

MIND OVER MATTER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

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

Pesach is exactly one week away, b"H. We are entering Zman Chairusainu—the Time of Our Freedom—except that, how many people really feel any freer before, during, or after Pesach?

Part of the problem is that, after being in the gentile world for so long, we have adapted to and adopted so many of their ideas and habits along the way. We have come to define our ideas with their definitions, and that's not going to free anyone very fast.

The Talmud records the following dialogue between God and Avraham Avinu:

Avraham asked God: "If the Children of Israel will sin, will they be destroyed like the Generation of the Flood or scattered like the Generation of the Dispersion?"

God said, "No."

Avraham asked: "Ba-Meh Eda—How can I know" (Bereishis 15:8)?"

God answered: "Take a three-year-old female calf, a three-year-old female goat . . . (Bereishis 15:9)."

Avraham asked: "But what will happen when there is no Bais HaMikdosh?" God answered him: "When they read the sections of the sacrifices, I will consider it as if they offered them, and I will pardon all their sins." (Megillah 31b)

This is one of those times that the Talmud reads deeper into a dialogue in the Torah than we might have, providing us with the story behind the story. In the Bris Ben HaBesarim—the Pact Between the Halves—God promised Avraham that the Land of Canaan would be inherited by his descendants. However, Avraham wanted an assurance, so he asked God, "How can I know?" after which God commanded him regarding the animals he was to bring for the sake of the upcoming prophecy regarding the future of the Jewish people.

The Talmud understands the dialogue to be about after they have already inherited the land, with Avraham asking how they will be able to keep their inheritance if they become spiritually unworthy of it. Hence, God answered that He has already built into history the possibility to atone for their sins, and remain worthy of Eretz Yisroel, by bringing sacrifices.

However, Avraham somehow knew that the Temple would eventually be destroyed, and with it, the

possibility of bring sacrifices to atone for the sins of the people. How, therefore, Avraham worried, would the people remain worthy then, to which God answered, "When they read the sections of the sacrifices, I will consider it as if they offered them, and I will pardon all their sins."

From this dialogue, and the Torah itself, it seems that bringing animal sacrifices is the ideal, and that merely mentioning them is the less-than-ideal way, something we only do when we lose the ability to actually bring live sacrifices. However, the truth is that the opposite is true, and in that truth lies the true path to true freedom.

There are five levels of soul, all within a single soul, called, from the bottom up: Nefesh, Ruach, Neshamah, Chiyah, and Yechidah. The Nefesh is in the blood of a person, and acts as interface between the spiritual and the physical, allowing the body to live. The Nitzotzei Kedushah—Holy Sparks—that keep the body alive flow to it through the Nefesh.

At the other end is the level called Yechidah, which is on the receiving end from the Ohr Ain Sof, God's Infinite Light from which the Nitzotzei Kedushah that will eventually feed the body originate. The other three levels in-between (from top to bottom), Chiyah, Neshamah, and Ruach, are spiritual links in the chain that receive the light, filter it, and then hand it over to the next level down, until it stops on the level of Nefesh.

According to Kabbalah, these five levels of soul correspond to five phases of a human behavior (from top to bottom): Ratzon, Hirhur, Machshavah, Dibur, and Ma'aseh, which translate as: Will, Thought, Mind, Speech, and Action. Everything we do begins with a will (Ratzon)—which we may not even be conscious of—to accomplish something, which causes us to consider (Hirhur) ways to carry out that will.

At some point, all of this will move more into our conscious mind, as we start to come up with plans (Machshavah) to actualize our will. As we do, we will start (Dibur) talking about possible ways to do what we plan, which will eventually result in action (Ma'aseh).

All of this is a fascinating discussion unto itself. However, the main point here is that, contrary to popular belief, action, in spite of all its impact on everyday life, is at the bottom of the totem pole of importance. And, even though we have expressions as, "Say little and do much," and, "Actions speak louder than words," the truth is that speech is spiritually more important than action.

Even more amazing is that Machshavah— thought—is even higher up, spiritually-speaking, than both action and speech. Indeed, the Nefesh HaChaim makes the most remarkable assertion:

When a person pursues impure thoughts of his heart (we should be protected from such things), it is comparable to bringing a woman of hire, the symbol of Divine jealousy, into the awesome Holy of Holies in the Heavenly Temple; he strengthens the forces of impurity and the Sitra Achra, far more than Titus did when he actually committed a profane act with such a woman in the Holy of Holies in the Temple below. Every sin a Jew considers in his heart is a "strange fire," whether it is a feeling of

anger or an evil longing. It is to this that the verse literally refers, "Our holy house and our glory which ... was burned in fire . . ." (Yeshayahu 64:10). The Merciful One should save us. (Nefesh HaChaim 1:4)

When he says "pursues impure thoughts of his heart," the Nefesh HaChaim means that the person not only has an impure thought, but that he chooses to dwell upon it. And, since, the body of Jew corresponds to the Temple, and the mind, specifically to the Holy of Holies, it is compared to bringing a woman of hire into the Kodesh Kodashim—the Holy of Holies.

In fact, even worse, since action only takes place in the lowest of all spiritual realms, and thought exists on two levels of up, it is far more damaging. Indeed, the physical damage that we witness, such as the destruction of the Temple in our world, is just the end result of the destruction our thoughts have caused in the upper realms. Hence, the Nefesh HaChaim explains with respect to the destruction of the First Temple:

Nebuchatnetzar and Titus could not affect the worlds above, since they themselves were not rooted in those worlds. It was because of our sins, by which we "weakened" the strength of God, and through which we defiled the Temple of God above, that Nebuchadnetzar and Titus were able to destroy the Temples below, which corresponded to the Temple above. This is the meaning of what the rabbis wrote, "You ground already ground flour" (Eichah Rabbosi 1:43). Our sins destroyed the Heavenly Abode, the Holy Upper Worlds; they only destroyed the Earthly Abode. (Nefesh HaChaim 1:4)

This may be counter-intuitive, because action seems so much powerful than thought. True, every act may begin with a thought, but so many times thoughts don't end in action, and when they don't what damage has really occurred? On the contrary, unless someone can read your mind, no one is ever the wiser when you are thinking something illicit.

