

WHO WE REALLY ARE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God, atone for your people Israel who You redeemed. (Devarim 21:8)

Ani l'dodi v'dodi lee. "I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me" (Shir HaShirim 6:3), are four of the most beautiful words ever composed by a human. On the surface of it, they describe an intense love between a man and woman, but on a deeper level, it is a description of the deep love that God has for His people, and His people have for Him.

The rabbis explain that when the first letters of each of the Hebrew words mentioned above—Aleph-Lamed--Vav-Lamed—are brought together, they spell 'Elul,' the Jewish month we just began this week. As it is well known, being the month right before Rosh Hashanah, it is the time of year when God comes closer to us, and that we are supposed to come closer to Him. But what's really going on?

What happens in life when a person falls in love with someone, but the feelings aren't mutual? Usually, the person in love tries to convince the person he loves to love him or her back. He or she tries to prove why a relationship with him or her is a mutually beneficial enterprise, and, right or wrong, often without success.

It is a different story if two people love each other, but they presently don't feel that love. They may currently be angry at each other, the result of which is that their feelings of anger overshadow their feelings of love.

To feel that love again may be as simple as saying, "I'm sorry." In fact, it is nothing short of wondrous how quickly anger can dissolve into love with the right words or gesture. Feelings of love are like a river that wants nothing more than to be able to keep flowing. And, if it wasn't for obstructions, they'd be able to do exactly that.

Hence, to get a dammed up river to flow again, it is not a question of finding water and bringing it to the river bed. That would be a difficult and probably expensive project. Rather, it is only a question of removing that which blocks the flow of the river, usually a much easier and less costly endeavor.

This is what the words, "I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me" mean. They say that just as we love God, God already loves us, and just as God loves us, we already love Him. A mutual love already exists, and we'd know this too if we could only remove the obstacles that interfere with that flow of love, the goal of this month, of Elul Zman.

This is what the Rambam teaches when answering the question: How does one come to love God?

When one contemplates His actions and His wondrous and great creations and sees in them His wisdom, that it has no limit and no end, immediately he will love and praise Him, and desire tremendously to know His great Name. (Yad Chazakah, Yesodei HaTorah, 2:2)

"Immediately," says the Rambam, "he will love . . ." as if to say, once the obstacles are removed from one's heart, one naturally feels love of God, like a river that naturally flows downstream once the dam has been removed. And, to do that, says the Rambam, one need only create a sense of awe and appreciation for God Himself, which naturally results from appreciating life and Creation for what it is.

Another good analogy is clothing. When some people get dressed in the morning, it is to enhance their personal presentation. They like themselves, and enjoy being who they are, and have just learned how to use clothing to feel that even more.

Other people, on the other hand, are always trying to be someone else. Usually, they are not content with themselves and spend their time and money trying to mold themselves into the type of person they are not, but idolize. After many years of approaching life this way, they lose sight of who they really are and have a difficult time being only themselves, even when being so is beneficial to them as well.

To return to who they really are, they have to do some soul searching, meaning the essence of who they are. We can dress up our bodies and make them look completely different, but our souls are outside of our domain of influence. We may be able to blemish them through sins, but we cannot change their nature at all. On the soul level, we are who we are, and that's the bottom line.

For many people who become ba'alei teshuvah, that is, who return to Judaism after being away from it, or never having lived according to Torah, the process is also one of self-discovery. In the secular world, there is a lot of material competition, that often 'convinces' people to live lifestyles that do not really fit their souls. It may bother them on some level, but lacking any known viable alternative, they tow the party line.

However, when they discover Torah and focus more on being good people than 'accepted' people, which allows them to shed layers of lifestyle in pursuit of their inner being, they start to feel more themselves. Self-acceptance all of a sudden becomes easier, and often a lot less expensive.

Until, that is, they move into the religious world which has its own ideals and forms of competition, and they are forced, once again, and often to their chagrin, 'to be' someone, or something, that they just aren't yet, or ever will be. But acceptance into any society comes with a price, and as a result, all of us end up being a little different on the outside than we are, in essence, on the inside.

But, though you can fool yourself some of the time, other people a lot of the time, you can't fool God any of the time. He knows who we really are, and who we're meant to be. He's not interested in

having a relationship with any frauds, just with the real people, the real 'dodi.'

Thus, for us to approach God during this time means for us to first become who we really are. God says to us, "Become who you are in essence, and then we can meet and share our love with one another." Relationship with a false personality is a false relationship, and if people have difficulty maintaining such a relationship, then certainly having one with God is impossible.

The goal of this time can be summed by a single verse:

I am my prayer, to You, God, at a fitting time . . . (Tehillim 69:14)

Traditionally, the words are translated, "As for me, let my prayer come to You, God, at a fitting time," but they can literally be read as I have written. For this is the goal of any person, to become his prayer, that is, for his very presence to speak on his behalf to God, something that can only happen when, as the Talmud says, one's inside is as one's outside. That's the beauty of it all. To become so sincere about oneself itself is the journey to God; the closeness happens on its own. By becoming who we are in essence, nothing more and nothing less, we will find ourselves before God. And, once we find ourselves before God, we will know that we have, at long last, found ourselves as well.

We will have done teshuvah. We will have atoned for ourselves. We will feel redeemed in the ultimate sense of the idea.

Text

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