

SHABBOS NACHAMU

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Your eyes have seen what G-d did as a result of Ba'al-Peor. Every man that went after Ba'al-Peor, G-d, your G-d destroyed him. However, you who adhere to G-d, your G-d - all of you are alive today.
(Devarim 4:3-4)

The final verse, actually, is recited in shuls around the world every week several times a week, in advance of the Torah reading and just after the kohen has been called up to the Bimah. And why not? It pretty much sums up the importance of the Torah that we are about to read; Torah is the way that we cling to G-d, and therefore, survive.

'Rattled off' before that is also a wonderful little prayer:

"And you will reveal and make visible His kingdom upon us soon, and give favor to our remnant and the remnant of His people, Bais Yisroel, with favor, mercy, and willingly... All give greatness to G-d and honor to Torah... Blessed is He Who gave Torah to His people, Israel, in His holiness."

After which the congregation responds,

You who adhere to G-d, your G-d-all of you are alive today.

Well, of course they are. If you disobey G-d, you get zapped. If you obey Him, He lets you live and maybe even enhances the quality of your life. What was Moshe Rabbeinu adding here that we didn't already know from Parashas Bechukosai, and the blessings and curses listed there?

In truth, Moshe Rabbeinu was not rehashing a discussion about reward and punishment here. Indeed, he was describing a reality, a very simple reality, one that is, nevertheless, hard to take seriously.

In other words, Torah is not our way of life. For the Jew, Torah is life itself, like the blood running through our veins. A way of life you can change; blood you have to live with your entire life. We depend upon blood to make the whole system work, and when we don't take care of it we destroy our very lives. Moshe Rabbeinu was trying to make this point perfectly clear to the Jewish people just prior to his death, those before him and those throughout Jewish history.

The only reason why this is hard to integrate and act upon is because we see so many people

survive PHYSICALLY-without Torah. Take away a person's blood and they drop dead, and eventually decay. Take away a person's Torah, and they become secular, and even seem to have a good time doing so.

Even in the Torah world, Torah is not always given enough importance. It is amazing to watch how people are reduced to willing servants when the one who signs their paychecks drops by for a visit. The attention that is paid and the effort that is made to show adequate respect to the 'boss' is often beyond exemplary. But, aside from the Kol Nidre Service, how many people run to kiss the Torah?

Once, when the Torah was being brought to the Bimah by the Chazzan, just after I bent over to kiss the Sefer Torah, I saw another man also do so, but with an expression of love and endearment that made me think twice. It was as if he was approaching a loved one, and to him, he was. Clearly he loved Torah (which was also evident by the way he conducted the rest of his mitzvos as well). He didn't just live WITH Torah, he lived FOR Torah.

I once heard that a certain well-respected rabbi was asked by a student:

"Why would Moshiach come in our generation? In the generation of the Holocaust there was tremendous suffering. They needed to be redeemed. However, in this generation, life for the Jew is quite good, physically and spiritually. What would Moshiach come to save us from?"

The rabbi answered sharply:

"Perhaps, but 'Kavod HaTorah' (Honor of Torah) is at the lowest it has ever been. There may have been more suffering in previous generations, but they also understand the importance of Torah to their survival."

If so, then our lacking in this area of Torah observance can only be indicative of a spiritual malady, being that we have yet to integrate the concept of Torah as the spiritual blood of the Jew, without which we can only face certain death. If so, then it is worth spending some time discussing some relevant ideas to reverse the trend, as we limp away from mourning the disasters of Tisha B'Av.

Shabbos Day:

You who adhere to G-d, your G-d - all of you are alive today. (Devarim 4:3-4)

Regarding this issue, the Arizal taught:

We need to explain why death causes a separation of the k'lipos from man. First of all, "kedushah" (holiness) is called "life," as it says, "See! I place before you life and good" (Devarim 30:15), and, "You who adhere to G-d, your G-d - all of you are alive today." (Devarim 4:4). This is because it is The Holy

One, Blessed is He, Who gives sustenance and food to all of his creations. However, the Sitra Achra (literally, "Other Side"), who removes the blessing from creations, is called "death," as it says, "and death and evil." Thus, when a person sins he draws the Sitra Achra, called "death" toward him, and therefore, the k'lipah cannot leave him until he dies, when the flesh rots in the soil. Then, the k'lipah that was tied to him leaves along with the k'lipah from the zuhama that was imparted to Adam and Chava. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Chapter 23)

For those who are unfamiliar, 'Sitra Achra' is the name given to that 'being' created by G-d to oppose man, and perhaps even lead him to sin. It represents the extreme opposite of all that is pure and holy, and as such, is associated with spiritual impurity and death.

