

A TRUE BAR MITZVAH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

*G-d told Moshe and Aharon, "This is the statute of the law which G-d commanded to be told. Tell the Children of Israel to take an unblemished, completely red heifer, which has never worn a yoke."
(Bamidbar 19:1-2)*

Which has never worn a yoke: just as they threw off the yoke of Heaven. (Rashi)

This Shabbos is my second oldest son's Bar Mitzvah, Chananyah Aharon, n"y, b"H, so in his honor I am going to devote this week's parshah sheet to the concept of accepting upon oneself the Ol Malchus Shamayim (the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven) and by extension, avoiding becoming the joke of the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is quite a remarkable thing. One moment a young man or young woman is not obligated in mitzvos, and the next, at Tzeitz HaKochavim (at the appearance of three medium stars) on the respective day of either Bar or Bas Mitzvah, he or she is. True, we teach children from an early age to act as if they are already obligated in mitzvos, to help with the transition from zero mitzvos to hundreds of mitzvos, the amount depends upon which moment in Jewish history one is living, and if one is a kohen or not, but in essence, it happens at a moment's notice.

The Arizal taught:

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." His Neshamah will enter him only when he completes his twentieth year, as it says in the Zohar (Mishpatim 94b). (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 2)

As it is well known, there are five levels of soul (from top to bottom): Yechidah, Chiyah, Neshamah, Ruach, and Nefesh. They correspond to the Ten Sefiros, and therefore, like the Ten Sefiros they act as filters for the light of G-d to reach us without destroying us physically. It is the level of Nefesh that acts as the spiritual interface between the spiritual and the physical, as the posuk indicates:

For the Nefesh of the flesh is in the blood . . . (Vayikra 17:11)

Often referred to as the animal soul, the Nefesh is the minimal amount of spiritual energy necessary to keep a body alive and functioning on auto-pilot. The extent to which man has perpetrated evil and acted in an unG-dly manner shows just how little an impact the Nefesh can have on a person's

spiritual consciousness. A baby emerges into the world accomplishing very little other than just trying to stay alive.

However, just as the general soul has five parts, so too does each section divide up similarly, resulting in a Yechidah of the Nefesh, a Chiyah of the Nefesh, etc., all the way down to the Nefesh of the Nefesh, otherwise called the Nefesh sh'b'Nefesh. The same is true for the other four levels as well, the uppermost level of all the soul-levels being the Yechidah sh'b'Yechidah. However, we won't see from the level of Nefesh sh'b'Chiyah on up until we reach Olam HaBah (the World-to-Come).

Thus, even on the level of Nefesh with which we are born there is plenty of work to do. Just getting to the Yechidah sh'b'Nefesh is an unparalleled, phenomenal accomplishment that would be reflected in spiritual greatness in everyday life. Furthermore, the distinction between the two levels, for example, between Nefesh sh'b'Nefesh and Ruach sh'b'Nefesh can be very great, resulting in a person who is far more spiritually complete.

Indeed, a person who is only holding on the level of Nefesh sh'b'Nefesh may barely even realize that he has a soul, being so spiritually insensitive. That can make up a good large bulk of the world's population at any given point in history. On the other hand, a person who is on the level of Ruach sh'b'Nefesh may not only acknowledge the reality of his soul, but he may already be quite devoted to G-d in everyday life, and much more so as the higher levels are reached.

In fact, the Arizal has called a person who has rectified all levels of Nefesh a "complete person," a term we may not have thought applicable to someone who has yet to even rectify his Nefesh sh'b'Ruach.

SHABBOS DAY:

Speak to the Children of Israel, saying, "If a Nefesh shall sin in error . . ." (Vayikra 4:1-2)

As usual, in Pshat an unusual word is taken to be a euphemism: soul only means person. However, in Sod the word is understood literally, that it is really the Nefesh that is being used for the sin, which prevents necessary upward growth:

However, if he does not completely rectify his Ruach then the Neshamah will not enter him and he will remain only with his Nefesh and Ruach. Likewise, if he doesn't completely rectify his Nefesh, then he will remain only with his Nefesh, lacking both his Ruach and Neshamah . . . (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 2)

What is important to know is that the levels of soul have other names as well, since they also correspond to different levels of reality. Thus, Chiyah corresponds to the realm called Atzilus (Emanation), Neshamah corresponds to Beyirah (Creation), Ruach corresponds to Yetzirah (Formation), and Nefesh corresponds to Asiyah (Action). The bottom three also correspond to Machshavah (Thought), Dibur (Speech), and Ma'aseh (Action).

