

THE TRUE "GIFT" OF LIFE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d spoke to Moshe saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and take an Gift-Offering for Me ..." (Shemos 25:1)

In this week's parshah, T'rumah, we read about the first official Jewish building fundraising drive. It was a great success. In fact, Moshe had to tell the Jewish people to stop giving when contributions to create the vessels for the Mishkan exceeded expectations.

The answer to this anomaly in Jewish history lies in a later Rashi, in Parashas Ki Sisa:

"There is no [absolute] chronological order to the Torah -- the golden calf occurred many days before the commandment to build the Mishkan ... [even though it appears in reverse order in the Torah]" (Shemos 31:18)

For, as the Talmud says, when it comes to the Jewish people, G-d makes the "cure" before the "illness." In this case, it means that the Mishkan existed, at least conceptually, before the sin of the golden calf, so that the Jewish people would have something with which to atone for their terrible sin and violation in advance.

It's a great fundraising technique. Rather than simply fund raise from wealthy people, look for the people with the guilty consciences, people looking to atone for some sin or another. It worked in Moshe's time -- why shouldn't it work today?

The answer is (more likely than not), NOT because such people are hard to find; even righteous people, said Shlomo HaMelech, sin at least occasionally. The difference is the way people react to their violations of Torah today, and that is, with far less sense of remorse than in the times of Moshe Rabbeinu.

But of course! How can we compare our day with Moshe's? Anyone living in the times of Moshe and the Mishkan, during the days of the manna and the miraculous well of water (not to mention the Clouds of Glory), would find it impossible NOT to feel regret after sinning. G-d was right there! There was no place to hide, so, it was better to admit than to pretend nothing wrong happened.

However, today, even though we know G-d is there, still, there is a sense -- a wrong sense -- that our errors are not scrutinized to the degree that they were in the desert. Lightening does not come down from the sky when we do something wrong. Furthermore, unlike it was with the, bread appears on the same shelf of the supermarket for those people who sin as it does for those who do not sin.

If we had to build a Mishkan today, would there be a surplus of gifts from hearts seeking Divine forgiveness for less than spiritually-perfect lives? When people give tzedakah today, for whom is the favor being done -- the giver or the receiver? Typically, we assume the receiver, who looks far less fortunate than we do.

However, applying the well-known (and accepted) principles that the "cure" precedes the "illness," and, that nothing ever happens by accident, perhaps it is the giver who truly benefits the most in the transaction. For, the concept of "shidduchim" does not merely apply to potential husbands and wives. It also applies to friends, business partners, and any situation in which two or more people are brought together, or, whenever we encounter a particular situation that just "happened" to come our way.

In other words, lightening may not come down from the sky every time (or even once!) we act against the values of the Torah, but, whenever we are asked to part with something dear -- like money, for instance, even when not for the sake of a mitzvah -- perhaps it is time to wonder. Wonder about what? That maybe G-d is giving us a break in advance; that maybe we are receiving the medicine in advance of the illness, sot-to-speak.

Wait, we're not finished with this idea yet (no, I am not a fundraiser ...). "But there are SO many people to give to these days," you might be saying. "There are so many causes -- some of which are not even authentic! It just gets impossible to care for every cause and to give to everyone ..."

True. However, that does not negate the point. Everything in life is a test designed to help us mature spiritually, to confront our shortcomings in order to become more G-dly. Our responsibility is to try not to become detached from the situation, to try not to react as if it has nothing to do with us since we don't feel like relating to the person in need, or the cause. Sometime you may not be able to give whatever is being asked of you, but that doesn't mean you can't care.

You never know when that person in front of you, or that cause on the table before you, is a spiritual "remedy" for a future "illness," an atonement that you're sure to need at a future time. It may not appear that way NOW, but it will in the future, at a time there will be little you can do to rectify the situation.

Shabbos Day:

This last past Monday, we entered a new Jewish month, the month of Adar Rishon (First Adar; this is a Jewish leap year) about which the Talmud writes:

When Adar comes in, increase your simchah ... (Ta'anis 29a)

It is very fitting that this Shabbos Mevarchin should be on the Shabbos that we read Parashas T'rumah -- the beginning of the parshios that deal with the Mishkan, for, the Mishkan represents the true source of simchah in this world, as the following alludes:

Ya'akov wanted to establish the "Mystery of Unity" below, and composed the twenty-four letters of, "Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom forever." He didn't make it twenty-five letters since the Mishkan had yet to be built ... (Zohar 2:139b)

What is this "Mystery of Unity"? This refers to the realization of the hearts and minds of men that G-d is King in Heaven AND on earth, as the words "Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom forever" indicate. The "Mystery of Unity" represents a sublime unification of Heaven and Earth, mankind with its Creator -- the ultimate goal of creation and, the Mishkan, the microcosmic representation of the universe.

