

מתוקים מדבש

*Dei'ah, Binah and Haskel on the weekly parashah*

RABBI MICHA BERGER

Bemachashavah Techilah

Judaism has numerous words for particular ideals; there is the *tzadik*, the *chasid*, the *ba'al teshuvah*, etc... But does it have a word for idealism itself – for the inherent value of a burning desire to pursue an ideal?

This question is quite important. If there is no word for idealism in *lashon hakodesh*, neither in biblical Hebrew nor rabbinic idiom, how can we argue that Judaism has such a value?

I think we can identify such a term. And our story starts with R' Saadia Gaon's analysis of laughter.

I

It happened that Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar Ben Azarya, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Akiva were walking along the road and heard the sound of the Roman masses from Pelitus, one hundred and twenty mil away. They began crying, but Rabbi Akiva laughed.

They asked him, "Why do you laugh?" He said to them, "And you, why do you cry?"

They said to him, "These pagans, who bow to images and bring offerings to idolatry, dwell in security and tranquility, whereas we – the house [that is] the footstool of our God has been burned by fire. Shall we not cry?"

He said to them, "It is for that reason that I laugh. If this is how it is for those who violate His will, then all the more so for those who perform His will!

One time, they were ascending to

Jerusalem. When they reached Har HaTzofim [the first point from which one can see the Temple Mount] they rent their garments. When they reached the Har HaBayis, they saw a fox leaving the [site of] the kodesh hakodashim [the innermost sanctum of the Temple]. They began crying, but Rabbi Akiva laughed.

They said to him, "Why do you laugh?" He responded, "Why do you cry?"

They said to him, "The site about which it is written: 'The foreigner who approaches shall be put to death' (Numbers 1) – now foxes walk there, and we shall not cry?"

He said to them, "Therefore I laugh. For it is written, 'I called upon reliable witnesses – Uriyah the Kohen, and Zechariah ben Yevarecheihu' (Yishayahu 8:2). What does Uriyah have to do with Zechariah – Uriyah [lived] during the First Temple [period], whereas Zechariah [lived] during the Second Temple [era]! Rather, the verse hinges the prophecy of Zechariah on the prophecy of Uriyah. In [a prophecy of] Uriyah it is written, 'Therefore, because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field,' (Michah 3) and in [a prophecy of] Zechariah it is written, 'There shall yet be old men and women in the squares of Jerusalem.' (Zechariah 7) So long as Uriyah's prophecy was unfulfilled, I feared lest Zechariah's prophecy will not be fulfilled. Now that Uriyah's prophecy has been fulfilled, it is certain that Zechariah's prophecy will be fulfilled."

They said to him: "Akiva, you have consoled us; Akiva, you have consoled us." (Makkos 24a-25b)

When Rabbi Eliezer became ill, his students went to visit him. He said to them, "There is great anger in the world" [referring to Hashem's giving power to the Romans]. They started to cry, except Rabbi Akiva who laughed. They said to him, "Why do you laugh?" He answered them, "And why do you cry?" They said to him, "Is it possible that one sees the scroll of the Torah in pain, and we do not weep?" He responded, "It is for that reason that I laughed. As long as I saw my rebbe, that his wine did not turn sour, his flax did not get smitten, his oil did not spoil, and honey did not crystallize, I could say that perhaps ch"v rebbe had received his world [now, not in the world-to-come]. But now that I see that rebbe suffers, I am happy." [Rabbi Eliezer] said to [Rabbi Akiva], "Did I neglect any matter of the Torah [for which I now suffer]?" [Rabbi Akiva] said to him, "Our rebbe, you taught us, 'For there is no righteous man on earth who does good without sinning.' (Koheles 7:20)" (Sanhedrin 101a)

There are three famous stories of the tears shortly after the fall of the Temple in which R' Akiva laughs: upon hearing Romans on the attack miles away, upon seeing foxes running in and out amongst the ruins on the Temple Mount, and when he witnessed R' Eliezer's suffering from disease. And in all three cases the Sages ask why, how can he laugh at such an apparently inappropriate time?

II

R' Saadia Gaon defines laughter as the reaction people have to a sudden realization of an underlying truth. What qualifies as a punchline to a joke is a sentence that forces you to recast and reassess how you understood the story until then. The need for suddenness is why timing is so crucial to comedy.

