

A SPIRITUAL PHYSICAL

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

This dvar Torah was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 186, Shalach Monos and Other Purim Issues. Good Shabbos!

Sanctifying Oneself Through The Physical

The Medrash in this week's parsha says, "Rabbi Yochanan said, G-d only reveals himself to idolaters at night -- a time when people separate from one another -- as it is written 'G-d came to Avimelech in a dream at night' [Bereishis 20:3] or 'G-d came to Bilaam at night' [Bamidbar 22:20]. However, G-d reveals Himself to Jewish prophets during the day, as it is written 'And he sat at the opening of the tent in the heat of the day' [Bereishis 18:1]."

What is the meaning of this Medrash? The Ateres Mordechai explains that this Medrash is telling us a very significant difference between Judaism and other religions. Many religions believe in a basic dichotomy between the physical and spiritual. They believe that if a person really wants to reach the highest levels of spirituality, he must separate himself from physical things, be celibate, become a monk. The more separate a person can become, the more holy he can become.

Judaism teaches us just the opposite. Torah teaches that the highest form of holiness comes through material matters. As the Kotzker Rebbe explains "V'ANSHEI-Kodesh Te'heyu Li" -- holy PEOPLE you shall be to Me. I want you to be both 'holy' and 'people', not holy angels. That is why we believe that a person can sanctify that which is physical. He can take a meal and make it into a Shabbos meal. He can take any act and elevate it to a higher form. That is our goal. "Through all your paths, know Him" [Mishlei 3:6]. By infusing all of our activities -- our eating and sleeping and drinking and work -- with holiness, we can become close to G-d.

This is precisely the meaning of the Medrash. G-d must come to Bilaam the idolater at night, at a time when people are separated from one another and when physical activity is on the wane. Only then can Bilaam deal with spirituality. Otherwise he is not able to deal with the conflict between the spiritual and the physical. But G-d can come to a Jewish prophet, l'havdil, even during the day, when the prophet is occupied with daily activities. Even in the midst of all that, there can be spirituality.

This is a powerful ethical teaching. The essence of a Jew's life is about taking his daily activities -- the accounting and the doctoring and the practicing of law -- and infusing them with a Kedusha [Holiness]. Every act that a person does should be for the sake of Heaven.

Glossary

l'havdil -- to distinguish (between two very different things)

Sources and Personalities

Ateres Mordechai -- Rav Mordechai Rogov, former Rosh Yeshiva in Beis Medrash L'Torah, Skokie, Illinois.

Kotzker Rebbe-- Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859), Poland.

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