

TO WIN BY A HAIRSBREADTH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

The angels returned to Ya'akov, saying, "We came to your brother, to Eisav; moreover, he is heading toward you, and four hundred men are with him." Ya'akov became very frightened, and it distressed him. (Bereishis 32:7)

But alas, the yetzer hara of a person is strong, and it is even possible to ignore the messages of G-d's prophets. A person who doesn't want to change his lifestyle will always find a reason to ignore the truth, to ignore Hashgochah Pratis. Even great people, people who prefer to do the right thing and walk with G-d, can be somewhat blind to the reason behind the misfortunes they have suffered, as the following story shows:

Rav Huna had four hundred barrels of wine which had turned into vinegar. On hearing about his misfortune, Rav Yehudah the brother of Rav Sala the chasid, accompanied by the rabbis, or as some say, Rav Adda bar Ahava, accompanied by the rabbis, came to visit him. They told him, "Let the master investigate his affairs."

"What!" he said. "Do you suspect me of a wrongdoing?"

"Shall we then," they responded, "suspect The Holy One, Blessed is He, of executing judgment unjustly?"

Rav Huna then said, "If you have heard something against me, then tell me."

So they said to him, "We heard that the master does not give his tenant a share in the vines [when they are pruned]."

But Rav Huna explained, "He has stolen all the produce of my vineyards and has left nothing for me."

"There is a maxim," they replied, "He who steals from a thief smells of theft."

"I accept upon myself to pay him," he told them.

Some say that the vinegar turned back into wine, and others say that the price of vinegar rose to that of wine. (Brochos 5b)

However, most people are not Rav Huna, and they certainly aren't Ya'akov Avinu either. People who are so truth-oriented that even when they have barely done a wrong, on the contrary, they

themselves have been wronged, can still take a Divine message personally and make amends. They would rather leave the message fuzzy, inject a bit of randomness into life, as if ignoring G-d somehow changes the meaning of the message and smoothes over whatever is wrong. In some cases, they use their misfortune as an excuse to turn their backs on G-d, unlike Ya'akov Avinu, who had trouble everywhere he went from an early age until the day he died.

SHABBOS DAY:

Ya'akov arrived intact at the city of Shechem which is in the land of Canaan, upon his arriving from Padan Aram, and he camped before the city. He bought the parcel of land upon which he pitched his tent from the children of Chamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred kesitahs. (Bereishis 33:18-19)

"What a shame about the ones who are lost and are no longer to be found. Many times I revealed Myself to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov as El Shaddai, and they never questioned Me, nor did they ask, 'What is Your Name?' I told Avraham, 'Arise, and walk the length and width of the land that I am giving to you.' (Bereishis 13:17). Yet, when he wanted a place to bury Sarah, he couldn't find anything until he purchased land for four hundred shekels! And, yet he didn't wonder about My methods. I told Yitzchak, "Live in this land and I will be with you and bless you" (Bereishis 26:3), yet when his servants wanted some water to drink, just as they found some, others fought with them, as it says, "The shepherds of Gerar fought with the shepherds of Yitzchak" (Ibid. 20). And yet, He didn't doubt Me. I told Ya'akov, "The land on which you are lying upon I will give to you" (Ibid. 28:13), and when he wanted to pitch his tent, who couldn't do it until he purchased some for 100 kesitahs, and yet, he did not question Me. (Sanhedrin 111a)

This interesting piece of Talmud is actually G-d's criticism of Moshe Rabbeinu after he returned from Pharaoh's palace, having had his request for Jewish freedom rejected outright. The truth is, Moshe knew in advance that Pharaoh would say no, but what he didn't expect was that Pharaoh would increase the level of slavery, which seemed to be working in the opposite direction of redemption.

Thus Moshe complained to G-d:

"Why have you sent me? From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name he did evil to this people, but you did not rescue Your people." (Shemos 5:23)

In other words, unlike Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov before him, Moshe questioned G-d, and not just in his heart and mind, but also verbally, to which G-d responded, and in the words of the Talmud, "What a shame about the ones who are lost and are no longer to be found." It was a stinging and biting criticism, but Moshe Rabbeinu got the message and dutifully fulfilled every request of G-d after that, no matter how backwards it may have appeared to him.