And so, when R' Akiva suddenly saw a truth, he laughed.

R' Saadia adds that "*simchah*" is the kind of happiness most related laughter.

According to R' Samson Raphael Hirsch's usual etymological rules¹, *\שמחה* would be a more intensive/active form of *\שמח*. The latter, R' Hirsch tells us, is the root from which we get "*sheim*" (to name). Understanding how something's underlying reality fits its relationship is comparable to naming it.

Ben Zoma tells us, "*Eizehu ashir? Hasamei'ach bechelko*. – Who is wealthy? One who is *samei'ach* with his lot."² The *ashir* is happy with what he has because he knows why he has what he does, and why he does not have what he does not. He understands why **his** lot is distinctly his.

"*Yesharim*" (straight ones), Rav Saadia Gaon continues, are those who see through to this inner truth, who head straight (*yashar*) for it without taking detours or compromises. Which is why "*Or zaru'ah latzadik, ulyishrei leiv simchah* – A light is sown for the righteous, and *simchah* for the *yesharim* of heart."³ *Mitzvos* are the means: "*Pekudei Hashem yesharim, mesamchei leiv...* – The appointments of Hashem are *yesharim*, they bring *simchah* to the heart..."⁴ The *yashar* sees *mitzvos* not as duties, but as

pekudim, Hashem appointing him to a higher role.

"*Ivdu es Hashem besimchah* – Serve Hashem in/with *simchah*"⁵ is to serve Him while keeping the ideal in focus, a call to idealism. The person who is *oveid besimchah* is *yashar*. He not only performs mitzvos, he not only does so with the contentment of knowing that he is accomplishing a higher purpose, but he is an *eved*, fully committed and subservient to that ideal.

"Yesharim" (straight ones), Rav Saadia Gaon continues, are those who see through to the inner truth.

There are three steps: the *yashar* works toward the underlying truth, even if he is still struggling and searching for what that truth is. With the perception of the truth comes *simchah bechelko*, the happiness of knowing one's role in life and of everything that occurs to him. Last, there is the single-minded pursuit of the *eved*, the person who lives only for that goal.

II

For three of the four occurrences of the *alef-beis* in *Megillas Eichah*, the acrostics in chapters 2 through 4, the letter *peh* precedes *ayin*. Why?

Chazal relate this to the first calamity of Tisha B'av, the *meraglim* (the spies sent by the exodus generation to Israel). They put their *peh* before their *einayim*, their mouths before their eyes. But the *meraglim* did not lie; they truly described what they actually saw. There really were giants and strong walled cities and abnormally large fruit, etc...

What they lacked was *simchah* – knowledge of the underlying truth. Without that, the *meraglim* reconstructed what they could from the evidence and reached a conclusion totally opposite from reality. They saw,

but were blind.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the *navi*. He can see the inner truth. The Sifri writes⁶ that Moshe Rabbeinu alone was able to say "*Zeh hadavar*" (this is the idea); other prophets only had "*Koh amar Hashem*" ("like this", not "this", G-d said). Moshe's special prophecy was that of "*Moshe avdi* – My servant Moshe", the one who was *oveid besimcha*. But any prophecy can only come when the person is *besimchah*.

This was a reason that Yitzchak asked Eisav to bring him game before blessing him, so that the *berachah* could be spoken prophetically. The ability to see "*koh*" is from a position of *simchah*.

Which brings us to *Parashas Devarim's*⁷ and *Megillas Eichah's* cry "*Eichah?* – How can it be?" which the Gemara relates back to G-d's call to Adam, "*Ayekah?* – Where are you?" Hashem did not ask Adam only for his location, but also "Where is your '*koh*', your 'like this', the ideal you pursue?" Without "*zeh devar Hashem*", without even "*koh amar Hashem*" there can be no *simchah*, no *ish yashar*. Only the *eichah* of those who refuse to see. The *peh* precedes the *ayin*. The sin of the *meraglim* survived down to the generation of Yirmiyahu.

