and praises Him for being with the Jewish people from behind those scenes (and "Hillel," the great rabbi of Temple times who was successful at making sincere converts).

Judge not the "sea" of history by its seemingly placid surface, at least not without taking into account the stormy undercurrents that dictate, ultimately, the direction in which the water flows.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

If a man causes a blemish to his fellow -- as he does, that is what shall be done to him: break for break, eye for eye (ayin tachas ayin) ... (Vayikra 24:19-20)

"Our rabbis have explained that this does not mean actual infliction of the blemish [to the offender], but rather, monetary compensation [for the blemish that was caused]. We estimate his value as a slave [in perfect health and the offender pays the difference]. This is why it uses the term "to give," that is, to indicate something that is given from hand-to-hand (i.e., money; Kesuvos 32b; Bava Kamma 84a)." (Rashi)

However, even though the Talmud can find a proof for its departure from the literal meaning of the verse, which, normally, we don't accept so readily (Shabbos 63a), still, the question remains: Is there any indication in the posuk itself that "ayin tachas ayin" means monetary and not bodily compensation?

So, I found in a sefer (which I have quoted before) called "Nitzutzei Shimshon," a similar discussion, and he points out that the Torah's usage of the word "tachas" is out of the ordinary. In other words, if

the Torah really meant "an eye for an eye," it should have said, "ayin b'ad (bais-ayin-dalet) ayin" -- the word "tachas" means "underneath," as if to say, "an eye for UNDERNEATH an eye."

And, in the Hebrew Aleph-Bais, what is "underneath" each letter of the Hebrew word for "eye" (ayin)? After the letter "ayin" comes the letter "peh"; after the letter "yud" comes the letter "chof"; after the letter "nun" comes the letter "samech." Put them together in the proper order, and they spell: chof-samech-peh, or, "kesef," which means "money"!

The only question is, what do we gain by such vagueness? It was not TOO long ago that people who either didn't know or accept the Oral Law literally cut off the hand that stole, or, inflicted the offender with similar bodily damage to that which he caused. Why risk it?

Because, G-d is more merciful than we are. With the exception of capital cases, G-d does not permit us to cause bodily harm to another, even though doing so would be quite "fair," especially when the harm was done with intention. This is why the connection is made between the word "eye" and "money," to tell us just this point.

In other words, just like the blood of the Sin-Offering is to atone for our own blood, which deserves to be on the altar and would be on the altar had it not been for Divine mercy, so too is our money to atone for our eye, or, whatever limb we should pay for the damage we caused. "Don't think," the Torah is warning, "that it is only money you are paying for the damage you caused; the money you are paying should be your OWN eye, or LEG, or whatever, and would be, if not for G-d's mercy. Therefore, take care of other people's limbs as well!"

MELAVE MALKAH:

Praise G-d! Give praise, servants of G-d! Praise the Name of G-d! (Tehillim 113a)

These words are not only the first of this tehillah, they are also the beginning of a series of Tehillim (113 - 118) that make up the Hallel prayer said on Holidays and Rosh Chodesh.

Who wrote them? According to the Talmud (Pesachim 117a), the Jewish people said Hallel upon merging from the sea after experiencing redemption and witnessing the drowning of the Egyptian army. The Talmud then goes on to cite the various occasions that the Jewish people had occasion to say Hallel as well, indicating that most of Hallel, at least, dates back to the time of Moshe Rabbeinu.

The word "hallel" can also mean "light," as the Talmud points out (Pesachim 2a), creating a strong connection between the concept of praise of G-d, and that of light. Hence, the power of Hallel specifically, and Tehillim in general, giving us good reason to praise G-d every chance we have. The result is not only reward for the praiser in the World-to-Come, but increased blessing for him and the world here and now.

Give praise, servants of G-d! Praise the Name of G-d Š

This is, perhaps, the reason why this is the first paragraph of Hallel, for it refers to the Jewish people as servants, which we were to Pharaoh in Egypt. Lest we lose sight of our reason to praise G-d, we are immediately reminded of our humble beginnings. No one sings louder than a freed slave; no one praises like a person whose slavery turns to freedom.

Praise the Name of G-d!

Why not just praise G-d Himself? This allows to remember at a time that one becomes "drunk" with gratitude to G-d that still, a distance must be maintained between us and the Creator of the Universe. As much as He allows us to relate to Him, even applying human traits to His behavior, still, we must recall that He is G-d -- Unlimited and Undefinable -- and also deserves our awe and fear.

As well, according to Kabbalah, it is through the use of Divine Names that G-d emanates His light down to the Lower Worlds. It is through the usage of such names that Kabbalists reach high into the Divine "program" for creation and affect rectification. It was with the 42-letter Name of G-d that Moshe Rabbeinu performed the miracle of killing the Egyptian in Egypt, and other great miracles as well.

From the rising of the sun to its setting, G-d's Name is to be praised Š (3)

As the Rokayach and other Kabbalists point out, creation only took place during the six days of creation during daylight hours -- from sunrise to sunset. This is why the word "vayechulu" (Bereishis 2:1) is written "chaser," that is, without the "vav" it might normally have; without the "vav," the gematria of the word is equal to seventy-two (6+10+20+30+6): six days times 12 daylight hours of creating.

As the Rambam points out, one of reasons for the spectacularness of creation is to inspire awe in man, and to make him appreciate the extent to which G-d made a "stage" upon which to act out his free-will decisions. It is difficult to praise G-d for the night, a time of hiddenness and contemplation. It is the daytime that brings to life and light the many myriad of details of physical existence for which G-d must be praised daily.

High above nations is G-d Š (4)

Is this not the struggle today within the Jewish people? There are those who place the nations above G-d (if they still believe in Him at all), and dance to their tune and answer first to their call. And, then there are those who know that the nations will have to answer to G-d, and that no one is above Him, and follow the Torah in spite of the pressure applied from the nations around.

He transforms the barren wife into a glad mother of children. Praise G-d! (9)

We'll leave the deep and holy explanations of this verse for now, for, they constitute quite a few divrei Torah, at least!

As "natural" as childbirth may be, it is one of the biggest miracles of physical existence, if not the biggest. No where is this clearer than when a couple is told by a doctor that naturally-born children are, for them, impossible -- only to find out one day (sometimes fifteen years later!) that the diagnosis was completely wrong -- miraculously wrong!

Furthermore, it is one thing to bear children, it is another thing to survive childbirth, to do so in happiness, and to raise them this way as well. All of it takes tremendous help from G-d, from conception to raising children (as one rabbi put it: raising children is 75% help from G-d, and 25% help from G-d). That we are as successful as we are, and survive to talk about it, is reason enough to praise G-d -- the ultimate use of speech in creation!

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston
