

Nourishment for the Neshama

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Reflections on Elul - Paying our debts

In Rabbi Cohen's shiur (Aug 21 2007 on Naaleh.com = notes on this blog) introducing Mesillas Yesharin, he delineates revenge as the dividing line between the animal soul and the tzelem elokim. He defines those who are involved with revenge as lowly and animalistic. Instead, we are to say thank you to those who hurt, insult and damage us, and this indicates our refinement and identifies us from our tzelem elokim.

This is not to be dismissed. The more I think about it, the more urgently I realized how central this is.

Avraham Aveinu's midda of chesed is our beginning. Avraham recognized Hashem and that our purpose is to serve Hashem and emulate His middos. On his merits, we are still here, and we, through our acts of chesed, we replenish ourselves and our world by using our free will to choose to attach to the heritage established by Avraham. Should we, with our free will, choose otherwise, we hang loose like a broken branch swinging from the tree in the wind. To stay spiritually attached to the tree, we are instructed to choose chesed and say thank you to Hashem when we are wronged or injured through the acts of others.

In his shiur on Elul, Rabbi Mordechai Miller from Gateshead (Talmud of Rabbi Dessler and Rebbe to Rabbi Akiva Tatz) discusses how it is hardly a coincidence that we read Shoftim in Elul. Hashem Who is righteous loves justice. Rabbi Miller helps us understand that, although we would much prefer Hashem to be a bale chesed with us, overlooking our faults, not exacting punishment, in fact, it is an act of kindness from Hashem that He treats us justly in order that we may receive the reward for our mitzvohs in the world to come. He explains that we cannot receive any of our reward until our debt is paid. That is, it is not like a cut in salary – instead of \$10 million we only get \$8 million because our averahs were subtracted out. We get \$0 until we pay our debt.

Rabbi Miller explains that when a righteous person pays off his debt, he feels joyous. In the month of Elul, when the King is in the field, he instructs us to receive our suffering and losses and frustrations, handle them appropriately, and realize with happiness that we are paying our debt for our inevitable errors and averahs so that Hashem can give us a chasima v'kasima tova on Rosh Hashana. We will, through these sufferings in Elul, have paid our debts. And, if we handle our sufferings and losses in a manner that facilitates further spiritual growth, we also acquire merits in the process. Every moment can be a gift.

But when we are in a time of stress, loss, suffering, damage and the like, we do not feel like saying thank you – we feel like getting back at the person who inflicted it. Sue! Complain! Speak lashon hara! Stab him in the back! Take! All good advice from our best friend and lawyer, the ever-present yetzer hara, who surely makes much more sense than saying thank you Hashem. And there in is the fulcrum, the central point, the decision, the behira, our eternity, our identity and our future. In that subconscious emotional moment where we want to throttle the one in front of us lies eternity and connection and significant self-definition and self-esteem. Which one do we choose? Stand up for ourselves at any cost OR Thank you Hashem?

We feel lack or loss. Surely we can protect our boundaries in loving ways. The issue becomes – do we violate someone else's boundaries? Rabbi Cohen's shiur triggers the thought that we can never get so wrapped up in the story line that we forget to connect to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. We are, in fact, obligated to Hashem. What are we obligated to? The mitzvahs are connections. We are obligated to connection and service – and why are we so obligated? By pursuing connection, we fulfill Hashem's purpose in Creation – to give us reward. We are in the corridor where we earn our eternal reward. Rabbi Miller tells us to be happy when we pay our debt to Hashem in Elul because in this way, He is able to give us eternal reward and a chasima v'kasima tova. We suffer. We have loss. What are we permitted to do? Where do we draw the line?

We draw the line at not hurting others for revenge, for then we hurt ourselves. Let's consider this from the

famous Bar Kamsa story. Rebbetzin Heller's in depth analysis of this story (July 1 2007) concludes with the following:

"However, when a person relates to someone on a physical and material level, they are going to end up with Kamisa (grasping, taking) and I will tell you why. The physical world is really limited. I am sure you observed this when you were a young child, that if you have two waffles and you give one away now you only have one. So the more materialistic and less spiritual people are, the more inevitably they see everyone else as a competitor. As soon as you see everyone else as a competitor, me against them, that means I am not them, we are separate and we are at each man for himself and that is the source of sinas chinum., where we distance from a person because we despise them, not because we don't like what they have done, but because we see them as a threat, a threat to something that we hold precious...could be our ego, or something material. But either way the source of it is always not seeing the other person's spirituality . There is no king of locusts because a king would gather them all together by catching them collectively without division. The reason we are held accountable for our government is because they are our collective voice. Locusts can't govern because each one is going out for himself. So this is all part of the name kamsa. The person kamsa, the friend, this was his essence, this was his personhood. The host, our unnamed host, was friends with him and that tells us where the host was holding and where all the beginning of the degradation started and where the sinas chinum also started. You can't have two opposing forces in co-existence without relationships to each other. So the achdus of Yerushalayim, where everyone saw what they have in common with everyone else on a spiritual basis, can't co-exist with the midda of kamsa (grasping and taking)

What we still have to talk about is how does this affect the rest of the story, - we don't know what this has to do with Reb Zachariah, how this affects the generation, and other things that we still have to find out. But in the meantime we are beginning to understand what sinas chinum means and the sort of ahavas chinum that we have to try to acquire to enter a situation of geulah – geulah means bringing the Shechina back - that is what geulah is. Being who we could be. The first of the three components of being who we could be, of geulah, is the restoration of Shechina, which comes through achdus and the rejection of the midda of kamisa (taking, grasping.)"

