

מתוקים מדבש



Weekly essays on Machshavah, Mussar, and Kavanah

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Bemachshavah Techilah

The *Hagadah* tells us that the Torah addresses the question of telling the Passover story to our children by referring to four different kinds of children. One is wise, one is evil, one is uncomplicated, and the last doesn't know to ask questions. Each son asks a question, even if the last does so in his silence. We can see from the question what they are looking to take from the seder experience.

I believe these four approaches follow through in how we react to tragedy as well. Given the dismal state of current events, perhaps this is worth some exploration.

R' Joseph Ber Soloveitchik²¹ addresses the question posed by the Holocaust in his essay "Kol Dodi Dofeik". Rav Soloveitchik's position is that the question of why is there human suffering can't be answered. Any attempt to address theodicy is going to insult the intellect or the emotions, and quite likely both. But "Why?" isn't the Jewish question. Judaism, with its focus on *halachah*, on deed, asks, "What shall I do about it?"

Rav Soloveitchik continues by quoting the Talmudic principle, "Just as we bless [G-d] for the good, so we bless [Him] for the evil." Just as we dedicate all the good that comes are way to be tools in our *avodas Hashem*, we also dedicate ourselves through our responses to suffering.

This is the wise son's reaction. "Who is wise? He who learns from every person." The wise son is one who turns everything into a learning experience. His response to the *seder* is "What are the testimonial acts, the dictates, the laws, which Hashem your G-d commanded you?" How does G-d teach us to react to the events of Egypt and freedom? How am I supposed to react to tragedy?

When G-d presents tragedy to the wise son, they are called *nisyonos* – challenges or tests. Like the Akeidah, a learning experience for Abraham, to get him to fully realize his potential.

The second son, the wicked son, needs a wake up call. What the gemarah refers to as "*yisurim*". In the weekday prayer "*Tachanun*" we ask G-d to forgive our sins "but not through *yisurim* or bad illness".

The evil son of the *Hagadah* doesn't respond to this wakeup call. He asks, – no, he says rhetorically, "What [good] is this job to you?" Our response is to blunt his teeth and point out that had he been there, he wouldn't have been amongst those to merit the Exodus. We tell him that it's not the tragedy that is leading him to rejecting G-d – it's his rejection of G-d that lead him to the tragedy. I like to imagine he accepts this answer in the silence after the paragraph.

There is a second kind of *yissurim*, *yissurim shel ahavah* – tribulations of love. This is not where the person is being evil, but he's not

living up to his full potential. He too is in a rut, and G-d calls to him to break out of it and improve. G-d calls him to *ahavah*, to greater love and closeness to G-d.

This is the uncomplicated son, the one who believes with simple and pure faith. He asks "What is this?" and we answer with the Pesach story, with all that G-d did for us. Unlike the wise son, who wants to know all the laws of the day, all the nuances of how to react, the uncomplicated son is given motivation to cling to the Almighty.

Then there are times where the thing we want is a greater *nisyon*, a greater challenge, than the ones we don't. And if we are not up to the challenge, if it's a test that we couldn't pass, G-d doesn't make us face it.

There is a story told¹ of R' Chanina ben Dosa, a man so holy that the Talmud tells numerous stories of miracles that occurred to him. And yet one so poor that a heavenly Voice commented that the whole world was supported by R' Chanina's merit, but he himself lived off a small measure of carob from one Friday to the next.

Eventually his wife just couldn't handle the abject poverty any longer. He agreed to her request that he pray for wealth. A heavenly hand came down and handed them a huge golden table leg. Certainly worth a fortune.

¹ Taanis 24b

That night, R' Chanina's wife had a dream. They were in heaven, and all the other couples were sitting at three legged tables. Except for them. Their table only had two legs, it couldn't stand.

Realizing that the third leg of their table was the gift they had received, she asked her husband to pray for it to be taken back. And it was.

R' Chaim Vilozhiner associates the three legs of the table in this story with the *mishnah*² about the three pillars of the world: Torah, Divine service, and acts of charity. The Voice said, after all, that R' Chanina supported the world.

