

IN PURSUIT OF HOLINESS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

(Parashas Acharei Mos)

He must take two goats for a Sin-Offering from the Children of Israel, and one ram for a Burnt-Offering. (Vayikra 16:5)

And thus begins the section dealing with the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur.

The first Yom Kippur, historically, was the day that Moshe Rabbeinu finally achieved atonement for the survivors of the golden calf incident, on the tenth day of Tishrei, 2449, or, 1313 BCE. It happened to arrive on exactly the 120th day since Moshe first ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the first set of Tablets: the first forty days Moshe received Torah and the First Tablets; the second forty days he begged G-d to forgive those who had not died through the incident of the calf, and, the last set of forty days Moshe worked on securing atonement.

It might seem that the tenth of Tishrei just happened to follow three complete sets of forty days, each being forty days long because that is the number that represents integration of Torah. However, that would be mistaken thinking, for, like all Jewish holidays -- even the rabbinical ones -- Yom Kippur -- has primordial roots. And thus, the reason why Moshe Rabbeinu finally achieved atonement for the Jewish people on THAT day was because it was imbued with a special spiritual potential for atonement, going back to the beginning of creation. The connection to the 120th day of that time is just another example of wonderful Divine timing.

In fact, according to Kabbalah, Yom Kippur is not only rooted in the origins of creations, but, it is also rooted in the future as well, as in, "Olam HaBah," or, the World-to-Come. Long after history as we are used to it has come to a close, and, all the other holidays are but distant memories, the light of Yom Kippur will shine in its full glory during the eighth millennium, one of the earlier stages of the World-to-Come, for, that is the period of time that the sefirah of Binah governs, which is the same light that shines, at least partially, on Yom Kippur.

"Binah" means "understanding," the level on which abstract knowledge becomes relateable to the mind. It is the stage of understanding at which a person can begin to look at a concept somewhat objectively in terms of its importance to him or life in general. It is the crucial point at which a person

can be convinced that his life should be changed (or not changed) because of a certain concept in question.

And thus, Binah is the source of teshuvah -- repentance, or, more accurately, "returning."

Returning to what? So, the Talmud states:

... These are the days of birth when they teach him the entire Torah ... However, when he reaches the air, an angel touches him on his mouth and he forgets the entire Torah ... And, they don't let him leave there until he swears ... that he will be righteous and not evil. (Niddah 30b)

Forgets, but never loses, for, Torah and the Jewish soul are but one and the same thing: expressions of the will of G-d. And, whether an angel is inside the womb teaching the infant Torah -- souls have no specific age -- or not, it matters not. What matters is that every Jewish baby is born with an innate knowledge of Torah, and that the rest of life is a process of "returning" to a conscious realization of that precious and holy knowledge.

What the womb and Yom Kippur have in common is that, in both instances, the body is more-or-less neutralized. For, Yom Kippur is the one day of the year, according to the Zohar, that the yetzer hara - the evil inclination -- is given the day off. You could say that Yom Kippur is kind of spiritual womb we enter once a year in order to return to being in touch with our innate knowledge of Torah, and, for that matter, our soul itself.

This is why Yom Kippur is not only a "journey" into the past, it is a journey into the far future of the unimaginable World-to-Come. For, it is then that whatever element of "physicality" -- and I use that term VERY loosely here -- we will still possess at that time will be completely subservient to our souls. This is the true source of teshuvah: neutralization of the body long enough to feel the Torah in one's soul, after which unity with G-d and atonement is the most natural consequence.

Shabbos Day:

(Parashas Kedoshim)

A man should fear his mother and father and My Shabbos should be kept; I am G-d your G-d. (Vayikra 19:3)

The juxtaposition of these two very central mitzvos, which show up on the Ten Commandments as well (but in reverse order), leads the Talmud to teach that fearing one's father and mother has a limitation -- that is, up until their command contradicts that of G-d (Yevamos 6a). After all, says the Talmud, EVERYONE, including one's parents, is obligated to honor G-d.

