

Mishpatim

Lo Sih’ye M’shakeila Va’akara

A synopsis of the Maamar found in Torah Or

WE JEWS put a lot of effort into serving G-d. We pray slowly and with concentration; we dedicate every available moment to Torah study; we strive to refine our characters and act with true love for our fellows. Hopefully, all one’s efforts bear fruit, and he or she comes to develop a true, heartfelt love and fear of G-d. Yet a person should always realize that no matter how much effort one has put into this spiritual quest, any success one achieves is not really one’s own. Authentic love and fear of G-d are gifts from G-d Himself – bestowed, perhaps, in recognition of one’s sincere efforts to attain them, but gifts of G-d all the same.

This is hinted at by a verse in this week’s Torah portion, *Mishpatim*. In blessing the Jews, G-d promises (Exodus 23:26), “There shall be no miscarrying or barren [woman] in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.” Land – earth – is that which sprouts forth growth and nourishment to sustain all physical life. There exists a spiritual counterpart to this: a heavenly concept of “land,” as it were, from whence flows spiritual life, i.e., true love of G-d and the motivation to perform His mitzvos. These are the things that “nourish” Jewish souls, no less than food nourishes our bodies.

In fact, the parallel extends further. The produce of earthly land is basic, essential to physical life: of what use would be all the gold, silver and wealth of the world if the land did not give forth its bounty (G-d forbid)? Similarly basic is the “produce” of the spiritual “land”: all the Torah one studies and all the mitzvos one performs are based upon the love of G-d which motivated those actions. What good is Torah one studies merely in order to show off one’s knowledge or to feel accomplished? What good is charity one gives merely for self-aggrandizement and to gain prestige? But when based upon sincere love of G-d and the desire to do His will, these things are life itself, and the very purpose of one’s existence.

(Actually, any good one does is still good even when performed for selfish reasons, and one should certainly continue doing it. Within that context, however, one’s challenge is to refine one’s motivation.)

Moreover, one cannot expect the physical ground to sprout forth sustenance without toil and effort invested in its cultivation. Only those who sow, reap. Similarly, the spiritual blessings of true love of G-d and purity of motivation in one’s worship are not gratuitous and automatic gifts from G-d; they are granted in response to the toil and effort one invests in their cultivation. For all these reasons, the heavenly source of spiritual success is referred to as “the land of life” (*eretz bachaim*), as in the expression (Psalms 116:9), “in the lands of the living,” which can also be translated “in the lands of [spiritual] life.” (The word “lands” is plural because in fact, this spiritual concept exists on two levels, one above the other.)

This is all alluded to by the verse (Psalms 97:11), “Light is sown for the righteous.” Here, the term “righteous” (*tzadikim* in Hebrew) is not used in its precise, technical sense (explained elsewhere), but simply in the sense of a good and upright person, as in the verse (Isaiah 60:21), “Your people are all

righteous.” The verse in Psalms is saying that “for the righteous” – in order to succeed at becoming a sincerely good and upright person, one who is attached to G-d and yearns to cleave to Him – “light is sown,” that is, the “light” of Divine assistance and blessing, although ready and waiting beneath the surface, comes out only when one has struggled and toiled at spiritual growth – when one has “sown” in the “land of life.”

Now, earthly growth is not really from the ground *per se*, as though planting a seed “mechanically” caused a plant to sprout – for, on the contrary, what naturally follows from planting organic matter in moist earth is the rotting and decay of what was planted. In reality, growth comes from the Divine life force within the ground. Spiritual growth, too, does not “automatically” occur, even through the heavenly level known as *eretx bachaim*; here too, it is a gift from G-d, even though bestowed only after one’s efforts at “sowing.” Thus, one should be mindful of this always, and not waste one’s (spiritual) efforts in trying to “become” someone who loves and fears G-d. First, because it isn’t one’s unassisted efforts that will bring that about, and if one thinks otherwise one has the wrong perspective. And second, because if one’s goal is to “become” anything – even a lover of G-d or a G-d fearing person – one has missed the point. One should try to lose oneself completely in loving and fearing G-d, conscious of nothing but His greatness and one’s longing to unite with Him. Someone in this state may be accurately described by others as a person who loves and fears G-d, but if the person him- or herself allows any ego into the picture (“I” really love G-d), they have spoiled it.

