

United We Stand

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Parshas Bechukosai

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The Parsha's Path

But if you will walk with me "keri" and refuse to heed me (26:21)

This week's Parsha opens with the blessings G-d will bestow on us for following the mitzvos (according to Rashbam and Rabbeinu Bachya, specifically for keeping *shemittah* and *yovel*), and the terrible curses for failing to follow them. There are seven rounds of curses which get progressively more severe if we fail to repent, c"v.

In today's era, people are deeply uncomfortable with the whole theology of the curses, which seem like G-d's vengeance. How can an All-Merciful G-d inflict such terrible suffering upon His people? Furthermore, how can coerced obedience be part of a meaningful relationship with G-d?

The third round of curses is introduced with the warning that they would happen if we walk with G-d *keri*. Rashi quotes the grammarian Menachem, who explains that this means refraining or holding back. Rashi notes that this is similar to Onkelos's translation, which renders *keri* as "hardness", meaning that they harden their hearts to refrain from drawing close to G-d. All of the subsequent rounds of curses also begin with a warning if we walk with G-d *keri* or *bikeri*.

I believe that this Rashi illuminates much of the answer to our questions. The Torah is informing us that clinging to G-d is part of our DNA. Every creature naturally desires to cling to its Source. Our hearts all yearn for G-d, if we don't prevent them.

However, in order to make drawing close to G-d part of our free will, G-d created forces that can pull us away from Him. The verses that describe how the first round of curses begin read *But if you will not listen to Me and will not perform all of these commandments, and if you will consider My statutes revolting, and if your being rejects My ordinances, so as not to perform all My commandments, to annul My covenant (26:14-15)*. Rashi explains that these verses discuss a progression. *If you will not listen to labor in Torah and to know the expositions of the Sages, you will ultimately be led to not perform all of these commandments, which will lead to abhorring others who perform the commandments, which will lead to hating Torah scholars, which will lead to preventing others from performing commandments, which will lead to denying that G-d commanded them, which will lead to denial of G-d*. Those familiar with individuals who have drifted away from observance will appreciate the accuracy of Rashi's description. Everyone is vulnerable to the forces pulling us away from G-d; once Torah learning is relaxed or abandoned, observance loses meaning and importance, which can ultimately lead to a rejection and spurning of Torah and the adoption of heretical philosophies to justify that departure, and so on.

Yet, even when we have strayed so very far away, even when it seems that we've completely removed ourselves from

G-d, our souls never stop yearning for Him, and G-d doesn't abandon us. The curses show us that G-d cares about our relationship and that it matters how we treat Him. They are designed to arouse our souls to acknowledge our bond with Him and call us back. By the second round of curses, it is impossible that we do not feel our souls pulling us towards G-d; we naturally feel a desire to return. The only way we could continue to stay astray is if we "harden our hearts to refrain from drawing close."

In *Ubikashtem Misham*, Rav Soloveitchik elaborates on how Shir HaShirim represents this natural dialectic we have with G-d. On the one hand, we yearn to draw close and embrace Him; at the same time, we are terrified and overwhelmed by Him. He is infinite and we are finite, and so we can never truly embrace without complete self-nullification. There is a safety and a comfort in our finitude that we struggle to escape from, as much as we simultaneously want to transcend ourselves and cling to the Infinite One. Thus, while the Lover pursues her Beloved, at the moment when the Beloved actually knocks on her door, she refrains from opening it until it's too late. This frustrating dynamic is, on one level or other, the hallmark of all of Man and the Jewish people's relationship with G-d.

If things go right, this dynamic can exist on a higher and higher plane, as we draw closer and closer to G-d even as we catch ourselves pulling back. We take further leaps to have deeper tefillos, stronger mitzvah performance, more Torah learning, and live on a more enlightened plane, even if it isn't always a linear ascent. Yet if things go wrong, if we let the tugs that pull us away get the better of us, then the tugs of ascent can be suppressed as we are swallowed by the pulls of our desires and society. Yet those tugs never disappear, and ultimately we are destined to follow the natural pull of our souls.

For me, this Rashi is a reminder that no matter how far apart we may seem from people, whether they appear spiritually higher or lower, all of us share the same *tzelem E-lokim*, with the same natural pulls towards G-d - and the same pressures holding us back. It reminds us that we should never give up on anyone, including ourselves. The curses are a sobering reminder of our vulnerability, but they are also an empowering testament to our potential for change.