There is another story in the Talmud that adds another piece to the puzzle of Hashgochah Pratis, and it goes like this:

The rabbis taught: It happened to the daughter of Nechunia, the well-digger, that she fell into a large

well. They came and told Rebi Chanina ben Dosa of it. During the first hour he said to them: "Peace [to her] and so also during the second hour. At the third hour, [when there was fear that she might have died], he said that she was out of the well. When the girl was asked who saved her, she said that a ram passed around the well led by an old man who saved her. When Rebi Chanina ben Dosa was asked whether he knew of her safety by prophecy, he said: "I am neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet, but I thought to myself, 'Is it possible that the children of that righteous man Nechunia, who was digging wells to enable those who travel to Jerusalem on the holidays to drink water from them, shall die by the very thing he was taking so much pains [to prepare for the welfare of Israel?]' " (Bava Kamma 50a)

Nice story, eh? Not that Rebi Chanina ben Dosa couldn't have performed some kind of miracle to save the daughter of Nechunia, the well-digger, since we see from the Talmud elsewhere that all kinds of miracles used to happen for him. However, in this case, a miracle wasn't necessary, at least not from him, since "measure-for-measure," the well-known and all-encompassing trait of Heavenly justice could save the day, and Nechunia's daughter.

For, "measure-for-measure," or middah k'neged middah in Hebrew, means that G-d punishes us based upon the sins we do. Not only is this fair, but it also acts as means for allowing us to learn from our mistakes for the future. And, as we see from the story, it also means that you cannot be punished with something that you use for the sake of a mitzvah.

Ah, well, not so fast. The Talmud has more to say, and it kind of takes the steam out of the sails of the good ship called "Divine Providence":

Rav Acha said: Nevertheless, his [Nechunia's] son died of thirst.

After all, Nechunia had been a well-digger, not a water provider, says Tosfos. True, he had dug his wells specifically for the purpose of providing that water, but his main effort was in the actual digging of the wells themselves, and therefore, his daughter could not die through one of them, even though his son died of thirst.

Talk about splitting hairs. And, speaking of hairs, the Talmud itself provides its own answer for this Divine exactitude:

The reason is, as the verse says, His surroundings are extremely turbulent" (Tehillim 50:3), from which it may be inferred that The Holy One, Blessed is He, is particular with His righteous even to a hairsbreadth. Rebi Chanina says: "From the following verse, "A G-d dreaded in the great council of the holy ones, and feared by all that are about Him" (Ibid. 89:8). (Ibid.)

A hairsbreadth, eh? Hmm. The better you are, the more Heaven expects from you, and the more precise they are about judgment of sins. This might discourage some from even thinking about becoming righteous, but as always, there is a sod to this idea.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

There is no righteous person in the world who does good but does not commit a transgression. (Koheles 7:20)

How can there be one, when man is born with an inherent yetzer hara? To be free of the yetzer hara, and thus avoid sin, is to become at least part angel, which is possible on occasion. But then we're no longer talking about a righteous person anymore, but about some kind of spiritual hybrid.

However, regarding this hairsbreadth business, the Arizal revealed this:

Righteous people and Torah scholars can never be affected by the fires of Gihennom, as it is written regarding Elisha (Acher): He cannot be judged because of his involvement with Torah (Chagigah 15b). Therefore, they need to reincarnate in this world to cleanse their sins for, "There is no righteous person in the world who does good but does not commit a transgression" (Koheles 7:20). (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Chapter 22)

In other words, of the many assets with which Torah provides a person, one of them is special protection against the rectifying "flames" of Gihennom. However, as great as this is, it also creates a technical problem for a Torah scholar in need of rectification, which, as Shlomo HaMelech wrote, includes just about everyone. Therefore, says the Arizal, he has no alternative but to complete all of his tikunim through gilgulim - reincarnation, instead.

A righteous person after he leaves this world is able to ascend to great heights in the World-to-Come, but not all at once. Immediately after his death they punish him to rid him of his more severe sins, after which time they place him past the first division. When the time comes to ascend to a higher partition, they return him to receive more punishment, this time for the lighter sins, after which he can ascend to the second level. (Ibid.)

Light sins? But aren't we all culpable for "light sins" as well? Not to this extent:

After that, they return him again to be punished for the minutiae of the law (the "hairsbreadth" that he did not carry out (b'sod, "His surroundings are extremely turbulent"(Tehillim 50:3). Then he will finally be able to ascend to his true and fitting section. (Ibid.)

