

Nourishment for the Neshama

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Stop the World I Want to Get Off!

"True good exists only in Gd. His wisdom therefore decreed that the nature of this true benefaction be His giving created things the opportunity to attach themselves to Him to the greatest degree possible for them. Therefore even though created things cannot emulate Gd's perfection in their own right, the fact that they can be attached to Him allows them to partake of it, since they can be considered part of Gd's perfection as a result of their association with Him. They can thus derive pleasure from that true good to the greatest degree possible for them. The purpose of all that was created was therefore to bring into existence a creature who could derive pleasure from Gd's own good, in a way that would be possible for it.

Gd's wisdom, however, decreed that for such good to be perfect, the one enjoying it must be its master. He must be one who has earned it for himself, and not one associated with it accidentally and without reason. In a way, this can be said to partially resemble Gd's own perfection, at least to the degree that this is possible. Gd is perfect because of His intrinsic nature, and not without cause. His true essence makes perfection imperative and precludes any fault...

...When this creature earns perfection, it is fit to become drawn close to its Creator by virtue of resembling Him. Besides this, however, through its very earning of perfection, it becomes drawn to Him continually – until ultimately, its earning of perfection and its bonding in closeness to Him are all one condition." Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (RAMCHAL), Derech Hashem, Chapter 2 (1) (2) and (3) page 39

Every second of our lives is a free will decision, an opportunity to use our independent free willed choice to bring Hashem's perfection into the world through our thoughts speech and deed. We experience our world as full of adversity and suffering of innumerable and sometimes immeasurable pain, and therefore it looks like we are "winning" when we have comfort and luxury and are beating back the apparent suffering. What the Ramchal is explaining is that we do not leave the world of adversity by seeking comfort and luxury and tranquility. In fact, we don't even begin the journey toward the most pleasant existence we can possibly have, the greatest pleasure that there is (i.e. to be connected and part of Gd's perfection) unless we reframe the suffering we see and subdue our thoughts and emotions about what is happening enough to find the spiritual doorway that he is describing.

Rabbi Nivin shared a great story about the Rambam's teacher to explain. The Rambam asked his teacher what was the greatest pleasure he experienced in his life? The Rabbi answered him by telling him about a boat journey he took. He did not have the funds for a ticket and in those days a person could ride for free in the cargo area of the ship. The Rabbi did so and on the top deck, where the paying passengers were, someone chose to relieve himself over the side of the ship, thinking it would just go into the sea. The wind however, blew it onto the lower deck and the Rabbi got drenched with the waste. He told the Rambam that he had been working a lifetime on the midda of anger, and this experience brought out his anger to such a degree as never before; however, he was finally able to rise above it and to experience a great pleasure in doing so. He told the Rambam that this moment was the most pleasurable moment of his life.

The reason that we do not experience these events as pleasurable is because our thoughts and emotions go back and forth dwelling on the suffering itself. Often, heaven forbid, we even react with violence and anger, inflicting pain and executing judgments on the ones apparently inflicting the suffering. The Ramchal is telling us that we should reframe our use of our free will and intelligence to see that when there is adversity, it is an opportunity, a golden ticket, the price we pay to become like Gd Himself (we are made in the Divine Image and contain the ability to bring out His 13 attributes of mercy)! Which of Gd's attributes of mercy and love can I bring to this situation? How can I be His emissary – what can I think, what can I do, that will align me with His Will and His Perfection such that by my emulating it or conforming to it I become part of it and therefore able to experience the pleasure of being close with Him and one with Him?

Every present moment we are enabled and empowered to reframe our experiences and add this question to our day. Our suffering does not go away, but by re-directing our thoughts toward finding the doorway

to connection, we properly use our energy to draw closer in thought and deed and thereby experience pleasure (that transcends the suffering, an added layer of pleasure knowing we are doing what is good and right in Hashem's eyes), and we build our eternity as well. Hashem is Elokai, His name that means judgment. That is His role, not ours. It is for us to remember His 13 Attributes of mercy as He showers them upon us (i.e. forgiveness, patience, tolerance, overlooking, compassion, and more – see Tomer Devorah) and to connect and bring these into our moments. If instead we are harsh with our children, our spouses, our parents, our co-workers or our friends or acquaintances, we actually add a layer of concealment to this important message about our free will – we cause depression, trauma, stress and more which may overpower and terrify the still small voice searching to transcend before it even knows what it is searching for! We become part of the problem instead of part of the solution, obscuring His presence from the world, even though we think we are doing what is just and right according to the morality and ethical standards we may hold ourselves to! Each person has to use their free willed choice to find transcendence. That is Gd's will and how He created us and this world.

We are fortunate to live in a country that gives us freedom of religion and freedom of thought. Let us utilize our freedom to yearn to be like Hashem's attributes of mercy and to bring His qualities to our daily choices. When we do, we truly stop the world and, although we don't get off, we transcend!

May every effort we make, no matter how incremental, bring us a degree of holiness that Hashem will find pleasing and may we be zocheh to see the redemption speedily!