However, as much as he seems to control us, it is we who have control over him. Like bacteria, he grows in spiritually impure environments that result from our lack of care and concern. The more impurity we allot to him, the stronger he gets, especially over the one responsible for strengthening him, the sinner.

The word 'k'lipah' itself means 'peel,' or 'outer layer.' This is because the Sitra Achra cannot only become stronger from our sins, but as the Arizal mentions above, it can be drawn to the person himself and become a spiritual encrustation around him. True to the analogy, like bacteria, the K'lipos can move into the person and start controlling his system until the person actually becomes an 'outpost' for the Sitra Achra.

The 'host' person, of course, will not know it. For, unlike physical bacteria that eventually causes the person to feel ill, the Sitra Achra, or the K'lipos, causes a person to become spiritually ill, which in a secular world, may not mean too much to the person. A physically-infected person becomes less physically comfortable, whereas a spiritually-infected person becomes more physically comfortable, doing all that which tingles the senses and entices the body.

If such a person is fortunate and someone in whom G-d sees hope, something may happen to him physically to make him think twice about his current spiritual lifestyle. More than likely, G-d will not affect him, at least not too directly. What kind of free-will would remain for us if those who sinned suffered, while those who did not prospered? No, for the sake of free-will, a person can successfully destroy himself spiritually, and only those who already know better will be the wiser.

What's worse is that the person will think that he is master over his own destiny, which is the greatest illusion of all. For, to be one's own master, one must exercise his ability of free-will. To do that, one must be aware of three things:

1. There is a G-d Who pays attention to the lives of men, Who evaluates their actions, and Who gives eternal reward for good deeds.
2. Torah is true, and the mitzvos are expressions of His will for man and the path to human perfection.

3. There is a 'yetzer hara' (evil inclination), the aspect of our existence through which the Sitra Achra can affect man and his decisions.

If not for the first concept, a person then feels no imperative to do anything that is not in keeping with how he feels or what he thinks at the moment. His reality can only be a subjective one, and he will live with the belief that nothing exists that can possibly know all that he thinks and does. It is this idea that promotes thinking beyond the immediate moment, and this side of history altogether, adding an eternal element to temporal actions.

The second concept tells him that, though he feels resistance when it comes to doing the moral thing, this is not an indication that he should desist. On the contrary, he will be cognizant of the natural struggle that results in a human being when having to do that which is right over that which feels good.

Regarding the third, we can provide an analogy. There are some people who walk home through the city knowing that muggers exist and can be lying in wait out of sight. As a result, they avoid dangerous areas and keep on guard everywhere they go, which may save them from being attacked.

Other people stroll about oblivious to the dangers of society that lurk in the shadows of everyday life. As a result, they make themselves into 'sitting ducks,' and are usually the prime targets of violence. And, not only do they get mugged, but they suffer extreme shock afterwards for some time to come.

The Ramchal refers to life as a 'raging battle,' and warns that if it doesn't feel that way for the person, then chances are that he has already lost the fight. He hears and receives commands from within, but he takes them to be his own voice, when very often they are the voice of the yetzer hara, trying to schlep him further in the direction of the Sitra Achra.

How can such a person resist the temptation to sin then? He may act as if he is in control when in fact he is really a servant of his inner yetzer hara. After all, free-will is free of WHAT? It is a decision that is free of the yetzer hara, one that proves the person has recognized each voice for what it is, and has made a decision to do the moral thing, the noble thing, as physically uncomfortable as it may be to do so.

Knowing the following helps to accomplish this very thing.

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

G-d your G-d is a consuming fire... (Devarim 4:24)

This verse, on the surface, is talking about G-d's unwillingness to put up with rebellious people, and

what He is willing to do to stop them. Sin is usually the result of some form of passion, which is likened to fire. So, measure-for-measure the sinner is consumed by a fire of judgment.

However, on a deeper level, the verse is not talking about how the Divine Presence (Shechinah) works against us, but on behalf of us, as the following reveals:

"When the Temple was destroyed, the Shechinah was exiled among the K'lipos because the souls were also exiled among them, and they lack the ability to extricate themselves being blemished by their sins. Therefore, the Shechinah, of which it is said, "Hashem your G-d is a consuming fire" (Devarim 4:24), entered the K'lipos in order to gather the sparks of the souls within them, to separate and elevate them to a place of holiness and renew them for life in this world, in the bodies of people."

