

## מתוקים מדבש



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

**RABBI MICHA BERGER**

## Bemachashavah Techilah

“It is the nature of good to have someone to whom to be good.” With these words the Ramchal<sup>1</sup> explains Hashem’s purpose for creating man. The human being can be defined as a *keli shefa*, a receptacle for emanations of Divine good and sustenance. Simply and personally put, you and I exist so that G-d would have someone to whom to be good. And yet, few of us would say life is perfect bliss. Why isn’t it?

If you were called upon to decide which student of a Rebbe is the better student, how do you judge? Intuitively, one would choose the one who remembers the most of the Rebbe’s teachings, who includes them most thoroughly in his own thoughts, and whose words of Torah are closest to the mentor’s style. But what if a key idea of the Rebbe’s thought was the importance of individuality and of personal creativity? The one who is most loyal to the Rebbe’s words or even his style is less loyal to this overall idea of the importance of finding one’s own contribution.

Hashem Himself is the Ultimate Good. For Hashem to share with us the ultimate good is for Him to share with us His own “nature.” But following Him as Teacher presents us with a similar paradox. On the one hand, we are “to walk in his ways.”<sup>2</sup> On the other, those ways include free will, choice, and creativity. This is a

basic dialectic: man the creature, receiver of G-d’s good vs. man the creator who lives in His image. Man must receive the ability to be in the image of the Giver to be able to give ourselves. For both to co-exist, a person has to be given the opportunity to participate in creating the ability or opportunity to receive, to earn his reward. The most suitable receiver for His good is one that is cre-

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ated imperfect, and then is charged to perfect him- or herself.

This point is well known to parents. A parent may want to do everything for their child, to protect him and provide for him. However, such limitless giving is not the ideal. A parent must also stand back, let the child be his own person, and even watch as he makes his own mistakes. Limitless giving is paradoxically not giving the most one can – one need also give them the opportunity to be creative, to be givers themselves.

How do we approach this task Hashem left us, that of perfecting our ability to receive His good?

If one puts a cup in the sink, and the cup does not fill as it ought to, there are two types of explanations.

The first is that the cup’s mouth is not properly in the stream; this is the assumption that the *keli* is fine, but not properly connected to the source. Taking this approach to the human

condition is suggested by the notion of the Ran<sup>3</sup> and his student R’ Yosef Albo<sup>4</sup>, who hold that the effects of sin are to dirty the soul and that the punishment of sin is that barrier blocking the soul’s access to Divine Good.

The implication is that the sinful soul itself is fine, but it made for itself a layer blocking it from the Light. And in fact, the Ramchal<sup>5</sup>, among many others, articulates this as the goal we seek to accomplish with mitzvos, that they are acts that bring us closer to G-d. In contemporary terminology, we would call this a *deveikus* approach.

The other approach would be to assume the cup is flawed, perhaps its mouth could be widened, or there is a hole to repair. In this opinion, the purpose of life is to give us opportunities to perfect the self. Apparently this is the position of Rabbeinu Yonah,<sup>6</sup> who compares the soul of a sinner to someone who is sick. Just as a sick person suffers from his disease, so does a sinner feel the effects his deeds had on his soul. *Teshuvah* is a repairing or healing process. This leads to an approach to mitzvos, equally well represented<sup>7</sup> as the previous, the idea of man’s quest as *temimus*, or “*sh’leimus ha’adam*,”

<sup>3</sup> D’rashos haRan, ch. 10

<sup>4</sup> Seifer haIkkarim 4:13

<sup>5</sup> Opening paragraphs of Mesilas Yesharim

<sup>6</sup> Sha’arei T’shuvah 4:1

<sup>7</sup> For example, Rav Yehuda Halevi in the opening of the Kuzari.

<sup>1</sup> Derech Hashem 2:1

<sup>2</sup> Devarim 28:9

the completion of man. Man's goal in life is to strive for self-perfection.

