

YOUR MISSION -- IF YOU SHOULD ACCEPT PLUS THE LAWS OF CHANUKA

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

How do we know what is right and what is wrong? I gave a lecture Thursday night in the Valley and a young man asked me that question. The discussion had been about the nature of good and bad, right and wrong, reward and punishment, and I had stipulated that good meant anything that brings a person closer to G-d and bad was anything that distances a person from G-d.

In the same vein, reward is anything that brings us closer to G-d and punishment is anything that distances us from G-d. From a different perspective it could be said that reward and punishment are subject to our free will. What we make of them, the attitudes that we bring to bear on the events of our lives, determines if something is a reward or a punishment. If the events of our lives cause us to distance ourselves from G-d then those events are by definition bad and a punishment. If the events of our lives force us to be closer to G-d then those events are by definition good and a reward.

I do not mean to suggest that there aren't absolute goods and evils. Events in and of them can be good or evil. For example, the events of 9-11 were evil; however, how we relate to those events, how we deal with the effects of evil on our lives is our choice. We can choose life - reward, or we can choose death - punishment. (Note: Death in this context means a denial of G-d and therefore a denial that there is existence beyond the physical. If we deny G-d's part in any or all events we remove Him from the equation of our lives. If we remove G-d from the equation of our lives we are left with a physical shell powered by the unknown forces of nature which when exhausted reduces us to so much organic matter devoid of divinity and devoid of eternity. That is why the verse says, "Behold I am placing before you life and death.")

As the discussion progressed a few of the questions directed the conversation to the topic of reincarnation. I was asked why certain bad things happen to children. I explained that the little I understand of G-d's methods involves a quality of timelessness that is beyond our comprehension. Nevertheless, my understanding is that every soul has a mission and that the soul is sent back time and time again until it has completed its individual mission. When all the souls have accomplished their missions G-d will create the World To Come. We believe that most of us contain "pre-owned souls" that have been returned to attempt completion of their missions. Sometimes it requires a complete lifetime for the soul to accomplish its goal and other times it requires but a few moments.

The same young man then asked me, "How do I know what my individual mission is?" At first I felt

like answering that his personal mission was to provide me with material for this week's Rabbi's Notebook, but I didn't; instead, I quoted from the Rambam in Hilchos Mada (the Laws of Character). The Rambam stated that just like there are doctors who are trained to heal the physical body, so too there are doctors who are trained to heal the soul. It is our rabbis and teachers who are the doctors of the soul and if a person desires to know what his or her mission is they must develop a relationship with a teacher / Rebbi. In time the teacher will get to know the student's strengths and weaknesses and be able to help him or her identify their mission.

The importance of having a teacher / mentor is central to Torah. The Mishnah in Avos says, "Make for yourself a Rav - teacher." In fact, the entire transmission of the Oral Law and the validity of the Written Law are predicated on the teacher - student relationship. If not for the unbroken transmission of information - the Mesora, from teacher to student from Moshe to this very day, we would not have Torah and there would not be a Jewish nation.

When did this system start? Did it begin with Revelation and Moshe descending Mt. Sinai bearing "Stone Tablets, the Torah, and the Mitzvos?" Or, did it begin with Avraham teaching his belief and understanding of the Creator to Yitzchak? Or was it Noach who witnessed the destruction and rebuilding of the world who first began teaching G-d's truths to his three sons? Or, did it start with Adam and Chava conveying the story of their creation to their children and grandchildren?

The truth is that Mesora always existed. It began with G-d creating Adam and Chava as fully-grown in mind and body. They awoke that first moment already aware of their mission and the incontrovertible knowledge of G-d's reality. From that first moment and on truth was available to all who desired to know. All anyone had to do was ask. (The Academy of Shem and Ever)

Asking demands humility. A person has to acknowledge that they do not know something and that someone else does know that something before they will seek an answer. It demands that we accept our limitations and acknowledge our responsibilities. It demands that we acknowledge the passage of time and the relatively miniscule part that each of us plays in the unfolding destiny of the universe. It demands that we see our teachers akin to G-d Himself. Just like we must honor and be in awe of G-d so too we must honor and be in awe of our teachers.

The Talmud says, "If your teacher appears to you as an angel of G-d, seek Torah from him. If he does not appear to you as an angel of G-d, do not seek Torah from him." The notion of comparing a teacher to an angel is deliberate. Just as an angel is a mere reflection of G-d's will, so too we must see our teachers as reflections of G-d's will - not only in the manner of their behavior, but in relation to the knowledge they impart to us. A Rebbi teaches what he was taught by his teachers who were the recipients of the knowledge that had been passed to them from teacher to student starting with G-d teaching Moshe! As the Rambam presented in his Thirteen Principles of faith # 7, #8, and #9, G-d gave the entire Torah (Oral and Written) to Moshe, and that Torah is the Torah we study today, and it is the Torah that all who follow us will study till the end of time.

The importance of Mesora to the events of Bereishis, and especially this week's Parsha, is easily seen. Had Yakov conferred with G-d before "hiding Dina" from Eisav's view there was a chance that the centuries of persecution and exile at the hands of Eisav would have never happened.

Had Reuven asked Yakov to explain why he had chosen Bilha's tent as his main residence after the death of Rachel rather than taking things into his own hands, the chances are that Reuven would not have lost his claim on kingship and priesthood.

Had Shimon and Levi first conferred with Yakov regarding their plans for justice and revenge against the city of Shechem rather than taking things into their own hands, the chances are that Yoseph would not have been sold into slavery and the Jews would not have had to go to Egypt.

Each of the sons, like the Forefathers who preceded them, had a mission. Identifying that mission required time, experience, and Yakov. It was incumbent upon the brothers to embrace Yakov's designation as the Chosen One among the Forefathers and learn from him the part each of them would play in the formation of the nation. Doing so would demand extraordinary humility and honesty. Starting in this week's Parsha, the Torah selected key stories from the lives of the Shevatim (Tribes) to illustrate the importance of Mesora and the obligation for students to learn. Granted, teachers have the obligation to teach; however, it is up to each student to seek out the knowledge that will help him or her identify their mission. In the end G-d will hold each of us responsible for having accomplished or not accomplished our mission. G-d can do so because G-d always made sure that there were teachers from whom to learn.

Quick Review: Laws of Chanukah

Friday night 12/19 through Shabbos 12/27. Hallel is said every morning and Al Hanisim is added to the Amidah and the Benching.

1. The Menorah should be lit 1/2 hour after sunset and remain lit for at least 1/2 hr. On Friday the Menorah must be lit before the Shabbos candles and remain lit for at least 90 minutes.
2. Candles should be placed in the Menorah from right to left and lit from left to right.
3. Olive oil or wax candles are acceptable; however, olive oil is preferred. Electric or gas lights are unacceptable.
4. Each family member should light their own Menorah. A wife may light her own (there are differing opinions about whether she should or should not) and, if agreed upon, exempt her husband if he will not be home.
5. The Menorah should be placed in a location where it can be seen by both the family and the public. The best height is at 35" to 40", however safety must be a priority.
6. Brochos should be recited before lighting the Menorah. Talking is prohibited between the Brochos and the lighting.

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