

## מתוקים מדבש

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

RABBI DOV KRAMER

**Bemachashavah Techilah**

“**A**nd it will be that just as G-d rejoiced over you to be good to you and to cause you to increase, so will G-d rejoice over you to devastate you and to destroy you, and you will be uprooted from the ground to which you are going, to inherit.<sup>1</sup>” Moshe warned the nation that if they did not keep the commandments properly, G-d would punish them severely – a punishment detailed at length in our *parasha*, as well as in *Parashas Bechukosai*. However, while we can understand the need for retribution, it seems very foreign for a kind (and just) G-d to show glee over delivering it. In fact, the Talmud<sup>2</sup> says that it is not G-d that will rejoice over our suffering, but rather that G-d will cause our enemies to rejoice when they see us suffering. Even so, there must be a reason why Moshe chose to compare the “rejoicing” of being good to us to the “rejoicing” when exacting punishment. As Rav Sa’adya Gaon explains the verse, “just as G-d wanted [to be good to us], so will He want [to destroy us].” Why is G-d “rejoicing” (or causing rejoicing) over our downfall? Why does He “want” it as much as He “wants” to be good to us?

In general, there is a large imbalance between the blessings and the curses. If the blessings come for following the commandments, and the curses come for not following them, there should be an equal amount of

each. Yet, there are only 11 verses<sup>3</sup> describing the blessings promised for “listening to G-d’s voice and keeping His commandments,” but 49 verses<sup>4</sup> detailing the tragedies that will befall us if we don’t. Shouldn’t there be an equal opportunity, and equal consequences, for each?

This question can be applied to the world in which we live in – the world G-d created – as well. There seems to be many more possibilities for tragedy to occur than the corresponding amount of joy and happiness; more potential for misfortune than fortune. We have the ravages of war, the mistreatment of those less fortunate, the various types of physical attacks (i.e. theft, bigotry and physical cravings), oppressive regimes and abuse of power, disease, natural disasters, etc. Can we say that there is an equivalent upside?

After telling us that the reward for keeping the commandments does not come in this world (but is reserved for the world to come), the Rambam<sup>5</sup> explains that the blessings put forth in the Torah do not contradict this. They are not intended as reward, per se, but as a means to continue keeping the commandments. By providing all of our physical needs – in abundance – and protecting us from any danger, G-d removes any distraction that would prevent us from sustaining our spiritual growth. We will not have to worry about where our food will come from, about surrounding nations

attacking us, etc. Instead, we can stay focused on our higher purpose.

If the blessings are not intended as a reward, we can understand why the “upside” does not reach any higher than “merely” providing our means, in an amount that allows us to not become concerned about them. However, we still have to resolve why the “downside” is so wide reaching – with so many possible ways of experiencing them.

The Rambam<sup>6</sup> says that the curses are the exact corollary to the blessings. Where the blessings are designed to help foster continued spiritual growth, the curses are designed to prevent someone unworthy from accumulating reward in the next world. For example,<sup>7</sup> if someone is immersed in the pleasures of this world (whether they be halachically permitted or not), he can still do *mitzvos*, thereby accumulating reward in the next world. By removing the physical things that caused the materialistic addictions in the first place, and causing (or allowing) other problems that serve to prevent the corrupt individual from amassing such reward, G-d avoids having to give an (overall) undeserving individual that portion (that would have been accumulated) in the world to come.

It is possible, then, that the varied types of “distractions” (i.e. the different types of potential tragedies) are needed depending on what will actually distract each individual. But there are other possibilities as well.

<sup>1</sup> Devarim 28:63

<sup>2</sup> Megillah 10b

<sup>3</sup> Devarim 28:3-13

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 28:16-44, 48-57, 59-68

<sup>5</sup> Hilchos Teshuvah 9:1

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> This is the Rambam’s example

The Seforno, writing about the physical blemishes<sup>8</sup> that cause spiritual impurity,<sup>9</sup> says that G-d sends messages to His followers so that they can know that they have been doing something wrong and can correct it. Rav Dessler<sup>10</sup> uses this concept to explain why G-d is more exacting with the righteous than the non-righteous, as the “punishments” sent for each little thing are a message intended to cause introspection – which will lead to fixing the problem. If there were only one type of message, there would be no way of deciphering from it which area needs strengthening. By creating a world with numerous latent messages, it is possible to tailor the message for the specific fault. This may be another reason why there needs to be such an abundance of potential “curses.”

