

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCKING ON PRAYER'S GATE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

This week's parshah sheet is dedicated in memory of Chana Leah bat Baila (Ann Rosenberg), z"l, whose yartzheit is the 24th of Elul, by her son, daughter-in-law, and their family. May the reading of this week's "Perceptions" be an ilui Neshamah for her.

FRIDAY NIGHT:

Moshe went and spoke all of these words to all of Israel. He said, "I am 120 years old today; I can no longer go out and come in" (Devarim 31:2)

Come and go means with respect to words of Torah, which teaches that the traditions and well-springs of wisdom were closed off to him. (Rashi)

It must have been hard to imagine that the fountains of Torah and prophecy from which the Jewish people had been spiritually drinking and sustaining themselves for 40 years could stop flowing through Moshe Rabbeinu. But it was true, confirmed by Moshe Rabbeinu himself, and even though they would divert themselves to flow through his protégé, Yehoshua Bin Nun, they would never be quite the same.

The question is, what exactly closed up?

The answer to this question comes from examining another idea that is very relevant to us now as we stand one week in advance of Rosh Hashanah. The rest of the year we have many ways to serve G-d and earn His favor; during the "Aseret Yemai Teshuvah", the "Ten Days of Repentance" we do it primarily through tefillah (prayer). However, according to Chazal it is not so simple, and the Tikunei HaZohar explains why (the large type is the Tikunei HaZohar, and the small type is the commentary "Mitok M'Dvash"):

THIS IS, "ALL THE GATES ARE LOCKED in terms of accepting prayers EXCEPT FOR THE GATES OF TEARS" (Brochot 32a), because the Sha'arei Dima (Gates of Tears) are on the level of Netzach and Hod of Chochmah, the sod of the two eyes, and the Chitzonim cannot reach that level, so therefore they are not closed, AND THERE IS NO ONE WHO CAN OPEN THOSE GATES, i.e., there is no one who can open the Sha'arei Tefillah UNTIL SOMEONE COMES IN TEARS, i.e., until he prays with tears AS IT SAYS, "AFTER SHE OPENED IT SHE SAW THE BOY - this refers to B'nei Yisroel - AND HE WAS CRYING" - who prayed with tears (Shemot 2:6), AND THERE IS NO HEICHEL THAT OPENS EXCEPT THROUGH IT, i.e., the Heichel of Tefillah only opens for one with tears. IT SAYS with respect to the

daughter of Pharaoh that "SHE OPENED IT", but it does not say that "she opened the basket" that alludes to CERTAINLY SHE OPENED IT i.e., the Shechinah opened the Sha'arei Heichel HaTefillah for the prayers of the Jewish people (AND THIS IS WHAT IT SAYS, "G-D, OPEN MY LIPS _" (Tehillim 51:17)). AND WITH WHAT DOES IT OPEN? WITH TEARS, AS IT SAYS, "AND HE WAS CRYING", that is, in the merit and the strength of the tears IMMEDIATELY "SHE HAD MERCY ON HIM" meaning that the Sha'arei Tefillah is open to accept their prayers. FURTHER REGARDING "AND SHE OPENED IT", WHEN ISRAEL DOES TESHUVAH WITH TEARS, i.e., they "open" with teshuvah and tears, IMMEDIATELY "SHE HAD MERCY ON HIM", immediately mercy is aroused on Israel, AS IT SAYS "CRYING THEY CAME" (Yirmiyahu 31:8), IN THE MERIT OF THEIR CRYING - in the merit of the crying of Israel - THEY ARE GATHERED and go out FROM EXILE. (Tikunei HaZohar, Tikun 11, p. 26b)

Putting Kabbalah aside for the moment, what we have just learned is that our prayers just don't go up and do their thing on their own. Rather, they ascend from our mouths upward to a specific location, what is called the "Sha'arei Tefillah" (the "Gates of Prayer"). If and when they enter these gates, then they can at least try and do their thing, bringing down to us the good for which we have prayed.

But if the gates are locked, then what good is our prayer?

SHABBAT DAY:

Open for me the Gates of Righteousness, I will enter them and thank G-d. (Tehillim 118:20)

Okay, so not the Gates of Righteousness, but at least the Gates of Prayer! First of all, why would they be locked in the first place? The answer is, for our own good. The question is, how can locking the gates intended to receive our prayers be for our own good? The answer is, because not only does locking the Sha'arei Tefillah keep out our prayers, but it also keeps out the Chitzonim as well.

Great. What's "chitzonim"?

Literally translated, "chitzonim" means "externalities" but also refers to elements of Creation that act as a spiritual barrier between us and G-d. They are there to challenge us, to literally play "devil's advocate", in order to force us to use our free-will to choose to be close to G-d, and therefore earn reward in the World-to-Come, the sole purpose of Creation. The trouble is, that they can do their job so well that we can also end up losing our portion in the World-to-Come, G-d forbid, because of their antics.

