

LISTEN UP! HERE'S THE BROCHAH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

Listen heavens, and I will speak! Hear earth, the words of my mouth! My oral lesson will drop like rain, my speech will flow like dew, like a mist upon the herb, like a rainstorm upon the grass. When I will proclaim the name of G-d, ascribe greatness to our G-d. (Devarim 32:1-3)

Nebuchadnetzar did this, and there is much to learn from him in terms of reward in the World-to-Come.

There is also a William Henry Gates III, born October 28, 1955, more commonly known as Bill Gates, an American businessman and a microcomputer pioneer. Along with others, he wrote the original Altair BASIC interpreter for the Altair 8800 (an early microcomputer). With Paul Allen, he co-founded Microsoft Corporation, and is now its chairman and "Chief Software Architect." According to Forbes Magazine, Bill Gates is the wealthiest person in the world. So says the Wikipedia.

Why is Bill Gates so successful? Well, the truth is that the software industry has made a lot of people very wealthy, but not as wealthy as Bill Gates, and many probably want to know why. Did he simply have a good idea at the right time, and then a lot of mazel to make it really go? He probably did. But there is more to it than that, because he has not been alone in this respect.

To begin with, I am using Microsoft Word to write this parshah sheet, not to mention all the books and essays I have written over the years, in an effort to bring the genius of Torah to as many Jews as I can reach. Which, of course, has mushroomed tremendously once I figured out how to use Microsoft Explorer and many other similar programs that take advantage of the interconnectivity of the Internet.

It is hard to fathom just how much kiruv rechokim (outreach), and even kerovim (inreach), has benefited from such technology. And, I am only one of hundreds, if not thousands, of Torah educators around the world benefiting from the genius of Microsoft software.

In other words, few computer programs have made as much impact on the Torah world as those produced by the Microsoft Corporation. How many seforim have been written because of their programs, and how much harbotzos Torah (dissemination of Torah) has been facilitated by their software? It is hard to estimate, but it is easy to say tons!

For the average businessman who either does not believe in Hashgochah Pratis or think about it in

everyday business terms, Bill Gates is simply a great American success story. Period. End of statement. However, for the believing Jew who understands that everything that happens in the world is a function of Jewish history (Yevamos 63a), especially the "big" things. Microsoft's contribution to the development of Torah education at this stage of history is probably primarily responsible for its founder's penultimate success: a payoff from Heaven.

"But," you will ask, "how can that be? Does Bill Gates have a mitzvah to emanate Torah, either directly or indirectly? Furthermore, did Bill Gates ever develop a piece of software or make a marketing move having the Torah world in mind? He was and still is a businessman first and foremost, and we're not even sure whether or not he even knows, or even cares, what his company has done for Tikun Olam in the Torah sense of the idea.

So, what relevance does Divine reward have here?

SHABBOS DAY:

You are righteous, O G-d, though I may express a grievance to You; but I will speak with You of judgments: Why does the way of the wicked prosper, and [why are] all the betrayers tranquil? You have planted them and they have taken root; they even produce fruit. (Yirmiyahu 12:1-2)

This, of course, is another example of the age-old question of why the evil prosper. However, in this case, Yirmiyahu had a specific wicked person in mind: Nebuchadnetzar, who had led successful campaigns against the Jewish people in Eretz Yisroel. Yirmiyahu wanted to know directly from G-d why that had been the case.

Asks the Talmud:

What was he answered? "If when you race with footmen they exhaust you, how can you compete with horses? [If] in peaceful territory, where you are secure, [you are endangered,] how will you cope in the heights of the Jordan?" (Yirmiyahu 12:5)

The Talmud explains the answer:

This may be compared to a man who boasted, "I can run three parsaoth in front of horses on marshy land." However, after coming across a pedestrian he ran three milin (only a quarter of a single parsaoth) before him on dry land, and was exhausted. As a result, he said to him, "If you are like this before a pedestrian, how much more so before horses; if three milin have [made you] so [tired], how much more so three parsaoth? And, if on dry land this is so, how much more so in marshy swamps!" It is likewise with you! If you are amazed at the reward given to that wicked man for the four steps which he ran in My honor, how much more so when I give due reward to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, who ran before me like horses! Hence, it is written, "Because of the prophets My heart is broken within me, all my bones tremble; I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine - because of G-d and because of His holy words" (Yirmiyahu 23:9). (Sanhedrin 96a)