Thus, this is the meaning of the Talmud. Rebi Nechunia was a phenomenal Torah scholar as well as a tremendous Ba'al Chesed (doer of kindness for others. But he wasn't perfect (no Torah scholar is before G-d, and technically, he would have required some time, albeit limited, in Gihennom. However, he was a great talmid chacham which would have rendered Gihennom useless against him. Thus, his son died from thirst, though not from any well he had dug for others, as the law of middah-k'neged middah dictates.

MELAVE MALKAH:

The actions of the Rock are perfect, and all His ways are judgment. (Devarim 32:4)

This is true even if we can't see how it is so at the moment. In Yemos HaMoshiach and onward, all

the questions about the way G-d runs His world will disappear, because we will be able to comprehend, a little, how deep G-d's justice actually goes. Any apparent imperfections in Hashgochah Pratis stems from us, not the way G-d runs His world. And that imperfection is not just in our understanding of G-d's ways, but also in our inability to properly judge the people affected by G-d's ways, which is a major part of the puzzle as well:

A person who has come into the world for the first time will have a difficult time subjugating his yetzer hara, even if his soul is very elevated since it is the beginning of his purification from the K'lipos (the depths of spiritual impurity from which souls are first drawn). Even while he was on the level of tzelem, he still contained k'lipos. As a result, this person will be quite sad all of his days and find himself worrying for no reason. However, in actuality, it is the K'lipos that cause it. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Chapter 27)

In other words, when we look at other people, we look at them as if they have had a "clean start" in life. And, though that may be true of their bodies, for the most part, that is rarely true of their souls, which is the driving force behind all that we do. For example:

This is the sod of what happened to Dovid HaMelech, who was close to G-d. Amazingly, his yetzer hara overcame him in the incidents involving Bas Sheva and Avigayil. However, as we have said, it occurred because it was the beginning of his departure from the K'lipos, as Dovid wrote, "I am sunk in the mire of the shadowy depths" (Tehillim 69:3). There are other possukim to this effect. (Ibid.)

It's like trying to run for your life in the face of hurricane winds blowing in the opposite direction. There are forces beyond your control holding you back, indeed pushing you backwards!

Thus, the sins of someone who has come into the world for the first time do not count before G-d as they do for others, since he is still affected by the K'lipos, and it takes great effort to leave them. This is the sod of what Chazal said: Had you not been Dovid and he not Shaul, I would have destroyed many Dovid's before Shaul (Moed Katan 16b). (Ibid.)

In other words, because of where Shaul HaMelech's soul came from it was very difficult for him to overcome his yetzer hara, and what he did accomplish was a great personal feat, and not to be taken lightly. Had Dovid made the same mistakes, given his own soul, he would have been held more accountable for them. The Arizal continues:

Sometimes the soul of a "new" person is very elevated although he cannot overcome his yetzer hara; if he could, he would easily be very pious. This is a powerful sod, for it explains why sometimes a person may only transgress lightly but receive a serious punishment, while someone else may perform a terrible sin, and yet not get punished for it. This is the sod of, "The actions of the Rock are perfect, and all His ways are judgment" (Devarim 32:4). This is enough for those who comprehend and therefore, one cannot question the ways of G-d, or even of the righteous when they sin. (Ibid.)

Thus, as smart as man may be, and he seems to be VERY smart sometimes, he has to be more than

that to be able to comprehend the ways of G-d. He has to at least be a prophet and be privy to G-d's calculations behind the events of history, and the Divine reaction to the actions of men. It's nice when everything works out in a way that we can relate to, but who says what we relate to is the best thing in the long run for us, mankind, and the world at large?

That is why we have phrases such as, "All that G-d does He does for the good." You don't need to say such things when that good is obvious to us; you need to say these words because, more often than not, the good is hidden from us at the moment we are burning to know it.

But that was the greatness of the Avos, G-d told Moshe Rabbeinu, and the Talmud is telling us. They were patient people, exceedingly patient people. More important, they were trusting servants of G-d who lived by such maxims as, "This too is for the good." Indeed, every tiring and exhausting step that Ya'akov had to run to free himself of Eisav's deadly scheme, and every distressing night he had to spend in Lavan's presence, he probably said these words.

We have to learn their ways well. Given the direction Jewish history is taking these days, we're going to need them. Perhaps, though, if in the end we already believe in them, we won't need them at all.

Have a great Shabbos,

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Text

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