<sup>8</sup> Specifically the *nega'im* on clothes

<sup>9</sup> Vayikra 13:47

<sup>10</sup> Michtav Me'Eliyahu II, pg. 75

These messages can only be sent to those with the ability to receive them. After all, what is the point in calling if the phone is disconnected! Therefore, those individuals who are disconnected from the Creator aren't sent any specific messages. But they are not protected from any tragedies either, even if they did nothing to warrant the suffering that the tragedy would incur.<sup>11</sup>

If there were only a limited number of things that could go wrong, this<sup>12</sup> would not be nearly as scary a proposition. However, with the possibilities of what can go wrong nearly limitless, there is a much stronger incentive to reach the level of divine protection. In essence, one not attached to G-d is walking a tightrope without a net – or even a balancing

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Rabbeinu Bachya on Bereishis 18:19

<sup>12</sup> being susceptible to anything and everything that might happen

bar. The extent of the possible suffering, as well as the numerous types of suffering (of which some types are scarier to some than others), is therefore designed as a mechanism to bring people back to their Creator, to motivate them to become attached (or re-attached) to G-d.

These last two possibilities<sup>13</sup> can also explain how the joy G-d feels (as it were) over providing the blessings can be compared to the joy felt when he punishes, as both are a vehicle for spurring spiritual growth.

May this Elul (and New Year) bring about the appropriate changes, corrections and adjustments that bring us closer to our Creator.

<sup>13</sup> punishments serving as messages and possible tragedies being the means to bring people back to G-d

## RABBI MICHA BERGER

### Bakeish Shalom

The past two weeks we looked at developing the awareness of what improvements in one's *middos* are both necessary and surmountable, as well as internalizing the desire for change through *cheshbon hanefesh* (a daily accounting of one's soul and decisions) and *hispa'alus* (concentrated and emotional study that penetrates the heart). At this point in our Elul program, it is time to look at tools for actual change.

Rav Yisrael Salanter divides the task of changing a *middah* into two. First is *kibbush hayeitzer*, conquering the inclination. This is where the desire still exists, but the person makes a conscious effort not to obey it. The person may still feel the anger, but he conquers it and does not give expression to the anger. This second step is *tikun hayeitzer*, repairing the inclination.

As we saw a few weeks ago, the Vilna Gaon comments on Mishlei that there are two types of *middos*.

*“I already wrote that there are two kinds of middos, those with which one is born and those to which one must acclimate oneself. Those with which one is born are called “derachav” (his path), for they are one's derech from the beginning of one's creation. Those to which one becomes acclimated are called regel (habit or foot), because one becomes acclimated (hircil) to them.*

*“Those [middos] to which one becomes acclimated, one must guard and straighten them a lot. When one guards them, then those that were in one's nature will certainly be guarded. This is ‘Paleis ma'gal raglecha – Make plain the circuit of your feet’ [the first half of our verse]. Those that one became used to, one needs to straighten and to pass little*

*by little from the bad middos, like a peles, and not to grab right away the other extreme. Until one habituates oneself and makes it like nature. (And it says “ma'gal” (circuit) because to those [middos] to which one acclimates oneself one must go around and revolve...)*

*“‘Vechol derachecha yikonu – and all your ways will be established’ [the verse continues]. Of course those middos that are his derech since birth are established (yikonu), from the term of “kan ubasis” (branch and base). If one does not guard those [middos that are] from habit, even “derachav” will not be established. For middos are like a string of pearls—if you make a knot at the end, then all are guarded, and if not, all are lost. So too are the middos. Therefore [the pasuk] says that if one straightens the circuit of one's feet (raglav), then one's ways (derachav)*

will be set.” (Commentary on Mishlei 4:26)

The Gaon writes of two sorts of *middos*, those with which we are born and those that we acquire by habit. If we are trying to modify a *middah* from what one was born with, the primary tool for doing so is *hergeil*, habituation. As Rav Yisrael notes, through the habit of *kevishas hayeitzer* despite the desire, one will cause its repair.

