

ALLUSIONS AND ILLUSIONS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d told Moshe, "Take the finest fragrances: 500 (shekels) of myrrh (mar dror)" (Shemos 30:22-23)

Where is Mordechai in the Torah? "Mar dror" (Shemos 30:23). (Chullin 139b)

MAR DROR: He is called the "head" (finest) of the spices, the righteous, and the Men of the Great Assembly. (Rashi)

I think it is amazing that the one allusion to Mordechai in the Torah falls out every year Purim time. Now THAT'S Hashgochah Pratis, which, of course, is what Purim is all about.

Purim is also all about something called "Da'as," which, in this context, refers to godly knowledge, the kind that allows one to see life as G-d does (as much as is humanly possible). And, the Ketores -- Incense -- according to tradition, is very strongly tied, conceptually, to Da'as.

And, as a good friend of mine pointed out to me in passing this last past Shabbos, the letters of "Mordechai": mem-raish-dalet-chof-yud, can be re-arranged to spell two words: derech me (dalet-raish-chof, mem-yud), which means, the "Way of Fifty," as in "Fifty Gates of Understanding," which would help to explain why five hundred (fifty times ten) was brought of the mar dror.

This fits in very nicely with the Pri Tzaddik's explanation of why Haman built his gallows fifty amos (75 feet) high. According to the Pri Tzaddik, Haman sensed that there was about to be a revelation of the Oral Law in history, and he recognized that Mordechai was going to be the outlet for that revelation. Therefore, he tried to counteract the "Fifty Gates of Understanding" with his "aitz" that was fifty amos high.

And, because his gallows is called an "aitz" in the Megillah, it is connected to the "Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Rah" -- the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil," the source, says the Talmud, is THE allusion to Haman in the Torah. And, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is called "Forty-Nine Faces of Purity and Forty-Nine Faces of Impurity," to allude to the fact that, unlike the Tree of Life, which is on the level of the "Fifty Gates of Understanding," the knowledge of the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Rah was susceptible to evil.

This is, ultimately, why Mordechai vanquished Haman. Think about it for a moment. Did Haman hate

Mordechai? Is grass green? Is the sky blue? Was Haman powerful, powerful enough to "rub out" Mordechai any time he wanted to? Beyond any shadow of doubt.

Yet, not only did Haman not succeed at eradicating Mordechai, but, he was forced to parade him around the streets of Shushan, causing himself, Haman, complete humiliation. Why?

The beginning of the answer to this question can be found in the Machzor for the High Holidays, which says:

And all evil will be destroyed like smoke (Amidah, Yemai Norayim)

What is unique about smoke is that it can give the appearance of being something very weighty, when, in fact, it is only colored air. You can run your hand through it like air, though, from the distance, it looks quite solid. It is no different when it comes to evil.

When it comes to evil people, such as Haman, they seem to really exist, but, the truth is, they depend upon our fear of them to define themselves. And, this is why Haman couldn't harm Mordechai, because, in Mordechai's eyes, Haman didn't really exist.

It wasn't that Mordechai could not see Haman walking the streets and making edicts. But, rather, it was that he could see that, ultimately, there was no difference between "blessed Mordechai and cursed Haman." Evil is just a "smoke screen" for the hand of G-d working to arouse us to do teshuvah, as the Talmud says, to merit redemption:

Rather, The Holy Blessed is He, puts a king in power like Haman, and Israel does teshuvah and returns to the side of good. (Sanhedrin 97b)

And teshuvah, the Kabbalists point out, is a function of "Da'as," and more specifically, the "Nun Sha'arei Binah" -- the "Fifty Gates of Understanding." It is "Derech Me," the "Way of Fifty," the way of Mordechai.

It was also the way of the incense, which burned down here, but whose smoke rose heavenward. It is as if the smoke of the Incense-Offering wanted to draw our eyes heavenward to the source of all that burns down here, just as Moshe Rabbeinu did, when he raised his arms during the battle against Amalek, Haman's ancestors.

This represents the ultimate eradication of Amalek, when we stop imbuing him with power he does not have, and access the Nun Sha'arei Binah through sincere teshuvah, eradicating any doubt we have about Who runs this world, and how.

Shabbos Day:

All the people pulled off the golden earrings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took all of it from them, and with an engraving tool formed it and made a molten calf. (Shemos 32:3-4)

This is the parshah of the golden calf. The incident of the calf was not just AN incident, but, it was THE incident. Not in the positive sense, but, in the negative sense.

