

SPIRITUAL IMPRESSIONS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

I know what they will do by how they behave right now, even before they enter the land I promised to them. (Devarim 31:21)

That must have come as good news for Moshe Rabbeinu. "You're going to die," God was essentially telling him, "but don't worry, everything you worked so hard to achieve with this people is going to go down the tubes once you're gone." Nothing like leaving this world on a good note, eh?

I mean, what's the point? What's the point of even trying to succeed when failure is predicted from the beginning? It would have been one thing if God had kept this little detail a secret between Him and Moshe, but they wrote it down in the Torah for everyone to see, and they knew it was talking about them. How could it not have affected their attitude towards life from that point onward?

The following halachah provides some insight that is very appropriate for this time of year:

During the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, (from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur) we take upon ourselves stringencies which we do not necessarily keep the rest of the year (Shulchan Aruch 603:1, Bais Yosef 603). The Ramak (Rav Moshe Cordevero) writes that even if one will not keep these stringencies after Yom Kippur it is still proper to do, because God acts with chassidus in these days and it is therefore appropriate for us to behave similarly with chassidus (Elef Hamagen 105 cited by Piskei Teshuvos 603:1).

You can fool yourself most of the time, but you cannot fool God any of the time; He knows long before we do how sincere we are about changing for the better. And He has a lot more experience with people who promised Him the moon but only came up with grains of sand than we do, and yet, He is prepared to act with us as if we really mean to deliver the moon, that is, to make real positive change.

We learn this from an episode in the Chumash, when Hagar and Yishmael were dying in the desert from thirst, after Avraham had sent them away on command from God. In the end, God saved their lives against the protestations of the angels, who reminded God of what Yishmael was destined to do to the Jewish people, and the rest of the world for that matter.

Nevertheless, God told them, He deals with people according to what they are doing at the moment. Since Yishmael at that time, close to the death, was truly repentant, God provided him and his mother with a well of water so that they could survive, which they did. The rest is history, and a

bloody one at that, and it isn't over yet. In fact, it is Yishmael's descendants who pose the greatest threat to the civilized world today, no matter how they claim to be on a mission of peace.

Likewise, does God deal with all of us on a moment-to-moment basis. Therefore, even though we know, from the start, that we probably will not live up to our Jewish New Year's Resolutions, the fact they we want to and are willing to try during the Aseres Yemai Teshuvah works in our favor at a time that we are actually being judged for the upcoming year, even though God already knows better about the rest of the year, as we do probably as well.

Why does God work that way? Is it merely a function of His incredible capacity for chesed, or is there something deeper at work here?

Undoubtedly, it is an amazing chesed, but it turns out that there is also something deeper at work here, something relatively Kabbalistic as well. When God made Creation, long before the physical world as we know it came into existence, He sent down a very high powered spiritual light into the void before retracting it once again forever. The question is, if God had planned to retract it from the start, what purpose was there in sending it down in the first place?

In Hebrew it's called a roshem, and it translates as impression. In fact, the term is used this way socially as well, as in, "He left a real roshem on me," meaning that the person who left made an impression on the person speaking that still remains. Sticking one's foot into wet cement will also leave a roshem, especially if the cement dries before it can be smoothed out again. People and things can pop in and out of history, but their roshem can maintain its impact for a long time to come.

Hence, even though God retracted the original light, it left behind a roshem, and it was this roshem that made possible the second, lesser light that descended, to remain down below and result in Creation as we know it. Even the Spies who rejected the land and were duly punished for doing so, laid the foundation through their failed mission for the second set of Spies, in Yehoshua's time, to succeed.

If something exists, it creates a roshem. The more important it is to Creation, the greater the roshem it will leave, just as important people leave a greater impression on their audiences than average people do, unless, of course, they do something important. It could be a good impression or a bad impression, but either way, it leaves an impression.

