

WHERE THERE'S A WILL...

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

G-d told Moshe, "*Command Aharon and his sons regarding the law of a Burnt- Offering.*" (Vayikra 6:1-2)

The rabbis teach that "nothing stands in the way of will." However, a cursory look through life would seem to provide many examples that seem to contradict that statement. For example, many times people have willed to live, but have died instead. And, nothing stands in the way of the will of man more than a commandment from G-d, which you are required to do or face the consequences.

Very little excites a Talmudist more than a contradiction of two Torah ideas. Secure with the knowledge that both characterize some aspect of Divine truth, such a contradiction is merely a challenge to his previous understanding of each concept. Resolving the contradiction, therefore, represents a threshold to a deeper and more profound understanding of Torah and life itself.

For example, there is a mitzvah to send away the mother bird before taking its young from the nest. However, even though the fulfillment of any mitzvah automatically results in reward in Olam HaBah (the World-to-Come), the Torah promises an additional reward for the fulfillment of this particular commandment:

Send the mother away before taking the young, so that it will go well for you, and that you may live a prolonged life. (Devarim 22:7)

Thus, in addition to reward in the World-to-Come for performing this mitzvah, it seems that one can extend one's life in this world too (Olam HaZeh). And, although the Talmud states elsewhere that in general, a person involved in a mitzvah is protected from damage (Pesachim 8a). Certainly a mitzvah that promises long life should not be dangerous to execute.

Not so, says the Talmud, and it brings a real-life example to back up its point:

It is taught in a brisa: Rebi Ya'akov said . . . There once was a father who told his son to climb up a tower and bring him some young birds. He went up, sent away the mother bird, took the young, and upon his return, he fell and died. Where was his long life? Where was his good for this? (Chullin 142a)

The story from the Talmud seems to contradict an actual posuk from the Torah! Therefore, explains the Talmud:

"You may live a prolonged life" in this world that is completely long, and "it will go well for you" in the

world that is completely good. (Ibid.) In other words, though the Torah seemed to promise a long life in THIS world for performing the mitzvah of sending away the mother bird, what it really means is that this mitzvah contributes significantly to one's portion in the World-to-Come. This is important to know, as the same Talmudic passage later explains:

If only Acher had learned this posuk like Rebi Ya'akov bar Bartei, he would not have sinned. What did he see? He saw this act happen . . . (Ibid.)

Acher was none other than Elisha ben Abuya, mentioned elsewhere as one of the four rabbis who entered "Pardes" with Rebi Akiva, Ben Azzai, and Ben Zoma (Chagigah 14b). Pardes is an acronym for Pshat, Remez, Drush, and Sod- the four levels upon which Torah can be learned, but is usually used specifically in reference to the deepest levels of Kabbalah. As the Leshem explains, these four rabbis ventured into the realm of Sod in order to try and rectify the world at that time, and end the mass slaughtering of Jews at the hands of the Romans.

However, as holy as their mission may have been, it met with disastrous results. Ben Azzai, the Talmud reports, died young for looking at that which was forbidden to see, Ben Zoma lost his mind, and Acher became the quintessential heretic, and he died that way. Only Rebi Akiva emerged unscathed; but, explains the Talmud, only because G-d saved him.

The Talmud here does not explain what caused Acher, once a truly great man and a teacher of the great Rebi Meir, to become such a heretic. However, in this section of the Talmud, it provides not one, but two explanations of what pushed Acher over the edge, and in each case, it was an episode that seemed to contradict his perception of Torah and Hashgochah Pratis (Divine Providence).

SHABBOS DAY:

One who trusts in G-d will be surrounded by kindness. (Tehillim 32:10)

There is another example of this idea. Based upon the above posuk, it says in Midrash Tehillim:

Even an evil person who trusts in G-d will be surrounded by kindness. (Midrash Tehillim 32:10)

What this means, explains the Leshem, is that nothing stands in the way of bitachon (trust in G-d) (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 114). A Jew can find himself in an extremely dangerous situation, G-d forbid, and without sufficient merit to justify a miracle from Heaven. B'derech teva, the situation can appear totally hopeless, and yet, if the person can somehow muster up complete trust in G-d and His power to save, a miracle is guaranteed to happen for him.

Continues the Midrash:

"Many are the agonies of the wicked" (Tehillim 32:10.), because they do not place their trust in The Holy One, Blessed is He. (Ibid.)