² Avos 1:2

On the seventh day of Pesach we celebrate the anniversary of the crossing of the Red Sea. The crossing was not only of great historical importance, but it elevated the Benei Yisrael to the point where "a handmaiden at the sea saw more than Yechezkel ben Buzi saw in his prophecy"¹ – whose seifer Yechezkel opens with the vision of the *Merkavah* and closes with a lengthy description of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Every morning we say in Shacharis, "And Yisrael saw (*vayar*) the 'Great Hand' which Hashem did in Mitzrayim, *vayir'u* – and the nation felt *yir'ah* (awe, fear) for Hashem, and they believed

¹ Mechilta 15:2

The golden leg they received was the one of kindness. Until now, they had reason not to give more charity – they had nothing more to give. The story as R' Chaim understands it (I couldn't say this about R' Chanina ben Dosa on my own), suggests that R' Chanina would have been unable to practice charity as he was worthy to had he had the opportunity.

So, R' Chanina ben Dosa was poor.

Similarly, the person who is medically needy because that keeps him close to G-d. The person who, had he been healthy, would have been more distracted by the physical opportunities afforded him.

This is the son who doesn't know how to ask. Unlike the wise son, who asks "How shall I respond?" or the

son of uncomplicated, pure and simple faith, who asks "My G-d, My G-d, why have You forsaken me?" (Tehillim 22:1) this son isn't asking anything. He isn't capable of grappling with this issue – be it a tragedy, or be it the Exodus.

"You shall start for him." Our response must be to help them grow.

Of course, these four sons are archetypes. Real people are wise on some issues, determined to be wrong about others. We have a simple straight to the point perspectives on yet other things, and there are those issues we aren't prepared or ready to face. But it is only through growth that we can reach our goals as individuals and as a people.

Bakeish Shalom

description of *yir'ah*, from which I will take the vast majority of this week's column. In his essay *Be'ikvos haYir'ah* (In the Footsteps of *Yir'ah*)⁴, Rav Avraham Elyah explicitly connects sight to *yir'ah* and gives a first-hand description of the path from *yir'ah* to the joy of *shirah*, of song. The rest of this column are his words, as translated by Rabbi Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer⁵:

...But one who has not traversed the actual pathway of illumination [that of the prophets and the sages],

in Hashem and in His servant Moshe. Then Moshe and the Benei Yisrael sang (lit: will sing)..."²

Note the progression: sight, *yir'ah*, song. To most of us this is startling. *Yir'ah*, fear, leads to song? Isn't song something we would intuitively associate more with *ahavah*, love?

Perhaps this is because we're under a misimpression about the nature of *yir'ah*.³

Rav Avraham Elyah Kaplan, who lived a mere 34 years at the beginning of the 20th century, left us with a poetic and moving

² Shemos 14:31-15:1

³ For related thoughts on this subject, see the *Sefasai Tiftach* column for *Beshalach* by Jon Baker at <<http://www.aishdas.org/mesukim/5764/beshalach.pdf>>

⁴ Realizing the article may be hard to find, we put it in its entirety on line at <<http://www.aishdas.org/raek/yirah.pdf>>

⁵ "In the Footsteps of Rav Avraham Eliyahu Kaplan", Jewish Action, Orthodox Union. Article available at <<http://www.aishdas.org/rygb/raek.htm>>

he who stands opposite the rays of light, at some distance, possesses little understanding of this term [yir'ah]. It would be better had he never known this term, and was now learning it for the first time. But this is his problem: He knows it, but does not know it properly. He possesses a dangerous translation of the entire concept, and cannot avoid its negative ramifications. For example, when we mention yir'ah to this person he can only translate it thus: Bent head, wrinkled brow, glazed eyes, hunched back, trembling left hand, right hand clapping "al cheit", knocking thighs, failing knees, stumbling heels. And he does not know that this translation is heretical for the one who knows what yir'ah is and what it means, the source from which it flows, and from whence it comes... There are times that demand tears and eulogies... It is necessary then to stoop like rushes and take up sackcloth and ashes. Times come upon the world when our sins require these. Such, however, is not Yir'as Hashem, not it and not even part of it. It is not yir'ah's essence, but only preparation for it...