Rabbi Cohen's shiur started with the last line of Koheles, which talks about what man could be – the spiritual heights and ideals of man's potential. He uses this to explain by way of introduction sefer Mesilas Yesharim:

"Shlomo HaMelech tells us what is going to be in the future? What is going to be with this world of ours. Shlomo HaMelech tells us I will tell you what is going to be with this world of ours. There is going to come a time that things will be good. Everyone will listen to Hakodosh Baruch Hu, and this means not just hearing, I hear You. No. I understand You and I feel You. Not only will we hear HKB's words and all the ten commandments and mitzvahs of the Torah. Not only will we hear You, I understand it, my mind will understand it, AND my heart will feel it. I will feel the words. This is the meaning – the entire world and creation will hear and do. We hear, we will feel it, in the mind and heart. When we stood at Sinai, we saw it ..it was not hefker. A world without an owner, shapeless. The pasuk is telling us, the future will be for mankind, that we will fear HKB and observe His commandments. This should be the end of the sentence but there are three more words...not only will the world come to recognize the Creator of the world, this is what man is...what man really is. Not that he will develop into something that he is not. This is what we should have always been, this is what we are, to listen to HKB and have yiras shemayim. "

"This introduction to Mesilas Yesharim, which tells us that there are gates of righteousness, of ethics of mussar, it directs us how to live a daily life. He tells us in the first chapter the foundation of chassidis, which means to follow the law to the fullest. You know what chassidus means? A kind person who goes above and beyond the law. The foundation of chassidus means nachas ruach, HKB is part of us. We should all strive for it."

A kind person who goes above and beyond the law. That is how we give Hashem nachas ruach. We stay connected when we are kind and avoid revenge [giving up our anger, making our ego smaller, accepting Hashem's Will as our Will].

Rabbi Tatz in his shiur on the 13 principles tells us that a non-Jew who builds a beautiful world here, who is honest and good, does not necessarily build eternal life. His reward is the beautiful world he builds in olam hazeh. To earn eternal life, he must have the intent HERE to serve Hashem and the Noahide laws. Again, connection is from intention to serve Hashem and follow Torah.

We stay connected to Hashem through emptying ourselves of ego and utilizing what Hashem gives us to serve Him.

When we are kind, we give to others, and when we give to others, we are emulating Hashem, and when we emulate Hashem, we can unite with Him in the next world AND FEEL that unity as a reward. If Hashem is the giver and we are the takers, being united with Hashem (Who is only a Giver) will not generate a rewarding feeling because a giver and a taker are opposites and we will not have acquired what we need spiritually to experience the reward. We have to engrave being a giver on our souls so that we have a means of receiving the FEELING of reward. Giving up anger (which stems from ego) and revenge (which is a primary animalistic expression of anger) are the central issue.

With this in mind, let's replay the scene of the Bar Kamsa story utilizing the principle of kindness and consciousness of two worlds.

The host invites Kamsa. Bar Kamsa comes in. The host wants to send him away. Bar Kamsa begs to stay rather than be humiliated, offering to pay for the whole feast. Instead of turning him away, the host thinks to himself, "Thank you Hashem. You sent my enemy here to diminish my pleasure at this party - you sent me this suffering, so that I can repay a debt to you. Since it is Your Will that my joy is diminished because of his presence, then I choose to understand it as a kaparah to cleanse me of unintentional wrongs I have performed in my service to you." And the host says, "You may stay." Bar Kamsa no longer seeks revenge and the Second Temple is not destroyed.

Or let's replay it utilizing the principle of not taking revenge:

The host invites Kamsa. Bar Kamsa comes instead. The host wants to send him away. Bar Kamsa begs to stay rather than be humiliated, offering to pay for the whole feast. The host, finding Bar Kamsa's presence some kind of a threat, insists that he leave. Bar Kamsa now thinks "Thank you Hashem. You sent me this humiliation, this suffering, as a way to repay my debts to you. I am very hurt. Please protect me from my negative urges right now to strike back at the host, the "stick" you used to strike me, because I know everything you send is good and my connection with YOU is my primary goal. If I give in to these negative urges, it will break my connection with You and I will be overwhelmed by the yetzer hara and do wrong in Your eyes. Help me to empty myself of this insult and become a vessel that You instead can fill with holiness, that I may emulate Your middos and thereby bring light into this world. Help me to rise above my limitations and bear this insult without revenge." Can you imagine the power of that? The Second Temple would be standing.

And now, in our era, we continue to suffer from this golus. We are in exile, sinas chinum is rampant and lashon hara is the revenge we take, embarrassing others who we feel wronged us. What would happen if we traded this in – what if we try "Thank You Hashem for allowing me to pay my debt to you."

We are obligated to connection (613 of them) so that we can fulfill the purpose of Creation (receiving eternal reward.) Say "Thank you Hashem" at times of suffering. Our suffering is the payment of our debts to Hashem for our inevitable mistakes and averahs. Choosing a kind way to protect our boundaries when we suffer, or choosing to say tehillim or give tzedakah, connects us to Hashem and replenishes the account established by Avraham from which we benefit today. We pay our debts and we acquire merits in the process. And most importantly, we imprint giving upon our souls – giving to others, serving Hashem – and that imprint, that giving which becomes tattooed on our soul, that example of rising above our limitations towards holiness, will serve as the channel through which we are capable of experiencing our reward for all eternity, the pleasure of attachment to the One without Limits, the Holy One Blessed Be He.