There are probably many other interpretations of this juxtaposition of mitzvos, but one very

interesting one comes in the name of the Arizal:

... This is explained based upon what we have said earlier, on the posuk, "Remember the day of Shabbos ..." One who originates Torah ideas on Shabbos brings great honor to his parents in the World-to-Come, as it says in the Zohar in Parashas Shlach. This is why the possukim are juxtaposed: "A man should fear his mother and father," to honor them on Shabbos through original words of Torah, and thus, "and My Shabbos should be kept." (Sha'ar HaPossukim)

Actually, this true of every day of the week, not just Shabbos. Any time a person performs a mitzvah, especially learning Torah and creating Torah novella, he brings merit to his deceased AND living parents. If so, then what is special about Shabbos in this matter that the possukim needed to be put together to teach this lesson, and why Torah novella, and not just Torah in general?

To begin with, from the following, it seems that Shabbos is a special time for souls. This shows up even in halachah:

It is forbidden to drink water between Minchah (Afternoon Service) and Ma'ariv (Evening Service) because that is when the souls return to Gehinnom. (Rama, Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 291:2)

What he means is that it is close to the time when they return to Gehinnom ... (Mishnah Brura, 291:2:8)

In fact, we even say a short little prayer for those who have to return to Gehinnom on Motzei Shabbos towards the end of Minchah called, "Tzidkasechah Tzedek," "Your Judgment in Righteous" (O.C. 292:2:6). Thus, Shabbos is a time when Divine judgment is suspended somewhat, and a soul is in a better position to enjoy the fruits of its labor, that is, the children left behind learning Torah.

What is unique about "chidushei Torah" (Torah novella) is that it represents a person's "place" within the world Torah. When a person originates a true Torah concept, it is his unique expression of Torah based upon all that he has become until that point. This is a far different concept than repeating an idea that has previously existed, either directly from Torah, or, a novel idea from someone else.

Thus, chidushei Torah are really a reflection of one's personal relationship to the world of Torah, and, quite indicative of one's personal spiritual and intellectual development. This brings great merit to the person, and to his parents who brought him into this world.

And, since Shabbos is a time when the World-to-Come interfaces with This World, there can be a certain level of neutralization of the body, like on Yom Kippur, that allows one to get in touch with the Torah that is also his or her soul. According to tradition, the word "Shabbos" itself, spelled: shin-bais-tav, is also an acronym for: "Shabbos Bo Teshuvah" -- "In Shabbos There is Teshuvah."

So, what better time is there in the week to get in touch with one's soul, and tap into one's own unique place in the world of Torah, and, at the same time, bring spiritual delight to oneself, one's family and friends, and, one's relatives living on another spiritual plane.

SEUDAH SHLISHI: (Parashas Kedoshim)

Do not hate your brother in your heart; you must criticize your fellow so that a sin should not occur to him. (Vayikra 19:17)

This is another interesting juxtaposition of mitzvos, and this time, the pshat is:

When you do not hate your brother in your heart, then you will be able to properly criticize your fellow so that a sin should not occur to him. For, all your intentions will be that your friend should no longer sin and that a sin should not occur for you when he does sin, for, every Jew is a guarantor for the other. In this way, the Jewish people can perfect the trait mentioned when at Mt. Sinai, "Israel (He) camped by the mountain" (Shemos 19:2), after which the Torah was given to them. As well, at Purim-time, they rectified this sin by acting in a brotherly manner towards one other, as it says, "Go and gather all the Jews" (Esther 4:16), after which they received the Torah anew (Shabbos 88a)... (Leket Peirushei Rebi Yitzchak Itzik Chaver, Parashas Kedoshim)

Never mind the fact that the Talmud says that no one knows how to give criticism today, and certainly even fewer know how to receive it (Sotah 49b). Following this line of thinking, this reality is symptomatic of a lack of care for one another, a lack of unification amongst the Jewish people.

Nothing novel about this idea; we are a very fractured people today. Self-interest of individuals and groups has taken priority, and money is a VERY big determining factor on so many levels in so many groups. In our old age, we have become a reverse image of our youth when we had camped at the base of Mt. Sinai, which is why the end of the above quote makes perfect sense:

It is known and I am certain that in advance of the arrival of Moshiach, this sin will be rectified in the Jewish people, and through this, Moshiach will come, as it says, "Behold, I will send you Eliyahu ... and the hearts of the fathers will return..." (Malachi 3:23). This is the explanation of the verse, "Behold, the number of the Children of Israel is like the sand of the sea that cannot be counted ..." (Hoshea 2:1). In other words, Israel is compared to the dust of the earth from the standpoint that it sticks together and unifies ...

