

מתקים מדבר



Dei'ah, Binah and Haskel on the weekly parashah

REB GIL STUDENT

Bemachshvah Techilah

When Avraham Avinu argues with G-d over the fate of the people of Sodom and the other cities, he suggests that perhaps there are tzaddikim in those cities. Implicit in this argument is that should there be tzaddikim in the cities then their merits would protect the entire city. This is difficult given the statement in Bava Basra 7b that talmidei chachamim do not have to pay the tax for the protection of the city because they do not need protection. The implication from this Gemara is that the merits of talmidei chachamim protect only them and not the entire city, for if they protected the entire city then not only would the talmidei chachamim not need a wall for protection but the entire city would have no need for a wall. If so, what was Avraham's argument that there might be tzaddikim in Sodom? Perhaps the tzaddikim who lived in Sodom would be individually protected while everyone else would be killed, like a talmid chacham who

lives in a city without a wall would be saved while everyone else in the city is endangered.

The Gemara in Avodah Zarah 4a explains this apparent contradiction as follows. A completely righteous person, a tzaddik gamur, is protected in such circumstances and will not be killed along with the unrighteous of his city. However, someone who is righteous but still retains minor flaws, a tzaddik she'eino gamur, will follow the fate of his neighbors.

What follows is that a tzaddik she'eino gamur does not have sufficient merit to deserve being singled out from among his peers and be saved while everyone else perishes. Therefore, either everyone is saved and the incomplete tzaddik remains alive or everyone dies. However, a tzaddik gamur has so much merit that he will be singled out from his neighbors and miraculously saved, even while punishment surrounds him on all sides. Paradoxically, a tzaddik gamur does

not save his neighbors because his fate is not tied to theirs while a tzaddik she'eino gamur can, but does not necessarily, save his neighbors because their fate is his.

Based on this, the Malbim¹ explains that Avraham was referring to incomplete tzaddikim while arguing with G-d. Perhaps, Avraham argued, there are fifty tzaddikim she'eino gamur who will be killed if Sodom is destroyed. Since they do not have sufficient merit to deserve being singled out, G-d has to either kill them along with their neighbors or save everyone. However, if they had been complete tzaddikim, which includes warning and berating the sinful Sodomites, then they would have been saved regardless of the fate of the cities' other inhabitants.

¹ HaTorah VeHaMitzvah, Bereishis 18:25. See also Hagahos Maharatz Chayes, Shabbos 55a

In the process of arguing with G-d over the fate of the wicked cities of Sodom et al., Avraham Avinu stated that he was arguing despite, or perhaps because, he was "dirt and ashes" (Bereishis 18:27). The meaning of this is unclear, particularly the seeming repetition. Was Avraham stating that he was unworthy? This is quite possible,

despite his being informed of G-d's proposed actions specifically because he was worthy (see verses 18-20). But it is also possible that he was saying the exact opposite. He was arguing on behalf of the people destined for death precisely because he was worthy of arguing with G-d. To understand this further, we need to elaborate on the distinction between

and the significance of "dirt and ashes".

The Gemara (Sotah 17a) relates that Rava expounded on the above verse that as reward for Avraham stating that he is "dirt and ashes" his descendants merited the two mitzvos of the dirt of Sotah and the ashes of the Parah Adumah. The dirt of Sotah was something added to the drink that

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a woman suspected of adultery would drink, subsequent to warning and her intentionally placing herself in a suspiciously compromising situation as testified by witnesses. Should she be guilty of wrongdoing the drink would kill her but if she was innocent the drink would make her especially fertile as a reward. What this has to do with Avraham's statement that he is dirt is unclear.

The other mitzvah mentioned in the Gemara is the ashes of the Parah Adumah. When a person comes into direct or indirect contact with a dead body he becomes impure. In order to remedy this impurity there is a special procedure in which water is mixed with the ashes of a perfectly red heifer, a parah adumah. While the actual preparation of the mixture renders anyone associated with the procedure impure, the resulting mixture purifies others through a sprinkling ritual. Again, we are left uncertain of the connection between this mitzvah and Avraham's statement other than the verbal association of "ashes".

