

PERCEPTIONS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

I call Heaven and earth today to witness that I have placed before you life and death, blessing and curse; choose life so that you and your seed shall live. (Devarim 30:19)

Since this year, a leap year, Nitzavim is a stand-alone parsha, it gives us a good opportunity to discuss what should be an obvious concept to all of us, and that which is the basis of our judgment on Rosh Hashanah, the choosing of life. However, the Torah is obviously not trying to convince us to not jump from the roof of a high building, because for anyone, for whom that is an option, God forbid, more help would be required than a verse from the Torah. We're talking about choosing to live on higher levels of consciousness here.

Like what, for example?

Imagine a room filled with four sets of study partners (which we will call SP1, SP2, SP3, and SP4 respectively), each one learning a different area of Torah. SP1 is learning Chumash with Rashi, and they are only interested in knowing the simplest explanation of the verses. There may be a lot more to what the Torah is saying, but for the time being, they aren't interested in knowing it.

SP2, on the other hand, has decided to learn Mishnah. They too are only interested in learning "Pshat" — the simplest explanation. However, the terse wording of the Mishnah, as well as what seem to be certain inconsistencies, has forced them to engage in discussions that take them beyond the simple words of the teaching. As they do, their discussions become more lively than those of SP1, which is wondering what all the excitement is about.

Still, their discussions do not compare to those of SP3, which is learning Talmud. The discussion of their section of learning is not only lively, it seems to have put them into a world of their own. They seem somewhat oblivious to the world around them, as they get up and pace back and forth, contemplative, and yet full of energy and the need to explain themselves. However, SP4 is learning Kabbalah. No one seems to notice them, because they are learning quietly and off to themselves. They are not only enthralled by their learning, they seem entranced by it. Indeed, they seem to be there, and yet, not there. In fact, they seem other-worldly, as the expressions on their faces seem to indicate.

These are, of course, the four levels of Torah referred to as "Pardes," a word which means "orchard," but which also stands for the four levels of Torah learning: Pshat, Remez, Drush, and Sod, literally: Simple, Hint, Exegesis, and Secret, or Mikrah, Mishnah, Talmud, and Kabbalah.

There are four levels [of Torah understanding] and the pneumonic is Pardes: Pshat, Remez, Drush, and Sod. A person needs to toil in all of them to the extent that he can, and seek out a teacher to teach them to him. If a person lacks one of these four levels relative to what he could have achieved then he will have to reincarnate. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 11)

They are the four levels on which a single Torah concept can be understood, and as one probes from level to level, he also moves from a lower level of consciousness to a higher one:

The rabbis taught: Four entered Pardes: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher, and Rebi Akiva. Rebi Akiva told them, "When you arrive at the Stones of Pure Marble, don't say, 'Water, water,' because it says, 'He who speaks falsehood will not be established before My eyes' (Tehillim 101:7)." Ben Azzai gazed at the Divine Presence and died, and with respect to him it says, "Difficult in the eyes of God is the death of His pious ones" (Tehillim 116:15). Ben Zoma gazed and went mad — to him the following verse may be applied: "Have you found honey? Eat as much as is sufficient for you, so that you do not consume too much and have to vomit" (Mishlei 25:16). Acher "cut off his plantings" (i.e., he became a heretic). Rebi Akiva entered in peace and departed in peace. (Chagigah 14b)

As Tosfos explains, their journey had not been a physical one, but rather, an intellectual one, as the Leshem further explains:

It says in the Zohar HaKodesh further regarding the four who entered Pardes, that it had been their intention to rectify the sin of Adam HaRishon, as it was said previously: to meditate and ascend from level to level until the Torah of Atzilus at the root of all Positive and Negative mitzvos. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 454)

For, just as there are four levels on which Torah can be learned, there are four levels of consciousness, and they correspond: Pshat-Asiyah, Remez- Yetzirah, Drush-Beriyah, and Sod-Atzilus. Therefore, as a person moves from a lower level of Torah understanding to a higher one, he is, in fact, entering a higher level of consciousness, and coming closer to God. It is a process that begins in the mind, but one which eventually spreads to the body as well, since the four levels also correspond to the four lower levels of one's soul: Pshat-Nefesh, Remez-Ruach, Drush-Neshama, and Sod- Chiyah.