The same is true not just of material things, but of ideas as well. What we think about not only leaves an impression on us, but on the world in general. Our physical eyes can't see how, but even our thoughts impact the direction of history because they affect the spiritual reality which in turn impacts the physical world. Other people might not know what you are thinking, but God does, and so does the rest of Creation. Hence, the rabbis teach:

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

For, it is only the effort that we make to succeed that we can control since only that is a function of

our own personal will. Success can be elusive, even after we have done everything we can to succeed.

Hence, it is only the effort that we make that really makes a roshem on Creation, because that is all that impresses Creation about us. We can't totally control the results of history, because we don't see the bigger big picture like God does. Sometimes we are denied success, by our standards, because the future requires it, or the past necessitated it. Only God can make those calculations.

However, what we think, or what we say, or what we do—all these are in the realm of our personal free-will, when we use it and don't abuse it. We get credit, or demerit, based upon our decisions, regardless of the final impact they have in the material world. Hence the Talmud states that if a person intends to do a mitzvah but is prevented from doing so for reasons beyond his means, he still gets credit for the mitzvah (Brochos 6a). As far as Heaven is concerned, if the effort would have resulted in the performance of the mitzvah otherwise, then it was done.

Therefore, if a person shows up for a minyan that he was led to believe always comes, but only eight other people show up that day to pray, even though to the human eye it appears as if he has dovened without a minyan, to Heaven's eye, he dovened with a minyan. This time, but the next time he should be a little more careful with this particular minyan.

Another application of this idea is that a person may be forced to pray somewhere unusual, like in an airport or some similar public place. Twenty minutes later he may finish and move on, but the spiritual roshem he left behind remains behind where he stood. Two months later someone may walk through that air space and be hit, so-to-speak, by the lingering roshem, the strength of which depends upon the effort of the person creating it.

The person, at first, might not feel anything unusual. But, over time, the exposure may have been just the right spiritual nudge to push him or her to live a more spiritually committed life. The world is that sensitive and intricate.

On a personal note, I am greatly encouraged by this idea, especially this year that I am a mourner and need to say Kaddish for my father, z"l, and often, lead the entire service. Unlike others around me where I doven, Hebrew is not my mother tongue, and the one in my mouth does not always cooperate with my brain even when speaking English. As a result, invariably, I stumble somewhere.

For the most part, the mistakes I make matter more to me than to anyone else listening. They are certainly innocent mistakes, and they do not change the meaning of what I am saying. But praying to God is an exact science, and it is a real pain in the neck when you are a perfectionist trying to do something at which you cannot be perfect. It can be both disheartening and a little humiliating sometimes.

There are good days and bad days, but some of the bad days make me question what I'm doing up there sometimes, when there are so many others around me who can do it much better, even

perfectly. That's when I recall that what counts the most before God, and on behalf of my father, z"l, is how hard I try to do it right. Even if I was unable to actually lead the service because I just wasn't up to the task, but really wanted to, from Heaven's point of view, it counts as if I did anyhow. (I was thinking of starting a mourner's support group.)

For this reason, even if the Jewish people were destined to fail at keeping the land in the future, entering it now still made a positive difference. Going through the motions of taking the land and settling it would leave a roshem, and contribute to the overall process of the Final Redemption. Merits are accumulative, both personally and nationally, and a generation that enters and is later exiled leaves a roshem and lays the foundation for future returning generations.

Hence, the Talmud says that you can tell if someone who has passed away is a Ben Olam HaBah, someone destined to go to the World-to-Come, by the way he or she is eulogized. That's just another way of saying by the roshem the deceased left on the people who have survived him or her. And, if anything, people are remembered more for how hard they tried to do good than for the good they actually accomplished.

It is a sobering thought, especially at this time of year, and especially while living in a result-oriented society. Consequently, people feel compelled to comprise on their morals, which may grant them some material success, but which will, in the end, leave a terrible roshem both on the people in the know, and most importantly of all, on all-knowing Heaven. This is the time of year to remember that, if you want to be impressive, leave a positive spiritual impression: Do your best to do the moral best.

Text

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