R' Yitzchak of Karlin¹ explains that the procedure in which a person purifies himself and prepares himself for solely holy activities involves remedying the inclination towards wrongdoing, the Yetzer Hara. However, there are two different possible avenues of dealing with the Yetzer Hara. One way is to totally destroy such urges; to burn them into non-existence. This is appropriate for certain desires that serve no purpose at all. Another possibility is to re-channel the urge and use it for holy rather than profane purposes. Certain desires are proper but only when used for sacred ends and not for the unholy.

The former procedure, R' Yitzchak explains, is similar to the burning of the ashes of a Parah

Adumah. Just like the ashes make everything impure until the entire process of burning and mixing is complete, so too such an evil desire is improper and will only serve impure ends until it is totally burned and eradicated.

The latter procedure, the redirecting of urges toward evil into a proper, holy course is similar to the dirt of Sotah. It can either kill a woman or make her fertile. Similarly, such urges can be used for either good or bad purposes.

Furthermore, R' Yitzchak points out, the ashes of something burned are totally useless. They cannot be used for fuel or for any other productive purpose. They are essentially non-existent. This is what must be done to urges that need to be eradicated. Dirt, on the other hand, can be used for planting. Something seemingly useless and even irritating can be turned around into something productive and helpful. This is what must be done to urges that can be re-channeled.

Thus, when Avraham told G-d that he was "dirt and ashes" he was not stating how lowly he was. Rather, he was stating how much he had accomplished. He had either destroyed or re-directed his Yetzer Hara and was at that time a completely righteous person. It was for this reason that he could argue with G-d on behalf of his fellow human beings.

This distinction between two categories of Yetzer Hara is one that R' Yisrael Salanter articulates in his Iggeres HaMussar². There are two different types of evil urges in a person. One type is the urge for physical pleasure. We want to eat, and not just any food but specifically tasty and usually unhealthy food. And we want not just a little but we want to

fill our stomachs with this delicious food. This is natural and understandable. However, it is an urge that can lead to terrible consequences. The answer, though, is not to destroy our desire for food. Rather it is to channel the desire away from forbidden foods and also away from unhealthy and – perhaps more importantly – extraneous food. If we eat only to sustain ourselves and to recognize the wonderful world G-d has given us, and not merely because we love to eat, then we have transformed the urge from one towards evil into one towards good. But this is a very difficult task.

Another type of urge is one that has no constructive purpose. Consider laziness. Of what use is it? In every circumstance laziness only serves to hinder our progress. If a student in school fails to hand in an assignment on time, can he explain that he could not finish the assignment because he was too lazy? Because he was too hungry, might perhaps be accepted in an extreme circumstance because everyone needs to eat. But laziness is never accepted as an excuse because it is understood that it is unequivocally wrong.

This is the Yetzer Hara that is merely there to divert us from our true paths in life and no amount of redirecting can raise holiness out of this urge. Laziness must be eradicated. It must be burned into ashes until there is no remnant of it. This, of course, is no easy task. It is a lifelong journey that takes planning and direction. But it is something that can be done and, even if only accomplished to a degree, is of tremendous value. Imagine life without laziness. Imagine being able to rise immediately out of bed in the morning without second thoughts. Imagine being able to work diligently on any project without breaks for diversions. This is something that we can all imagine because there have been times in our lives, perhaps many times, when we have overcome laziness. While the

¹ Keren Orah, Sotah 17a

² Published in his Or Yisrael after the numbered letters.

temporary defeat of laziness is a major success, complete victory comes when we can totally burn laziness out of our personalities. And, indeed, we can see that the most successful people in life, both in

business and in private lives, are those who consistently overcome laziness in everything they do. This is what we must do to laziness and, from their example, we can know that it is humanly possible. It is not the task

that only a superhuman can accomplish but even mortals like ourselves can, like Avraham Avinu, turn ourselves into “dirt and ashes”.