Yir'ah is not anguish, not pain, not bitter anxiety. To what may yir'ah be likened? To the tremor of fear which a father feels when his beloved young son rides his shoulders as he dances with him and rejoices before him, taking care that he not fall off. Here there is joy that is incomparable, pleasure that is incomparable. And the fear tied up with them is pleasant too. It does not impede the freedom of dance... It passes through them like a spinal column that straightens and strengthens. And it envelops them like a modest frame that lends grace and pleasantness... It is clear to the father that his son is riding securely upon him and will not fall back, for

he constantly remembers him, not for a moment does he forget him. His son's every movement, even the smallest, he feels, and he ensures that his son will not sway from his place, nor incline sideways - his heart is, therefore, sure, and he dances and rejoices. If a person is sure that the "bundle" of his life's meaning is safely held high by the shoulders of his awareness, he knows that this bundle will not fall backwards, he will not forget it for a moment, he will remember it constantly, with yir'ah he will safe keep it. If every moment he checks it - then his heart is confident, and he dances and rejoices...

What is yir'ah? It is the broad jump over the vast gap between myself and my Creator... It is a mitzvah to separate - to separate from smallness! Fly over barriers! And from there quest Him, for there you will find Him.

When the Torah was given to Israel solemnity and joy came down bundled together. They are fused together and cannot be separated. That is the secret of "gil be're'ada" (joy in trembling) mentioned in Tehillim. Dance and judgment, song and law became partners with each other... Indeed, this is the balance... A rod⁶ of noble yir'ah passes through the rings of joy... [It is] the inner rod embedded deep in an individual's soul that connects end to end, it links complete joy in this world (eating, drinking and gift giving) to that which is beyond this world (remembering the [inevitable] day of death⁷) to graft

⁶ An allusion to the bari'ach hatichon, the inner rod in the middle of the Mishkan's walls that went all the way through from one side to the other. (RYGB)

⁷ Alluding to Chazal's way to combat the yetzer hara: "Yazkir lo yom hamisa." (Remind him of the day of death.) (RYGB)

one upon the other so to produce eternal fruit...

...What is yir'ah? It is the broad jump over the vast gap between myself and my Creator... It is a mitzvah to separate - to separate from smallness! Fly over barriers! And from there quest Him, for there you will find Him...

Indeed, this is the direct relationship. Indeed, this is the true vision that we call yir'ah... And this, therefore, is the reason that we dwell so much on fear of sin ("yir'as ha'onesh"). This is also vision - seeing things as they really are... One who refuses to see his future shortchanges only himself. Only if

he sees (re'iyah) will he fear (yirah), and only if he fears will he repent... And from here we proceed to the fear [awe] of loftiness ("yir'as haromemus") - that is the vision [the perception] of loftiness.

From here - "The maid servant at the Red Sea saw loftier visions than the Prophet Yechezkel." From here comes the direct view, across all the dividers, to the source of existence. This is an unceasing inner gaze toward the matter that is one's responsibility [the bundle of his life's meaning] (that he must safeguard lest it fall...). The gaze is one that leads to remembrance, remembrance that leads to care, care that leads to confidence, confidence that leads to strength ("oz") - an inner, bold, uplifting, strength ("Hashem oz li'amo yiten") and a strength that leads to peace ("shalom") and wholeness ["sheleimus"], internally and externally, in thought and in deed ("Hashem yivareich es amo ba'shalom"). Indeed, This is the wisdom of life: "Reishis chochma yir'as Hashem" A fear that is vision. "And remember" - "And see" - "Shivisi Hashem l'negdi tamid..."

Sefasai Tiftach

The gemara¹ explores why it is we say the paragraphs of Tehillim we do for *Hallel*, rather than *perek* 136, “*Hallel haGadol*” (which begins “*Hodu Lashem ki tov, kil le’olam chasdo*”).