"*Mishenichnas Adar marbim besimchah* – when Adar enters, we increase our *simchah*." Adar, the month of Purim, of seeing Hashem in the mundane, will necessarily cause an increase of *simchah*. "*Mishenichnas Av mema'atim besimchah* – when Av enters, we reduce *simchah*." Av is a month of *aveilus*, of morning. *Aveilus* is being in a state of *aval*, of "but". A time when *simchah* eludes us because we cannot reconcile the truth with the very real experience of tragedy, an experience that cannot be simply swept under the rug or explained away. The events confuse us, it is hard to feel

¹ See also R' Matisyahu Clark's "Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew"

² Avos 4:1

³ Tehillim 97:11

⁴ Ibid. 19:9

⁵ Tehillim 100:2

⁶ As quoted by Rashi on *Parashas Matos* 30:2

⁷ Devarim 1:12

G-d's presence, and so the *Shechinah* too is in exile.

IV

“*Venomar lefanav shir chadash al ge'ulaseinu ve'al pedus nafsheinu* – And we will say before Him a new song, on our freedom and the redemption of our souls.” (Passover Hag-gadah)

Who says Hallel? Hallel is reserved for the revealed, the obvious, miracle. The daily hidden miracle does not get Hallel – it is not even allowed to get Hallel. One who says Hallel every day is a labeled a heretic.⁸ Hallel is said *besimchah*, when one can see new insights into the fundamental truth. As it says in Tehillim, “*Ranenu tzadikim Bashem, layesharim navah sehillah – Tzadikim rejoice in G-d, for yesharim, tehillah*” – from the same /הלל/ root as *hallel* – “is pleasant.” Which is then elaborated in Nusach Ashkenaz “*Befi yesharim tis-hallah*” . . .

Rashi⁹ comments that a *yashar* is on a higher plane than a *tzadik*. The Netziv notes that Chazal call the book of Bereishis “*Seifer HaYesharim*.” The value of pursuing the ideal is a core message of an entire book of the Torah! Our forefathers are praised as being *yashar* in particular, which brings a totally new meaning to

⁸ Sbabos 118b

⁹ Ta'anis 15a

I

Hardly a day goes by without a sensitive soul wondering how he or she might have done better at this or that. After all, we all err, and there is not a moment that isn't fraught with mixed successes and failures in our *avodah*. But we are told in two adjacent *pesukim* in our *parasha* that there is always hope, for we can

Hashem's statement to Avraham: “because [only] from Yitzchak” – who is named for laughter! – “shall be called your offspring.”¹⁰

V

This progression, from the “*zeh hadavar*” of *Parashas Matos* to the “*Eichah?*” of Devarim and Tisha B'Av, leads us to this week – *Shabbos Nachamu* and Tu B'Av.

The *haftorah* opens “*Nachamu nachamu ami', yomar E-lokeichem*. – ‘Be comforted, be comforted, My people’, your G-d will say.” (Yishayahu 40:1) *Nechamah* is being reconciled with something that had happened because one understands that it had a purpose. It is a return to “*samei'ach bechelko*”, understanding that there is a point to what one does not have. It is returning from the bewilderment of suffering and being able to look back upon it in context.

The *navi* goes on a bit later to say, “A voice calls, ‘In the wilderness, prepare the way of Hashem; in the *aravah*, the desert, make *yashar* the path to our G-d.’” (40:3) We are all bidden to take that *nechamah*, and use that regained understanding as motivation to be *yashar* in our *avodas Hashem*.

Maseches Ta'anis ends with a quote from R' Shimon ben Gamliel that there are no holidays in the Jewish

¹⁰ Bereishis 21:12

always do *teshuvah*.¹ But what is *teshuvah*, at bottom? On one level it's simply the process of refraining from doing a wrong, taking it upon yourself never to do it again, regretting having done it, and verbally admitting you had done it, as Rambam lays it out.²

There are several other worthwhile things Rambam sug-

¹ See Devarim 4:29 and 4:30

² Hilchos Teshuvah 2:2

calendar greater than Yom Kippur and Tu B'Av. Note that one is a return to Hashem from something we did, the other returning to Him after the incomprehensibility of what He did.

Specifically on Tu B'Av, when we recover *simchah* after the Three Weeks, was when women tried to find husbands. And each told their prospects not to put the *peh* before the *ayin* but to look for the woman's real qualities. “Charisma is a lie, and beauty is vain, a woman who has awe for G-d – she shall be praised (*tis-halal*).”¹¹ “Give her of the fruits of her labors; and they, the things she makes, will praise her” – *viyhaleluha*, again the notion of *hallel!* – “in the gates.”¹² “Go out and see, daughters of Tzion, the king Shlomo in his crown which his mother crowned him, on the day of his wedding; on the day of the *simchah* of his heart.”¹³ The Talmud asks, “What is the day of his wedding? That is the giving of the Torah. What is the day of the *simchah* of his heart? The day the *Beis HaMikdash* was built.”¹⁴

Be comforted. Everything we have been through and are still going through is so that that day can again come!