Indeed, the Ramban says something similar:

This is why it says, "Trust in G-d and do good" (Tehillim 37:3); it does not say "Do good and trust in G-d." Rather, trust in G-d does not depend upon good deeds at all, but rather one should trust in G-d whether he is righteous or evil. (Sefer Emunah v'Bitachon, Ch. 1)

The only question is: how much bitachon is enough?

After all, our history is filled with great tzaddikim, people who we must assume were ba'alei bitachon, righteous individuals who completely threw in their lot with G-d. Spiritual giants like Rebi Akiva, who said the "Shema" as his body was being raked with burning combs of metal by the Romans (Brochos 61b), or Rebi Chanina ben Teradyon, who remained calm and expressed his faith in G-d as he was burned together with the Sefer Torah that he observed his entire life. (Avodah Zarah 18a)

If their bitachon wasn't enough to get them out of their deadly situations, then how can ours? And, if the Midrash is talking about a level of bitachon beyond that which the Ten Martyrs were able to achieve and maintain, then what good is the Midrash and its promise to us? Or, does reality simply contradict the Midrash?

The Leshem anticipated our question:

Do not wonder regarding holy people of earlier times who suffered terribly and did not make use of the trait of bitachon, as a result of which they would have certainly been saved. They made use of a different trait: loving acceptance of suffering, as Rebi Akiva said, "All of my life I was bothered . . . when will I get the chance to fulfill" (Brochos 61b), and as Rebi Eliezer said, "Come my brothers and dear ones" (Bava Metzia 84b). For those who did not want to trouble their Creator, they instead responded with mesiros nefesh (self-sacrifice), specifically giving themselves over to The Holy One, Blessed is He, to do with them whatever He willed. As Rebi Yehuda ben Babba said, "Behold, I am before them like a stone that has no one to turn it over" (Sanhedrin 14a). There is a very deep matter here. For, sometimes it is His will, May His Name Be Blessed, to bring about a specific decree as a function of Kavshei d'Rachmana, the hidden thoughts of G-d. As a result, He may remove free-will and put fear into their hearts until it is impossible to strengthen their trait of bitachon in order to fulfill the decree, Rachmana Litzlan. As HaGaon Rav Ya'akov from Lisa wrote in the name of the Ramban in his commentary on Megillas Esther, on the posuk, "Mordechai would not bend or bow" (Esther 3:2); see there. However, in truth, nothing stands in the way of bitachon, and with regard to this it says: "But the righteous are as confident as a young lion" (Mishlei 28:1). (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 115)

Once again we learn that there are rules, and there are the exceptions to the rules. Once again we see that our understanding of Torah and how G-d runs His world is not absolute, but is based only upon what G-d, Who is Absolute, chooses to reveal to us. Though, the Torah or the Talmud may present a concept as if it is immutable, time-and-time-again we experience how reality can turn one concept or another on its head, forcing the Talmud to introduce another, more ominous concept called Kavshei d'Rachmana (Secrets of G-d). (Brochos 10a)

The Talmud addresses this issue elsewhere as well:

When Moshe ascended to the Exalted Place, he found The Holy One, Blessed is He, sitting and tying crowns onto the letters [found in a Torah Scroll]. He said before Him, "Master of the World! Why are You doing that?" He answered him, "There will be a man in the future after many generations and Akiva ben Yosef will be his name. In the future he will elucidate every point and mound of law."

He said before Him, "Master of the World! Show me him."

"Turn around," He told him.

He turned around and went and sat at the back of eight rows. When Moshe had no idea what they were discussing, he became distressed until his students asked him, "Rebi, from where do you learn that?"

Rebi Akiva answered them, "It is a halachah that goes back to Moshe at Mt. Sinai."

At that time, his mind then became settled, and he returned to The Holy One, Blessed is He. He said before Him, "Master of the World! You have one such as he and You wish to give the Torah through me?!"

He answered him, "Silence! This is what occurred before Me!"

He said before Him, "Master of the World! You showed me his Torah, now show me his reward!"

He told him, "Turn around."

He turned around and saw them weighing his flesh in the market place, and he said before Him [in horror], "Master of the World! This is Torah and this is its reward?!"