Thus, sin and tikun (rectification) on the level of Nefesh is usually action-oriented, on the level of Ruach it is speech-oriented (e.g., speaking Torah, praying, etc.), and on the level of Neshamah, it is thought-oriented (e.g., thinking holy thoughts, having the proper intention when performing a mitzvah, etc.). Hence, though there are 613 Mitzvos, not every mitzvah affects the same level of soul, but rather action mitzvos affect the level of Nefesh, speech mitzvos affect the level of Ruach, and thought mitzvos affect the level of Neshamah.

Likewise, not all sins are equal before G-d. Even though actions speak louder than words to people who are spiritually hard of hearing, it is not necessarily so in Heaven.

A Jew should conduct himself accordingly and never think to himself, "What am I, and what difference can my insignificant actions make to the world?" Rather, he should understand and be conscious that every detail of his actions, words, and thoughts, at any moment, is never meaningless, G-d forbid. On the contrary, how many and exalted are his actions, each one reaching up to its specific root, to have its impact in the Highest Heights, in the worlds and the splendorous lights above. Certainly, the wise man, who fully understands this idea, finds his heart trembling when he considers his inappropriate actions and how destructive their impact can be, G-d forbid, worse even than the damage done by Nebuchadnetzar. This is because Nebuchadnetzar and Titus could not affect the worlds above, since they were not rooted in those worlds. It was because of our sins, by which we "weakened" the strength of G-d, and through which we defiled the Temple of G-d above, that Nebuchadnetzar and Titus were able to destroy the Temples below, which corresponded to the Temple above. This is the meaning of what the rabbis wrote, "You ground already ground flour" (Eichah Rabbosi 1:43). Our sins destroyed the Heavenly Abode, the Holy Upper Worlds; they (Nebuchadnetzar and Titus) only destroyed the earthly abode. (Nefesh HaChaim, Ch. 4)

Rather, an action down here can have far less impact on Creation than an impure thought up there. This is why the Torah advises us to be holy, which amounts to us making sure as much as possible that the environment we live in encourages the proper spiritual outlook on a daily basis.

However, it gets even more complicated. For, we know first hand that not everyone starts off on the same spiritual level, regardless of the family into which they are born. Some people seem to be at a spiritual advantage or disadvantage from Day One, and the Arizal explains why:

Even though it is known that there are people whose Nefesh is from the Malchus of Asiyah, and there are those whose are from the Yesod of Asiyah, nonetheless, every person must rectify all aspects of Asiyah. Only then can each receive his Ruach from Yetzirah, since Yetzirah is greater than all of Asiyah. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 1)

Thus we see that it is true, that souls come from different levels, which means that the starting point of one individual can be on a higher plane than a person whose soul-root is on a lower level. However, that only serves to increase the expectation for growth for the person on the higher spiritual plane. Hence, whereas one person may perpetually come ten minutes late for prayer, he

may be held less accountable than the person who only comes five minutes late and only on occasion, because his soul-root permits him to be on time always. Sin is relative to one's soul-root.

Not only this, but the higher up one's soul-root is, the greater the damage his sin causes. Thus, a simple sin by a spiritually higher soul can be worse for Creation than a more serious sin by a soul on a far lower spiritual plane:

When a righteous person leaves this world he 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. 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, fitting section. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 22)

Thus, the Talmud states:

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?]' " Rav Acha said: Nevertheless, his son died of thirst. The reason is, as the posuk 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. (Bava Kamma 50a)

For, most of us the sin may be great while the effect is small, but for righteous people the sin is small, but the effect, very grave.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

G-d spares no Nefesh; consider thoughts so that no one be banished from him. (II Shmuel 14:14)

It is not just sufficient to rectify the particular spot to which his soul is connected. Rather, he must rectify all aspects of each level as we have mentioned, until he merits all of Asiyah, at which time he can achieve his Ruach of Yetzirah. It is this way with all worlds. This means that one must be involved with Torah and mitzvos that correspond to all of Asiyah, not just those which correspond to the specific place to which one's Nefesh is attached. This is called the "upholding Torah and mitzvos."

(Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 1)

As it is well known, the 613 Mitzvos correspond to the various limbs and tendons that make up a human being and represent the structure of the Sefiros in the spiritual realm. Thus, the performance of specific mitzvos brings rectification to the corresponding parts of the human body and to the corresponding section of the Sefiros. Since this is a necessity and the mandate of Torah, doing this constitutes the upholding of Torah and mitzvos.

A person might have thought that since his soul originates on a higher level than those to which specific mitzvos correspond, that he need not take those mitzvos seriously. After all, they can only bring about rectification of soul-levels that he was already born above, so what is the point? This is perhaps, why some people on higher levels find certain mitzvos somewhat tedious, though people on lower levels take them quite seriously.