¹¹ Mishlei 31:30

¹² ibid 31

¹³ Shir Hashirim 3:11

¹⁴ Taanis 26b

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Bakeish Shalom

gests we might do to repent for our sins, which we'll come back to. And they align more or less with Rabbeinu Yonah's more strident counsel that, among other things, we should come to feel despondent about what we'd done as well as worry about and be ashamed of it, that we ask G-d for help in our *teshuvah*, and that we learn to overcome **all** our physical cravings in the process as well as to scru-

tinize all our ways.³

II

I once met a truly *fine* person who had once been one of the "dregs" of society – a penitent in the classical sense of the term. He had been a blackguard, having been a drug addict, having lived barbarically underground in abandoned subway stops, and having robbed others aboveground for drugs.

Now, while Rabbeinu Yonah's demands seem reasonable enough or even mild for someone like him, or for us more "pedestrian" sinners when we are confronted by the more existentially threatening instances that Rabbeinu Yonah offers there – as when we're overrun by troubles, when we grow old, when we're admonished by a *talmid chacham*, etc.⁴ – still-and-all none of those demands seem to touch upon what I take to be our center-most *daily* ethical dilemma. That is, how to stop ourselves from doing something we know to be wrong which we intend to do anyway.

There is something else puzzling about Rabbeinu Yonah's notion of *teshuvah*, to my mind. It seems to disregard basic human nature. After all, as Rabbeinu Bachya Ibn Pakudah points out,⁵ we all tend to be "negligent when it comes to [our] duties to the Creator" from time to time, simply "because [we are] im-

³ Shaarei Teshuvah 1:10-50

⁴ See Gate 2 there

⁵ Chovos Halevovos, Introduction to Gate 7

Grandfather Yaakov, the midrash tells us, was on his deathbed. He gathered his sons, and was prepared to tell them what will happen at the end of time. Suddenly, the gift of prophecy left him. Suddenly in the dark, Yaakov

pulsive by nature and made up of many opposing elements, traits and motives". After all, we are "sometimes pleasant, other times objectionable; sometimes criminal, other times righteous; sometimes good, other times bad". Thus, Rabbeinu Bachya seems to contend that we indeed need constant access to *teshuvah* much the way computers need fans to run all the time – in order not to "overheat". But that we should find it easy enough to do it.

So again, what will inspire us to repent on a more everyday level, and how do we stop ourselves from sinning when we are about to?

III

I think the two *pesukim* in our *parasha* help explain what we need to concentrate on, and that Rambam's other suggestions we alluded to offer what we can do. The *pesukim* tell us that we have to "find" G-d again after sinning and to "return" to Him. But how does one ever "lose" or "leave" G-d in the first place?

As Rabbeinu Yonah explains, we leave (i.e., "abandon") G-d each time we sin.⁶ So, all we need to do to return to Him would be to call upon the primal pull in the human heart to do just that; for as many gedolim have explained, we are all "parts" of G-d that just naturally long to return to our "Source."⁷ So the easiest way

⁶ Shaarei Teshuvah 1:10

⁷ See Tanya Ch. 44

Avinu was frightened. Could it be that one of his sons wasn't pure, and that was why they did not merit to be told about the Messianic age?

How could the fathers of the tribes reassure him? How could they succinctly tell their father that they were

to transcend our everyday derelictions is to sense the loss of G-d in our lives and truly want Him back.

And I contend that Rambam's other words advise us how to "find" Him once we have "lost" Him – which is to say, what to do when we are about to sin and lose our connection to G-d despite ourselves. Rambam offers that we should "cry out to G-d [for help] and give *tzaddakah*" when we repent.⁸ And I suggest that we would do well to do just that, right there and then, in order to hold ourselves back from sinning. (I myself have done much like that, as well as asked G-d to help me avoid a particular sin *for the next hour*, hour after hour, which has worked). And I also suggest that we heed Rambam's more dramatic suggestions there that we "change our name" and "wander about from place to place" in *teshuvah*. Which is to say, that we picture ourselves as being someone greater than who we are (and thus assume another "name") right there and then, and that we ("wander" about in our minds so as to) transpose ourselves into someone who would not commit that particular sin.