As long as the Jewish people maintained a Temple, the spiritual quality of the world was a lot different, especially during the time of the First Temple. In a sense, the Temple was a shield against the negative spiritual elements, which certainly promoted great spiritual growth. Apparently, the K'lipos had less hold over the souls destined to come into the world during reincarnations.

The result of the sinning of the generation of the Temple was to lose the Temple, which lead to both, a physical and spiritual exile - physical amongst the nations and spiritual amongst the K'lipos. The negative forces in creation became stronger and spiritual growth became more difficult. However, to keep the process going, the Divine Presence, so-to-speak, went into exile with the soul-sparks.

"This is the sod of the Shechinah in exile. Since the destruction of the Temple, this is what G-d has been doing."

That is, assisting the soul-sparks out of the K'lipos so that they can reincarnate and continue on with their own personal rectifications and that of the world. It takes a 'consuming fire' to help cleanse the soul-sparks from the Depths of the K'lipos.

"Until such time as all the souls that fell amongst the K'lipos... have been gathered... Moshiach will not be revealed nor will the Jewish people be redeemed..."

From this, it would seem, that redemption depends upon Heaven. Since only G-d can help the souls out of the K'lipos, and Moshiach's arrival depends upon the completion of this process, we have to wait until the Divine Presence finishes its work. However:

"...The Shechinah does not gather them except as a result of the actions of those below and their prayers, b'sod, "Give strength to G-d" (Tehillim 68:35)."

As the Nefesh HaChaim explains at length in the first section, the point of free-will is to allow man to become a partner with G-d in bringing creation to completion. One of the rules that He has set up and by which He abides (for our sake) is that He takes His cue from us. So:

"According to the extent of the actions of those below the souls can be drawn out. Thus, if the entire Jewish people were to do teshuvah, then the Shechinah would be able to take all the souls out in one instance. On the other hand, our sins weaken G-d (so-to-speak), as it says, "You weakened the Rock that bore you" (Devarim 32:18)." (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Chapter 15)

So, now we can better appreciate the importance of Torah, not just to us, but to all of creation. Not only does it keep us on the 'straight-and-narrow,' and empower us to use our free-will and thereby maximize our portion in the World-to-Come, but it is the means by which we empower G-d, so-to-speak, to speed up the process of our own redemption.

Now we can appreciate the concept of 'nechamah' - consolation.

MELAVE MALKAH:

"Comfort, comfort My people," says your G-d. "Speak consolingly of Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her period [of exile] has been completed, that her iniquity has been forgiven; for she has received double for her sins from the hand of G-d." (Yeshayahu 40:1-2)

When a person comes down with a fever, he knows that he is not well. Perhaps, he may become weak, and unusually tired and be forced to take it easy until he regains his strength once again. Droopy eyes and a dour expression give it away to onlookers that he is sick and in need of a recovery.

However, in truth, all of that is not the main event, but an external representation of what is really going on inside the body. What is really happening is that the blood cells are fighting off an infection and all the external symptoms are the result of having to focus energy in the direction of the main event. The body is being made to rest so that the antibodies can do their thing unimpeded before the infection can gain the upper hand and do longer lasting damage.

The same thing can be said about exile. We see Jews scattered all over the world, some doing well, while others are doing poorly. Some seem to be making the best of exile while for others, exile is getting the better of them. There is much suffering, and at times the suffering has been overwhelming, almost to the point of annihilation, G-d forbid.

On the other hand, there is also terrible intermarriage and assimilation. Countless Jews leave the fold daily, either knowingly or unknowingly. Even amongst the devout, there is some confusion and difficulty. To the outside, the patient is clearly not himself and in need of a cure soon. Well, that's exile for you!

However, all of this is just the external manifestation of what is really going on in history, which is the removal of the souls from the side of spiritual impurity. All of the suffering and other aspects of exile

are just to help the process along, usually beyond what our eyes and minds can see.

However, as the prophet has said above, there is a limit to the process, which the Divine Presence is carrying out every moment of the day. Thus, when the Talmud says:

The Son of Dovid (Moshiach) will not come until all the souls are completed from the body.
(Yevamos 62a)

This means the process described above has come to completion. However, the Arizal has explained, our Torah learning and mitzvos enhance the process, helping G-d, so-to-speak, to speed up the process.

Thus, our lives, and especially the possibility of enjoying the Final Redemption depend upon Torah, our learning of it and our fulfillment of its mitzvos. "Give honor to Torah"- not just because Torah deserves such honor, but also because our own redemption and consolation depends upon it, may it come speedily in our days.

Have a good Shabbos,
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