The first answer offered is that *Hallel* contains five themes: leaving *Mitzrayim* (“*Betzeis Yisrael Mimitzrayim*”), crossing the *Yam Suf* (“*Hayam ra’ah vayanos*”), the giving of the Torah at *Har Sinai* (“*Heharim rakedu khe’eilim*”), the revival of the dead (“*Es-haleikh lifnei Hashem*”), and the birth-pangs of the messiah (“*Lo lanu Hashem, lo lanu*”). While this last point about “*Lo lanu*”, is said in the name of Rav Yochanan, another opinion has Rav Yochanan associate “*Lo lanu*” to the war of *Gog uMagog*, immediately before the messianic era.

Rav Nachman suggests that *Hallel* was chosen because it speaks of the souls of *tzadikim* being saved from *gehenom*, as it says “*Anah Hashem maltah nafshi*”.

Chizkiyah offers a third answer. *Hallel* was chosen because “*Lo lanu*” was said by Chananiah, Misha’el and Azariah when they were thrown into the fiery furnace, and “*Halelu es Hashem*” when they emerged. Chananiah said “*Lo lanu Hashem, lo lanu*”, Misha’el continued with the next verse, “*Ki lishimkha tein kavod*”, Azariah said the *pasuk* “*Al chasdecha va’amitekha*”, and all three concluded with “*Lama yomeru hagoyim*” onward. And when they emerged, Chananiah said “*Halelu es Hashem*”, Misha’el said the next phrase “*Shabechuhu kol ha’umim*”, Azariah added “*ki gavar aleinu*

chasdo”, and again they concluded together, “*ve’emes Hashem le’olam*”.

The paragraph “*Lo lanu*” figures as central to two of the three explanations, whether it refers to the birth-pangs of the messiah, the final war of *Gog uMagog*, or saving Chananiah, Misha’el and Azariah from the furnace. Even according to Rav Nachman’s opinion, focusing on the connection in the paragraph “*Ahavti*” to saving from *gehenom*, perhaps casts light on this. Its parallel on saving the *tzadikim* from the more mundane fires of the furnace is striking. In all opinions, a critical element of *Hallel* is that even sinking into crisis is a prelude to a greater redemption.

We say in “*Lo lanu*” “Why should the nations say, ‘Where, please, is your G-d?’ When our G-d is in heaven, anything that He desires, He does.” As the *pasuk* says, “Why should the nations say ‘Where is their G-d?’” The first sentence is understandable, the paragraph is clearly one written from within a moment of crisis. During such moments Hashem’s Hand in events is more hidden, and that alone can be reason for the crisis to end. But why do we continue, “Anything that He desires, He does” – what’s the connection to the theme of the paragraph?

Rav Yechiel Michel Schlesinger, the founder of Yeshivas Kol Torah in Yerushalayim, asks a second question. In describing idolatry, the Tehillim reads, “They have a mouth, but do not speak; they have eyes but do not see. They have ears but do not hear; they have a nose, but do not breath.” Each phrase is of the form “... *lahem, velo* ...” But then, it switches structure: “Their

hands but they do not feel; their feet but they do not walk.” Why?

The *mishnah* (Avodah Zara 3:2) states: “One may enjoy benefit from the broken pieces of an idol. However, if one finds an entire hand or foot [of the idol], may not take benefit for these things are sometimes worshipped on their own.” The Vilna Gaon explains that this is the cause of the shift in phrasing. The mouth, eyes, ears, and nose are only relevant as part of a greater idol. Thus we say about the idol that “they have” these things. However, “their hands” and “their feet” are themselves idols, and therefore their being parts of a whole is not stressed.

Rav Shlesinger continues this idea. To an idolater, the purpose of worship is to obtain things from their gods. Thus a hand or a foot alone, something that expresses action, could be the subject of worship, unlike other parts of the idol. This stands in contrast to worshipping Hashem, even in times of trouble, with the steadfast belief that “Our G-d is in the heavens”, spiritual. Religion centered on the notion of providing man with a higher calling. “Anything He desires, He does”, and the worshipper strive to align himself with that purpose.

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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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¹ Pesachim 118a