Last week’s *parashah* opens with the *mitzvah* of the *eishes yefas to’ar*. A Jewish soldier finds a woman in the enemy camp attractive and wants to take her. He is told that he must shave her head, dress her like a person (rather than booty), and allow her to mourn her family for a month. In short, the Torah allows the relationship but sets limits by requiring that the man take steps to insure treating her like a person. Rashi quotes Chazal, saying, “The Torah only spoke against the *yeitzer hara*.”<sup>1</sup> This is usually taken to mean that while the act itself is against Torah values, Hashem realized that banning it altogether would be beyond the soldier’s ability to obey. However, that overlooks Chazal’s use of the word “*keneged* – against”. We are being given a key tool in fighting against the *yeitzer hara*.

To conquer a *middah* one does not try to eliminate it in a single step. Rather, one takes a single step, followed by another and another. It is a process of *shteiging*, of ever ascending upward. *Kibbush HaYeitzer* requires deciding to take that small step, to acquire a habit that whittles

<sup>1</sup> On Devarim 21:11

Our *parasha* opens with a prayer – the prayer that the farmer made upon bringing his first fruits to *Yerushalayim*. While it is basically a prayer thanking G-d for giving us the Land of Israel and

down the improper *middah*. Because these practices are accepted upon oneself, they are called *kabbalos*.

Ideally, a *kabbalah* should meet the following criteria: it should be (1) small enough that the person has a reasonable chance of following through on it, and yet (2) large enough to be measurable. Third, a *kabbalah* should be made for a fixed period of weeks or months, and not an open-ended commitment. At the end of the period, one can assess whether one is ready to progress, or perhaps if the *kabbalah* was overly ambitious and needs to be rethought.

For example, if someone is working on *savlanus* (patience), a reasonable *kabbalah* might be to accept upon oneself not to lose one’s patience for the first five minutes upon returning home, or perhaps not to ever yell at the dinner table. It is not going to conquer the *yeitzer* all at once, but it is a measurable change that is small enough to actually follow through upon and yet also significant enough to build upon.

In this week’s *parashah*, Moshe and the elders of Israel command the Jews, “Observe all the commandments that I will command you today. It will be when you cross the Jordan to the land which Hashem you G-d is giving you, you shall set up for yourselves large stones, and cover them in lime. Write on them all the words of this Torah...”<sup>2</sup>

Crossing the Jordan need not have been a reminder to observe the *mitzvos*. Moshe commands them, though, to perform a commemorative act, to use the moment. This

<sup>2</sup> Devarim 27:1-3

for having it bring forth its fruits, it refers to another prayer – when the nation suffered as slaves in Egypt and cried out to G-d for help.<sup>1</sup> Thanking

<sup>1</sup> Devarim 26:7

corresponds to a second kind of *kabbalah*, an acceptance to use a moment and artificially connect it to the desired goal. This could be because the triggering event is frequent and therefore would serve as a regular reminder to establish a habit. For example, one friend accepted a *kabbalah* to remember the six basic *mitzvos* of the mind every time he enters the car, using its ceiling, floor and four sides as a mnemonic for the six beliefs.

A third kind of *kabbalah* aims to change what used to be a preconscious decision into a conscious one. Dr. Alan Morinis tells of one such, recommended to him by Rabbi Yitzchok Perr, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Derech Aisan in Far Rockaway. Rabbi Perr recommended that whenever one feels impatient or angry, one should slip a rubber band, one loose enough to be comfortable but yet small enough to be felt, on one’s hand.<sup>3</sup> This is also *hergel*; it is practicing making the process of getting impatient or angry a conscious one, rather than an immediate reaction that short-circuits our free will.

In the *Mussar* communities of pre-war Europe, Elul was a time for making *kabbalos*. Through these exercises we can build the habits that allow us to conquer and ultimately repair our *middos*. They can enable us to use Elul and Tishrei to effect true change, true growth, in our lives.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Morinis, *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder*, pp. 47-48

## RABBI DOV KRAMER Sefasai Tiftach

G-d for all He has done for us certainly makes sense, as it awakens within us a feeling of gratitude. Songs of praise can help us realize/internalize/reiterate how exalted G-d is, bringing about a sense of awe

and appreciation (and humility). But prayers of supplication are a bit harder to explain. After all, G-d is all-knowing, so already knows what we want/need. He is all-powerful, so can fulfill that need.<sup>2</sup> And He is just, so will only do something if we actually deserve it. Therefore, if He knows what we want, and we deserve it, we should get it whether we ask for it or not! How does “begging” for something change what might happen?