Note that the *rishonim* cited, the Ran, R' Yosef Albo and Rabbeinu Yonah, all define punishment as a consequence of the imperfection or barrier created by sin. Both sides of this debate assume that the role of *mitzvos* is a change in personal state, and that reward and punishment are consequences of that state.

The difference is in whether the change is one of approaching G-d, or one of self-perfection, making His Glory manifest in ourselves.

In this week's *parashah*, the covenant Abraham enters into with G-d, our first defining moment as His people, is introduced with the words, "Ani Kei-l Shak-ai, his-halech

*lefanai veheyey samim* – I am Kei-l Shak-ai, walk yourself before Me, and be whole."<sup>8</sup> How are we supposed to read this quote? Is it the walking before G-d, *deveikus*, that is primary and being whole a side effect? Or is being whole the focus of the *pasuk* and walking before G-d a means to reach that *temimus*?

Similarly, we say in the *Amidah* for *mussaf*, "*vetaheir libeinu le'avdecha be'emes* – purify our souls to serve You in truth." One can see this in two ways: We request from Hashem that He purify us, so that we may reach that *deveikus* to serve Him truthfully and reliably. Alternatively, we could be requesting *temimus*, that purity which we are describing by its enabling us to serve Him.

On another level, these two approaches are different aspects of the same idea. To achieve wholeness, so that the entire person is working harmoniously, he would necessarily be walking in Hashem's path. The converse is equally true. If one strives for *deveikus* to a singular G-d who has a single goal, how could one be a chaotic battleground of warring

urges? Cleaving to G-d forces His priorities to be yours, thereby causing *temimus*, a wholeness and harmony of self.

This is not to say that there is no distinction in approach. By stressing different elements, there are profound practical implications. For example, consider the debate between Chassidim and non-Chassidim

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on the importance of *davening* in the appointed times. (We should be clear that the Chassidic position is that one must invest time to prepare for *davening*, even if this is at the expense of timeliness – it is not blanket permission to ignore the clock.) Chassidus is a *deveikus*-based *hash-kafah*. Therefore, when weighing the relative merits, it is more important to be able to invest time to prepare one's mind and heart for the act of *tefillah*, for relating to Hashem, than when the *tefillah* actually begins. To someone with a *temimus* orientation, however, *zehirus*, meticulousness, care in how each facet of the *mitzvah* is done, is the more important consideration. *Zerizus*, haste to do what is right, is an important *middah* (personality trait). Both come into play when considering the timeliness of *tefillah*.

Contemporary Orthodox Jewish thought embraces a number of variants of these two basic approaches.

Most forms of Chassidus consider the route to *deveikus* to be the experience of each act, with the focus on having one's feelings in line with those we can perceive in the Creator. The Ba'al HaTanya, on the other hand, focused on Chaba"d (insight, comprehension and knowledge), to

make one's thoughts G-dly. In this he follows the Rambam,<sup>9</sup> who writes that one's connection to Hashem is strictly determined by the extent of one's knowledge of Him.

Similarly, there has been variations in the understanding of *temimus*. The Vilna Gaon writes, "the whole purpose of the Torah is to shatter the [evil] *middos*."<sup>10</sup> The Ba'alei Mussar took the idea further, and committed themselves to character improvement through means beyond *halachah* as well. In Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's Neo-Orthodoxy, *temimus* translates to a well-rounded individual, using *derekh erez* in service of Torah. To Rav Yosef-Ber Solovetichik<sup>11</sup>, the goal of man is to maximize his creativity, to be in the image of the Creator.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps this plurality is the entire message of the Torah's doubled phraseology. Because there are many approaches to accomplishing the same end, Hashem did not specify one to the exclusion of the other. "*Dera-cheha darchei no'am*, its ways are ways of pleasantness"<sup>12</sup> – "ways", in the plural – "and all its paths are peace." Each community or person can pick out a *derech* that best suits him – as long as the goal is "*his-halech lifanai v'heyey samim*."

