

ANGEL OR DEMON?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

Ya'akov left Be'er Sheva in the direction of Charan. He arrived and slept there because the sun had set. He took some stones from there, put them around his head, and lay down over there. (Bereishis 28:10-11)

Part of that story is the hot pursuit of Eliphaz, Eisav's son who had been sent to hunt Ya'akov down and kill him. He did catch up to him along the way, but was persuaded by Ya'akov not to actually physically kill him. Instead, he robbed him of all his possessions, because as the Talmud says, a poor man is like a dead man (Nedarim 64b).

Speaking of which, this predicament was not unique to Ya'akov Avinu, but occurred as well to another very famous personality from Tanach: Shlomo HaMelech. According to the Talmud, Shlomo HaMelech had been temporarily deposed as king of the Jewish people by the head demon, Ashmedai.

As the story goes, Shlomo HaMelech had decided to begin construction on the First Temple, and was confronted with a problem. According to the Torah, the stones of the altar cannot be hewn using metal since it is a material used to make weapons that kill. The altar symbolizes life and tries to preserve it, and therefore using weapon material for the altar was a contradiction.

For this purpose, G-d created the Shamir worm, a special little worm capable of cutting through rock. However, there was only one such worm in the world, and Shlomo HaMelech needed Ashmedai to tell him its whereabouts and how to capture it, which first meant capturing Ashmedai himself. That was accomplished, but only after setting a clever trap for him, and thus Shlomo eventually ended up with the Shamir worm.

According to the Talmud, Shlomo HaMelech kept Ashmedai imprisoned in chains sealed with the Name of G-d the entire period that the Temple was under construction. One day, Shlomo HaMelech questioned his unusual house guest -- a grave mistake, as the Talmud tells:

He [Shlomo HaMelech] asked the latter:

"What is your superiority over us alluded to by the posuk, 'According to the power of His loftiness' (Bamidbar 23:22), for which they interpret 'loftiness' to refer to ministering angels and 'power' to demons?"

Ashmedai replied, "Remove this chain from my neck and give me your signet ring, and I will show you my superiority."

No sooner did Shlomo HaMelech comply when Ashmedai snatched him up, swallowed him, and stretching his wings, one touching the heaven and the other the earth, he spit him out again to a distance of four hundred miles. It is with reference to this time that Shlomo said, "What benefit is there for a man who toils under the sun?" (Koheles 1:3), and "This is my portion of all my labor." (Ibid. 2:10). To what does "this" refer? Rav and Shmuel argue: one said it refers to his staff, while the other holds that it refers to his kingly garment, with which Solomon went about from door to door begging. Wherever he went he said, "I, Koheles, was king over Israel in Jerusalem" (Ibid. 1:12). (Gittin 68b)

After being ousted by Ashmedai, Shlomo's stature was reduced dramatically, and he was left with only his staff and his cloak. Regarding retaining one's staff only, we learn from Ya'akov that this is a sign of one's poverty, as Ya'akov said regarding himself, "With my staff I crossed the river" (Bereishis 32:11), this statement being a description of his poverty at that time. The posuk is actually from Parashas Vayishlach, but it is recounting Ya'akov's state of affairs in this week's parshah after Eliphaz robbed Ya'akov on his way to Padan Aram.

SHABBOS DAY:

What benefit is there for a man who toils under the sun? (Koheles 1:3)

However, though the rest of Ya'akov's worldly possessions were taken from him, Shlomo HaMelech at least retained his royal clothing (Maharshah, Sanhedrin 20b).

In a separate tractate, the Talmud describes the complete descent of Shlomo HaMelech from his height of power to his lowest level. At first, Shlomo was king over both the upper beings (such as demons) and the lower beings, such as humans. Then he lost authority and ruled over humans only, then only over the Jewish people, and then only over Jerusalem. Eventually, the Talmud says, he ruled only over himself, and finally, only over his staff and cloak.

It is always amazing how quickly and dramatically life can change directions. As they say, "Be careful with the people you see on the way up, because you'll see them again on the way down." Such is life in this world of ups and downs. Here was Ya'akov Avinu one day learning Torah in relative peace and free of the hatred of his brother, and the next day he is running for his life away from home to a strange land, and as broke as one could be!

