ACCESSING THE LIGHT - OHR AIN SOF

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The Talmud relates that when God told Shmuel the prophet to anoint Dovid as the new king of the Jewish people, he became concerned. He was worried that Shaul HaMelech would see him and try to kill him, since he had already told him that his right to rule had been revoked by God (Pesachim 8b).

God's answer was rather unusual. One might have expected God to answer Shmuel along the following lines: "Not to worry. I run the world, so I'll make sure than Shaul either doesn't see you or does not try to attack you." Indeed, it is strange that Shmuel, being the prophet that he was, should have had to even express such a concern in the first place.

Instead, however, God told Shmuel to take an animal with him, to pretend that he only was bringing up a sacrifice to God. This would allay a somewhat paranoid and suspicious Shaul HaMelech, and allow Shmuel to continue on with his real mission unhampered, which is exactly how the events transpired.

It is a reminder, once again, of God's dual citizenship, so-to-speak. On one hand, God reveals Himself to man, even talks to and performs miracles for him. On the other hand, whenever possible, God prefers to abide by the rules of Creation and to work with them, rather than around them.

This week's parshah is also a reminder of this dual reality. On one hand, the kohanim are chosen for the service of God that will include many miracles from day-to-day. One might think that, in their position, they would be unaffected by some of the more mundane aspects of physical reality, such as disqualifying bodily blemishes.

But they are affected, and to such an extent that they can be denied the opportunity to be a part of the Temple service, even though they were merely born with their defects. For reasons beyond their control, they can be denied the opportunity to function in the capacity in which they were born.

Welcome to Olam HaZeh—This World. This is a world in which miracle and nature work together as partners in the making of history, and to such an extent that oftentimes even the miraculous, such as birth, for example, can seem "natural," even though it is anything but.

Indeed, should a person investigate the so-called natural he will find that at its core is always something supernatural. If he thinks about it long enough, he will even realize that "natural" is just a term we use for the supernatural when it happens often and consistently enough.

However, in day-to-day life, we tend to see things differently. The "natural world" seems to be solid and fixed, whereas the supernatural world seems to be fleeting and dream-like. And, since this is what we believe, this is what we perceive, and since this is what we perceive, this is the way the world works with us as well.

Walk through a wall? Not unless it is made of paper, or at least something softer than our heads and bodies. However, if it is not, then the wall will be more successful at keeping us out than we will be at walking through it.

True, but the Theory of Probability says that if we keep trying, eventually we will be able to walk through the wall, even if it is made from concrete. Science itself has come to acknowledge that the physical reality is not as solid as it appears to be, and that if a person keeps trying, eventually he will be able to walk through that wall as if it is not even there. Huh?

However, Kabbalah goes even further than the discussion of particles and waves. Even the smallest physical elements of Creation are still physical, and therefore, are not the core of existence. Something spiritual is at the root of all Creation, and it can only be spoken about in supernatural terms: Ohr Ain Sof.

Literally, Ohr Ain Sof means Light Without End, because, being more spiritual than we can fathom, we can only talk about it in terms of what it is not, not in terms of what it is. Yet, anything that exists was made with its light, and if it still exists, is sustained by its light from moment to moment. If Ohr Ain Sof is withdrawn from anything that thing ceases to exist completely and immediately. Poof!

It kind of reminds me, a bit, of the earth on which we live and which we take for granted. Little seems as solid and permanent as good old terra firma, but that is only an illusion. For, the core of the earth is molten metal, thousands of degrees hot, quite un-solid, and constantly in motion. All it takes is a single earthquake to remind us of just how unstable the earth's surface really is.

Kabbalah explains that even the most physical and seemingly stable elements in Creation have at their core Ohr Ain Sof, a totally spiritual and supernatural element. This is what makes possible the unimaginable, such as the splitting of a massive sea to allow the fleeing Jewish nation to miraculously escape from a pursuing and deadly Egyptian army.

All the Ohr Ain Sof has to do is change its mind, so-to-speak, about the form of that which it inhabits, something that is purely a function of the will of God, and the physical world shifts, even significantly, at a moment's notice, changing miraculously before our very eyes. The supernatural reality is very much built into the natural world.

The timing of this discussion is good, because it is is an important part of the message of Lag B'Omer, which will occur this Motzei Shabbos, b"H. After 32 days of building our hearts, so-to-speak (the gematria of leiv, or heart, is 32), we celebrate Lag B'Omer (that is, the 33rd day of the Omer), before concluding the Omer Count with 17 more days, the gematria of the word tov, which means

good, in time for Shavuos and the giving of Torah.

As mentioned earlier, the goal of the Omer Count is to develop a leiv tov, a good heart, the most desirable trait to achieve, as per Pirkei Avos:

He [Rebi Yochanan] said to them [his students], "Go out and discern which is the best way to which a person should cling." Rebi Eliezer said: "A good eye (i.e., be tolerant of others)." Rebi Yehoshua said: "A good friend (i.e., he should be one and have one)." Rebi Yosi said: "A good neighbor [from whom he can learn good traits]." Rebi Shimon said: "One who considers consequences [of his actions]." Rebi Elazar said: "A good heart [that will lead him to all of the above]." He said to them, "I prefer the words of Elazar ben Arach over your words, for included in his words are your words." (Pirkei Avos 2:13)

How does one go about doing this? Lag B'Omer, the day on which Rebi Shimon Bar Yochai revealed the Zohar to his students, says by getting in touch with the core of your heart, which is also the light of Ohr Ain Sof. By tapping into the spiritual component of our hearts, we can rise above personal biases and mundane desires.

Sound a little abstract? Well, the first time the word tov is used in the Torah, it is respect to the first light that God made, which the Talmud and Kabbalah teach was a spiritual light, not a physical one:

With the light that The Holy One, Blessed is He, created on the first day, Adam looked and was able to see from one end of the world until the other. (Chagigah 12a)

As the Talmud points out, and as Rashi quotes, this light was hidden from man on the first day of Creation. However, as the Leshem explains, it was only hidden from people who might abuse its holy and incredible power, remaining accessible only to those worthy of using it, as the Leshem explains:

He made a separation in the illumination of the light, so that it should not flow or give off light except for the righteous, whose actions draw it down and make it shine. However, the actions of the evil block it, leaving them in darkness, and this itself was the hiding of the light. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 133)

Now, what distinguishes a righteous person from an evil person, in essence, is his heart. Physically their hearts may look the same, but spiritually, one is filled with Divine light while the other is devoid of it. For, it is the heart of a righteous person that is capable of accessing this hidden light of Creation, allowing him to rise above the natural and mundane reality of everyday life.

Not so the heart of an evil person. Without access to such light, the heart of such a person remains locked into the natural and mundane reality of everyday life. For such a person, the world is a dark and unruly place, to be taken advantage of and abused by those crafty enough to do so and not get caught.

Accessing this light is something that God, obviously, can arrange for us. However, it is something that God prefers we at least try and do on our own. Therefore, He makes the world seem quite

natural and physically rigorous, even to the point of seeming unfair. Even when He does save the day, He prefers to avoid using obvious miracles.

This way, we can be the ones to discover, and to reveal, just how supernatural, physically malleable, and ultimately fair the world really is. As a result of this, we can be the ones to reveal how God has saved the day, even when the miracles are not as obvious as one might have hoped or expected them to be.

Text

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