May G-d always grant us the wherewithal to serve Him.

⁸ Hilchos Teshuvah 2:4

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committed to carry on his work? In this moment was born the first line of the *Shema*: *Shema Yisrael*, Hear, our father Israel, the one named by an angel for his ability to interact with G-d and the angels, to be active in the spiritual realm. We too accept Hashem as our

ultimate authority. We too believe that He is unique and indivisible.

294 years later, it is time for Moshe Rabbeinu's final lesson. He too wonders about the future of the Jewish people, and provides for us an explanation of Yaakov's sons' words. This week's *parashah* (6:4-9) contains the first verse of *Keri'as Shema*, where Moshe expands the idea of the first verse.

"*Ve'ahavta es Hashem Elokecha* – and you shall love Hashem your G-d". How can we be commanded to love something? Can we be expected to have control over our emotions?

In *Michtav Mei'Eliyahu I*, R. Dessler writes "Giving may bring about love for the same reason that a person loves what he himself has created or nurtured: he recognizes it as part of himself.... Love flows in the direction of giving."

In a similar sense, R' Samson Raphael Hirsch comments on our *pasuk*, "In *ahav*, both meanings are contained, *hav*, to give and to bring; *ihiv*, to give oneself and bring of oneself."

We are not so much being commanded to love our Creator, but to give of ourselves and our possessions. From fulfilling this obligation, we will by the nature of being human, bring ourselves to love Him.

Moshe Rabbeinu categorizes exactly what we shall commit to G-d: *bechol levavcha, uvechol nafshecha, uvechol me'odecha* – all of your heart, all of your *nefesh*, and all of your fortune.

There are two ways to say "your heart" in biblical Hebrew: *levavecha*, as in this verse, with two *beis*'s; and *libechah*, with one *beis*. *Levavecha* well describes the turmoil that is as the core of human identity. Two *beis*'s illustrate the two warring forces. This is why the Gemara writes, "with all your heart - with both of your inclinations, with the good inclination, and

with the evil inclination."¹ *Levavecha* describes that part of the man we have been calling in this series the intellect, living in constant tension between the spiritual and the animal.

The first step to loving Hashem is to connect that intellect to the spiritual. To follow in the footsteps of Yaakov, and strive to become a Yisrael.

Bechol nafshecha. Nefesh, the Zohar tells us, refers to that part of the soul that is the life-force. Animals have a *nefesh*. Once the intellect is committed to service of G-d, then we are able to take our animalistic urges, our needs for food and sex, for "*basar veyayin* - meat and wine" to make us happy, and put them in service of G-d.

Bechol me'odecha. With all your fortune. The person is now fully committed to serve his spiritual self: intellect in service of spirit, and animal in service of intellect. This fully connected person can now impact the

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world around him. *Bechol me'odechah*, with all of the world that is at your control.

The following verse elaborate the same idea. The first step, the commitment of the intellect, is "*vehayu hadevarim ha'eileh... al levavecha. Veshinantum levanechah, vedibarta bam, ...*" "And these things shall be on your heart", again, the two *beis* heart. Study them, teach them to your children. Engage your mind.

To remind ourselves that the body must then follow the mind, the next verse obligates us to place signs upon of our body. Tie them for a sign on your hand, by which you change the

¹ Berachos 57a

world, and between your eyes, by which you take in the world. Do not let your connection to the world control you, you must be in charge.

One step further removed is *mezuzah*. We cannot fall into the trap of believing "*kochi ve'otzem yadi asa li es hachayil hazeh* - my strength, and the force of my arm, won for me this war". We do not protect ourselves. The house we build does not protect us.

When we shape the world, G-d's imprint must be on every doorway. G-d commanded Adam to "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the world, and master it." Mastering the world is a worthy endeavor, but we must remember that it is only a tool toward our ultimate goal.

The journey started with one man, Yaakov. Through his efforts he became Yisrael, the image of man on the Divine Throne: animal serving mind serving spirit. May we live for the day when the journey ends, when the words of Aleinu are fulfilled: "*Lesaken olam bemalchus Sha-dai* – and we remake the world into the kingdom of G-d."

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