The story of the calf begins back in the Garden of Eden (and even earlier, but that gets too Kabbalistic). There was Adam, Chava, and the Snake. Adam was created to bring the world to its final stage of perfection, Chava was created to help him do it, and, the Snake was created to make their job challenging.

As it turned out, the Snake was good, very good. Not only was he able to convince Adam and Chava to eat from the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but, he even imparted to them something, in the Talmud, called "zuhamah" -- kind of an indelible spiritual impurity. However, according to the Talmud, when the Jewish people stood at Mt. Sinai and accepted Torah, they were able to remove all the lasting effects of the snake (Shabbos 146a).

According to the Arizal, the incident of the golden calf and the return of the zuhamah had another effect that won't show up until Parashas Shemini of Sefer Vayikra. It is in that parshah that Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon HaKohen, on the eighth day of the Mishkan's inauguration, make the fateful mistake of bringing an unauthorized Incense-Offering -- about which this week's parshah speaks -- and die immediately as a result:

Nadav and Avihu, sons of Aharon, took their incense pans and put fire and incense in them, and offered an unauthorized fire before G-d. A fire went out from before G-d and burned them up, and they died (Vayikra 10:1-2)

Shortly after, the parshah comments and says:

Let your brothers, the whole House of Israel, cry over the burning which G-d burned. (6)

Why did the entire "House of Israel" have to cry over the death of Nadav and Avihu? Because, says the Arizal, had it not been for the sin of the golden calf, Nadav and Avihu would not have had to die in such a dramatic way. Instead of a fire coming out and entering their nostrils to burn out the Nefesh from within them, they would have had a normal death. Therefore, the burning of Nadav and Avihu was a direct result of the Jewish people's involvement with the golden calf, and, therefore, they felt quite responsible (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Hakdamah 33).

However, that doesn't explain the connection between the two. True, it doesn't, but the Arizal does.

According to Kabbalistic tradition, via Kayin son of Adam HaRishon, Nadav and Avihu received the Nefesh-Soul that, before the sin of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, had belonged to Adam

HaRishon himself. Being the Nefesh, the lowest of the five soul-parts, it had been affected by the zuhama of the snake, and it remained affected until Nadav and Avihu stood at Mt. Sinai and the zuhama was removed from all the Jewish people.

However, when the zuhama returned to the nation because of the calf, then, the Nefesh of Adam HaRishon, within Nadav, and, especially Avihu, once again became "infected" with zuhama. This itself made Nadav and Avihu spiritually vulnerable, and thus resulted in their sin and the severity of the punishment: removal of the Nefesh of Adam HaRishon the very way that it entered him -- through the nostrils of Nadav and Avihu.

This is why, explains the Arizal, why "Avihu" was called that, for, it means, "He is my father," a reference to Adam HaRishon, who is called the "father of the entire world." Thus, when the Jewish people mourned the untimely and catastrophic death of Aharon's two sons, they were also mourning the damage they had caused, through the incident of the calf, to the Nefesh of the "father of the entire world," Adam HaRishon himself.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

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. In this week's parshah, because of the sin of the golden calf, G-d had threatened to wipe away the Jewish people and start again with Moshe. Moshe, however, interceded successfully on behalf of the Jewish nation, and capitalizing on a moment of Divine forbearance, requested a higher revelation of G-d Himself.

But, as G-d Himself 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, though it would have resulted in Divine ecstasy.

In the end, G-d did reveal to Moshe a high enough level of revelation that Moshe's body became purified to the point that his soul could emanate through it. These are the "Horns of Glory," mentioned at the end of the parshah (Shemos 34:29), that Moshe exuded. This is why he no longer needed to eat or drink to be nourished; he received his sustenance directly from G-d, and not through the medium of food (see Shemos 34:28).

This brings up the concept of tzimtzum -- the constriction of G-d's light -- or, in Purim terms, "hester panim," the hiding of G-d's face, if you will. For creation to exist, there must be a spiritual flow of G-d's Holy and sublime Light. For good to triumph, there must a lot of flow of such light. There is no better reminder of the concept of tzimtzum than the existence of evil and its ability to succeed.

