

APPRECIATION: SAVES US FROM SIN

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

When you come into the land which God, your God, gives you for an inheritance . . . (Devarim 26:1)

It is hard to believe that we have arrived at Parashas Ki Savo. Was it not just a short time ago that we were finishing Sefer Vayikra, the third book of the Torah? Seems like it to me, making me wonder where this year has gone. Time flies when history itself becomes distracting.

The timing of course is not coincidental. This is the parshah of ninety- eight curses for disobedience to Torah, so it certainly stands out especially as we make our final approach to Rosh HaShanah and the Day of Judgment. In fact, so-much-so, that we overlook an important part of the parshah that is far more positive: Eretz Yisroel:

And it will be, when you come into the land which the God, your God, gives you for an inheritance, and you possess it and settle in it, that you shall take of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you will bring from your land, which the God, your God, is giving you. And you shall put [them] into a basket and go to the place which the God, your God, will choose to have His Name dwell there. (Devarim 26:1-2)

This is the mitzvah of bikurim, the bringing of the first fruits from a year's crop. This is one of the ways that a Jew is supposed to stay connected to God, and to recall that all of his bounty is a gift from the Creator, especially Eretz Yisroel:

Three wonderful gifts were given by The Holy One, Blessed is He, to the Jewish people, and all of them were given through hardship. They are Torah, Eretz Yisroel, and The World-to-Come. (Brochos 5a)

Appreciation is the name of the game, as the following makes clear:

And you shall come to the kohen who will be [serving] in those days, and say to him, "I declare this day to God, your God, that I have come to the land which God swore to our forefathers to give us." (Devarim 26:3)

And say to him: that you are not ungrateful [for all that God has done for you]. (Rashi)

This is something that is worth elaborating on as we enter the final lap before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. There are many thing that we focus on as we enter the Days of Awe, but they are all based upon one question: What does God want from us? There are many answers to this question, but few of them have to do with simply appreciating the good that God gives to us.

The answer can be used, also surprisingly, to explain a fundamental difference between a righteous person, an evil person, and the one between the two of them. One might have thought the answer was simply the number of mitzvos each person performs. This is true, but it is not the bottom line. It is never really the number of mitzvos that we do that bespeaks our spiritual greatness, but the circumstances regarding the mitzvos that we have performed. As our rabbis have taught:

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

Pain? Mitzvos are about pain?

Actually yes, except that we have another more dignified term for such pain: mesiras Nefesh, or self-sacrifice. Pain conjures up only negative images and sad memories. The term "self-sacrifice," however, reminds us of our nobler moments, and about the heroes of history who made great sacrifices to make life better for themselves and others.

It's almost like alchemy, which is described by Wikipedia as:

Alchemy is an influential philosophical tradition whose practitioners have, from antiquity, claimed it to be the precursor to profound powers. The defining objectives of alchemy are varied but historically have typically included one or more of the following goals: the creation of the fabled philosopher's stone; the ability to transmute base metals into the noble metals (gold or silver); and development of an elixir of life, which would confer youth and longevity.

What is it that magically and mystically transforms unwanted pain—all pain from the body's point of view is unwanted—into self-sacrifice and acceptable pain? What makes it possible for a student who hates to study, later read countless books on his favorite topic, for an athlete who could never get himself to take the garbage out as a child growing up into a marathon runner, or for a businessman who was too lazy to do any homework, work long hours to make a lot of money?

In a word: appreciation. In two Hebrew words, it is called hakores hatov, the recognition of good.

We were first introduced to the opposite of this concept, kefui tovah, which means a "denier of good," at the beginning of history, back in the Garden of Eden. It was showcased by Adam HaRishon after he was caught with his hand in the cookie jar, or more accurately, with the cookie already in his mouth:

And [God] said, "Who told you that you are naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (Bereishis 3:11)

If only the first man had known how critical a question it had been. If only he had known that this world had been made for teshuvah (Menachos 29b), and answered accordingly:

"Funny you should ask (munch . . . munch . . .)," he could have answered. "Actually I did eat, but You probably already knew that, you know, being God and all (munch . . . munch . . .), so why don't I just fess up and take my punishment like a man . . ."

Not only would such an admission have impressed the Creator of the World, but it would have also meant remaining in Paradise forever. That would have been the tikun—rectification, personal and world, and God would have taken care of the rest, as Kabbalah explains.

But, I am writing this essay from exile, the end of the fourth and final one. History reads like a failed experiment being far from Paradise physically and ideologically. Even the Jewish people, after receiving "cheat notes" in the form of a God-dictated Torah, have been unable to turn things. The world, once again, is sliding into another dark period of history. What went wrong? The following:

*And the man said, "The woman whom You gave [to be] with me she gave me of the tree; so I ate."
(Bereishis 3:12)*

Whom You gave [to be] with me: Here he [Adam] showed his ingratitude. (Rashi)

Thus began the exile of mankind which has continued, to date, for 5,775 years. Imagine it: everything, including the worst of the worse has gone, and is going wrong today in history, because of ingratitude. This is what this week's parshah is telling us: Start with ingratitude and you'll end with the curses:

*All these curses will befall you, pursuing you and overtaking you to destroy you because you did not obey God, your God, to observe His commandments and statutes which He commanded you. And they will be as a sign and a wonder, upon you and your offspring, forever, because you did not serve God, your God, with happiness and with gladness of heart, when [you had an] abundance of everything.
(Devarim 28:45-47)*

It is not an overnight thing. It takes times before the effects of ingratitude settle in and do their long-term damage. It is an attitude that leads to abuse, first of the world around us, then of other people, and eventually of the person himself. Ultimately, it is a rejection of God, because all the good is from God, and has God within it. When we take good for granted, we taken God for granted.

This is why we make blessings before we partake of this world, and blessings after. This is also why one must be focused when making blessings, and when praying three times a day. The best way to tell how much a person appreciates something is the way he says "please" and "thank you." The level of sincerity is the tell-tale sign of how much a person's heart is in what they are saying.

Probably the most important distinguishing factor of a righteous, evil, and average person is his level of a hakores hatov, his recognition and appreciation of the good God has granted him. The righteous person is righteous because that is the best way to say thank you to God for the opportunity of life. The evil person is evil because, as far as he is concerned, he is nothing for which to be thankful.

The average person usually fluctuates between these two extremes and has the Ten Days of Repentance to choose in which direction he wants to gravitate. What he may not realize is that he is not only choosing to rectify his own life, but he is also choosing to participate in the rectification of all of Creation. Bikurim is the answer to Adam HaRishon's mistake because it makes a person focus on

the gift of life and all that comes with it. This appreciation leads to joy, joy leads to motivation, and it takes motivation to live loyal to God and His Torah.

After all, had Adam HaRishon appreciated the gift his wife had been in the first place, he would have taught her that God only said don't eat, and that not touching the tree was his own invention to safeguard against eating. Knowing this would have given her a defense against the wiles of the snake, the result of which would have been that we'd still be in the Garden of Eden today. Adam's denial of the good already surfaced back then, and blaming Chava later, and God for that matter, was just symptomatic of that.

The true judgment of Rosh Hashanah, a prelude to the final one after death, is on the level of appreciation that we have for the gift of life. Reviewing our previous year is only to see how our actions revealed how much we appreciated the opportunity of life. What happens to us in the coming year is purely a function of this judgment because, as they say, "Abuse it, lose it."

Why wait for Rosh Hashanah to get back on the appreciation track? We have Elul Zman to do that so that by the time Rosh Hashanah arrives, we are already moving in the direction of the righteous, whose appreciation of the opportunity of life is obvious from the way they live.

Text

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