As Rashi explains, the prophets being referred to here are Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. And, though the posuk seems to be talking about a sad heart, here, Rashi explains, the Talmud understands it to mean a heart that is overwhelmed by the reward destined for the Forefathers. As to the four steps Nebuchadnetzar took to warrant such phenomenal reward, the Talmud continues:

To what do the four steps refer? It says, "At that time, Merodach-Baladan son of Baladan, the king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Chizkiah, for he had heard that he had been sick, and was recovered" (Yeshayahu 39:1). Just because Chizkiah had been sick and had recovered, he sent him letters and a present?! Indeed "to inquire of the miracle that had happened in the land" (II Divrei HaYamim 32:31). For, Rebi Yochanan said, "The day on which Achaz died consisted of but two hours . . ."

That is, on the day of his death the sun set ten hours too soon, to allow no time for the funeral and eulogies, in order to atone for his sins. For, the disgrace of being deprived funeral honors atones for one's sins.

". . . and when Chizkiah fell ill and recovered, The Holy One, Blessed is He, restored those ten hours, as it says, 'Behold, I shall turn back the shade over the degrees which it had already descended on the degrees of the sun-clock of Achaz, ten degrees backwards' (Yeshayahu 38:8)." Thus, the sun returned the ten degrees that it had already descended, after which he (Merodach-Baladan) asked them (his courtiers), "What is this?"

They replied, "Chizkiah was sick and recovered."

"There is such a man," he exclaimed, "and I shall not send him a greeting?! Write to him. 'Peace to King Chizkiah, peace to the city of Jerusalem, and peace to the great G-d!'"

Nebuchadnetzar had been Baladan's scribe, but he was not present at that time. When he arrived he asked them, "How did you write it?"

They told him, "We wrote thus and thus."

"You called Him the great G-d," he said, "and yet you mentioned Him last! This is how you should have written it: Peace to the great G-d, peace to the city of Jerusalem, and peace to King Chizkiah."

"Let the reader of the letter become the messenger," they told him.

So he ran after him (the messenger), but after four steps Gavriel came and made him stop. Rebi Yochanah commented: "Had Gavriel not come and stopped him, nothing could have saved the 'enemies of Israel.'" (Sanhedrin 96a)

A euphemism for errant Jews, the meaning is this: Had Nebuchadnetzar taken ALL the steps he had intended to take in order to carry through with his desire to honor the G-d of the Jewish people, his reward would have been so insurmountable as to gain the ability to entirely destroy the Jewish people. This, of course, was not to be in the cards, which is why Gavriel was dispatched to stop him

in his tracks after those first four steps.

This alone earned Nebuchadnetzar, a gentile who had no mitzvah to honor G-d, though he did have the intention to do so, the right to destroy the Temple, the House of G-d. And, more importantly, we learn that if this is the "reward" for such an evil gentile, imagine the reward for a Jew who does one single mitzvah he is commanded to do, and with the intention to do the mitzvah as well!

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Keep the mitzvah and the statute and the judgment which I command you today to do them. (Devarim 7:11)

Today to do them . . . And tomorrow, in the World-to-Come, to receive reward. (Rashi)

According to the simple reading of the posuk, Moshe is simply telling us to keep all the mitzvos which he commanded us THEN, on behalf of G-d, all the days of our lives. What about the reward for keeping them? That is not part of the discussion here at the end of Parashas VaEschanan, or so we thought.

According to Rashi, by mentioning the word "today," which is somewhat superfluous, Moshe was hinting to the answer regarding the time for receiving the reward for being loyal to Torah and mitzvos: "Tomorrow," that is, in the World-to-Come. This is consistent with the Talmud, which says that, "there is no reward in this world". (Kiddushin 39b)

There isn't? You could have fooled me! Look at all the big luxurious houses so many Jews enjoy, and the fancy cars, and the expensive clothing and jewelry, not to mention the wonderful food and disposable income! If that's not reward then what is?