He answered him, "Silence! This is what occurred before Me!" (Menachos 29b)

What is that supposed to mean? Such an answer at such a time could only result in terrible confusion, and thus it was precisely this confusion that Moshe had wished to clear up.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Moshe said to G-d, *"You are telling me to bring up this people, yet You have not told me whom You will send with me. You have [also] said, 'I know you by name, and you have pleased Me.' Please, if I have pleased You, let me know Your way, so I can know You, and so I can please You."* (Shemos 33:12-12)

The Talmud relates:

He (Moshe) requested to know the ways of The Holy One, Blessed is He, and it was granted him, as it says, "Let me know Your way . . ." (Shemos 33:13). He asked before Him, "Master of the Universe! Why are there righteous people who prosper and righteous people who suffer; evil people who prosper and evil people who suffer?" (Brochos 7a)

Moshe was asking the same question that mankind has been asking for a millennia: Why is there an apparent lack of justice in This World? If You're such a benevolent G-d, and You created existence for a good reason- to benefit us, why isn't that obvious in history? Fill in the intellectual gaps for us, so we can make sense of every aspect of history, and not be forced to grope in spiritual darkness!

It seems at first from the Talmud, that Moshe was given an answer to his question. However, in the end, the Talmud concludes that Moshe was not answered, as explained by the Talmud:

"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and show My mercy to whom I will show My mercy" (Shemos 33:19): Even if it doesn't seem fitting . . . (Brochos 7a)

Hence, the following Midrash is really just an extension of the same idea:

"Go and see the works of G-d, awesome in deed toward mankind" (Tehillim 66:5); See how when The Holy One, Blessed is He, created the world, from the first day He created the Angel of Death as well . . . Man was made on the sixth day, yet death was blamed on him. What is this similar to? To a man who decided that he wanted to divorce his wife and then wrote her a Get (divorce document), after which he went home holding the Get looking for a pretext to give it to her. He told her, "Prepare me something to drink."

She did, and taking it, he said, "Here is your Get (divorce document)."

She asked him, "What did I do wrong?"

He told her, "Leave my house because you made me a warm drink."

She answered him, "Were you able to know that I would prepare you a warm drink in the future, that you wrote a Get in advance and came home with it?"

So too did Adam say to The Holy One, Blessed is He, "Master of the Universe! Before You created the world, Torah was with You for 2,000 years . . . And what is written in it, 'This is the law when a man will die in a tent' (Bamidbar 19:14). If You had not established death for Your creations, would You have written this? Rather, You just wanted to blame death on me" . . . It also says the same thing with respect to Yosef . . . Rav Yudan said, "The Holy One, Blessed is He, wanted to carry out the decree of 'Know that you shall surely be (strangers),' and therefore set it up in such a way that Ya'akov would love Yosef more so that the brothers would hate him and sell him to the Arabs, so that they would all go down to Egypt . . ." This is what is meant by "awesome in deed." (Tanchuma, Vayaishev 4)

There are many such examples, and they all lead to the same conclusion: as obvious as Creation may appear to us, it is not necessarily so. G-d is sublime and so is His will, and as human beings, there is a limit to how close we can approach the Source of that will. There is a "framework" within which we have to work, and within which we can accomplish a tremendous amount; what lies beyond that framework is understood solely by G-d, until such time as He decides otherwise.

Nevertheless, sometimes the answers to our questions and contradictions do exist, but on another, far deeper level of Torah understanding. As in the case of Acher, it is possible for us to perceive a contradiction in Torah and mistakenly think that it is, in fact, a contradiction, G-d forbid. In reality, the answer may already exist in a realm accessible to man.

Thus, when the Talmud states that nothing stands in the way of will, though it seems to be stating an absolute, as if to say that will alone is enough to maintain life, no matter how close to the brink of death one has come, is this absolutely true? The corollary of this fundamental would be: if a person dies, it must be that on some level he lacked the will to live, no matter how much it appeared to the contrary on the outside. Otherwise, what do we make of this posuk if people who willed to live die in the end, or people who lacked the will to live survive anyhow?

As is the case so often, the answer to such profound questions lie in the realm of Sod. In Sha'ar HaGilgulim (the Gate of Reincarnation), a classic Kabbalistic work based on the teachings of the premier Kabbalist of the last 500 years, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, better known as the Arizal, we find principles about life and death in this world that are far more sophisticated than what is taught in the realm of Pshat, Remez, or even Drush.