Anything that interferes with our belief in G-d and closeness to Him, is by definition associated with the Chitzonim. When they are weak, it is easy to be spiritual and sense the Presence of G-d. But when they are strong, it can become almost impossible to do so, at least not without great effort. If you want to know where the Chitzonim "live" and "hang out", just ask yourself, "Where do I feel the most distracted from G-d and spirituality? Which activities promote G-d awareness and which ones detract from it? Which people inspire me to become closer to G-d and help me feel His Presence,

and which ones turn me away from Him?"

Hence, anyone who believes in the World-to-Come and wants to get there as spiritually intact as possible, wants to know how to avoid the Chitzonim. It would be great to be able to destroy them, but as Adam HaRishon found out the hard way, we don't always have that luxury. Sometimes the best we can do is to just avoid them, which in a world like ours is also not so simple, certainly not for any great length of time.

Strategizing against the Chitzonim becomes clear when in an actual war, the best defense is an offence, and the best offence means cutting off the enemy's supply lines. Every army needs to eat and drink if it is going to be able to fight, and the Chitzonim are no different, except that they draw sustenance from kedushah (holiness).

Indeed, the Chitzonim are often compared to "bees", and the kedushah they seek with everything they have, is like a bee to honey. Evil has no intrinsic evil source of life, so therefore they must feed off kedushah to survive. The more kedushah to which they can latch onto and from which they can draw spiritual nourishment, the stronger they become and the more over-powering they become. If they could, they would reach up to the highest of heights to steal the kedushah meant for far holier purposes.

However, they can't do that either, for if they could, they would have the power to destroy Creation, and they do not have permission to do that. Cause the world to approach the brink of self-destruction, yes, but actually push us over the edge, no. What this amounts to is G-d shutting the door to certain levels in the Sefirot, the spiritual emanations/channels through which the Divine light flows down to us, to limit the exposure to the negative elements of Creation that would abuse it.

The good news is that the Chitzonim are kept at bay. The bad news is that so are we, since it is kind of an all or nothing thing. Thus, when the rabbis prayed that the yetzer hara for idol worship be taken away and were successful (Yoma 69b), with it also went our drive to serve G-d. For, idol worship is the abuse of that drive, a counterfeit spiritual experience.

Tefillah is a function of the mouth, and the mouth is on the level of Malchut, the lowest sefirah of the ten, and therefore, the most susceptible to the Chitzonim. Thus, to protect "her" from the Chitzonim, she had to be shut down, so-to-speak, at least temporarily while in exile and while the Chitzonim clearly have the upper hand. And with that, the Gates of Prayer were shut and locked, locked to the Chitzonim and locked to our tefillot as well.

SEUDAT SHLISHIT:

G-d said to Moshe, "Why are you crying out to me? Speak to the Children of Israel and tell them to move forward." (Shemot 14:15)

If you stood with your back to a huge and impassable sea while facing a murderous army with nothing but sticks and stones to defend yourself, wouldn't you cry out to G-d? It's not only the

Jewish thing to do at a time of crisis, but the human thing. Besides, it was only because we cried out last time that G-d even listened to us:

Eventually the king of Egypt died, but by that time the Children of Israel were broken because of the servitude, and they cried out. Their cry for help came up to G-d, Who heard their groaning. G-d remembered His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, and saw the Children of Israel. G-d was aware of their suffering. (Shemot 2:23-25)

So, from this passage of Torah, it seems as if crying is a good thing to do when we need help, big time. Unless, of course, at that time the Sha'arei Tefillah are closed to ward off the impure forces of Creation, which circle like vultures at times of Divine judgment looking for the kind of kedushah that prayer generates. In such a situation, one must find a way to by-pass the Chitzonim, to reach higher than they can go, and find an alternative and safer way to enter the Gates of Prayer, such as the Sha'arei Dima, for example (the Gates of Tears). For, they are on the level of the "eyes" in the Sefirot, on a level forbidden to the Chitzonim, but NOT to the tears of a Jew.

It's like trying to get in to see the boss to ask for a raise in salary. Just as you get there, an office somewhere on the ground floor, you find a long line-up and all kinds of people standing in line ahead of you just to get an appointment. However, not being the pushing-shoving type, you decide that this line-up is not for you.

Dejected, you turn around to walk out when you bump into a relative of yours who just happens to work upstairs with the rest of management. After a short conversation, you open up and tell him your problem and disappointment. With a reassuring smile your relative tells you, "You don't have to stand in line with the rest of these people who aren't going to get raises anyhow. Come with me to the ninth floor (the level of the sefirah of Chochmah), and I'll get you into rooms three (Netzach) and four (Hod). There you can actually make your request directly and see results!"

