

HE THINKS HIGHLY OF YOU

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

And God said to Avram, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace . . . (Bereishis 12:1)

When it happens to me I get disappointed. I feel as if I have put myself out for God and that God hasn't come through on His part of the bargain. I got up early, learned a bit, tried to pray with good intention, and yet, the positive result I had hoped for didn't materialize. Doesn't it say somewhere that if you do good you get good?

Recovering somewhat, I quickly remind myself that sometimes God wants to see if we serve Him not for the sake of receiving a reward (Pirkei Avos 1:3). I also remind myself that getting it right once does not necessarily counterbalance all the times I get it wrong. Last but not least, I recall the Talmud that says that reward for mitzvos does not come in this world, but in the next one (Kiddushin 39b).

Imagine how Avraham must have felt. He left everything behind to follow God to Eretz Canaan, making many important sacrifices to do so. God even promised him compensation for what he'd be passing up to make the journey, only to reach his destination and experience just the opposite. No sooner had he arrived in Eretz Yisroel than he had to face famine and travel once again, this time to an unfriendly country, Egypt.

Not only had Avraham been forced to go down to Egypt, but his wife had been kidnapped along the way and taken to the leader of the country to do as he pleased. The Torah only briefly describes what happened, devoid of all the actual hardship and emotional upheaval, but it could not have been an easy situation to have survived. He may have been a forefather, but he had also been human.

This of course is counted as one of Avraham's ten tests of faith and loyalty in God. In the end he not only survived it, he became enriched because of it, after God miraculously humbled Pharaoh and forced his hand. When it was over Pharaoh and his court were only too happy to see Avraham and his entire entourage leave, and gave him great wealth to make sure that they did.

There is no question that spiritual challenges are part of our personal development. Relationships are about loyalty, especially one with God, and nothing tests the limits of one's loyalty to God more than getting nothing back, or worse, a negative outcome in return for self-sacrifice in serving Him. It's one thing to not serve God for the sake of reward but it is something altogether more difficult to serve Him and receive a punishing result.

Take Rebi Akiva for example. For 40 years he lived the life of a simpleton only to later become a ba'al teshuvah and devote the next 40 years of his life to become a talmid chacham. After that, he spent the last 40 years of his life leading the nation, often at great personal sacrifice, including the loss of 24,000 of his students to a plague.

At the end of his life he was captured by the Romans for being a devout Jew and Torah leader. As a simpleton he might have been able to escape death, but as a Torah scholar and leader he was an enemy of the state. As such he was tortured to death and became one of the "Ten Martyrs," and even the angels looking on questioned his manner of dying:

[Rebi Akiva as he died] prolonged the word [of the Shema,] "One," and died while saying it . . . The ministering angels said before The Holy One, Blessed is He, "He should have been from those "who die by Your hand, O God" (Tehillim 17:14). He replied to them, "The righteous person's 'portion is in eternal life' (Tehillim 17:14)." A voice went forth and proclaimed, "Happy are you, Rebi Akiva, that you are destined for the life of the World-to- Come!" (Brochos 61b)

The angels were asking God why such a great man warranted such a terrible death? He should have died more naturally, they argued, like other great rabbis of his time. And how was, "Happy are you, Rebi Akiva, that you are destined for the life of the World-to-Come!" an answer to their question, if at all?

To answer this question one must recall what Rashi says at the beginning of his commentary on the Torah:

In the beginning Elokim created the heaven and the earth. (Bereishis 1:1)

It does not say "Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh created," because in the beginning it was His intention to create it according to the Attribute [of Strict] Justice [as implied by the Name Elokim]. However He saw that the world would not endure and therefore He preceded it with the Attribute of Mercy, making it a partner with the Attribute of Justice. This is the reason it is later written, "on the day that Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh-Elokim made earth and heaven." (Rashi, Bereishis 1:1)

Rashi is revealing that the ideal state of Creation is one of strict justice. After all, the "seal" of God is "Truth" (Yoma 69b), and nothing is more truthful than strict justice. The only reason why mercy, a distortion of justice, is necessary and acceptable is because Creation. To justify its existence, Creation requires man who, in order to survive requires mercy.

It is similar to the following example. Ideally, on Shabbos, a person should not stir his cholent, even if it is already fully cooked, while it is still sitting on the blech over the fire. Rather, he should first remove it to a place that is less than yad soledes bo (between 104-113 degrees fahrenheit), and then stir it there while at the same time fulfilling all of the conditions that will enable him to return it to its original place on the blech once he is finished.