Rather, a person’s efforts should be directed in the manner advised by the verse (Exodus 23:25), “And you should serve G-d, your L-rd.” The Hebrew word used here for “and you should serve” is *va’avad’tem*, which connotes putting effort into one’s service. What should be the goal of those efforts? That “G-d” should be “your L-rd,” where the Hebrew word for

“G-d” is the Tetragrammaton (*Havaye*) and that for “L-rd” is *Elokim*. As explained elsewhere, the Divine name *Havaye* refers to G-d as the utterly transcendent One who simultaneously was, is and always will be; the One in whom the creation of the universe effected no change whatsoever; the One before whom all is literally as nought. The name *Elokim* refers to G-d as manifest within creation, a level one can relate to on a personal level. One should work at internalizing awareness of *Havaye* to the point that *Havaye* is like one’s *Elokim*. That is, one should strive to reach the point at which awareness of *Havaye* is so firmly established within one’s brain and thought, and so truly felt and grasped by one’s intellect, that it is as though his or her perception of the exalted level of *Havaye* is as real as if He were actually revealed before the person’s very eyes.

All the praises of G-d found in our liturgy and elsewhere, for example, “G-d of Abraham,” “the Great One,” etc., are of this order, in the sense that G-d – *Havaye* – really is utterly transcendent, and to describe or praise Him in any of these ways – suggesting that G-d relates to such things as Abraham or “greatness” – is meaningless except as praise of His “humility” in condescending to “lower” Himself to the point where we can describe Him in these ways. Nevertheless, out of His unbounded love for us Jews and desire that we be able to relate to Him, He does in fact “lower” Himself into these levels – starting with the loftiest levels of heaven and all the way down to the point at which manifestation of the level of *Havaye* can even (in a manner of speaking) “fit” within our human brains. But for this to come about requires great effort and preparation on our part.

Yet when we succeed in these efforts, and develop a true realization of *Havaye* in our own minds, there is born of this a genuine love and fear of G-d Himself. In fact, this is actually referred to by the term “birth,” and the love and fear of G-d are called “son” and “daughter” respectively. (This is the inner meaning of the Talmudic dictum (*Bava Basra* 141a), “[If one has] a daughter first, it is a good sign for sons [to follow].” In the natural order of things, fear of G-d (the “daughter”) and the resultant purity from sin are prerequisites to developing authentic love of G-d (the “son”).)

On the other hand, if one does not follow this path of worship, and instead wants to “possess” the “desirable” traits of love and fear of G-d –

in other words, if the person's goal is simply that they themselves should "have" love and fear of G-d, which they seek to obtain by their own efforts – they cannot possibly succeed. What love and fear of G-d they experience this way will not be "real," but vain fantasies, which have no permanence and peter out after a while. In contrast with the "birth" of lasting and genuine love and fear of G-d as described above, this situation is called "miscarriage," because it is characterized by birth which does not last. Or, the person will prove unable to generate any love or fear of G-d at all, a situation termed "barren."

That is why, in the verse immediately following that in which we are told to "serve G-d, your L-rd," we are promised that, by doing so, "There shall be no miscarrying or barren [one] in your land." The possessive phrase "in your land" is significant: the problem which causes "miscarriage" or "barrenness" is that the person is trying to bring forth love and fear of G-d from their own land, like one who believes that by the work of their hand and sweat of their brow in planting and sowing, they will naturally come to reap the fruits of their labor. They fail to recognize that, whether with respect to physical land or the spiritual *eretẓ bachaim* – land of life – results do not come automatically with effort, but are a gift from G-d. Realization of this truth avoids the problem of "miscarrying or barren in your land."

There is a second type of "barren," as in the Talmudic teaching (*Yevamos* 64a) on the verse (Genesis 11:30), "she had no child": "she did not even have a womb." That is to say, a person can be barren because they actually lack the physical organ of conception. At a minimum, in our context of giving birth to genuine love and fear of G-d by opening one's mind to being totally absorbed in G-d's transcendent Self, the person's mind must be a potential receptacle for this higher influence. If the person's mind is self-absorbed, full of its own needs, desires and perceived significance, it cannot possibly be absorbed within G-dliness; the person literally lacks the "equipment" necessary to "conceive" authentic love and fear of G-d Himself.