There is no question that the Aseret Yemai Teshuvah are the most crucial days of the year when we try to justify another year of life, and perhaps even some success. So, we spend hours in shul either dovening or contemplating the value of our lives. Nevertheless, we are in exile and quite clearly immersed in a sea of Chitzonim which is attacking kedushah on all fronts. Who knows if our prayers are really penetrating the Sha'arei Tefillah at all?

We don't know and there is a good chance they aren't.

But if you cry, it is most certainly a different story. While the Chitzonim keep knocking on a locked door, your tears have free passage in on a higher level, and they shlepp your prayers along with them. It is a whole different story when the tears start to flow, a whole different Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

But not everyone is so fortunate to be able to just turn on the taps of tears, especially in a public place. And certainly insincere tears do not count for much either.

That's why we have Elul Zman. Elul Zman is a time given to us by G-d so that we don't come into Rosh Hashanah cold, unprepared for the opportunity of a lifetime, literally. The shofar we blow each day says, "Wake up! Get real with life! Get real with what day is coming up soon, and what it means to you! Start 'exercising' now! Get your emotions in order, and get an appreciation of what's at stake, of Who you're going to be standing before and what you can gain and lose!"

If we had appreciated this in the desert back then, perhaps we would not have lost Moshe Rabbeinu and the channels of light he could access and keep free of Chitzonim. Instead, he was taken from us, and the level of light that came through Yehoshua was far less, so-much-so that we are still in golut because of it.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Nefesh HaChaim, Chapter 3

Likewise, when G-d created man, He empowered him to control countless forces and worlds, handing control of them over to him so that he should be the one to direct them, according to his actions, words, and thoughts - for good, or G-d forbid, the opposite.

It is the positive actions, words and thoughts of man that sustain and give energy to countless forces and holy celestial worlds, increasing their holiness and light, as it says, "I have placed My word in your mouth ... to plant heaven and to establish land" (Yeshayahu 51:16). And as the rabbis teach, "... Don't read banayich (your children), but bonayich (your builders) ..." (Brochot 64a), because it is they who arrange the upper worlds like a builder does his building, giving them great strength.

Likewise, G-d forbid, man can destroy countless forces and holy upper worlds through his immoral actions, words, or thoughts, as it says, "Your destroyers and wasters emanate from you" (Yeshayahu 49:17). He darkens and reduces their light and holiness, G-d forbid, adding strength instead to the source of spiritual impurity.

This is what the words, "And G-d created the man in His image; in the image of G-d" (Bereishit 1:27), and "In the image of G-d he was made" (Bereishit 9:6) mean. For, just as G-d is Elokim, which means "Master of all Forces" and the One Who orders and directs them each moment, likewise it was His will to empower man to control countless forces and worlds through the details of his behavior every moment in time, depending upon how his actions, words, or thoughts are "rooted" in the Upper World. It is as if he is the master of their abilities.

The rabbis taught:

Rebi Azariah said in the name of Rebi Yehuda ben Rebi Shimon: "When Israel does the will of G-d they add strength above, as it says, 'Through G-d (Elokim) we will do valiantly' (Tehillim 60:14). When Israel disobeys G- d, they weaken the strength above, as it is written, 'Of the Rock that bore you are you unmindful' (Devarim 32:18)." (Eichah Rabbosai 1:33)

In the holy Zohar it also says in many places that the sins of men cause imperfections above; it speaks of the opposite as well. This is the meaning of the verse, "Give strength to G-d!" (Tehillim 68:35).

And in the Zohar, at the beginning of Parashat Bo it says,

"It happened one day that they came...to present themselves before G-d..." (Iyov 1:6): When they want to prosecute the actions of Israel against G-d they lay their charges, because when Israel acts improperly they weaken the strength of G-d; when they act correctly they give strength and power to G-d. With respect to this it is written, "Give strength to G-d (Elokim)!" How do we do that? Through proper conduct.

Therefore it says, "to Elokim" and likewise, "through Elokim" (Tehillim 60:14), because in this context, they speak of G-d as the Master of all Forces.

Have a great Shabbos. L'Shannah Tovah u'Metukah. Ketivah u'Chatimah Tovah. And thank you once again for the opportunity to write a year's worth of "Perceptions". And, a big thank you and yasher koach to Mrs. Miriam Tovah Weinberg for taking the time each week, free of charge, to edit Perceptions, one of the few parshah sheets about five pages long each week. May she only know brochah for it. Thank you to Torah.org for posting it and sending it out each week. Most of all, thank you Hashem Yisborach for the opportunity of life and the opportunity of a lifetime to learn, live, and write Torah.

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