One possibility is that just as thanking G-d helps us appreciate what He does for us, asking G-d when we are in need helps us recognize that everything comes from Him. The very fact that we turn to Him when we want something shows that He is the source that provides it.

However, according to this explanation, the asking – the prayer itself – is not related to it being answered,<sup>3</sup> as it is only a vehicle for our recognition of G-d being the provider. There would be no reason why the prayer should cause what is specifically being asked for to be provided more than another need that is deserved but was not asked for.

Nevertheless, it would explain how the person might deserve something post-prayer that wasn't deserved pre-prayer, as asking G-d brought about a greater appreciation of Him. It would just not be a reason why that particular prayer was answered, instead of something that wasn't requested- but is at least as needed- being provided in its place. Similarly, the Ralbag<sup>4</sup> says that prayer works by improving the individual,

<sup>2</sup> Anyway, if He couldn't, there would be no point in asking Him to!

<sup>3</sup> Unless G-d specifically answers a prayer just to reinforce and encourage the practice of asking Him for things, as it reminds us that He is the source of all. See *Derech Hashem* (4:5), where the *Ramchal* says that a prayer made before the *hishtadlus* (human effort) is done shows that G-d is the true provider. This would only apply if the prayer were for the same thing the effort was being made in.

<sup>4</sup> Shemos 33/34, lesson #3

not by getting the prayer directly answered.

When one prays for himself, the Ralbag explains, he cannot change what G-d has intended for him, based on the person he was before the prayer started. However, one of two things (or possibly both) can happen as a result of praying, which will bring about a change in the status of the person praying.

First of all, while praying, one may realize what must be corrected (in one's self) in order to become worthy of G-d “answering” the prayer, and thereby “fix” what was “broken,” or improve upon the level already attained. Because he or she is no longer the same person as before the prayer, what was originally intended may no longer be appropriate. This can take the form of preventing or removing harm, or bestowing (additional) benefit(s) on this new “improved” person.

Another possibility the Ralbag discusses, based on a theme echoed throughout his writings, is that the experience of praying can bring about an attachment to G-d that enables His divine providence to become attached to the person praying. Once this level of attachment has been attained—a level, the Seforno says,<sup>5</sup> that very few individuals reach—G-d deals directly and individually with that person, allowing for the “personalized attention” that might be needed in order to remove harm and or bestow benefits. If this level was attained because of the act of praying, it can cause something that would not have been possible pre-prayer to occur post-prayer.

Even so, we are still left “only” with explanations as to how a person can deserve something because of a prayer that wasn't deserved prior to it; what the prayer is actually asking for would still be irrelevant to the change that occurred.

When discussing Moshe's prayer after the golden calf, the Ralbag

<sup>5</sup> Vayikra 13:47

understands his request of “erase me from your book”<sup>6</sup> to mean “erase me from the Book of Life,” i.e. kill me. Moshe was saying that the thought of the nation being destroyed affected him to such an extent, that he would rather die. Because G-d will not allow harm to come to anyone if it<sup>7</sup> will cause pain to those attached to Him,<sup>8</sup> by showing that what happens to the nation affects him so much, Moshe was able to diminish the punishment intended for them. G-d didn't want Moshe to suffer, and harming the nation would have done just that.

This can be applied to what one asks for himself as well; when we ask for something specific, it shows that (or is a result of) that particular issue being very important to us. If not having the prayer answered causes pain to someone attached to G-d (in this case the one doing the actual supplication), G-d will likely answer it. Therefore, the specific prayer may be answered precisely *because* of the prayer – as its remaining unanswered adversely affects the one asking for it.

By attaching ourselves to G-d, we will likely receive the things that are helpful to us without even asking. Praying for them may help speed our receiving them, but it will definitely improve our attachment to Him, enabling us to deserve more of His divine help.

<sup>6</sup> Shemos 32:32

<sup>7</sup> the harm to that other person

<sup>8</sup> See Shemos 32 10-11 and 31-33 lesson #4

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