But there was a difference between Ya'akov's fall and Shlomo's fall, as the Talmud discusses. The Talmud explains that it was Shlomo HaMelech's marriage to the daughter of the Pharaoh that precipitated his fall from power (on the very night he finished building the First Temple! In the case of Ya'akov Avinu, circumstances created his dilemma, and he had responded to the call of duty. However, Shlomo HaMelech created his set of circumstances, and not only did they pave the road for his own descent, but it paved the path to the destruction of the Second Temple.

Thus, in the case of Ya'akov Avinu, he had been put to a test by G-d, and that is why he not only passed, but all the results were only positive. However, Shlomo HaMelech created his own test, and as a result, he almost destroyed himself completely. Indeed, the Talmud argues whether or not he ever regained his former stature, with one opinion saying yes, and the other opinion saying that he never again ruled the upper beings.

The Maharal interprets this account, providing an insight into how to maintain spiritual fortitude and how to learn a Talmudic midrash.

According to the Maharal, the chain with G-d's Name engraved upon it symbolized Shlomo HaMelech's devotion to G-d, and it was this that provided him with both the wisdom and ability to rule over the upper beings as well as the lower ones. When he wanted to understand the greatness of the power of demons, Ashmedai told him that he had no power as long as he was bound by the chain with G-d's Name on it, and also while Shlomo HaMelech wore his ring with G-d's Name on it.

That is, explains the Maharal, as long as Shlomo's devotion to G-d and his clarity of mind did not falter, Ashmedai could have no influence over him. For, as the gematria of Amalek hints (Amalek = 240 = suffek = doubt), evil only has power in areas that men have doubt. When Shlomo complied and gave up the ring and the chain, it symbolized a breaking of his resolve and the loss of his intellectual clarity, and immediately he fell drastically, losing his former stature.

This, in the words of the Leshem, is a perfect example of what happens when a person chooses to be spiritually tested on his own. The basic rule is, G-d can test us, but we can't test ourselves. Only He knows the true limits of our own spiritual strengths, and can custom design a personal test that can challenge us, but which we can also pass as well. We neither know our own spiritual abilities nor what is involved in any test in life, and therefore, we are more likely to fail than to succeed.

This, Shlomo HaMelech learned the long, hard way, and Koheles is his testimony to the Jewish people throughout the generations that he left behind. It says, in essence, "Look how greatly I erred, and how close I came to spiritual oblivion. Learn from my mistake, and don't repeat it. Let G-d give you the test. Don't enter them on your own."

No wonder we read Koheles just after Yom Kippur, on Shabbos Chol HaMoed Succos.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Ya'akov went on his way, and angels of G-d met him. When he saw them, Ya'akov said, "This is an encampment of G-d." So he called the place "Machanaim." (Bereishis 32:2-3)

In fact, says the Maharal, the whole episode is just a metaphor. In fact, Shlomo HaMelech never really left the palace and wandered from door-to-door as a beggar. Rather, his new behavior after being bested by Ashmedai caused him to appear as if he was a demonic imposter who had taken the throne from the real king. Only after the Sanhedrin re-endowed him with a ring and new chain and rallied around him, did the "old" Shlomo have the ability to fight off the forces of evil that had

overcome him.

It was not an easy task, returning from the brink of spiritual annihilation. Many have gone the same route and have never returned. Instead, as they spiritually dissolve their perspective on life and Torah, they lose their ability to even understand why they ever believed in Torah in the first place. On the contrary, they assume that they have just gained intellectual clarity, not that they have lost it.

Not everyone is Shlomo HaMelech, the wisest man to ever have lived, and not everyone has the Sanhedrin to help them return to spiritual clarity. And even then, it is questionable whether or not he ever fully regained his entire kingdom. Furthermore, the Talmud says that Shlomo HaMelech lived in fear of Ashmedai for the rest of his life (a clear sign of the lasting impact that his brush with spiritual death left on him, and the demon that brought it about?

Demon? Do Torah Jews believe in demons? In Hebrew they have other names, such as Shaidim or Mazikin, but a demon by any other name is still a demon. However, unlike other views of such Heavenly beings, the Torah perspective sees them as servants of G-d just as much as good angels are. They work for G-d, and quite obediently for that matter, and can never challenge Him or go against His will, no matter how much it looks to the contrary. G-d is not at war with them and they are not at war with G-d.