(I was once davening in a minyan that a certain talmid chacham was also davening in, and having finished his Shemonah Esrai he began to talk in learning with someone while the rest of us were still praying. People said "Shhhh!" to him, but it wasn't long before he was talking again, breaking the silence and irritating other people praying. His learning, at least to him, seemed more important than basic shul decorum.)

Not so, says the Arizal. To achieve completion and to move on to higher levels of soul-acquisition means rectifying all the levels, even the ones beneath one's own soul-root. Thus, no mitzvah can be tedious to anyone, not a simple Jew nor a Gadol HaDor, which is what the mishnah alludes to when it says:

Be as careful with a minor mitzvah as with a major one, for you do not know the reward for the mitzvos. (Pirkei Avos 2:1)

Nor do we know what holds us back from rising to much higher levels of spiritual growth. However, the mishnah is merely echoing the words of the Torah:

The consequence will (Ayin-Kuf-Bais) be if you listen to these judgments . . . (Devarim 7:12)

That is, if you will listen to the light mitzvos that a person usually treads on with his heel (Ayin-Kuf-Bais) . . . (Rashi)

Which mitzvos does a person usually tread upon? Those he feels are beneath his dignity, which translates as, beneath is soul-root. And yet, those very mitzvos can be the ones that hold him back from personal spiritual greatness!

MELAVE MALKAH:

*G-d told Moshe and Aharon, "This is the statute of the law which G-d commanded to be told. Tell the Children of Israel to take an unblemished, completely red heifer, which has never worn a yoke."
(Bamidbar 19:1-2)*

The mitzvah of Parah Adumah is a great parable for a child reaching the age of Bas or Bar Mitzvah, a conclusion we can draw from Rashi:

Red Heifer: It is like a handmaid's child that defiled the king's palace. They said, "Let the mother come and clean up the filth." Similarly, since they (the Jewish people) became defiled through a [golden] calf, let the mother (the red heifer) come and atone for the calf. (Rashi)

The transformation from an eigel to a parah is symbolic of the transformation of a child to an adult. Whereas the eigel represents the yoke-less, frolicsome child, the parah represents the adult who puts his shoulder to the burden. The golden calf was a physical projection and representation of the desire of those who built it to remain forever youthful, forever free of responsibility, and with reckless abandon:

Moshe saw that the people had been restrained, because Aharon had restrained them by doing only a small part of what some demanded to be done. (Shemos 32:25)

Therefore, the Parah Adumah, the tikun for the eigel hazahav, represented just the opposite. It was the acknowledgement that we have to grow up and take responsibility for ourselves; we have to move into the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is the acceptance that the World-to-Come is where the pleasure is meant to be enjoyed and that this world is for achieving personal perfection. It represents the realization that until we do complete the levels of Nefesh, Ruach, and Neshamah, we cannot fully realize the essence of what it means to be a Yisroel:

... If a person then endeavors to learn the "Hidden Wisdom" (the secrets of Torah) then he will merit to receive a Neshamah which is from Beriyah, and it will give off light from within the Ruach, and cause even more elevation. Then he is called "Adam Shalaim" (Complete Man) to which the posuk refers when it says: "G-d made man in His image" (Bereishis 1:26). The sod is as follows: when a person only possesses Nefesh, then he is only influenced by the Name [of G-d] Aleph-Dalet-Nun-Yud (pronounced, Adon"ai). When he learns Torah altruistically, then he merits Ruach, which comes from the Name Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh. When he learns the mysteries of Torah (Kabbalah), then he merits Neshamah, and he will draw down strength and blessing from the Name Aleph-Heh-Yud-Heh (mentioned in Shemos 3:14). Now, when all three Names come together in the person they total the gematria of "yabok" (Yud-Bais-Kuf). With respect to him it says, "Ye'anainu v'yom karainu - Answer us on the day we call!" (Tehillim 20:10), which has the head-letters of yabok. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 18)

Yabok, of course, is the name of the river Ya'akov Avinu crossed to fight the Angel of Eisav, and earn the name Yisroel. When a Bar Mitzvah accepts upon himself to fulfill the Torah to the best of his ability, he is really accepting upon himself the task of using Torah and mitzvos to perfect his Nefesh, then his Ruach, and finally his Neshamah. He is accepting his own personal mission to go from being just a Ya'akov to a Yisroel in the way only he personally can become.

And, at the end of his journey awaits the greatest reward possible: the chance to walk in Gan Aiden

with Hashem Yisborach Himself.

Mazel Tov, and have a great Shabbos,
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Text

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