

# A SPIRITUAL TIME

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

*If you listen carefully to God, your God, and observe and to do all His commandments which I command you today, then God, your God will raise you above all nations of the earth. (Devarim 28:1)*

Every time we open the Aron HaKodesh to take out a Sefer Torah from which to read, we say the prayer, "B r i c h Sh'mai," which is Aramric for, "Blessed is His Name," found in the Zohar. It is a spiritually propitious time when the Ark is open, and this prayer was designed to take advantage of such a moment.

Towards the end of the prayer, and sometime in parentheses, it says:

... Open my heart to Torah (and give me male children who perform Your will) ...

Unfortunately, when it comes to prayer, the words often flow too fast to really make an impact. I can only speak for myself, but so much of the time, I am just trying to keep up with the minyan, which always seems ahead of me, and having intention for the words is tough enough.

However, once in a while, on a good day, even as I race to keep up with the minyan, and say the words carefully, the words impact me enough to make me think about the deeper meaning of what they say. And, on one such day, I wondered why the above phrase says "who perform Your will," as opposed to the more obvious expression, "who keep Your Torah," something that every Torah parent dreams of, and works so hard to make happen.

And, then it occurred to me that, perhaps, this verse is not only a request, but a lesson as well to all parents who ever dreamed of having their child grow up to be a righteous Torah Jew, made every effort they could think of to make it happen, and then had to suffer as they watched their child not strive for the same Torah goals, or worse, God forbid, reject Torah altogether.

There is only the will of God. There is no way to go against it (Chullin 7b), so much so that we have special terms — kavshei d'Rachmanah, allilus, etc. — to refer to those times when it seems that everything but the will of God is being done. Ultimately, this is what the all-purpose, time-honored phrase, "all is for the good" means: all — even the bad — is for the good — the will of God.

As a Torah parent, it seems so obvious. Keep Torah, raise your family in a Torah community, enroll them in Torah schools, perform Torah activities, and then watch them grow up and become righteous Torah Jews. If only it was so straight-forward, so simple. That's like planning to get home on time for supper within 20 minutes by using the main highway, without taking into account that it is

rush hour, when 3,000,000 other people are doing the same thing.

First of all, there is the soul of the child itself. Unlike the physical body of the child, it is not a genetic replication of the parents, and may be driven in directions that the parents never considered.

Secondly, there are so many outside influences that cannot always be blocked, that can distract the child along his or her way. And then, there are life's experiences that can rarely be anticipated, than can impact the child in either a positive or negative way.

There are the financial issues as well, that may add terrible pressure to the family dynamics, and the parents' own personal hang-ups can make for problems in shalom bayis — peace in the house — which always pull the children down. Even grandparents can add elements to the family that can be a bad influence on the children, things that can often only be appreciated after the fact, after it is too late to do anything about them.

In other words, it is clear: parents have such little control over the destinies of their children, which is why they tend to overcompensate, trying too hard to mold their children in their own image, or at least in the image that the parents have for their children. It is the easiest thing to do, sometimes out of personal need, sometimes out of fear, to try and force a child to walk the path that his or her parent has decided for him or her.

To this, Shlomo HaMelech responded by saying:

*Teach a child according to his way; even when he grows old, he will not turn away from it. (Mishlei 22:6)*

"His way," which is not necessarily your way, but which is definitely the will of God. Of course, as parents, we have to do our best to make it as easy and as "natural" as possible for every Jewish child to choose the path of Torah, according to his or her own way. But, guarantee it? Not likely. Chizkiah was one of the most righteous kings in all of Jewish history, almost being Moshiach himself (Sanhedrin 94a). Yet, it was his son, Menashe, who turned the country to idol worship for 33 years, after his father spent his entire kingship turning the people away from it.

How many stories are there like this? When the parents are careless in the way they raise their children, barely doting over their young ones to make sure that they grow up straight and true, we have no questions. However, ironically, some of the most moral and important people have emerged from such families, even though the parents barely cared that they did.

On the other hand, there have been so many families who wanted nothing but to raise their children in the path of Torah, and spent time, energy, and even money, doing so. The amount of prayers they offered to God for His help and guarantee that they would succeed, not to mention all the segulos they performed to help the matter, is quite praiseworthy. And yet, at the end of the day, their children still didn't turn out to be classical Torah observant Jews, breaking their parents' hearts.