What happens if a person forgets the halachah and stirs it while it still over the fire, a clear violation of the Shabbos halachah? It depends: If it was truly accidental and the cholent is a main course of his meal, then he can still serve it for lunch since to do without it would be detrimental to the honor of Shabbos. If he violated the law willfully, or the cholent is only a side dish that he can certainly do without, he should not use the cholent until after Shabbos has ended.

One should either look up the law in an authoritative halachah sefer, or ask a halachic authority to confirm the law in his or her personal predicament. However, the point is clear: Sometimes higher priorities make less-than-ideal situations the ideal one. It would have been better not to have stirred the cholent over the fire on Shabbos, but after having had done so accidentally it is better to eat it for the sake of honoring Shabbos.

Likewise, it would have been "better" to have created a world according to strict justice, as the strict Shammai emphasized. This would have been a more truthful world. Better than this, though, is the existence of man since the world was made for the sake of free will. This therefore makes the addition of mercy an ideal one, as Hillel pointed out (Shabbos 31a; Eiruvim 13b).

The question is, now that God made a world that is a function of both strict justice and mercy, is this the way it is meant to remain? As they say, "You can pay us now or you can pay us later." Given that mercy is an unearned benefit in a world in which nothing is free, it means that at some point in the future we're going to have "pay" the mercy back:

Rebi Yannai [acted] upon his views, for he said, "A man should never stand in a place of danger and say that a miracle will happen for him, in case it doesn't. And if a miracle does occur for him, it will be deducted from his merits [in the World-to-Come]." (Shabbos 32a)

The answer to our question is the same as the answer given to the angels who protested the death of Rebi Akiva:

Happy are you, Rebi Akiva, that you are destined for the life of the World-to-Come!

The angels complained that Rebi Akiva after a life of total self-sacrifice for God and His people should have been deserving of Divine mercy. God answered back that Rebi Akiva, after a life of total self-sacrifice for God and His people, became deserving of strict justice. He had perfected himself to such a point that he was able to live on the ideal level of reality, without the partnership of mercy.

As a result Rebi Akiva paid every last one of his spiritual debts in death and was ready to go straight to the World-to-Come. By the time he died saying the Shema and sanctifying God's Name to the greatest degree possible, he was without any need for Gehenom whatsoever. Like Moshe Rabbeinu before him, he rose to the level of Ish Elokim, "Man of God," angelic in nature.

The same could be said of Avraham Avinu. Righteous person that he had been he was still the son of

an idol worshiper and lived within an idol worshiping society. He didn't have the entire God picture from Day One, but developed it as time went on, so there were still things for which he had to be cleansed. In fact, the Arizal explains, that is why he had to go through the entire episode of the cauldron of fire in Ur Kasdim.

Leaving home and following God to Eretz Canaan elevated him to the point that God could be stricter, and therefore more truthful with him, to his benefit. This was especially so once he arrived in Eretz Yisroel because it is a land of truth, which is why it can, as no other land can, "spit" out its inhabitants for debase behavior. It may take time, but eventually the land itself rejects those who choose a life of falsehood.

Therefore, as soon as he arrived in Eretz Canaan he was sent south in search of food. There are many ways to be "spit" out by the land, even if a person leaves thinking that it is to his benefit. The bottom line is that he wasn't able to make life work for himself in Eretz Yisroel, and he has to ask himself why.

This is why, as the Talmud warns, Eretz Yisroel, like Torah and the World- to-Come, is "acquired" through yesurim, or suffering (Brochos 5a). "You want to live here?" it's as if the land asks the person making aliyah. "Then expect to be put through the ringer somewhat as Heaven brings you up to spiritual speed."

Once Avraham Avinu survived the strict justice applied to his life he became a worthy vessel for the light of God and all of the rewards for being so. A miracle happened to save his wife and return her untouched. Pharaoh himself sent Avraham away a very wealthy man. By the time he returned to Eretz Yisroel his relationship to both God and the land had changed, having been elevated to the level of unmitigated justice.

We may not reach the levels of the Forefathers, but the concept can be applied to anyone who strives to become spiritually refined. This is the entire point of performing mitzvos and avoiding sin. We may want mercy and may even expect it for serving God with self-sacrifice. The greatest compliment that we can receive from Heaven for all of our spiritual efforts, however, is not necessarily mercy or the miraculous results we seek. It is, rather, just the opposite: the payment of past mistakes through recent mitzvos.

So if you had a great Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and you really put yourself into the mitzvos of Succos, but tripped over the "threshold" on the way out, do not fret. Certainly do not kick the succah, so-to-speak (Avodah Zarah 3b). Instead celebrate that God thinks highly enough of you to deal with you on the ideal level of Creation.

Text

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