The Leshem explains with the following statement from the Talmud:

Charity feeds the entire world. (Brochos 17b)

This means that everything we receive in this world is not reward for any mitzvah we do, and therefore, is unearned. It is called chesed and tzeddakah, given to us by G-d in order to keep learning Torah and performing more mitzvos. It is like a father who takes from his own pocket to give to his son so that he can invest it and make more money for himself. Good deal, no? Good G-d, yes!

However, there is a practical side to all of this, if you can call it that. There is a very technical reason as to why we do not receive any reward in this world for the mitzvos we do: We do not have the capacity to receive it. For, if we were to receive even a fraction of that pleasure in this world, with the present state of our physical bodies, we would instantaneously explode in spiritual ecstasy. It's a nice way to go, but not before one's time.

Are you having a difficult time comprehending that? Just take a look at William Henry Gates III, and the success he has enjoyed for his indirect and unintended contribution to the spreading of Torah.

Here is a man, who gives plenty of charity, but not necessarily because he believes it is what G-d wants from him. (I don't know his personal religious beliefs.)

Don't get me wrong, I do not personally know Bill Gates, nor have I read much about him. Therefore, I do not have much of an opinion of him. (I certainly am not comparing him to Nebuchadnezzar.) What I do know is that, through him and his efforts, I have benefited much. Perhaps I can come to appreciate a VERY little bit of what reward in the World-to-Come might be like, even while living in a reality so distant from it.

MELAVE MALKAH:

This is the blessing Moshe, the Man of G-d, blessed the Children of Israel before his death. He said, "G-d came from Sinai, having shone forth from Seir to them, having appeared from Mount Paran, and then approached with some of the holy myriads - from His right hand He presented the fiery to them." (Devarim 33:1-2)

There is something unusual about this last statement. According to Kabbalah, the right hand always represents the side of Chesed, which is compared to water. On the other hand, fire is said to represent Gevurah. Therefore, how can G-d's right hand, so-to-speak, present a Gevurah- oriented Torah?

We can learn a lesson from the hail that fell in Egypt for the seventh plague, a number that symbolizes the physical, natural world. Nevertheless, the Midrash teaches, the hail (frozen water) fell as a mixture along with fire, even though, naturally speaking, one should eliminate the other. Even the word for Heaven (Shamayim) is said to be a combination of the words aish (fire) and mayim (water).

What is the message? When it comes to Torah, which governs life in the everyday, NATURAL, physical world, there is still a way to rise above the limitations of Nature, albeit not always in the most obvious way.

For example, when the Jewish people camped out at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah, the deadly desert bloomed and became a lush paradise, and it pretty much remained that way everywhere the Jewish people traveled for the next forty years. Not too many deserts have bloomed for us since, but some incredible miracles have happened, and continue to happen, for the Torah world.

This is the blessing that Moshe Rabbeinu gave to us before his death. He gave us a way out of the mundane reality of the natural world, which binds everyone else with its laws and rules, even while we live within it. It doesn't mean that we don't suffer trials and tribulations, to say the least. However, it means that even when we do suffer, somehow we survive them in a supernatural way. Even the Holocaust, one of the darkest moments in our history, saw survival against all odds rooted in the natural world.

One of the greatest joys I have found, is holding the Torah, either as "Hagbah" after the Torah

reading, or while dancing with one on Simchas Torah. I feel an overwhelming sense of love well up inside of me, and an intense desire to squeeze the Torah as much as, if not more than, anything else I love dearly.

It might be my imagination, but when I hold onto that Sefer Torah, it feels like energy from another dimension flowing from the Torah to me. It melts me, because I feel the power of the Torah that has tremendous impact on a life to make a person want to be close to G-d. It feels as if nothing else matters but being close to G-d, and there seems to be a taste of eternity.

Do I really feel it? Of course, I'd like to believe that I do. Regardless, this is true: Torah has the ability to transcend the physical world even from within it, even before the eyes of people who see nothing of the sort. And I'm certainly counting on that as we begin to sail through 5766, a year that may see Nature bully us around a bit more before finally giving way to the reality of Torah in a big way.

Have a great Shabbos and wonderful Chag,
Pinchas Winston

Text

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