Or so people mistakenly think. That's what the system is trying to tell you, that thoughts count for much more than action, the latter just being the end result of the former. This is why the Talmud can state that, if a person means to do a mitzvah but is prevented from doing so for reasons beyond his control, the mitzvah still counts in Heaven (Brochos 6a). Or why, it can state elsewhere with respect to sacrifices, "Whether you bring a little or lot, all that matters is that your heart is directed towards Heaven" (Menachos 110a).

Indeed, Dovid HaMelech wrote:

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. (Tehillim 51:19)

Really? Really.

Do you think that we will be performing actions forever? Won't action at some point cease to be, and instead, reality will become one only of consciousness, very much like it was for Adam HaRishon before his sin physicalized the world? Before the sin, when he worked the Garden, it was Pardes, the intellectual garden of Pshat, Remez, Drush, and Sod, the four levels on which Torah can be learned.

It has only been post-sin that gardening has been with a hoe and lawnmower.

To know this concept is to be steps ahead of the world, but to believe in it, is to have the key to freedom. For, as we mentioned in last week's parshah, and many times in the past, freedom comes down to the building of the Aleph (this is the subject of my new book, "The Last Exile: What It Is and How To Leave It Forever). The Aleph represents the soul, and therefore, the intellectual component of man, transforming him from a flesh-and-blood zombie into someone created in the image of God with the ability to act Godly. In a sense, the Aleph represents pure will, which is so incredibly spiritual that we're rarely aware of it these days until it filters down into some kind of definitive action.

The freedom that we are used to is the kind that is given to us on a spiritual platter because we failed to think it for ourselves. This is also why it did not last, because if we don't think redemption on our own, build towards it in our upper realms of consciousness, then it won't happen automatically for us on the level of action. The best that can happen is that God will impose it on the world, but the moment He pulls back, we'll go right back to being intellectual, and therefore physical, slaves, as we did after leaving Egypt, and throughout the rest of history as well.

Make no mistake about it: The idea behind sacrifices is eternal, and the tikun they affect is very real. Commanding them was not about weaning the Jewish people off pagan rites, as the Ramban, and certainly Kabbalah, explains.

However, the impact they have on Creation is more effectively achieved on the level of Machshavah, for obvious reasons. Nevertheless, since we became so physical after the sin of eating from the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Rah, and later, after the sin of the golden calf, we have lacked sufficient control over our minds and thoughts to be able to have the same affect as physical sacrifices, and have required them to be able to adjust our Machshavah, a little like reverse-engineering.

The redemption from Egypt was meant to right all of that, but didn't. In the end, redemption was a gift from God, and not built first in the minds of the Jews of that time, at least not enough. The Haggadah is also meant to help us think more like God, as is the rest of Torah, especially the Talmudic process.

This is the real Korban Pesach—Pesach Offering meant to be offered each year, and which we recite these days when we can't actually physically offer it. In fact, it is alluded to in the word Pesach itself, which can be translated as, Peh Sach—the mouth that spoke (Maharal). There can be no greater sacrifice to God, from God's perspective, than when a person takes control of his thoughts and gives his mind over to contemplating higher, more spiritual realities.

Which brings us to this week's parshah as well, which emphasizes the idea of commandment. As Rashi points out, God told Moshe to command Aharon and his sons in the laws of the Olah-Offering, because it was one from which they did not eat, and therefore, they had to be encouraged regarding its laws.

However, did God suspect, for even a moment, that personal gain drove Aharon HaKohen, one of the most altruistic men of all history, in his service of God, even a little bit? Of course not, at least not on any level for which he could be held responsible, but, perhaps, on a level for which he could not be held responsible, because it is simply a function of being human.

"Strike that from the record!" the judge yelled out. "The jury will not take into account that statement!"

Right, after they already heard it, and it registered in their minds?

Somehow, when deliberating the innocence or guilt of an individual or individuals, they're going to be able to tell whether or not the inadmissible statement is not coloring the view of the case on some level?

Of course not, and that is why the person who made the statement in court did so, knowing only too well that the judge would probably reject, strike it from the record, and advise the jurors accordingly.

The Talmud states that God has said:

I created the yetzer hara, and I created the Torah as its spice. (Kiddushin 30b)

The yetzer hara is an inescapable reality on this side of history, as it was created to be. The Talmud even warns that the greater the person is, the greater his yetzer hara will be as well, just to maintain his free-will, which is why many great people have fallen even late in life. Aharon HaKohen had no choice: His yetzer hara was bound to be upset by the lack of personal benefit from the Korban Olah.

He would, of course, fight against it, and prevail. But, how how much? 100 percent? 90 percent? Even less? This was the service of God in the holiest place in the world, and there was no room for error, at least when it could be avoided, and commanding him in the mitzvah added fortitude to allow him to do the service as perfectly as he would have wanted to, and God would have expected. The commandment freed him from the devices of the yetzer hara, and instead spiced it, so-to-speak.

We have heard that life is a function of mind over matter. We even believe it on some level. However, when push comes to shove, we hold action in higher esteem, which is why after 5,772 years of history, and over 3300 years of Jewish history, we're still waiting for redemption. What matters is the mind.

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