Sefasai Tiftach

The two central texts of davening – Shema and Shemoneh Esreh – are repeated throughout the different services of the day. Shema is recited in Shacharis, Ma’ariv and at the bedside while Shemoneh Esreh is the center of every prayer service including mussaf. Another familiar text that is repeated is Ashrei. This is chapter 145 of Tehillim with two introductory verses and one concluding verse from elsewhere. In fact, the Gemara refers to this text as “Tehillah Le-David”, reflecting the first words of chapter 145 and the third sentence of what we call Ashrei.

This text is recited three times a day based on the following passage from the Gemara (Berachos 4b):

“Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Avina: Whoever recites Tehillah Le-David three times each day is guaranteed a place in the world-to-come. Why? If you were to say because it is in the order of the Aleph Beis... Because it contains the verse ‘You open Your hand [and satisfy the desire of every living thing]’... Rather because it has both.”

What follows from the Gemara is that we recite Ashrei three times each day, something that is reflected in our siddurim, because it is in the order of the Hebrew alphabet and contains the verse “Posei’ach es yadecha”. R’ Meir Simcha HaKohen of Dvinsk¹ explains the significance of these two items along the following lines.

There are two main themes in Tehillim 145. The first is that we praise G-d incessantly. For what? That is the second theme; G-d sustains all of his creatures. He feeds us, protects us and fulfills our needs. This second theme is exemplified with the verse “You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing,” which is why the Gemara gives it as an example for why we recite Ashrei three times a day and is why some siddurim tell the reader to have extra intent while reciting this verse.

The part of davening called “Hodu” contains three sections. The first begins with “Hodu” and ends with “Uvini’ai Al Tareyu”. This is from Divrei HaYamim 1 16:8-22 and is the passage that was read with the daily morning sacrifice, the korban tamid shel shachar. The second section is from “Shiru LaHashem” through “VeHallel LaHashem”, Divrei HaYamim 1 16:23-37, and is the passage that was read with the daily afternoon sacrifice, the korban tamid shel bein ha’arbayim. The last section is from “Romimu” until “Gamal Alai” and is a collection of various verses describing and requesting G-d’s mercy². Since these passages are related to the sacrificial order Nusach Sephard connects them to korbanos and recites them before Baruch She’amar. However, since they discuss praising G-d, Nusach Ashkenaz recites them after Baruch She’amar.

Like most of Pesukei Dezimra, the first section has two main themes. The first is the mandate to praise Hashem at every opportunity, loudly, clearly, and constantly. The second theme is the content of that praise. G-d is the master of history who has guided and saved the Jewish people. He has intervened in our individual lives and also in our nation’s collective life, choosing us for distinction and, during our exile, saving us from extinction.

The first section begins with the verse “Hodu LaHashem” which tells us to praise G-d and to speak to everyone, Jew and Gentile, about His wondrous deeds. “Shiru Lo” Our songs should be about praising Him and our discussions about how He runs the world, rather than about mere mundane matters. “Hishallelu” We should make G-d’s actions such a center of our lives that we become known as people who speak of G-d and the resource for those who search for Him. “Dirshu” We must search for Hashem in everything that happens, always looking for the Divine hand in our lives. “Zichru” Furthermore, we must always remember His hand in history. “Zera Yisrael” This is particularly relevant to us, the Jewish people, whom G-d chose and guided with care. “Hu Hashem” We are His people and, even though he is G-d to all mankind, we have a special relationship with Him. “Zichru Le’olam... Asher Karas... Vaya’amideha” Remember the source of our closeness to G-d, the covenant he made with our forefathers which included the eternal Torah. “Leimor... Bihyoschem... Lo