So, it seems, Jewish unity is THE threshold to be crossed over by Moshiach. No wonder why so many people give up hope. "If you only had told me to circle the entire universe," a person said, "I might have kept up hope in Moshiach's arrival. But, not that you have raised the issue of Jewish unity once again ... Woe are we ..."

Perhaps. It reminds me of adding fractions with different denominators. As long as even one of the denominators is different from the rest of those in the equation, even if only one out of thirty-six is unlike the rest, still, you cannot add up the other thirty-five and arrive at the correct answer. So, you have to keep on searching for that one common denominator that is the same for all the fractions,

which will unify them all.

So, too, it is with the Jewish people. Each one of us from this tiny but spunky nation is like a fraction that must be added to the others. But, all of us also have our own interests, which may even differ from those among the group to which we belong. We have yet to find our common denominator, which is an understatement.

At Mt. Sinai, when we camped as a single individual, we had our common denominator for a while: G-d and Torah. The awe of G-d revealing Himself from atop the smoking mountain guaranteed that this would be the case. We could do it again, if we really wanted to.

There are few other things in life that can have the same effect, except, perhaps, for a lethal attack against the ENTIRE Jewish people, G-d forbid. We're a stubborn people, but, a nation-threatening war brings out the brotherhood in most of us by pushing our everyday self-interests down the chain of priorities.

It's a terrible thought, and from G-d's point of view as well as our own, it is a very LAST resort. But the goal is real and must come to be sooner than later, and, if that's what it takes ...

MELAVE MALKAH: (Sefiros HaOmer)

From the second night of Pesach, we count the omer. The omer is a Biblical dry measure equal to about two quarts. That is how much barley was brought to the Temple from the new crop to permit it to be used (it is in Nissan that the wheat crops of Eretz Yisroel become ready for harvesting):

"You are to count from the next day of the rest day, from the day you brought the Omer-Offering that is waved; they are to be seven complete weeks ... (Vayikra 23:15)

The counting of the omer is an easy mitzvah to perform. At night time, after three medium stars have appeared in the sky, one needs to merely make the proper blessing, and then to count the day according to the traditional text found in siddurim. The total amount of time to perform the mitzvah is seconds, the amount of energy expended, minimal. It makes one wonder what the mitzvah is even meant to accomplish.

However, we know that the period of time between Pesach and Shavuot is a special time. Over 3,000 years ago, it was the period of time between the exodus from Egypt to the reception of Torah at Mt. Sinai -- a great spiritual distance to traverse in so much a short time. No human being could have grown so much so quickly without Divine assistance. This interim period remains to be one imbued with special Heavenly help to accomplish great spiritual strides for all generations -- if one knows, that is, how to access the opportunity of the day.

That is why, in many siddurim, the following paragraph is found:

Master of the Universe, You commanded us through Moshe, Your servant to count the Omer-Count in order to cleanse us from our encrustations of evil and from our contaminations, as You have written in Your Torah, "You are to count from the day after the rest day, from the day you brought the Omer-Offering that is waved; they are to be seven complete weeks. Until the day after the seventh week you are to count fifty days ..." (Vayikra 23:15), so that the souls of Your people Israel be cleansed of their contamination. Therefore, may it be Your will, G-d, our G-d and the G-d of our Forefathers, that in the merit of the Omer-Count that I have counted today, that there be corrected whatever blemish I have caused in the sefirah (here we insert the sefirah that corresponds to the day itself). May I be cleansed and sanctified with the holiness of Above, and through this may abundant bounty flow in all the worlds. And may it correct our lives, spirits, and souls from all sediment and blemish; may it cleanse us and sanctify us with Your exalted holiness. Amen, Selah!

This is followed by a list of forty-nine middos, or traits. The first is "Chesed sh'b'Chesed" and the last is "Malchus sh'b'Malchus."

Sefiros are very Kabbalistic concepts. It is simpler to refer to them here by the name "middos," which are traits. We know that G-d manifests Himself in different ways to man, depending upon the needs of the situation, and the spiritual level of mankind. There are times He deals with us mercifully, and there are times that He plays the role of a strict judge. There are times He acts towards us with chesed -- kindness -- and there are times that He acts towards us with strength -- gevurah.

