

YAAKOV'S BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Ya'akov called for his sons and said, "Gather yourselves and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days. Assemble yourselves together and listen, O sons of Ya'akov. Listen to Israel your father." (Bereishis 49:1-2)

And, gather and listen they did. But, speak about the End-of-Days, he did not. Rather, in the end, Ya'akov Avinu skipped over that thorny issue, and went right to the blessings themselves. If you feel cheated of such interesting, and perhaps, life-saving information, imagine how Ya'akov's sons felt, especially since it was the result of God's denying Ya'akov the prophecy to tell, implying a lack of worthiness of Yosef's brothers.

To clarify the matter, and to show how this week's parsha is the basis for the fast day of Asara b'Teves this week, we must consider the following dialogue:

"Perhaps, God forbid, there is something unfit from my bed (i.e., a spiritually unworthy child), just as Yishmael was born to Avraham, and Eisav to my father Yitzchak?" His sons answered, "Shema Yisroel, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad—Just as in your heart only [God is] One, so too in our hearts, there is only One." At that moment Ya'akov said, "Boruch Shem kevod Malchuso l'olam vaed— Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom forever!" (Pesachim 56a)

An unusual dialogue, true, but at least it cleared the brothers of any wrongdoing or spiritual lacking. Or did it?

Ya'akov wanted to establish the "Mystery of Unity"[1] below, and composed the 24 letters of, "Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom forever". He didn't give it 25 letters [like the "Shema"], since the Mishkan— the Tabernacle—had yet to be built. Once the Mishkan was built the first word was completed ... With regard to this it says, "God spoke to him from the Appointed Tent, saying ..." (Vayikra 1:1),[2] which has 25 letters. (Zohar 2:139b)

What did Ya'akov really answer his sons, who had professed their belief in the unity of God? He seems to have been saying, "The unity of which you speak is not complete in your minds, as you proclaim, for had it been complete, the prophecy would not have left me." Indeed, we see later on that Yosef has to remind them, once again, of their inconsistent manner of dealing with Divine Providence:

They ordered [someone] to say to Yosef, "Your father commanded us before his death to say to Yosef,

'Please forgive the crime of your brothers and their guilt, though they have done evil to you.' Please forgive the crime of the servants of your father's God." Yosef wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also wept, and fell before him and said, "We are here to be your slaves." Yosef said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in place of God?" (Bereishis 50:16-19)

Well, of course not. If so, then why did Yosef's brothers act as if he could take revenge on them, even if God didn't agree? For, if God did not agree, could Yosef, in fact, have his revenge? Of course not. And, if God wanted the brothers punished for what they had done, could Yosef interfere? Of course not. Hence, Yosef told them, there is no need for any of this, is there?

The meaning of this is that He alone, may His Name be blessed, has done everything, does everything, and will do all that will be done, for all created things. This is the yichud^[3] of BSKML"V:^[4] everything is from His kingdom and the result of His guidance. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 89)

This is what Ya'akov Avinu had answered his sons. It's not the Shema Yisroel part that I am worried about. I know that you believe in God and that He is one; I know that you take seriously that He made Creation and maintains it every moment of history. What concerns me, however, is how well you have integrated that belief into your everyday lives, how much it is the basis of all that you think, say, and do. You didn't do so well in Shechem— twice—and now that the prophecy has left me, I have to wonder how you are with it today.

It is the Mystery of Faith, and what is it? "God is one, and His Name is one." God is one: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" is one yichud, and BSKML"V is the other yichud, so that His Name can be one. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 89)

For, this is the sod of prophecy. For prophecy to work, the Upper Realm must be connected to the Lower Realm in the minds of men. The water, that is, the prophecy, is in the reservoir, that is, in the world above, but is the pipeline attached to it so that it can flow to the people in the world below? If not, then the prophecy will remain above, as it has, and the people below will continue to thirst for it.

This is why, after 1,000 years of prophecy (2448-3448/1313-313 BCE), it ended, 40 years after the Purim miracle. Until that time, some connection between the two worlds had remained, at least in the minds of the leaders of the generations, most notably, Mordechai in the story of Purim:

"Do not imagine that you will be able to escape in the king's palace any more than the rest of the Jews. For if you continue to remain silent at a time like this, relief and salvation will come to the Jews from another place, while you and your father's house will perish. And, who knows whether it was for such a time as this that you attained the royal position!" (Esther 4:13)

However, exile in Babylonia had taken its toll. The people no longer related to Divine Providence on the level they had previously, evident by the fact that many people did not appreciate what Mordechai had done to save the Jewish people, and that most Jews never returned back to Eretz Yisroel after the redemption occurred. Amalek, in this case, Haman, had succeeded, somewhat, in

dividing the Name of God in the minds of many Jews.