What this essentially means is that, if one only learns Torah on the Pshatlevel, he will only access the level of Nefesh, which will limit the amount of Godly light that will make it to the level of the body, also limiting the impact on the body. Elevated he will feel, but not beyond the reality of everyday life. He will feel holier, but not enough to take him beyond mundane matters.

To learn on the level of Remez is to access the light of Ruach, and to elevate the body significantly higher. While learning it, the person will remain aware of the world around him, but he will also feel above it, to some degree. He will feel a greater sense of identification with the material he is learning than he did when he only learned Chumash.

Learning Talmud, as Talmud is meant to be learned, will draw the mind of the person to the level of Neshama, which will have a profound impact on the body of the person as well. Though the physical appearance of a person learning Talmud may not change, he will feel quite different. He will become more spiritual, which is why many students who previously had difficulty learning Chumash and Mishnah for long periods of time, can become "hooked" on the learning of Talmud.

It is also one of the reasons why entry into the world of Talmud can be so difficult for many, even after they have learned Aramaic, the language of the Talmud. It is not merely a matter of simply opening a larger and longer book than that of Mishnah. It is a matter of going to a higher level of consciousness to relate to the words inside, which can be read by just about anyone, but which are related to only by those who make the jump to the level of Neshama.

If this is true of the level of Talmud-Neshama, then it is even truer about the level of Sod-Chiyah. The leap from the first level of learning to the second level, or from the second level of learning to the third one, is not nearly as great as the quantum leap from the third level of Drush to that of Sod. To make such a leap is to never turn back again, for on the level of Sod, one is so close to God (as much as possible in this world), that it would be tantamount to spiritual suicide to do so.

Again, this is only true if the person learning Sod is doing far more than simply reading the words and repeating them as they appear. On each level, the body must line up with the light that is coming to it, or the Torah will not have its desired impact. Sod is the level of Neshama, an extremely high level of Ohr Ain Sof, and if the body is not a fitting container for such a holy level of light, it won't even try to enter it.

In essence, this is what Rosh Hashanah evaluates, and this is the basis of the teshuva we are expected to do. On Rosh Hashanah, the question is: did we reach the level of consciousness that we were capable of achieving? And if yes, did we work to maintain it? The evidence to answer these questions is, for the most part, how we spent our time and resources the previous year, and what we hope to achieve in the upcoming year, and the rest of our lives, for that matter.

Therefore, when the Torah admonishes us to choose life, it is really telling us to choose higher levels of consciousness, whenever it is possible to do so. For, to live on a lesser level of consciousness than we are capable of is a level of death, one that can even result in physical death, either as a function of Divine response to our waste of life, or, as a result of our lack of ability to rise to a level of consciousness that affords us a clearer picture of the hand of God, and where history is heading.

This discussion becomes especially pertinent in our present generation, for the Arizal has revealed:

Since these ten colleagues [of Rebi Shimon bar Yochai's time] ... are from the level of the Chassadim of the Upper Zivug [in the Sefiros] ... that is Yisroel with Rachel, all the secrets of Torah were revealed and explained to them without any suffering. This will not occur again until the Generation of Moshiach as mentioned in the Zohar in many places. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, p. 26)

If you want to know what all these terms mean, you'll have to start studying Kabbalah. However, in the meantime, on a simple level, it means that the generation in advance of Moshiach's arrival will have an easier time accessing higher levels of light and consciousness than previous generations. And, as we have already seen, this not something that is optional, but obligatory, and something, history has proven, that can only enhance one's quality of life and his closeness to God.

L'Shannah Tova u'Metuka. Kesiva v'Chasima Tova.

Text

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