

WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN TO YOU?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

When we read about the Evil Son in the Haggadah, we immediately distance ourselves from him and anything he has to say. The assumption is: He is evil, and therefore, nothing he can say or do can have any relevance to us or our lives. Sadly, this is a mistaken assumption.

"What does this service mean to you?" is a question that all of us must answer, including the chachamim amongst us, by the time the Seder is over. For, the answer to the question is what defines us as Jews, and determines the level of freedom we are destined to achieve in the upcoming year. In other words, it is not the question that makes the Evil Son evil, but his answer. Indeed, his question is his answer, because it is rhetorical. In fact, it is really a statement phrased as a question, which is: "This service may have once meant something back in Egypt, but not today. Today it means nothing, not to me, and not to God. You can sacrifice a lamb if you want to, but don't tell me that such a mitzvah exists today!"

The Evil Son assumes, as do many revisionists, that mitzvos are circumstantial, and that they cease to be mitzvos once the circumstances that gave rise to them end. Since no one really worships the lamb anymore, the need to sacrifice one to separate ourselves from such a form of idol worship is no longer applicable. It is today, at best, a commemoration. Of course, that is not true, as this week's parshah makes clear. The verse says:

When a soul will bring a meal-offering to God . . . (Vayikra 2:1)

"Soul" was not used with reference to any voluntary offerings except for the meal-offering. Whose practice is it to dedicate a meal-offering? A poor person. The Holy One, Blessed is He, said, "[Although the poor person's offering is modest,] I consider it on his behalf as if he offered his soul." (Rashi)

Why is this the case? Because, for a poor person, even a meal-offering is a financially difficult thing and requires considerable self-sacrifice, what we call, Mesiras Nefesh, literally, the "giving of one's soul." Nothing impresses Heaven more than Mesiras Nefesh, as the Talmud points out:

Rav Papa asked Abaye, "Why was it that miracles occurred for the former generations, but for us miracles do not occur? It cannot be because of their learning, because in Rav Yehudah's time the whole of their studies was confined to [Seder] Nezikin, whereas we study all six Orders [of the Mishnah] . . . And yet when Rav Yehudah slipped off one shoe [on a fast day for rain] it used to rain! However, we torment ourselves and cry out loud [in prayer] and no notice is taken of us!" He replied,

"The former generations used to sacrifice their lives for Kiddush Hashem—the sanctification of God's Name; we do not sacrifice ourselves for the sake of Kiddush Hashem." (Brochos 20a)

Kabbalah teaches that every mitzvah we do impacts the spiritual world in a very specific way, and causes a particular rectification that no other mitzvah we do can. Even particular aspects of a single mitzvah impact the world differently than other aspects of the same mitzvah, which is why we have to be careful to carry out each one as if the entire mitzvah, and world rectification, depends upon this.

Because it does. Very often in halachah the question will be asked, "If this detail is left out, or not performed as required, is the entire mitzvah prevented?" Sometimes the answer is no, but oftentimes the answer is yes, because without that aspect of the mitzvah, the tikun, or rectification, cannot be completed.

This is not so easy to see or appreciate when learning halachah or its basis in the Talmud. However, in Kabbalah, where often the impact of specific mitzvos is discussed, it is clear that a lot more depends upon our mitzvos and how we do them than we usually think.

However, aside from all of this, mitzvos perform a very basic function as well: they measure a person's level of Mesiras Nefesh, and answer the question of, "What does this service mean to you?"

For example, when someone decides to learn while others are praying Kabbalas Shabbos, it is clear that the mitzvah is not all that important to him. It is also clear that he doesn't mind standing apart from the rest of the congregation, something halachah does not like too much.

Granted, sometimes it is unavoidable. For example, a person needs to know a halachah all of a sudden, or he is giving the drashah before Ma'ariv, he belatedly realizes he needs to look something up before speaking. In each case and similar ones, it is not because of his lack of love of welcoming in the Shabbos with the rest of his co-worshippers.

Someone once asked a halachah rabbi how bad it was if he continued on with such a practice. The rabbi answered, "It is not one of the worst things you can do." However, before the person could revel in that psak, the rabbi added, "But when you go to the World-to-Come, and Shabbos is there to greet all those who observed it, don't expect to get a warm greeting, if one at all."

There is no question that God loves it when a person cannot tear himself away from His Torah, when his love of learning makes it a top priority for him. I mean, He REALLY loves it—except, that is, when it is at the wrong time, like most of Torah on Tisha B'Av, for example, or during times when he has another more pressing mitzvah to do, such as listening to the Chazzan who is repeating the Shemonah Esrai on behalf of the congregation, or when he should be helping someone else out, like his mother, or wife, etc.

In fact, learning at the wrong time can have the exact opposite impact, just as a sacrifice, at the wrong time, or in the wrong time, can be disgusting to God:

Shmuel said: "Does God delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as much as does someone listening to the voice of God? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen, than the fat of rams." (I Shmuel 15:22)

Given the centrality of Torah learning, and its crucial role in helping us to properly fulfill the will of God, it is easy to make a mistake about this. Many do, just as there are others who do not learn enough, or at all, allowing other mitzvos that are "easier" for them to perform get in the way, including tzedakah projects. In fact, some have placed such an emphasis on being good to others to the point that they let that mitzvah interfere with all-important mitzvos, such as the keeping of Shabbos.

However, as the Talmud stated above, at the end of the time, it is our Mesiras Nefesh that proves where we hold with God, Torah, and His mitzvos. When we perform mitzvos correctly, especially the ones that our yetzer haras like to mock, or even disgrace, and when we go the distance that the halachah says we should go, then God looks at it as if we have handed our very soul over to Him, and there is nothing more precious to Him than that. As commentaries on the Haggadah point out, each of us has an aspect of all four sons within us, depending upon the day and our mood, including the evil son. When we belittle any service of God, no matter how unimportant it might seem to others around us, we answer his question of, "What does this service mean to you?" by saying, "Not that much."

When that happens, we can chalk one up for the side of the Sitra Achra and yetzer hara, and we can assume that we're not as free as we thought we were.

Text

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