The spiritual "community of Jewish souls" (*k'nesses Yisrael*) is compared to the concept of *kos y'shuos*, the "cup of salvations" found in mystical and *halachic* (Jewish legal) settings. This (and its counterpart, the Jewish People at large) is a receptacle for spiritual blessings, and called *kos*

shel b'racha, a “cup of blessing” (see *B'rachos* 51a; *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 183), since it holds the “wine which gladdens” – that is, the type of contemplation of G-d discussed above. But this assumes the cup is empty, and therefore able to receive the blessings that are poured into it. If a person has a sense of their own self, however, and considers themselves not an “empty vessel” waiting to be filled up with G-dliness but something in its own right, they are like a solid cup! Of course they will not be able to receive any input from without – they will not be able to “conceive.”

The solution to this condition is in accordance with the verse (Psalms 51:19), “a broken and contrite heart, etc.” Just as a craftsman who fashions a cup must bang and hammer out the metal to the point where the inside is hollow, so must the sincere worshipper honestly and critically, even “brutally,” evaluate oneself and one’s actions and motivations, until one comes to a true and humble realization of one’s own insignificance. This leaves one “empty” of that arrogance and self-worth which had clogged one’s spiritual pipeline, and makes it possible to hold G-d’s blessings after all.

Another requirement under Jewish law for a *kos shel b'racha*, “cup of blessing” (such as that used to recite *kiddush*, or the *havdalah* ceremony), is that the inside must be rinsed clean. This symbolizes the need of even one who is already humble – for example, a poor person, accustomed to humility in any event – to keep him- or herself free of attachment to and preoccupation with even permissible worldly matters. Certainly, a person comes into contact with various things which are perfectly permissible according to the Torah, and in which a person has no choice but to engage (e.g., one’s livelihood or one’s food and drink) but which are not in and of themselves holy. When involved in such things, one should beware of developing an attachment to them for their own sake, or of losing one’s focus exclusively on service of G-d. Otherwise, one is comparable to a “dirty” cup – it is empty, to be sure, but still cannot be used to hold the wine until rinsed clean. In the context of “conception” and “birth” of true love and fear of G-d, this concept is analogous to a woman who, while perfectly healthy – not barren at all – is still unable to receive conception because ritually impure.

Now, even after all is said and done – one has made themselves into a hollow, clean and rinsed vessel for receipt of G-dly influence – one needs yet another step.

The community of Jewish souls, k'nesses Yisrael, can be discussed on several levels and called by several names (see Or Hatorah, Eikev, p. 603). In the state of “childbirth” – having successfully given birth to genuine love and fear of G-d – k'nesses Yisrael may be referred to by the name Leah, “the mother of children” (eim habanim). However, in the “barren” state – inability to generate true love and fear of G-d – it is called Chana, as in the verse (I Samuel 1:2), “and Chana had no children.” The solution is to do as Chana did (see I Samuel 1:10): “and [Chana] prayed to G-d.” As noted in the synopsis of the discourse *B'etzem Hayom Hazeh Yatzu Kol Tzivos Hashem Me'ereetz Mitzrayim* in the Torah portion *Bo*, the Hebrew words used here for “to G-d” are *al Havaye*. “*Al Havaye*” literally means, “upon *Havaye*,” and the implication is that her prayer was directed to a level of G-d which transcends even the sublime and transcendent aspect of G-d represented by the name *Havaye* (explained earlier). For, even saying that G-d “transcends all of creation” relates G-d to creation. But in fact, G-d Himself – His very Essence, so to speak – cannot be referred to in terms of creation, even to say that He “transcends” it, for even that is “beneath” G-d’s very Self, as it were.

Chana reached up to that indescribable level “and wept bitterly.” This symbolizes the arousal of pity – a pity stemming from a level so high that even the loftiest spiritual realms are its fitting objects, for even they are so low compared to G-d’s Self. We, too, should arouse pity on our souls from this supreme level, and we will thereby receive the Divine help we need to achieve true love and fear of G-d.

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