MELAVE MALKAH:

G-d said all these things: *"I am G-d, your G-d, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of servants. You will have no other gods besides Me."* (Shemos 20:1-2)

For example, it says in Sha'ar HaGilgulim:

Now, we will explain the Wing. The Left Wing in which the roots of the soul of Kayin reach have three thousand "feathers": one thousand large, one thousand medium-size, and one thousand small. Within each feather there are 150 "hairs," which are the level of soul-sparks. For each feather, there is one hole in the Shoulder limb in which the feather is wedged and from which it grows. As well, every feather has at its upper end that is stuck into the hole a level of blood that is absorbed within it. At the other end, above the head there is a small section of tube that has no hair. Beyond this, hairs sprout from both sides until the end of the feather, of which there are large long hairs, and small short hairs. The small hairs are the soul-sparks of the small children who died young. There are many levels among them, for none of the small hairs are the same length, as is understandable. Likewise, there are many levels among the large hairs, and the length of the hair determines the number of years of a particular soul in this world. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 35)

Though the Arizal speaks of "feathers" and "hairs," these are just representative names for Nitzotzei Kedushah (Holy Sparks) in the spiritual realm of the Sefiros, from which the soul of every individual is taken. They are fixed realities: the source of one's soul, and its inherent characteristics, cannot be changed no matter how much will one has to live, or how much trust one places in G-d. This is one's mazel, and though some aspects of mazel can be overturned as a result of the performance of mitzvos (Shabbos 156a), this aspect cannot.

Another example of this is the following:

A person may completely rectify his Nefesh, but not know how to draw his Ruach to him to rectify it by leaving his Nefesh at night by using the posuk, "(With) my soul (Nafshi) I longed." This person must therefore die, in order to rectify his Ruach in a second body, and when he does, his Nefesh will join him. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 7)

However, this is something known only to Heaven. Down here on earth, what we see is a righteous person who has taken ill all of a sudden. So, he does teshuvah as is fitting of his spiritual stature, the community prays fervently for his recovery, and the doctors administer their host of remedies. Yet, the status of the righteous person only worsens, and though all parties step up their efforts to save his life, in the end, he is taken from us, G-d forbid.

As we mourn, as is fitting, wondering what it was that we did or didn't do that resulted in such a great communal loss, in reality, his soul was set free and able to move on to a higher level of tikun in a new gilgul:

Remarkably, this is why some completely righteous people die early in life after having rectified their Nefesh, only after a few years. They do not know how to draw down their Ruach by sending away their Nefesh using the intention we mentioned earlier, and there is no reason to delay their time in this world. Just the opposite! They leave early in order for their Ruach to enter a second body and become rectified. (Ibid.)

It would seem like a cruel joke if it wasn't for the fact that Hashgochah Pratis works it out that justice is done to all parties, no matter what the scenario. However, as the Torah teaches and the Talmud elucidates, all the different parties in any given situation are brought together for a combined effect that is custom-tailored to suit the personal tikun of every individual involved.

To be sure, as one penetrates the levels of Sod, of which there are many, it becomes eminently apparent that Creation and Hashgochah Pratis are far more sophisticated than everyday reality would allow us to believe. That is, until something happens that is completely out of whack with what we know and accept. For some, like Elisha ben Abuya, it is a point of departure from Torah Judaism. For others, it leads to denial of one idea or another.

And for those who approach Torah with the confidence that two true, but seemingly contradictory Torah ideas must have a solution, a more exciting and sublime level of understanding about life awaits them just around the other side of an intellectual threshold. It is a choice that only the individual can make, if he/she truly wishes to become ba'alei bechirah (masters of free-will).

It is Shabbos HaGadol, the Shabbos before Pesach. Pesach is not just a celebration of freedom from Egyptian slavery, but more importantly, it is a celebration of free-will. For, by leaving the slavery of Egypt we were able to accept upon ourselves the servitude of Heaven. However, whereas the former suppressed our free-will, the latter facilitates it.

"Tzav" is not a mitzvah to simply abandon our free-will to G-d, it is an invitation to use it to see life as G-d sees it, so that we can maximize our lives by ceasing to be a slave to our yetzer haras, by delving deeper into the more profound levels of Torah understanding.

Have a great Shabbos, Chag Kosher v'Samayach, and may we merit to see the Geulah Shlaimah this Pesach.

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