

PERFECTING THE BALANCE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The deeds of the [Mighty] Rock are perfect, for all His ways are just . . . (Devarim 32:4)

One of my favorite books of Tanach is Koheles, or Ecclesiastes. I know that others feel just the opposite, finding the work somewhat morbid. For them it's as if the author, Shlomo HaMelech, saps all the excitement out of life by finding just about everything that people find fun futile.

Ironically, it is the megillah that we read on Shabbos Chol HaMoed Succos, the holiday that we call "Zman Simchasaynu," the "Time of Our Joy." A mismatch? Our rabbis did not think so. Quite the contrary, they chose Koheles for that Shabbos because the wisest man on earth wrote it to define the Jewish idea of joy, and no, it is not death and dying. To understand what he meant is to tap into the true source of joy.

One phrase that constantly appears throughout Koheles, aside from, "this too is vanity," is "under the sun." When he refers to activities that he investigated for their intrinsic meaning he spoke about doing them, or that they are done, "under the sun," that is, in this world and for the sake of their physical value alone. Since the sun is what allows physical life to exist it represents the physical element of life.

Koheles also uses this expression to distinguish what is done "under the sun" from what is done "above the sun," meaning for spiritual reasons. The point is that it is not always only a matter of what you are doing, but also "why" you are doing it. Sometimes a secular activity for a spiritual purpose can transform it from an activity that is "under the sun" to one that is "above the sun." Likewise, oftentimes a spiritual activity performed for "secular" reasons, such as learning Torah to gain the respect of others, can transform it from an activity that is usually "above the sun" to one that is "under the sun."

The struggle throughout life is to walk with our feet on the ground but with our heads in the clouds, so-to-speak. We're not talking about living a "spaced-out" existence. We're talking about living in this world with an ongoing awareness of the World-to-Come, as the mishnah says:

This world is like a corridor before the World-to-Come. Rectify yourself in the corridor in order

to be able to enter the Banquet Hall. (Pirkei Avos 4:16)

Both extremes are easier to do. The vast majority of the world's population walk with both their feet and the heads in the temporal world. It is hard not to, since it is so in our faces, coming at us in every way and from every angle. The next world is exactly that, the next world, meaning there is very little, if any at all, trace of it in the here-and-now. This makes our belief in it more a function of emunah—faith—than of empirical evidence.

Others go to the other extreme. Disinterested in the trappings of the material world, or out of fear of it, they avoid it as much as possible. Even that which can enhance their Godly experience is off bounds if it is also a way to achieve just the opposite. As the expression goes, "Better safe than sorry," even when safe means, metaphorically-speaking, watching the baby go out with the bathwater.

Of the two approaches to life it is certainly the less dangerous one. Those who belong to this camp, if they err, live with out something that might have improved the spiritual quality of their lives. However, those belonging to the first camp, if they err, can either partially or completely destroy the spiritual fabric of their existence and end up doing a lot of time in Gihennom.

Nevertheless, even the "better safe than sorry" group does lose out if they end up rejecting the material world out-of-hand. As the Talmud states, not only are we expected to taste and enjoy all that is permissible to eat, but even the taste of those foods which are forbidden to Jews can be enjoyed through some other kind of food from the kosher side of the fence. True, the main pleasure of life will come in the World-to-Come, but no one can deny that this world was created to give pleasure as well.

A balance is necessary. It was easier for Avraham to lean towards unbridled chesed—kindness, and Yitzchak to lean towards unbridled gevurah—strict justice. God therefore did not begin the Jewish nation until Ya'akov was born, whose trait is Tifferes, a harmonic beauty born from striking the perfect balance between the two extremes. How much chesed and how much gevurah to exhibit may vary from situation to situation, but it is the balance between the two opposites in any given situation that reveals the true greatness of a person and that which he does.