¹ Meshech Chochmah, Vayikra 26:4

² This section is the first to be skipped if there is no time. See the Rama in Orach Chaim 52:1 and Aruch HaShulchan par. 7

Hini'ach... Al Tig'u" This covenant includes His protecting us. Even though we are a small people, and we wander throughout the nations, He has not and will not allow any one person to rule over all of us and, thereby, oppress the entire Jewish nation at once. Furthermore, the leaders who did oppress portions of our people were rebuked by G-d and punished. R' Meir Simcha further explains that the significance of Tehillah Le-David being an alphabetic acrostic is that the alphabet represents the natural order of things. When the verses each begin with a successive letter of the alphabet it indicates the message that the theme follows the normal progression of nature. In our case, the theme of G-d sustaining the world is meant to be through natural means.

As a part of nature, G-d provides food and sustenance to His creations. While we may see our needs satisfied through our own work, we are really witnessing G-d providing for us through nature.

It is this important message that we recite three times a day. While we work very hard for our livings, our success and failure depend on G-d. Hard work does not always lead to reward and little work sometimes leads to great bounty. That is the Divine hand at work providing for us. It is very easy to become caught up in nature and to believe that we provide for ourselves. For this reason Chazal tell us to recite Ashrei repeatedly each day so that we do not forget that it is G-d who provides for us.

The Pnei Yehoshua³ adds that when we constantly remember that G-d determines how much money we make we are able to scale back on the time we spend working and allocate more time to studying Torah. It is this additional and worry-free study of Torah, made possible by the message imbued through the daily repetition of Ashrei, that guarantees a person a place in the world-to-come. Saying Ashrei is not a magic formula. Rather, its message of Divine sustenance and the resulting intensification of religious study is what takes a person into the world-to-come.

³ Berachos 4b

A Message from AishDas...

Shelomo Hamelech writes, "Have you found honey? Eat only your limit of it lest you fill yourself and vomit it." (*Mishlei* 25:16) The Vilna Gaon explains the metaphor of honey, *devash*, as coming from its being an acronym of *de'ah* [knowledge], *binah* [comprehension], and *seichel* [insight]. One's progress in Torah needs to be slow and progressive. "Eat only your limit" attempting for too much too rapidly invites failure. The *pasuk* does not make sense if it means the cerebral and abstract pursuit of Torah. The Alter of Kelm told a student celebrating his third *siyum haSha's*, "It is not a discussion of how many times you have gone through *Sha's*, but how many times *Sha's* has gone through you." It is of that kind of Talmud Torah that *Mishlei* speaks. *Da'as*

with all of its connotations of intimacy and unity with the subject. Having the tools to grapple with what we face in life, to find meaning in our celebrations and tragedies and in our daily routine. *Bindah*, a deep understanding, deductively finding the line *bein* (between) the various categories and inductively building (*livnos*) from those principles. *Haskeil*, searching for practical and personal application of these ideas in our lives.

To this end we will be providing each week three divrei Torah, each on topics essential to our *Yahadus*, yet sadly too often underaddressed. "*Bemachshvah Techilah*". We open with words of *machshavah*, Jewish thought. A pursuit of a deep understanding of how Hashem runs the world, and with what purposes He imbued our lives. In "*Bakeish*

Shalom" we will be looking at *mussar* topics, exploring our search for peace and wholeness. What lessons can we take from the *parashah*, what ideals can we look to implement during the coming week. Finally, all too often our *tefillah* degenerates in a mindless rote of words. We therefore open our *Amidah* with "*Hashem, sefasai tifatch!*" "*Hashem, open my lips! Break down the barrier between what goes on inside me and the words I utter!*" To address this challenge we will provide a thought on the meaning of our *tefillos*.

Mesukim Midevash is a project of The AishDas Society, offering words of *machshavah*, *mussar* and *tefillah* each week. For more information, email mesukim@aishdas.org or call (201) 757-0246.

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