

A DIFFERENT KIND OF FRIEND

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov, and saw no perversity in Yisroel. Hashem his G-d is with him, and the friendship of the King is in him." (23:21)

The commentators translate "teruas melech" as "the friendship of the King", "teruas" being from the word "rayus" - "friendship". Rashi explains the verse as Balaam expressing the futility of any attempt to curse Bnei Yisroel, for Hashem does not scrutinize their iniquity nor criticize them for their shortcomings, even when they provoke Him by maliciously violating His word^[1]. Why would not criticizing a person for his wrongdoing be an expression of friendship? On the contrary, a true friend is not afraid to criticize, for that is the manner in which he expresses his concern for his friend's well-being.

In Parshas Kedoshim we find the commandment "ve'ahavta lera'acha kamocha" - "you should love your friend as you love yourself^[2]." Translating "rayacha" as "neighbor" is incorrect. Rayacha is derived from the word "rayus" - "friendship". From this verse we can derive that in the hierarchy of relationships, love is greater than friendship, for we are commanded to love a person who already is our friend: "ve'ahavta lera'acha". In the last of the Sheva Berachos, the seven blessings established by the Rabbis as part of the wedding ceremony, we thank Hashem for the various levels of relationships which can be attained by the bride and groom. Presumably, we give thanks in ascending order. Here we say "ahava ve'achva shalom verayus" - "love, brotherhood, harmony, and friendship". The implication is that the relationship of friendship transcends that of love. How do we reconcile this apparent contradiction?

In his commentary that introduces Pirkei Avos, the Shmoneh Perakim, the Rambam cites Aristotle who defines various levels of friendship. The most common type are friends with whom a person shares experiences. Although he may enjoy their company, a person still maintains a facade, unwilling to present his vulnerabilities to them, for fear that they may use this information against him. Very rarely, do we find a friend in whom we place our complete trust and for whom we are willing to let down our guard and share our insecurities. This only occurs if we sense that this friend is completely dedicated to our growth and his actions are motivated by his concern for our best interests.

There is no contradiction between the verse in Parshas Kedoshim and the terminology used at the Sheva Berachos. The verse is teaching us that we should learn to love our friends who fall into the first category. The Rabbis bless the married couple that their relationship should transcend from

love to the friendship of the second category.

It is difficult to accept criticism graciously, especially when the criticism emanates from an injured party. The reason for this is that we convince ourselves that the criticism is not being levied because the person cares for us, rather because he is an injured party. This is only true of a friend from the first category. However, if the criticism is given by a person who we know to have our best interests at heart, we can accept that the rebuke is meant to prevent us from harmful behavior. Rashi's interpretation of the verse is thus: It is because of our "rayus" - friendship with Hashem that He does not criticize us for what we have done to Him. Hashem is willing to overlook the hurt that we cause Him. It is only for the damage which we cause ourselves that Hashem rebukes and punishes us, for Hashem's only agenda is our best interests.

1.23:21

2.19:18

"Who has counted the dust of Yaakov..." (23:10)

In his second explanation of this verse, Rashi offers the Midrashic interpretation: Who can count the agricultural mitzvos that Bnei Yisroel perform, for they are so numerous[1]. The Maharal asks why it is particularly the agricultural mitzvos that are drawn to Balaam's attention[2]?

On the third day of creation Hashem instructs that there should be "aytz pri oseh pri" - "fruit trees yielding fruit[3]". However, when the trees are actually created, we find that the verse states "v'aytz oseh pri" - "trees yielding fruit[4]". Rashi comments that Hashem commanded the earth to produce trees which were edible themselves and had the same taste as the fruit that they yielded. However, the earth produced trees which were inedible themselves, but yielded edible fruit. Therefore, when man was cursed for the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Hashem cursed the earth as well: "Accursed is the ground[5,6]". What is the notion of the earth disobeying Hashem's will? Furthermore, why is the punishment of the earth delayed until Adam's punishment?

Clearly, the earth cannot rebel against Hashem's wishes, rather Hashem must have programmed that instead of the earth producing trees in their perfect state, i.e. having the same taste as their fruit, the earth brought forth an imperfect product. The question that must then be addressed is why would Hashem create the illusion that one of His creations rebelled against Him?

Since man is created from the earth, as is verified by his name "Adam" - "from the adama (the ground)[7]", it is the very perception that the ground chose not to follow the will of Hashem that gives man his ability of free choice, the ability to either conform to or rebel against the will of Hashem. Since man's ability to sin stemmed from being created out of the earth, it is only once he does sin that the earth is punished as well. Punishing the earth is a furthering of the illusion that the earth has its independence and the ability to choose not to conform to the will of Hashem.

The ultimate purpose of mitzvos which involve the use of the earth is to take the element in creation that appears to be the most separate from Hashem and has the greatest expression of Hashem distancing Himself from the world, and reconnect it back to Hashem. It is specifically those elements which appear most alienated from Hashem that when connected back to Him reveal His glory in the greatest manner. It is this ability that Bnei Yisroel have to take that which is cursed and turn it into beracha - blessing, i.e. being reconnected back to Hashem, which impacts upon Balaam. Balaam recognizes that Bnei Yisroel view that which is cursed as an opportunity to reveal Hashem's glory, and not as an obstacle. Therefore, ultimately Bnei Yisroel will be impervious to his curses.

1.23:10

2.Gur Arye ibid

3.1:11

4.1:12

5.1:11

6.3:17

7.1:7