In fact, every vessel used in the Mishkan was like another "limb" in the body of understanding that draws man closer to G-d. Every detail -- size, amount, usage, etc. -- was Divinely-instructed to maximize the spiritual and intellectual effect of perfecting mankind. The Mishkan was, in a very real sense, an interface between the physical, finite world and the spiritual, infinite realm.

Fine. But what does all of this have to do with simchah, and the month of Adar, for that matter?

The answer is, it depends upon how one defines the concept of "simchah." Does simchah merely refer to a happy event, or, is it an indication that the event itself has the potential to lead to something even better. Do we celebrate the fact that a man and woman are marrying one another, or, that, by marrying one another something unique and holy is going to result from the union?

Well, if there was a way to know that, within one week, spouses would become disillusioned with one another and want a divorce, could we dance with the same joy at the chasanah -- even though TODAY they seem to love one another? Of course not! Marriage is not about the moment and the joy of the wedding; it is about long-term commitment to build and nurture a new world, with the hope that this new world will positively impact the older, larger one.

In other words, there is no greater simchah, from the Torah's perspective, than seeing our efforts result in "Tikun Olam" -- "Rectification of the World." "Fun" can be meaningless, and "pleasure" can be purely physical, but "simchah" is the result of the perception that our contributions to history meet in

agreement with the master plan for Creation, and more specifically, the "Master" Himself!

True simchah is the direct result of working in partnership with G-d towards the fulfillment of creation, and self.

That was, is, the story of Purim, and that is the idea behind the Mishkan. And, this Shabbos, when we bless the new month of Adar, that is the time to start tapping into this concept, and working on increasing our simchah, for, as the Talmud hints, the spiritual atmosphere is ripe for such crucial growth.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

And you shall make a table from ? wood, two amos in length, one amah in width, and one and a half amos in height. Cover it with pure gold and make a gold ? around it. (Shemos 25:23-24)

"Gold ? around it ... 'This is a sign of the crown of royalty, for, the table symbolizes wealth and greatness' ... This is what Rashi has said, and he is right, because this was the secret of the table. That is, since the time the world was created, it has not been possible to create 'something from nothing,' but rather, the world has a nature ... that when something is already there, blessing can come and add to it ..." (Ramban, Shemos 25:24)

In other words, says the Ramban, since the time of Ma'aseh Bereishis, something good must ALREADY exist before blessing can affect it. For example, it was Yitzchak's intention to bless Eisav, since he was OFFICIALLY the firstborn son. However, he probably knew that Eisav had very little redeeming value at the time (how could he not know?!) -- potential, perhaps, but goodness? Not at that time.

Nevertheless, the halachah was to bless Eisav, and, in order for the blessing to take effect, there had to be something blessable about Eisav. Therefore, Yitzchak sent Eisav on a mission to hunt food for his father, a mitzvah of honoring his father. Performing this mitzvah would have given Eisav some merit, and to that merit Yitzchak's blessing for the firstborn could have attached itself and, more than likely, bring Eisav to teshuvah.

As the Ramban points out, this is also why Elishah did the miracle of the oil only after having the oil from the house brought out, and Eliyahu did his miracle of increased flour using the remaining bread. Likewise, explains the Ramban, the "Shulchan" brought blessing to ALL of the Jewish people through the loaves of bread that were placed on it. This is a concept that can be applied to all areas of life. If you want blessing from Heaven, you have to create a basis for that blessing, like doing a mitzvah for the right reasons.

However, it must be understood that this is not because G-d needs our help for Him to perform His

miracles. Rather, it is more of a free-will issue, from two angles. First of all, as Bris Milah alludes, man must work in partnership to bring about the fulfillment of mankind and creation. G-d purposely leaves over some aspect of creation in each of our lives so that we can work WITH Him to bring creation to perfection.

Secondly, there must be room in every miracle for doubt, even if only a little. Completely overt miracles, like what happened at Mt. Sinai at the giving of Torah, are so obvious that free-will can be greatly, if not completely, reduced (temporarily). That is not what creation is about, and therefore, G-d sets the situation up so that our efforts can be combined with His direct intervention, leaving room for free-will choice and faith in His Providence.

But, it is this partnership with and trust in G-d that transforms a Jew into a true servant of G-d, and reveals his holier inner being. This is why the Shulchan is called "shulchan," but has the letters of "shel chayn," like the chayn that Noach found in the eyes of G-d in order to avoid destruction.