Deeper Meanings

Reprinted from 5779.

While it may be after Lag BaOmer, it is still appropriate to discuss the B'raisa (in Maseches Yevamos 62b) regarding Rabbi Akiva's students, which contains many valuable insights.

The context of the Gemara is a fundamental principle: "when you accomplish good things when you're younger, you should not be content; rather continue when you're older (paraphrased)." The story of Rabbi Akiva's students applies this

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idea to having students - that if you teach and have students when you're younger, you should continue pursuing teaching when you're older, because, as Rashi explains, you don't know what students are going to end up shining. The Gemara recounts the story of how Rabbi Akiva's 12,000 pairs of students didn't respect their study partners, and thus all died between Pesach and Shavuot. Rabbi Akiva later replaced these students with the five original Tannaim of the Mishna (one of them being Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, who in particular left a rich Kabbalistic legacy and thus the connection to Lag BaOmer.)

My Rebbe told the story of how someone once asked him how it was possible that Rabbi Akiva's students didn't love each other when Rabbi Akiva was all about "V'Ahavta Lereicha Kamocha." My Rebbe replied to him, "Do you love your baby?" "Yes."

"Do you honor him?"

"No, of course not."

"There's your answer."

The Gemara discusses the fact that the students didn't act with honor towards their comrades - it had nothing to do with a lack of love. You can love someone greatly but think that they're as dumb as a nail. In fact, the Ari, commenting on this story in Shaar HaKavanos, notes that the problem that lended itself to the behavior of Rabbi Akiva's students was a narrow, competitive view of things. They each felt that they were right and that nobody else could be right, and so they didn't tolerate when their friends argued with them. In order to succeed, both in learning and life, one must be broad minded. As Ben Zoma in Pirkei Avos (4:1) says, "Who is wise? He who learns from all men." One must be open to hearing different possibilities, accept the value in other views, and humbly consider them to ensure that his own views still appear the most correct to him. This is what enables both intellectual honesty as well as honor for others. This is the message of the sefira period. It's one thing to love your fellow Jew, but it's another thing to honor them for their views and who they are. Let us all strive to fulfill both, and merit to fulfill the latter statement of Ben Zoma (ibid.), "Who is honored? He who honors all created beings, as it says, 'For those who honor me, I will honor, and those who despise me will be held in little esteem.'"

Pirkei Avos Paths

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Ben Azai says: Run to do an easy mitzvah as to a difficult one, and flee from sin; since a mitzvah leads to another mitzvah and a sin leads to another sin, since the reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah and the reward for a sin is a sin." (4:2).

What is the difference between a "mitzvah leads to another mitzvah" and "the reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah"? Rabbeinu Yona explains that when we do a mitzvah, two things happen: 1. We habituate ourselves to do more mitzvos; it becomes easier and more natural; 2. We merit Divine Providence that G-d will grant us more opportunities to do mitzvos. And, as

the Mishna illustrates, the reverse is true as well. (Of course, the commentators are quick to point out that the gift of Divine Providence for another mitzva is not to the exclusion of reward in the World to Come).

In a previous Mishna, it was expressed that we should run to do even the easier or "lighter" commandments because we do not know the reward for any of them, and the truth is that the reward for all mitzvos is very great. That Mishna reflected the motivation of an individual regarding reward and punishment. This Mishna provides a deeper incentive: Not only are their immediate consequences in our heavenly account book, their performance also affects our character and our future. With every sin we destroy a piece of ourselves, and with every mitzva we build ourselves up. We make it easier to pursue the path we choose and we naturally live life differently as a result. Most of our lives, we're on cruise control, doing what just comes naturally. Sometimes we arouse ourselves and really contemplate deciding. It is these moments that steer the course for the rest of the time, and weighing those ramifications should help us take the decision with the utmost seriousness.

Goal of the week

Reach out to a less religious friend or relative.

This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rachel Zlotta, Masha Sarah bas Teiviah Leah, Reuven ben Golda, Ephraim Melech ben Teilah, Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror, as well as for the safe return of all the hostages and soldiers. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

Have A Great Shabbos !!

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