In the way of such Divine balance is the yetzer hara:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, said to the Jewish people: "I created the yetzer hara, and I created Torah as its spice. If you involve yourselves in Torah then you will not fall prey to it, as it says, 'If you improve, [you will be forgiven]' (Bereishis 4:7). If you don't involve yourselves with Torah

then you will fall prey to it, as it says, '[If you don't improve] then transgression crouches at your door' (Bereishis 4:7). Not only this, but it will expend every energy to induce you to transgress, as it says, 'To you is its desire' (Bereishis 4:7), but if you choose to, you can rule over it, as it says, 'And you can control it'(Bereishis 4:7)." (Kiddushin 30b)

The yetzer hara is so difficult that even its Creator called it "evil," as it says, "The inclination of the heart of man is evil from his youth" (Bereishis 8:21). Rav Shimon, the son of Levi said: "Every day the yetzer of a man strengthens itself seeking to kill him . . ." (Kiddushin 30b)

Ironically, it is not necessarily about being secular over being religious. There is a "secular" yetzer hara, the one that pushes a person after meaningless and often illicit pleasures. This one does not require much explanation because it has been showcased throughout history and is incredibly obvious today.

Less known is a "religious" yetzer hara, the one that pushes a person to pursue morality to such an extreme that it becomes immoral. Religious extremism often begins with a true value but is pursued by extremists to the point that it interferes with higher levels of morality.

The Talmud provides the following example of such an idea:

Now how does Rebi Yochanan interpret, "that your brother may live with you" (Vayikra 25:36)? He uses it for that which was taught regarding the case when two people are traveling on a journey [far from civilization], and only one has a canteen of water. If both drink they will [both] die, but if one only drinks, he can reach civilization. Ben Patura taught: It is better that both should drink and die rather than that one should see his companion die. However, Rebi Akiva came and taught: "that your brother may live with you," which means that your life takes precedence over his life. (Bava Metzia 62a)

What we have here is the clashing of two mitzvos, one of which says a person should love his fellow man like himself. Just as you want the water and to survive a little longer so does your fellow. Therefore, to love him like yourself would mean sharing the water with him fifty-fifty and extending his life a little longer. This is the opinion of Ben Patura.

Rebi Akiva, who happens to be famous for, among other reasons, saying that this mitzvah to love's one fellow as himself is great principle of Torah, disagrees. This is because there is another mitzvah to maintain your own life, which means that the mitzvah to love one's fellow as himself is only

applicable up until the point that it can kill you.

There are some mitzvos for which a Jew has to die, but loving one's neighbor as himself is not one of them. If a person gives up his life for his fellow at a time that, from a Torah perspective, he shouldn't, he is guilty for having unnecessarily caused his own death, something for which he will have to answer on the Day of Judgment.

Likewise, there is a mitzvah to point out the halachic mistakes of one's fellow Jew. In fact, says the Torah, if a person sees a "neighbor" committing a sin and fails to correct the person when he could, he himself is responsible for each time his friend commits the sin, as it says:

You shall surely rebuke your fellow, but you shall not bear a sin on his account. (Vayikra 19:17)

Yet, there is another side to this mitzvah that changes the obligation based upon the circumstance. Rashi explains:

But You shall not bear a sin on his account: I.e., [in the course of your rebuking your fellow,] do not embarrass him in public (Toras Kohanim 19:43; Arachin 16b). (Rashi)

Other examples include throwing bleach on people because they are not dressed modestly, or rocks at cars because the drivers are breaking Shabbos. Dressing modestly is hugely important to God, but so is not causing bodily harm to another person, especially if they are not yet sensitized to the importance of dressing in a Torah fashion. Likewise, keeping Shabbos maintains Creation and breaking it is like worshipping idols. Yet this does not allow one to endanger the life of another to improve Shabbos observance.

Then there is the classic example of what the Talmud calls a "Chassid Shoteh," or a "crazy pious individual." That is someone, the Talmud says, who allows a person of the opposite gender to drown because saving them would involve bodily contact that in normal circumstances is strictly forbidden by the Torah. Drowning may not only apply to water, but to any situation that might be dangerous for another person.

Life is not simple and it is rarely black and white, because that is the way God wants it. He made it that way so that we have to think about what happens to us and how to respond to the challenges of life. The Torah presents all of the most important values of life, many of which can coexist seamlessly while some contradict others in certain situations. We become Godly not when we simply apply them at all times and in all ways, but when we consider their applicability based upon

the situation God has placed before us.

Just as when we go to a poseik, a qualified rabbi who can tell us to do when the halachah seems to defy us, we expect him to make his decision after weighing all of the relevant details, likewise must we do the same with ourselves. When we make decisions in life, especially those that can affect others, we have to take the time to weigh all the necessary components of our decisions. We expect God to do that with our lives on Rosh Hashanah. He expects us to do that with our lives all year long. That is the realteshuvah, and according to Koheles, the true source of meaning and joy in life.