MELAVE MALKAH:

... *Sing to G-d a new song; let His praise be in the gathering of the pious.*M (Tehillim 149:1)

Next in line in Pesukei d'Zimra, this tehillah exhorts a Jew to continuously be inspired by life so that we will constantly be composing new songs of praise to G-d for all that He does for us and the world in general. Does this mean that we have to come up with new words and new tunes everyday to sing to G-d? Not necessarily; as in the case of the Shemonah Esrai, it is enough to say the same prayer each time, BUT, with NEW enthusiasm each time!

Here is an example of what this means:

Sunday:

Moshe: Boruch Hashem, this morning I found out that a company we have been pursuing for two years now wants to place an order for twenty-five units ...

Aharon: You're right! Boruch Hashem! That's one of the single biggest orders this company has ever had!

Monday:

Moshe: Remember that order we spoke about yesterday? Well, they're willing to take an extra five units, and pay cash if we can complete their order by next month ... Thirty units!

Aharon: Wow! Boruch Hashem again! That's even better than we thought. Let's work to fill that order on time!

(Phone rings, and Moshe picks up.)

Moshe: Really? You're kidding!

Aharon: What is it, Moshe? Who's on the phone?

Moshe: It's the company president of ABC ...

Aharon: The company that's placing that order?

Moshe: Yup, and it gets better. They're so impressed with the product that they want to work out some kind of deal so that we will supply them on a yearly basis ...

Aharon: Wow! Boruch Hashem!! That's fantastic!

It was the same company making all the purchases, but, as the full extent of the order became apparent, Moshe's and Aharon's joy increased, as did their desire to praise G-d. It is a simple equation:

AWARENESS = SENSITIVITY = APPRECIATION = PRAISE OF G-D

Increase your awareness of G-d's goodness, and you will enhance your sensitivity to how good He is to you, which, of course, will enhance your appreciation of His goodness and INSPIRE you to praise Him more often.

I remember quite clearly the time my wife gave birth to our daughter and first child. It was in a small hospital in Jerusalem, and, rather than be close enough to offer verbal support, my wife opted that I be in the next room saying Tehillim on her and the baby's behalf, which I did. At the time, I was not a big Tehillim-sayer, but, being inept at helping my wife with her breathing exercises, it was the least I could do for her.

As Divine Providence would have it, I was in the midst of Tehillah 136, and the long list of direct praises of G-d that we say Shabbos morning and in Hallel in the Haggadah. Being close enough to the delivery room to hear everything as it was happening, my intention became more intense as I heard the moment of birth approaching. It was the same tehillah that I had been saying for years on Shabbos mornings, but somehow, the words gained added meaning THAT morning as the miracle of life unfolded before my very ears.

And then, right on the words, "... for His kindness is forever," I heard, "Waaaaaaa, waaaaaaa, waaaaaaa ..." and I melted with joy and great, I mean GREAT thanks to G-d. Thirteen years later, ba"h, as I struggle to cope with the difficulties of bringing a teenager into this world, I still remember that moment with joy when saying the same words in the "Hodu" of Hallel, and count my blessings all over again.

And, I try to apply the same lesson to every day of life. It is the yetzer hara's role in life to make life look grayer than it is, to make us focus on the fact that we lack the blessings of another person though we have our own, unique blessings. It is the yetzer hara's goal -- and he can be SO

successful -- to make the song of life seem repetitive, and therefore, uninspired.

It is our role and goal in life, as people made in the "image of G-d," is to reverse that instinct, and see past the apparent grayness of life, and to see each new moment as a gift. It is our job to increase our awareness of G-d's goodness -- even the parts we don't understand and relate to yet -- and thereby, our appreciation of that goodness. This creates the inspiration for song -- for new song -- though the words of the praises be the same everyday.

This was part of the lesson of the Mishkan as well. After Moshe came down from Har Sinai with the commandment to build the Mishkan, the Jewish people understood what it meant: a physical place on earth in which the Shechinah would allow its Presence to be felt. It was a time for celebration and jubilation, and their enthusiasm was expressed in their bringing more gifts than was necessary to make the vessels for the Mishkan.

However, it is only later, after everything was assembled and put in place that the full impact of their achievement became clear to them, after the Divine Presence "came down" and placed Its seal of approval on their work. The posuk says:

... Fire came forth from before G-d and consumed the Burnt-Offerings and the choice parts of the altar. When the people saw this, they sang out praise and threw themselves on their faces. (Vayikra 9:24)

New praise -- they sang out NEW praise. It had been the same Mishkan, and the same vessels they had seen for months. But, the experience was new, as was the inspiration, and therefore, so was the song of praise. And, though, life is not always one big ball of inspiration, it can be if one trains himself or herself to see the goodness in life -- the GIFT of life -- and rise above the trappings of the yetzer hara.

Have a great and INSPIRING Shabbos,
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