<sup>8</sup> B'reishis 17:1

<sup>9</sup> Guide to the Perplexed, vol. III, ch. 51

<sup>10</sup> Even Sh'leimah, title of first chapter. In the Gaon's terminology, "*middos*" is used to refer to undesirable behaviors in particular, and not (as is generally understood) all personality traits.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, Halachic Man, pg. 109

<sup>12</sup> Mishlei 3:17

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## Bakeish Shalom

In the beginning of the *parashah*, Hashem calls Avram to go to Canaan. “*Lech lecha* – go for yourself.”<sup>1</sup> Rashi<sup>2</sup> comments on the word “*lecha*”, that Hashem is telling the man who would become our forefather Avraham that this journey will be “for your enjoyment and your good.”

The *Mishnah* in Avos says, “Ten trials Avraham our father was tested, and he withstood all of them, to teach you the love of Avraham our father.”<sup>3</sup> There are different opinions among the *rishonim* as to which events in Avraham’s life were included in this *Mishnah*’s count of tests. Some count trials, such as his being thrown into the furnace by Nimrod, that do not appear in the *Chumash*. Others do not. However, all count this charge to leave his homeland and his family to some unknown destination “which I will show you.”

Why, then, does Hashem say it is “for his benefit”? Or conversely, if Avraham is reassured that he is to personally gain from the trip, in what way is it a trial?

Rav Shimon Shkop<sup>4</sup> notes that people place self-interest first; we are inherently selfish beings. As Hillel told the prospective convert, “What you do not want done to you, do not do to others.” There is a recognition that people act in their own self-interest. The call is not to eradicate this aspect of being human, but to rechannel it.

This selfishness means (1) that we want things and (2) we do not

want to feel indebted to anyone or Anyone for what we have. Combined, one has an inescapable dilemma. The more one accumulates (whether it is wealth, wisdom, friends, opportunities...), the more one is the product of others – nature, other manufacturers, the counterparty in a business deal, etc... An attempt

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to seek satisfaction through such accumulation is inherently frustrating. As Chazal say, “He who has a one hundred *zuz* coin wants two hundred.”

The only way to break out of this negative cycle is to realize that one is part of a greater whole. He utilizes his selfishness productively because his notion of self-interest now includes a G-d-like need to share with others. This is Rav Shimon’s explanation of Hillel’s enigmatic questions “If I am not for me (*li*), who will be for me? And if I am only for myself (*le’atzmi*), what am I?” The narrowest view of self is one’s physical body, “*atzmi*”, my core, my bones. Broader, one can see themselves as body, mind and soul. Most people naturally see themselves as part of a family, and therefore can give to their spouses, children and parents almost as readily or even more readily than they take for themselves. A person with an even broader perspective has a “*li*” a “for me” that includes their community, or the Jew-

ish people as a whole, or the entirety of humanity. The key to generosity is not to eliminate selfishness, but to maximize its scope.

It is only when one lives in the image of the Creator, living entirely to give to others, that one can appreciate what one has. The more one lives for that greater whole, views his “self” as one part of something greater and lives accordingly, the more happiness and satisfaction one can have with one’s lot. The lower the wall between “self” and “other”, the less bothersome it is to one’s ego to admit to oneself that I have received from others. As we say in the Shabbos morning Amidah, “Moshe will be happy with the giving of his portion, because ‘a faithful servant’ You have called him.” Our teacher Moshe was not disturbed by the fact that his portion was given to him by G-d, that his efforts to earn it was only a small part of their attainment, because he lived his entire life for G-d.

This, then, was Avraham’s challenge: to eliminate *negi’os*, personal interests, from the motivation in his action. Had Avraham made the same trip because Hashem promised that it would be pleasurable, that very pleasure would escape his grasp. And Avraham passed that test. “Avram went as Hashem spoke to him...”<sup>5</sup> Not because it would be better for Avraham alone, but because it is part of G-d’s plan for giving to humanity.

