

PARSHAS VAYEISHEV

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Vayeishev, 5631

Here we are again. It is Shabbos, and the Sfas Emes is speaking to his chassidim. Full-time learning - i.e., kollel -- is not an option for them. First, they are too poor to afford it. Second, I have been told that Gerrer Chassidus does not believe in kollel for all, forever. This approach should not come as a surprise after last week's ma'amar of the Sfas Emes. As we saw there, the Sfas Emes does not view our activities (our "asiya") during the week ("yemei ha'ma'aseh") negatively, as a curse. On the contrary, he sees our asiya as having the potential for positive spiritual value. Thus, in the Gerrer approach, after marriage, most men go to work.

But these people face a daunting task: How to suffuse their lives with kedusha (sanctity) without full-time learning? A properly experienced Shabbos can be a great help in dealing with that difficult assignment. For this reason, the Sfas Emes's ma'amar often discusses Shabbos and its potential for ruchniyus (spirituality). For a reason that will soon become apparent, on this Shabbos, parshas Vayeishev, the Sfas Emes dealt with Shabbos not as a collateral topic, but rather as his central theme.

The Sfas Emes begins by noting the linguistic link between the words VayeiSheV and SHaBBos. (This link is obvious once the Sfas Emes pointed it out. But how come I never noticed it until he showed it to me?) The Sfas Emes is not playing a word game here. Rather, the link in language has alerted him to a connection in meaning -- in this case, a connection that is telling us something about the substance of Shabbos. Namely, that we should view Shabbos as an opportunity to ('nisyaSHeiV') -- i.e., to 'settle into', 'to return' to our shores (our 'root'): to our primal selves, including our relationship with HaShem.

The Sfas Emes goes on to tell us that Shabbos is (or can be) a time for "habitul lashores"; that is, a time for deleting our personal agenda, and replacing it with the desire to do retzon HaShem (HaShem's will)... The Sfas Emes proceeds to develop this line of thought. He does so by quoting the first paragraph of Medrash Rabba on Vayeishev. The key phrase here is: " kinuso veki'nos banav hitzilo." (That is, Ya'akov Avinu's "kinus" and the "kinus" of his progeny saved him from Esav.) Some commentaries understand "kinus" as meaning tefila (prayer). Other authorities -- including the Sfas Emes -- understand "kinuso" as meaning "coming together."

A question. According to the authorities who understand "kinuso" as "coming together", who is

coming together with whom? The mainline answer is: Ya'akov and his sons came together. That is, Yaakov Avinu and the Shevatim put aside whatever difficulties they may have had, and united to confront Esau. By contrast, the Sfas Emes reads the Medrash very differently.. As noted, he understands it as telling us that what saved Ya'akov Avinu was his coming together with his shoresh -- i.e., with his primal, true self..

'Coming together with one's primal, true self' may seem unremarkable, unimportant, and irrelevant in life. But consider the opposite state -- one in which a person is not all together -- at one -- with his/her self, with nature, and with HaShem. That state is called 'alienation'. And alienation is the name used to characterize many of the individual and social problems of today's world.

The Sfas Emes buttresses this perspective by citing a phrase (from the Zohar Hakadosh) that Nusach Sefard recites just before ma'ariv on leil Shabbos: "Beshabbos is'yachadas beraza de'echad." (That is, on Shabbos, she -- Knessess Yisroel -- comes together with the secret of HaShem's yichud (unity) . For, HaShem's yichud is in fact a secret. Note how few people are aware of it.)

The text in the Zohar continues: 'Ve'ahl yedei zeh, kohl dinin mis'abrin minei.' That is, by coming together with our true nature - i.e., when we recognize that we are created in the image of HaShem, and what that implies for the way we should live our lives -- all harsh judgements depart and leave us alone. And as the Sfas Emes points out, induced by Ya'akov Avinu's "kinus," Eisav did in fact depart, and Ya'akov was saved.