And, what about when children pre-decease their parents, God forbid, sometimes even just before birth, or just after it? The Talmud says that the great Rebi Yochanan had to bury 10 of his children during his lifetime. How does a parent survive that, or what parents had to survive during the Holocaust? We're told, as a people, to strive for perfection, both in our own lives and those of our offspring, but in reality, it almost seems like a cruel joke sometimes, given all the obstacles Heaven puts into our path along the way.

That is why we have statements such as:

*All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven. (Brochos 34b)*

Many are the thoughts of man, but the will of God is what prevails. (Mishlei 19:21)

According to the effort is the reward. (Pirkei Avos 5:26)

They tell us two things. They tell us that there is the world of our thoughts, plans, and efforts. And, they tell us that there is another world that is in synch with ours, but that it is not one that necessarily mirrors our own. For, whereas we, as human beings, must follow the Torah to the best of our ability and life situations, God, being the Master of the Universe and not bound by time or any limitation, takes into account a much bigger picture, one which may not always define success as we do.

For God, there is no such thing as error. Everything that exists and will ever happen is for the sake of achieving His ultimate goal for Creation. We may deviate from our intended path, seemingly, but Creation NEVER deviates from the will of God. It is all for the sake of tikun olam — world rectification, even the most destructive aspects of history, something we will only be able to see and understand, for the most part, much later in the future, in the World-to-Come.

Hence, failure, in Torah terms, is not defined by what we produce, because no matter what we produce, and no matter what the reason is why we produce it, it is the will of God that it came into existence. Otherwise, it would not have, no matter how hard we tried to create it and make it exist. We cannot go against the will of God for good or bad.

Rather, failure is determined by our lack of effort to bring about good results, as defined by the Torah. A parent who carelessly raises a child that eventually grows up to become a righteous individual is a far greater failure than one who did everything he could to raise a righteous child, but failed to do so for reasons beyond his or her control. Indeed, in the latter case, the parent may have failed to raise the child of his dreams, but he succeeded as a servant of God, which is all that counts, in the end.

In other words, though we feel successful when we raise perfect children, or produce anything else of spiritual perfection, including ourselves, in truth, what must concern us most is the fulfillment of the will of God, whatever that may be. Sometimes, happily, they are one and the same thing.

However, often, they are not, and when that happens, we have to remind ourselves that we are here in this world to advance the purpose of Creation, no matter how unpopular our results may be in our own eyes, or in the eyes of our community that seems to expect external perfection even more than internal perfection.

That is a true eved Hashem — servant of God, the person whose entire mandate is to do the will of God, no matter what form it takes, and no matter how much it produces results that go against his own vision of what should be. Likewise, a true eved Hashem knows that, even after making his best effort to produce "favorable" results, he lived to see just the opposite — Avraham witnessed the life of Yishmael, Yitzchak lived to see the evil of Eisav, and Ya'akov had 12 sons to worry about — that too is for the good, that is, that too was the will of God.

Thus, there are Jews who scrupulously perform the mitzvos of God, and yet barely have enough money to put bread on the table, while others who barely perform the mitzvos of God, have more money than they can personally use. And, while righteous people become sick, and even die young, leaving young families and many orphans, less-than-righteous people live healthy lives, and are there for their families well into their old age.

Furthermore, there are those who are committed to the will of God, who apply their lives to the fulfillment of the purpose of Creation, and yet they suffer obstacle after obstacle to make a difference. This is while others, less committed to the ultimate goals of the Jewish people, have great success with their plans, being duly rewarded in every respect in this world.

So be it. So be it, because that is the way it often turns out. After making your best effort to get it right, things did not go the way you planned, or thought they ought to. It is b'shert. It was meant to be. It is the will of God. It can be nothing else, and learning to live with that reality, as opposed to trying to compensate for it, is what keeps a person close to God, the Jewish people on track with the national goals of the people, and the Final Redemption on schedule.

That is why the parshah tells us to listen carefully to God. For, what we hear at first, on a superficial level, may not always be what God is saying, something that becomes a lot clearer when you learn to listen to God on a deeper, big picture level.

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