There are really ten such middos. However, during our time of history and "hester panim" (hiddenness of G-d), only the lower seven directly affect us (Chesed through Malchus). Each of these seven traits have their own set of ten, but, again, the top three (Kesser, Chochmah, Binah -- Crown, Wisdom, and Understanding) are "hidden" from us. Therefore, we deal with the subset of seven, which makes a total of forty-nine middos altogether -- one for each day of the period between the second night of Pesach and the holiday of Shavuot -- Kabbalos HaTorah -- fifty days later.

Therefore, the middah of each day is really an insight into what level of spiritual growth is most easily attained on that day. It is a kind of "portal" to a spiritual reality that bears the name of the middah, and if one knows how to translate that middah into a practical application, then one can draw on its unique spiritual energy. The following will try to provide some direction in this area, first by explaining each of the seven middos, and then how they interact with each other.

INSIGHTS INTO THE MIDDOS:

The Seven Middos are: Chesed, Gevurah, Tifferes, Netzach, Hod, Yesod, and Malchus -- Kindness, Strength, Beauty, Dominance, Glory, Foundation, and Kingship. We will now briefly explain each one, and its role within bringing creation to fulfillment:

CHESED (Kindness): In Kabbalah, Chesed is compared to water, because it is like unbridled potential. Water has the capacity to accomplish tremendous things, even to sustain life. However, without something to channel the water, it is potential that can remain untapped -- like water without a glass

from which to drink.

Chesed is the most primary force within creation. It represents the original light that emanated out from G-d to make creation:

A world of chesed You created ... (Tehillim 89:3)

This idea is echoed by the fact that Avraham, the forefather of the Jewish people, is identified with this trait, for it was from him that all generations of the Jewish people originated.

The main point of Avraham's chesed, the Talmud teaches, was to reveal G-d to the people of the world:

... Avraham had all who passed by and stayed [with him] call out in G-d's name. How did he do it? After they ate and drank and stood up to bless him [before taking their leave], he would say, "Was it of mine you ate? It was of the G-d of the world that you ate! Thank, praise, and bless the One who spoke and created the world ..." (Sotah 10b)

Hence, Chesed is associated with light, which is often called, "Ohr HaChesed" -- the Light of Chesed. This is why it is the first day of creation, on which the Primordial Light was first revealed, that corresponds to the sefirah of Chesed.

Therefore, because of this, and because it is a unifying trait, it is associated with stillness, quiet, and simplicity. Greatness, in a chesed-oriented person tends to be sensed, but not revealed, being kept to the person himself. Chesed-oriented people tend to be humble, and require others to cause their greatness to be revealed on the "outside," the same way that the sefirah of Chesed requires the lower six sefiros to give revelation to its light.

Hence, the process of going from Chesed sh'b'Chesed to Malchus sh'b'Malchus -- forty-nine days later -- is the process of going from hiddenness to a complete revelation of light, which was, by definition, what happened at the giving of Torah.

GEVURAH (Strength): What the glass is to water, the light of Gevurah is to the light of Chesed. Just as the glass constricts the water's flow, giving form to a formless entity, thereby releasing its potential within creation, so too does the light of Gevurah constrict the light of Chesed, making possible physical existence.

No one can see My face because no man can see Me and live! (Shemos 33:20)

These words were told to Moshe Rabbeinu by G-d after the sin of the golden calf. Moshe, capitalizing on a moment of Divine forbearance, requested a higher revelation of G-d Himself. However, G-d told Moshe, the level of revelation that he requested was beyond physical capability. The physical brain and body can not handle such a high level of spiritual exposure -- at least at this point in history -- and it would have necessitated Moshe's own premature death.

The concept of holding back light is called "tzimtzum," which means "constriction." With an extreme amount of tzimtzum, too much light is held back and darkness results -- spiritual and physical. Too little tzimtzum, and there is only light, the light of Ain Sof -- G-d Himself -- and nothing physical can exist.