The Sfas Emes moves on now to another theme. As we have seen, a word in the parsha's first pasuk , "Vayeishev", called to the Sfas Emes's mind the word "Shabbos ", and triggered a discussion of that topic. Similarly, a word in the parsha's second pasuk leads the Sfas Emes (and hence, us) to a new line of thought. Which word is the trigger in the second pasuk? "Yosef", which, translated literally, means: " he will increase" . What will "he increase"? The Sfas Emes tells us: "Shabbos"! Thus, the association of words just noted leads the Sfas Emes to a brief discussion of "tosefes Shabbos".

What is "tosefes Shabbos"? The term refers to the practice of bringing Shabbos in early -- before the time that halacha mandates. The Sfas Emes commends this practice. As he phrases it: 'Vezeh avoda gedola, le'havi kedushas hashabbos toch yemei ha'ma'aseh mamash': ("This is a great avoda -- to bring the sanctity of Shabbos into weekday time." [1]).

How can a person bring about such a transformation? The Sfas Emes answers: a person's yearning and love for Shabbos can give him/her simcha (joy). And that joy gives a person the power to turn weekday time into Shabbos time.

A fair reaction at this point may be: "The idea that simcha can have this marvelous power sounds wonderful. But how does it work in the real world?" I say: 'a fair reaction' because the Sfas Emes always deals with the (real) real world. Hence, the question: how does this extraordinary process of transforming weekday time into Shabbos actually operate?

Apparently this question also bothered the Sfas Emes. How do we know? Because he provided an answer. He does so by quoting a pasuk in Mishlei (27:19): 'Kamayim ha'pahnim la'pahnim, kein leiv ha'ahdam la'ahdam'. (ArtScroll: "As water reflects back a face to a face, so one's heart is reflected back to him by another.") Thus, if we prepare for Shabbos with simcha, HaShem reciprocates with simcha toward us. And HaShem's joy -- likened to the joy of a choson after the chupa (Tehilim, 19: 6) -- gives us the extraordinary power needed to transform weekday time into Shabbos.

A take-home lesson? One possibility comes to mind immediately. Go back to the beginning of this ma'amar, where I mentioned the difficult task that these chassidim face. They must try to live a life of kedusha even though they are out in the world, without full-time Torah learning. As you probably noted, we face the same challenge. For most of the people who receive the Sfas Emes e-mails are also out in the world. Indeed, we are even more vulnerable than the chassidim; for they have sources of protection that most of us lack. The sources of protection unique to chassidim include: tight social ties, which culminate in reverence for the Rebbe, shelita; and the levush (chassidic attire), which can help keep them out of unsavory environments.

Despite these advantages, the Sfas Emes made special efforts to emphasize the potential of a well-lived Shabbos to infuse his chassidim with kedusha. The take-home lesson is clear: that we focus on Shabbos as an avenue to kedusha. This may involve making the effort on Shabbos to come together with our true nature - i.e., to try to view ourselves as agents of HaShem's will.

That notion may initially seem strange to us. We live in a society that glorifies self-expression -- to the point of narcissism. In such a social context, the idea of subordinating our will to anyone else's will -- even HaShem's will -- may even strike us as morally repugnant. But the Sfas Emes is obviously on firm hashkofo ground when he commends this doctrine to our attention. Hopefully, by heeding his counsel, we will experience Shabbos not as a day to catch up on our sleep, but rather as Shabbos is supposed to be: 'yom menucha u'kedusha' -- a day of repose and sanctity.

1. Fellow-learners who remember last week's Sfas Emes may find his commendation of tosefes Shabbos this week confusing. For, in parshas Vayishlach, the Sfas Emes (echoing Chazal in Medrash Raba) spoke with approbation of Ya'akov Avinu's doing melacha until the very last moment before Shabbos. So you may ask: which practice is right -- tosefes Shabbos or working until the last moment?

I suggest that the answer is: both. That is, one approach may be right for one person and the other approach suits someone else. Or, one practice may be right for a person at one time or at one phase of his life. But as circumstances change, so too should his/her practice change. We live in a complex world; but with the help of HaShem, we should be able to handle it.

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