

COMING OF (S)AGE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Moshe and Aharon took these men who were mentioned by name, and assembled the entire congregation together on the first day of the second month, and they recorded their ancestry according to their paternal lines. Those 20 years of age and older were counted individually by name. (Bamidbar 1:17-18)

In Judaism, age 20 is an important turning point in a person's life, and not just because the teenage years have been left behind for good. In fact, from that perspective, reaching the age of 20 might be cause for mourning for some, as they acknowledge the need to become a fully responsible adult. However, from a Torah perspective, it is a time for celebration, even though culpability, as far as punishment for sins is concerned, increases to that of a normal adult.

The reason for the difference necessitates an introduction. As it is well known, there are five levels of soul, and they are, Nefesh, Ruach, Neshamah, Chiyah, and Yechidah, and each is linked to the level above it and/or below it, like links in a chain.

Above Yechidah (literally, "Singular"), the most sublime of the five levels of soul, is what is called the "Light of Ain Sof," the "Infinite Light" that G-d created to give of Himself to others. It is so holy and abstract that we rarely speak of it, but it is the first and crucial link that receives the light of G-d in order to pass it on to the lower levels in order to provide and maintain life.

Yechidah, after receiving light from Ain Sof, filters it in order to reduce its intensity for the sake of Chiyah, the next level of soul. Chiyah means "life," because it is this level that is called the "source of life" within the soul-chain, being the first level to have any kind of revelation within existence.

As Yechidah did for it, Chiyah receives and reduces the light of Ain Sof to a level that Neshamah is capable of receiving without becoming damaged in the process. "Neshamah" comes from the word "neshimah," which means "breath," and is said to be like a breath in the "mouth" of G-d, like a person who fills his mouth with air just prior to blowing it out.

As the breath leaves the mouth, so-to-speak, and moves downward, it becomes like a wind, a ruach, creating the second lowest level of soul called "Ruach." Indeed, the Kabbalists compare this part of the system to that of a glass-blower, who fills his mouth with air before blowing into a long tube in

order to fill the molten glass at the end of the tube with air. After the air leaves his mouth, it becomes a ruach in the tube itself, making this level of soul a transitional level between Neshamah above it, and the Nefesh below it.

As we learned from Parashas Bereishis, when G-d created Shabbos, the word "Nefesh" (vayinafash) means "and He rested." Thus, the level of Nefesh is the level at which the Ruach comes to rest within the body itself, and it represents the spiritual interface between the spiritual and the physical. In fact, the Nefesh, which is non-physical, is said to be in the blood, which is physical, and this is why, as the Torah states, we are not permitted to eat animal blood.

Therefore, Kabbalistically-speaking, though physical man may only reach around seven feet in height, spiritual man spans between the lowest of the low and the highest of the high, making it possible for him to elevate himself or descend spiritually. However, having all these levels of souls does mean that we can access them, as we will now discuss.

Shabbos Day:

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

One of the remarkable things about physical life is how we are born with just about everything we'll ever need the rest of our lives. It's all there, on some level, though we can't necessarily use it all until we reach certain points of development during our lifetimes.

Likewise, a person is born with all five levels of soul, because without the light of Ain Sof, nothing can exist for even a moment. On the other hand, without the four upper levels of soul to filter that light, the body could never survive exposure to it, as G-d told Moshe on Mt. Sinai:

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

In this case, "face" just means a more direct, less filtered exposure to the light of G-d, the light of Ain Sof.

However, if that is the case, then why aren't we perfect from Day One? Why does it take a lifetime to become even just a fraction of the spiritual self we are capable of becoming when in touch with levels of soul such as Neshamah? Well, why does a child, who already has most of his brains from birth, not act 30 years more than his age from the beginning?

The answer is, of course, because even though he may have the "vessels," he lacks the ability to access them. Likewise, even though we are born with all five levels of soul, we are not born with access to them, as the Arizal explains:

When a person is born, his Nefesh enters him. If he is adequately rectified through his actions, his Ruach will enter him at the end of his thirteenth year when he becomes a "complete person"

(Mishpatim 94b) . . . (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Chapter 2)

In other words, when a baby is born, it only has access to the bare minimum soul necessary to allow and maintain life, the Nefesh. This level of soul is often called the "Animal Soul," because it is a level of soul that we have in common with animals as well. Thus, it is not a level of soul that allows for anything to distinguish us from the rest of living beings in creation.

For this reason, childhood education is more a matter of training and conditioning than anything else. The responsibility for the child's "education" at this stage lies solely on the shoulders of the mentors, be they the parents or the child's school teachers. Children, at this stage of life may be able to mock adults and their free-will decisions, but in truth, they have no free-will at all at this point, which is why they have no obligation (from the Torah) to fulfill the mitzvos.

If the conditioning process is successful, and the child has been sufficiently prepared to gain access to his Ruach, then that door will open as early as the age of 13 years. If not, the door will remain closed until that child is ready to receive the gift of his Ruach, though physically, he ages like any child or adult:

If he doesn't completely rectify his Nefesh, then he will remain with only his Nefesh, lacking both his Ruach and Neshamah. (Ibid.)

And, this is the way he will stay, perhaps through many reincarnations, until he finally rectifies his Nefesh and is ready to gain access to his level of Ruach:

Therefore, he will have to die and return in order to receive the Ruach. Furthermore, once the Ruach is sufficiently rectified, then he will also have to reincarnate before receiving a Neshamah, as was the case with the Ruach. (Ibid.)

However, if all has gone well, and he not only completed his Nefesh on time, but his Ruach as well, then:

His Neshamah will enter him only when he completes his TWENTIETH year, as it says in the Zohar. (Ibid.)

But, again:

If he does not completely rectify his Ruach, then the Neshamah will not enter him and he will remain with only his Nefesh and Ruach. (Ibid.)