The truth is, that is really what the destruction of the Temple in 3338/423 BCE represented, the "snapping" of the connection between Heaven and Earth, between the Temple above and the Temple below. Already, in advance of the exile to Bavel, more and more of the Jewish people begun to live lives that contradicted their belief in God, that He sees everything, pays attention to everything, and cares about all of it.

In other words, though the people at the end of the First Temple Period may have believed that God overtly runs the world, what we call "Hashgocha Pratis," they lived as if He only runs it covertly, that is, through nature alone, except for the occasional miracle here and there. This level of Divine Providence is called, "Hashgocha Klallis," or "General Divine Providence," and it "runs" the world outside of Eretz Yisroel.

Hence, for intellectually exiling themselves from the Providence of Eretz Yisroel to that of the Diaspora, measure-for-measure, they were eventually exiled, physically, from Eretz Yisroel to Bavel. It is a word that means "confound," and it was a remembrance of the tower once built by mankind to challenge the Providence of God in everyday life. Every physical exile begins with a spiritual one.

After that, it was only a matter of time until the unthinkable occurred: the destruction of the Temple, on Tisha B'Av, 3338/423 BCE. The event was so profound and final that many Jews thought it represented the permanent severance of the relationship between Heaven and Earth, between God and the Jewish people, forever. The prophet Yeshayahu had to assure them that this had not been the case, just that, like an errant spouse, they had been pushed out for a time.

And, why on Tisha B'Av specifically? Because, that is day that the Spies of Moshe Rabbeinu's time came back from their mission, and convinced the people not to go up the land (Ta'anis 29a). Acting as if God couldn't even hear what they were saying, they told the people:

They brought an evil report of the land which they had spied to the Children of Israel, saying, "The land which we spied is a land that consumes its inhabitants and all the people that we saw there were of great stature. We saw giants, sons of Anak, who come from giants. If in our eyes we were like grasshoppers, then certainly we were the same in their eyes!" (Bamidbar 13:32-33)

And, the root of the Spies' inability to unify the upper and lower realms? The tribes themselves, as the Arizal explains (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 36). This is why, the Arizal revealed, Yosef called his brothers, "Spies!" as they stood before him in search of food during the famine (Bereishis 42:8). He was warning them: If you don't learn to unify the upper and lower realms now, then your descendants will be unable to do so later, causing exile to themselves and the rest of the nation.

What about today? It is pretty much the same thing. Jews talk about God's control over Creation, and His involvement in history. However, their lives do not necessarily reflect this belief, as they fail to trust God as much as their belief dictates they ought to. Furthermore, many speak badly about

Eretz Yisroel and the idea of making aliyah, perpetuating the sin of the Spies, without any remorse. They simply ignore the Hashgocha Pratis behind all that is happening, and has been happening until today.

The fast days of Asara b'Teves is a good day to contemplate just how damaging such a perspective can be.

But, it won't exist for much longer. For, the events about which Ya'akov Avinu wanted to tell his sons at the beginning of our history are starting to tell us about themselves now, at the end of days. The upper realm of Yud- Heh is beginning to join up with the lower realm of Vav-Heh, ending the damage of thousands of years of exposure to Amalekian thinking (Rashi, Shemos 17:16).

The involvement of God in the affairs of man is becoming increasingly more prevalent, and difficult to deny.

[1] A Kabbalistic concept referring to the supernatural revelation of God to mankind, which will occur during the days of Moshiach. Then, just as God is revealed in the world above, His reality will be clear to man below as well, unifying both the upper and lower realms.

[2] That is, the last part of the first verse of Vayikra, in reference to the Mishkan, has 25 letters. According to the Zohar, once the Mishkan was completed the spiritual root of the light to which the second verse of the Shema alludes was able to emanate its light and draw down the Divine unity that Ya'akov intended to cause. This is why the Mishkan was completed on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev. Furthermore, says the Zohar, this is why thirteen materials were used for the Mishkan, and twelve stones were put into the Ephod—to make a total of 25, alluding to the sublime unity that was to be achieved.

[3] Unification.

[4] The roshei teivos of Boruch Shem kevod Malchuso l'olam va-ed, formed by combining the first letter of each word.

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