Because Gevurah is associated with the holding back of Divine light, it is representative of G-d's harsh judgment lacking in mercy, with hester panim (the "hiding" of G-d's "face"), chaos, darkness, and with fire. It is the trait that symbolizes Yitzchak, who unlike his father, was entrenched and not involved with revealing G-d's Name to the world. The Kabbalists make it clear that Gevurah is not merely the absence of light, but a light that has the ability to restrain.

For this reason, Gevurah is considered the opposite of simplicity, a symbol, instead, of complexity and multiplicity. It was the force that allowed for the division of waters on the second day of creation, and is a trait that results in relentless movement and stimulation. Because of Gevurah, the potential to produce countless species and types in creation was realized over the following five days of creation.

Just like unbridled Chesed results in nothing concrete, unbridled Gevurah results in nothing stable. This is why, in the Torah, Avraham's test were all in the area of Gevurah, forcing him to withhold chesed, and Yitzchak's tests were in the area of Chesed, forcing him to be less judgment-oriented.

This is also Avraham married Sarah, who was from the side of Gevurah, and Yitzchak married Rivkah, whose trait was Chesed. It is the partnership of Chesed and Gevurah that results in true "beauty," and the trait of Tifferes. It also results in a son named Ya'akov, from whom twelve tribes could emanate to build a Jewish nation.

TIFFERES (Beauty): Tifferes corresponds to Ya'akov Avinu, and the third day of creation. It is the "machria," a Hebrew term that means to bring about resolution between two opposing opinions or sides. However, it is not a solution that overrides one side for the other; it is a solution that brings an acceptable compromise and balance to both. Therein lies its harmony and beauty.

Chesed usually translates into mercy; Gevurah usually results in strict judgment. Tifferes brings a wonderful balance based upon the two of them called Chesed shel Emes, "Truthful Chesed." It is the best of both worlds, because as we have seen, both Chesed and Gevurah in extreme measure are destructive. Too much Chesed can deny the recipient a sense of self and independence, and too much Gevurah can deny a person the assistance he needs. Too much "right hand" means the child will never learn discipline; too much "left hand" will mean the child will never learn love.

Hence, Tifferes is the ultimate state that the Jew strives to reach in This World. A well-balanced person is a truthful person, consistent on the inside and the outside. This is why Ya'akov was called "Ish-Emes," the "Man of Truth," and why it was Ya'akov who struggled with the angel, and, as a result, received the name "Yisroel." It is this name that symbolizes the ultimate level of spiritual greatness for the Jew. In the sefiros, this is symbolized by the fact Tifferes is the "body," and Chesed and

Gevurah are the "right" and "left arm" respectively.

Hence, it was on day three of creation that G-d made the Garden of Eden.

NETZACH (Dominance): After Tifferes, the sefiros become more "external." Whereas Chesed, Gevurah, and Tifferes make up the "body" of creation, so-to-speak, Netzach, Hod, Yesod, and Malchus represent parts external to the main part of that body, such as the "legs," for example. This triad is a duplication of the upper triad on a lower level.

Nevertheless, Netzach corresponds to Moshe Rabbeinu, and the day on which the moon was placed in the sky; the moon symbolizes the Jewish people. Moshe's personality was extremely well-balanced, but it was the "Netzach" aspect of his being that gave him the strength of character to stand up to the likes of Korach and other would-be rebels. Moshe was the "humblest man on earth," but he also could rise to the occasion and was not intimidated, and even argued with G-d over the future of the Jewish people (Shemos 32:1).

Taken to its unbridled extreme, Netzach is the trait that makes one over-bearing and causes one to impose upon another. This is why prophecy was considered a "Netzach-experience," since G-d "imposed" His message on the prophet's psyche. Furthermore, as the Rambam writes, the body of the prophet usually had to be "paralyzed" somewhat to be able to handle the prophecy from G-d, so awesome an experience it is.

In a sense, G-d's "master plan" for creation emanates out from Netzach, because it is the "bottom line" in all that happens in history. Yes -- man has free will. However, as we have seen countless times throughout history, and as the Torah itself warns us, the moment man's abuse of free-will undermines G-d's intended purpose for creation, He steps in, so-to-speak, with His counter-measure, imposing His will on ours.

Thus, in the end, it will be our quality of Netzach that will allow us to overcome the forces of evil within creation, and reveal G-d's light to all of mankind.

Have a Great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston