

Nourishment for the Neshama

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Reflections on Human Nature – Ahavas Yisrael as a Trump Card

On what merits will we be redeemed from this golus? It is said that we will be redeemed because of the merits of our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov but also on our desire for kedusha.

For the purposes of this essay, kedusha means rising above our physical, earthly limitations in order to bring into this world the Divine Will, both in mitzvahs and in emulating His Yud Gimel middos. A desire for kedusha means that the desire for the resulting relationship with Hashem becomes our primary motivation in order that we may throughout our day experience this source of great joy (an actual experiential joy).

We have free will – do we, with our free will, choose kedusha? Or are we flooded by the demands of every day life to a point where the flood has or has almost extinguished the flame inside our own private mizbeach?

What “floats your boat? Is it succeeding and feeling mastery in achievement oriented daily pursuits? If so, are we expending more of our holy energy on what, in the end, is a sophisticated game of life than on what Chazal tell us is our purpose here? Are we concerned that our wisdom and our judgments be seen as right and true or are we concerned that with our wisdom we are capable of bringing in the wisdom and middos of the Highest Consciousness? Do we feel strength in connection to a group of like-minded powerful people (and fear of being rejected) or do we feel strength from connection to Hashem and being small and beloved in His eyes?

The goal of this essay is to suggest that we all take up pursuing a desire for kedusha as a daily involvement, believing that we can develop a joyful relationship with Hashem through mitzvahs and emulating His middos, a relationship for its own sake, but knowing that thereby we will also be acquiring merits and eternity. This is ongoing work on an infinite path.

Many people have a favorite game. When I was young, my dad loved baseball. I remember sitting on his lap and watching Yankee games – I knew the names of the players, the number on their uniform, all the rules of the game. It was one of the main ways to be a part of my father's life. I did it for the relationship and I still like baseball.

Those early memories are the reason that I am still interested in the World Series playoffs. I can picture the baseball diamond, follow the radio announcer's descriptions of the game, and feel the excitement. Wow. A nice distraction. Yet I hesitate to listen to the game because I fear it will strengthen the part of my soul that craves satisfaction from this world activities rather than the part of my soul that craves closeness to Hashem and holiness. Ultimately, I want to feel excitement and interest in activities that deepen my relationship to Hashem – mitzvahs and emulating His middos.

As a Baalas Teshuva, it has taken me many years to acquire a taste for closeness to Hashem. But I believe I have an inkling of it at times. And, even when I don't have the joy of feeling close to Hashem, I have the memory of the smattering moments when I felt connected – a sense of shelamos, of joy, of being small and beloved in Hashem's arms. At those rare moments, I have a perspective on my physicality that I believe is healthy – a temporal existence that allows me time and gives me opportunity to attach to what is eternal.

What is so amazing though is how easily a moment of fear or anger can cloud the pathway to that immense pleasure. Human nature. We all have a yetzer hara, an evil inclination. One day, when the Moshiach comes, the yetzer hara will be no more and we will no longer have the opportunity to press against it and grow. But now we do. And every moment we are aware of its interference, we can say I want to rise above it, to overcome it and ask Hashem to help us. And He will. Doing so is, in my opinion, the pre-eminent pursuit of happiness, something that I want to occupy my time at every moment.

The key is that we have to want to overcome (and not want) what the yetzer hara tells us is the greatest pleasure – power, control, revenge, desire, etc. If I have any doubt that the greatest pleasure is the sense of closeness to Hashem, if I can't remember that, what will keep me from pursuing the seemingly logical steps that the yetzer hara lures us with? After all the yetzer hara sounds more like our best friend than our mortal enemy, especially when we see that “everyone is doing it,” and that, in a culture where externalities are defining who we are more and more, the inner self is quite diminished in our own eyes. Our subsequent sins, heaven forfend, may even look like mitzvahs to us! But they cover up our holiness and we are, in reality, cutoff from the most pleasurable experience of life, closeness to Hashem and the sense of blessing that comes from bringing in shefa and from doing actions that are pleasing to Hashem.

How can we choose to pursue kadosh? Each person is an individual and has an individual answer. There were twelve tribes because no one tribe could adequately represent all the many facets of Hashem and His attributes. Together, we are Klal Yisrael. There is no one way that is right. There is merely a Torah-dic way to process through our free willed choices.

Here are a few questions:

1. Do I de-humanize people and objectify them for my own purposes?
2. Am I considering my eternal self when I make choices? Am I taking into primary consideration the part of me that will experience the consequences for eternity rather than the part of me that is here to help me accomplish my mission?
3. Am I playing games with people for my own gain or do I truly see them as made in the image of Hashem and treat them as such – giving to them, treating them with Hashem's Yud Gimel middos?
4. Do I feel a connection to people and to all things in this world as having the same root source, the one and only Hashem? (Ahavas Yisrael)

We all have a yetzer hara. We will until the Moshiach comes. Yet we all have a tzelem elokimas well. When we look at each other and see only the yetzer hara, we are missing the most precious thing about every person – Hashem loves every single one of us and we are connected, one body with many limbs and organs. Our yetzer hara would have us think that we can do something to one person that we are not doing to ourselves and all of us. That is simply not true. We can choose to see what we have in common and how that is truly everything. We love each other even though we all have yetzer haras and are struggling with this work. That is Ahavas Yisrael.

So, the next time we are frustrated, angry, feeling powerless, upset, or any other negative feeling driving us to “take action”, if we remember that everything is happening for our ultimate growth and development (to rectify us, to bring us closer to Hashem), we will no longer feel the need to be upset with the messengers Hashem used to bring the matter to our attention. Suffering strips away all the externalities that can cover over our neshamas.

Instead, let's remember the joy of closeness and ask Hashem to help us rise above our initial reactions and rise upward in our soul, soothing us as we re-gain a sense of being small and beloved in His Arms. What mitzvah can I do? Which of Hashem's Yud Gimel Middos might I emulate here? Which message of the

yetzer hara will I be turning away from (indignation, jealousy, desire, insult) by turning toward Hashem?
What action can I take that will concretize my choice to rise above my natural inclinations in pursuit of kedusha?

May Hashem help me to keep the fire on my mizbeach burning.