<sup>1</sup> Bereishis 12:1

<sup>2</sup> Ad loc

<sup>3</sup> Avos 5:3

<sup>4</sup> Introduction to Shaarei Yosheir

<sup>5</sup> Bereishis 12:4

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## Sefasai Tiftach

The first of the requests of the Shemoneh Esrei is *Birchas HaDa'as*, the blessing on understanding. We first state “*Atah chonein le’adam da’as* – You grant humanity understanding, *um’lameid le’enosh binah* – and teach man comprehension.” What is *da’as* that is *chonein*, granted freely, whereas *binah* is taught, and therefore requires that the student participate by learning it? And why is *da’as* a feature of *adam*, whereas *binah* is that of *enosh*?

The Reisha Rav, R’ Efrayim Levine,<sup>1</sup> explains that *da’as* is knowledge of a single fact. Singular, like Adam, an individual. While “*adam*” means man, it is not pluralized. On the other hand, *binah* is the ability to combine ideas in order to produce new ones. *Binah* is most effective in a community, as anyone who studied with a *chavrusah* experienced. One of the forty-eight ways necessary to acquire Torah listed in Avos is “*pilpul hatalmidim* – the sharp give-and-take of the students”.<sup>2</sup> The usual Hebrew word for people is *anashim*, plural of *enosh*. Enosh, Adam’s grandson, was the first generation to consist of multiple nuclear families living together. Adam and Chavah were a unique couple. Their children Kayin and Hevel certainly could not combine into a society, leaving Sheis and his wife as another unique couple. Until Enosh, there was no concept of “society.” Thus, *binah* was incomplete until *Enosh*.

Perhaps we can answer our first question by utilizing R’ Efrayim Levine’s idea. *Binah* requires working at the idea, the give and take. *Da’as* may be gifted, but *binah* cannot be

fully absorbed that way. This is the need for *ameilus baTorah*, toiling in Torah, “*melameid le’enosh binah*.”

Another thing to note is that the *da’as* of an idea is both what it is upon which *binah* acts, as well as the conclusion toward which *binah* works.

Shlomo 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*, *binah*, 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 HaShas*, “It is not a discussion of how many times you have gone through *Shas*, but how many times *Shas* has gone through you.” It is of that kind of Talmud Torah that Mishlei speaks. And it is that kind of self-changing wisdom that we ask for when we request *dei’ah*, *binah*, *vehaskeil* – knowledge (*dei’ah*), developed through reason (*binah*) to be applied in one’s life (*haskeil*).

This version of the text recognizes the progression set up in the opening of the *berachah*. Adam receives *da’as*, Enosh develops it as *binah*, and request from Hashem that this progression continue into *haskeil*.

However, it has the clause “*chaneinu me’itecha* – grant us from You,” which does not fit *binah*, and certainly not *haskeil*. *Haskeil* must be self-developed; people must have the power to shape how they apply their

knowledge as action, or else there is no free will.

Perhaps the Nusach Sefarad chose a different progression because this implication is difficult. But it does so at the expense of continuity with the ideas already developed. In Nusach Sefarad, the progression is *chochmah*, insight, according to the Tanya<sup>3</sup>, the gifted from G-d awareness of an idea, raw, undeveloped. This is then developed in *binah*, and *da’as*, knowledge, is produced. Rather than Ashkenaz’s progression from knowledge to action, Nusach Sefarad gives the progression from inspiration to knowledge.

Using the ideas developed in this week’s *Machshavah Techilah* column, Nusach Ashkenaz focuses on how the intellect is used for self-perfection, *sheleimus*. Sefaradim and Chassidim speak of knowledge as a flow from G-d’s Divine Wisdom, a connection to Him, *temimus*.

<sup>3</sup> Likutei Sichos ch. 2

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<sup>1</sup> HaDerash VeHaYun, *Parashas Bereishis*

<sup>2</sup> Avos 6:6