Perhaps the best example of this is the Sitra Achra, often referred to as the Satan, which the Talmud also calls the Angel of Death and the Yetzer Hara, the evil inclination (Bava Basra 16a). But how can one being be so many things at one time? The answer is that he cannot; he is each thing at different times.

For example, in order to test a person's spiritual resolve, he starts off as the Yetzer Hara, the inclination to do evil. As the Yetzer Hara, like the Original Snake in the Garden of Eden, he creates an option to go against the will of G-d, in order to provide the person with free-will choice. Then the person has to decide what he will do, and to which voice he will listen, his own or that of his evil inclination.

After the choice is made, and especially if the person chooses to sin, the Satan quickly removes his hat as he rushes to stand before the Heavenly Court. There he puts on the hat of the Prosecuting Attorney as he presents the case of John Doe who has just sinned on earth down below. And, after the verdict, he does a quick change again, this time donning of the clothing of the Angel of Death as he is invested by the court to carry out the punishment.

Thus, the Sitra Achra is more of a process than a being, a system by which free-will is given to man and through which judgment of free-will decisions can be carried out effectively. How G-d chooses to manifest His systems (like the angels Ya'akov met upon returning to Eretz Yisroel (depends upon the time, the place, and the people involved. However, what counts is that G-d is constantly involved in our lives, testing our spiritual resolve in one way or another, in order to maximize our reward in the World-to-Come.

MELAVE MALKAH:

At night, G-d came to Lavan the Syrian in a dream. He told him, "Be careful and don't speak to Ya'akov either for good or evil." (Bereishis 31:24)

The Talmud makes an interesting statement, based upon this posuk:

Rebi Yochanan said in the name of Rebi Shimon bar Yochai: Any good from an evil person is evil for the righteous, as it says, "Be careful in case you speak to Ya'akov either good or evil." Bad is understandable, but why not good? Thus we learn that the good of the evil is evil for the righteous. (Yevamos 103a)

In other words, even the favors of evil people are far from that. Now, the Talmud does not mean that somehow and at sometime in the future the evil person will double-cross the righteous one and harm him in the end. It means that even if a righteous person receives and secures benefit from an evil person, it is still no benefit.

It's not that the money, or the gift, or whatever the evil person did for the righteous person has no objective value; it does. The problem lies not with that which was given, but with the giving itself. It is as if that which was received was stolen property to begin with (even if it wasn't (which makes using it honestly impossible.

This is because the process of giving and taking is not as finite as people tend to think, or treat it. On the contrary, what attracts us to possessions and even inspires us to surrender time and money for them is the potential for relationship with them, on whatever level is suitable for the "attainment" in question. Symbolism aside, we surrender part of ourselves when we sell something we previously owned, and the new buyer inherits it on some level.

This is why when a man marries a woman he gives a certain amount of value, usually in the form of a ring. On one level, an acquisition is being made, but on a deeper, far more esoteric level, they are both giving of themselves to each other, and opening a spiritual conduit between the two of them. They have the rest of their marriage to work on increasing the potential flow through that channel.

This is why the good of evil people is evil for good people. The moment you give something, anything, you create a relationship between giver and receiver. To what extent that relationship can go depends upon what was given and how, and though this may not be felt on an emotional level, it is certainly true in the spiritual realm, to such an extent that the spiritual impurities of the giver can go over to the recipient of an evil person's gift.

And evil doesn't always mean that a person is doing the worst things imaginable. Evil from a Torah perspective is also a lack of good, so that even misguided people can be doing evil, though somewhat unwittingly. No question that intention plays a major role in the evaluation of good and evil, but still, evil acts even with the best of intentions carry an aspect of that evil.

Thus, we see that even though Dovid HaMelech only killed with the permission of Torah, still the "blood on his hands" prevented him from being the builder of the First Temple. That honor fell to his son, Shlomo HaMelech, who didn't have to fight the wars that his father did. And, even though Ya'akov stole the blessings from Eisav for the sake of Heaven, it was still called a "ma'aseh geneivah" (an act of stealing) for which we have had to pay on some level. But that is all a function of Hashgochah Pratis (Divine Providence.)

So, in the end it is not a simple case of simply buying something, paying for it, and checking out. There is room to be careful, not just about what you buy, but where and how you buy something. For, it might come with a spiritual dividend, and one that you might have preferred to do without.

Have a great Shabbos,

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