The good news is that tzimtzum makes life in This World possible, and therefore, life in the World-to-Come possible. The bad news is that it also makes evil, death, and all the other things we humans fear about ourselves and life in This World, possible. Hey, it's a two-way street, and you have to walk it to get to the "other side."

Once the concept of tzimtzum was given reality, everything else in creation has been a function of determining how much tzimtzum and when. Though, it is very hard for us to conceive of spiritual light resulting in physical matter, that is exactly what has happened, and continues to happen. The myriad of creations and their details are a function of what began as the pure and extremely spiritual light of Ain Sof ("Without End") after it was "filtered" and "reduced" according to G-d's will.

Thus, it is tzimtzum that makes possible free-will choices, the purpose of creation. For, without tzimtzum there can be no darkness; without darkness, there can be no evil; without evil, there can be no alternative to make free-choice a reality. If so, then it seems that tzimtzum, at least in the lower levels of creation, is what mankind's choices really affect. Indeed:

Rebi Azariah said in the name of Rebi Yehudah b. R' Simon: When Yisroel does the will of G-d, they add strength to Above, as it says, "Through G-d (Elokim) we will do valiantly." (Tehillim 60:14); when Yisroel disobeys G-d, they weaken the strength Above, as it is written, "Of the Rock that bore you are you unmindful ..." (Devarim 32:18). (Eichah Rabbosai 1:33)

"Giving strength to G-d" means making His reality more apparent within creation, the opposite of tzimtzum. This is mankind's mandate:

Give strength to G-d! (Tehillim 68:35)

To make choices that open the spiritual "valves" and reduce the constriction of G-d's light, so that He can act more openly and less covertly. This is what the Purim says to the Jewish people: End the tzimtzum. End the tzimtzum, end the tzores.

MELAVE MALKAH:

For the Conductor; upon Neginos; on the Sheminis. A psalm to Dovid. G-d, do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chastise me in Your rage. (Tehillim 6:1-2)

According to tradition, this psalm was composed when Dovid HaMelech was sick and in pain. Thus, this tehillah was meant to be said by people in similar situations, and the entire nation when they suffered oppression and deprivation. Thus, it is an anti-tzimtzum psalm.

For, as the Nefesh HaChaim emphasizes in the second section of his classic work, when Jews suffer, it is both the result and cause of Chillul Hashem -- Profanation of the Divine Name.

The Hebrew term "chillul" comes from the word "challal," which means "hollow," indicating an

absence of Heavenly Light. The less godly light that comes down, the more the physical world is vulnerable to sickness and decay. And, the more evil can act out its will without immediate response from Heaven. Chillul Hashem is the spiritual "Pitri Dish" within which the bacteria of evil is able to grow and fester.

As it turns out, this tehillah is the main part of the "Tachanun" (Supplication) Prayer said everyday (except for days of joy). It is the part of the prayer service, just after the Amidah, when we supplicate before G-d, virtually begging for our lives to go on. We admit our short-comings, and remind G-d that if are not allowed to continue, we can no longer praise Him:

For, there is no mention of You in death, in the grave who will praise= You? (6)

On the other hand, so what? That's our problem, not G-d's. He doesn't need our praise, but, WE need to praise Him. He can always make another us, but we can't. Far more than He needs us we need Him, so what kind of weak petition is this?

Thus, the answer is that we are not reminding G-d of our potential to praise Him, and thereby, justifying another chance at life. We are showing G-d that we are reminding OURSELVES about our potential to praise Him, and thereby, justifying another chance at life. We are telling G-d that we now recognize the "hollow" and its lack of light, and now wish to devote our lives to filling it with holy light, by learning Torah and doing mitzvos.

There is no other way, for that is the specific purpose of learning Torah and performing mitzvos, to draw the light down. It is like making a phone call, in a sense. A person can possess a telephone and a line, but, until he picks up the receiver and dials a number, nothing significant happens. It is as if the phone merely exists in a void. The dialing creates a demand that draws all kinds of services to the person making the call.

So, too, when a person learns Torah, a spiritual demand is created by his mind, that draws down light from Above. The letters and words of Torah may exist down here on the page in front of him, but, the light they represent exists Above. And, when the person attempts to "connect" to those words, Divine Light is drawn down, bringing spiritual rectification to the person, and the world. It is the same with mitzvos as well, and this tehillah comes to remind us of the importance of being real with this idea, especially at times that the Jewish people is being oppressed.

Have a great Shabbos,
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