Thus, this is the source of the age of 20 being the age of true "individuality." Teenagers may fight for it, and even demand it, but the truth is, until one accesses his Neshamah, he lacks it, for a reason that we will now discuss.

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

The woman saw that the tree was good for food, appealing to the eyes, and an attractive means for gaining understanding (l'haskil). (Bereishis 3:6)

Raising children can be very frustrating for adults. Though many children are wiser beyond their years, for the most part, adults are far wiser than children. And, if adults expect their children to think like adults, especially during the teenage years, they are in for a long, hard period of frustration, during which they will often be heard saying, "Where's your seichel? Don't you have any seichel?"

In general terms, "seichel" is a Hebrew term for "brains." However, that's only in very general terms, because the true term for brains is the word "muchin." Indeed, the meaning of seichel is something far more specific, and just because someone has brains, does not mean they will have seichel.

The first time the word "seichel" appears in the Torah in any form is in the following posuk:

The woman saw that the tree was good for food, appealing to the eyes, and an attractive means for gaining understanding (l'haskil). (Bereishis 3:6)

In other words, the Torah is telling us in quite specific terms that, contrary to Western interpretations of the first sin of Mankind, Chava reached for the forbidden fruit not to simply taste its fruit, but as means to gain a higher level of concept recognition, l'haskil.

Dayah - factual knowledge - of good and evil Chava already had; G-d had taught them this by naming the tree along these lines. Binah - understanding - of good and evil she also achieved when G-d informed Adam of the consequences for eating against His will, who duly taught it to Chava. However, as Chava found out, these two levels of knowing were not sufficient to stand up to the likes of the wily and deceitful serpent/yetzer hara.

Just ask anyone who has ever tried to diet. They know the problem with eating fattening food, and they even understand the consequences of doing so. However, at a moment of weakness and vulnerability, when under attack from the yetzer hara, they can and often succumb and do exactly the opposite of what they know is right, all rationalizations aside.

To win against the yetzer hara, one must achieve the third and higher level of knowing referred to as "haskil," which we pray for daily in the fourth blessing of the Shemonah Esrai. It is only on the level of haskil that we become one with a concept, and a concept becomes one with us, to the point that violation of the concept feels like a violation of our own being.

That was something that Chava had become convinced could only be achieved by actually "experiencing" the good and evil of the tree itself. The first snake was a crafty marketing and advertising genius. She was like a person who says, "Let me eat the cake and become overweight, and then I'll really understand just how fattening foods lead to obesity," or like the smoker who can only quit smoking after seeing his own black and scarred lungs. Yes, that is true haskil, and yes,

there is a better way.

MELAVE MALKAH:

In the third month after Israel left Egypt, they arrived in the Sinai desert. They had traveled from Refidim, had come to the Sinai desert and camped there, opposite the mountain. (Shemos 19:1-2)

Actually, the three levels, Dayah, Binah, and Haskil correspond to the three levels of soul, Nefesh, Ruach, and Neshamah, respectively. And, as we have discussed previously, Nefesh, Ruach, and Neshamah correspond to the levels of Torah learning, Pshat, Remez, and Drush, which in turn correspond to the three levels of Torah learning, Mikrah, Mishnah, and Talmud.

The point of Mishnah is to provide understanding to the Oral Law as to what is not clear from the literal reading of the Written Law, which is called "Mikrah." The goal of Talmudic learning is to reveal the Divine logic behind the explanations of the Mishnah, which explains the Torah, so that we can learn to think along the same lines as G-d, and perfect creation in partnership with Him.

Although "Pshat" is the simple understanding in any area level of learning, in this hierarchy, it refers to the level of Mikrah, or Nefesh. Therefore, Remez, which means "hint" and which refers to the level of Mishnah, corresponds to the level of soul called "Ruach." Likewise, Drush (exegetical) corresponds to Talmud, which is on the level of the Neshamah, and therefore the soul of "Haskil," or in everyday terms, "seichel."

Indeed, the Neshamah-level is said to "hover" above the person's head, just over the spot where, as baby, the skull had yet to form. In other words, Neshamah is the source of seichel, and if you are talking to a child before the age of 20, excitedly asking, "Where is your seichel?" The answer can only be, "I don't have any yet!"

The same will be true for any adult who has yet to gain access to this level of Neshamah, which helps to explain all the adults who are still acting as children, and why, after 5763 years, we still can't get "it" right. After all, if you think about, "evil people" are just mischievous children who never grew up, people who have never been able to grasp the fundamental difference between right and wrong on the level of Haskil, and more than likely, not even on the level of Binah either.

Thus, is it any wonder that "individuality" and "personality" are intimately linked with one's depth of knowledge? For, to move from one level of understanding to a higher one is to move from one level of soul to a higher one. The result is a greater sense of self and being, more free-will and more self-confidence.

Therefore, the Torah emphasizes that Age 20 is an important turning point in a person's life. We become fully responsible and punishable for our actions then, because gaining the opportunity to

achieve the level of Haskil by learning from level to level, we also gain greater free-will choice.

Free-will is based upon knowledge and our relationship to it. The deeper and more profound our knowledge is, the more possible it is to distinguish between good and evil, which can, on some levels, be deceptively similar. Without Binah, a person is doomed to live in intellectual darkness; without Haskil, a person is doomed to live a life of inconsistency filled with false conclusions.

As we leave this week's parshah and point our feet in the direction of Shavuot and the giving of Torah, we have to recall that this was the gift G-d presented to the Jewish people at that historical moment in time. It was a road map of a different sort, a straight path from Dayah to Binah to Haskil, and self-perfection along the way.

Have a great Shabbos, and a successful Kabbalos HaTorah,
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