

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Nitzavim

Close at Heart

כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיו ובלבבך לעשתו

For the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it (30:14)

NATURAL ASSETS

Hashem has endowed man with numerous assets and faculties which can serve him faithfully, provided he does not impair them. For example, the five senses are there to serve man, but can become de-sensitized through excessive and unhealthy behavior. Similarly, the world's resources are available to man, yet can prove inadequate if he engages in them excessively, turning yesterday's luxuries into today's necessities. With this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah explains the Mishnah's famous statement¹ regarding why humans can sometimes find it hard to make a living: "הרעותי את מעשי – I corrupted my deeds and (thus) frustrated my livelihood." The relationship between these two phrases is that when one "corrupts his deeds" and becomes dependent on luxury items, making a living that requires their inclusion thereby becomes a frustrated endeavor.

The same is true with regards to matters of morals. Man has been endowed with a natural moral sense, valuing good and kindness while rejecting evil and injustice. However, these senses, too, can become dulled. If a person gives in to his baser drives, he can come to dull or even corrupt his natural sense of right and wrong. These forces serve to blind the person to basic truths which were once clear to him. Indeed, the person himself can sometimes recognize this blinding effect, for once his wrongful activity is over he regrets it, with all the justifications and rationalizations that accompanied it falling away. This is the meaning of the Gemara's statement² that after a person passes away, "his soul testifies against him." The recognition of the immoral nature of the person's acts is something that originally existed within the soul while the person was alive, but was then robbed of it by his desires. Now, free of the skewing influences of the person's selfish drives, his soul is free to testify concerning these deeds with full clarity and conviction.

1 Kiddushin 82b.

2 Taanis 11a.

So, too, with regards to recognition that the world has Creator. The natural unfettered response to seeing a world which caters for all of man's needs is to conclude that Someone ordered it in this way. This was the way Avraham came to an awareness of Hashem. Here, too, one can choose to give in to forces which are not prepared to recognize Hashem, at which point he will be forced to come up with much more elaborate explanations as to how all these things came into being and exists in the way that they do.

All of these ideas are summed up in Shlomo Hamelech's words in Koheles:³

אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאָדָם יָשָׁר וְהֵמָּה בִקְשׁוּ חִשְׁבֹנוֹת רַבִּים

For God made man upright, while they pursued many calculations.

Hashem created man in a state which was "upright" (yashar) where certain key truths and values were clear to him. Part of man giving into corrupting influences is that he is then forced to "pursue many calculations" in propounding ideas that fit in with the way he wishes to live his life.

"THE BOOK OF MAN'S SOURCE"

The implications of the above idea is that man innately possesses the ability to make correct moral decisions, as well as the capacity to recognize Hashem based on his observation of the world. These are the two areas the basics of which comprise the seven Noachide laws. With this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah offers a fascinating explanation of a statement in the Talmud Yerushalmi.⁴ R' Akiva famously says that "וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ – love your neighbor like yourself,"⁵ is a "כלל גדול בתורה – major principle in the Torah." To this Ben Azzai responds, there is a greater principle still, contained within the verse: "זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדוֹת אָדָם – This is the book of the generations of man."⁶

This response of Ben Azzai is quite difficult to understand. It is not readily apparent how that verse about the generations of man constitutes a principle at all, much less the greatest of all principles!

The Meshech Chochmah explains that Ben Azzai expounds this verse as saying that not only is man obligated by the Torah to treat his fellow fairly and correctly – *man himself is a book* where that command can be read! The word "תולדות" refers to how things emanate. As long as man is close to his initial uncorrupted mode of emanation ("תולדות אדם – the emanation of man"), his natural sense is in accord with moral behavior, which makes his very being the equivalent of a book or moral instruction. It is with this in mind that verse concludes by saying that man was created "בְּדְמוּת אֱלֹקִים – in the likeness of God." Hashem, the ultimate Source of moral instruction, has made Man in his likeness, endowing him with a sense of moral behavior to instruct him on Hashem's behalf.

THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND THE TORAH

The above holds true for humanity in general. However, the outstanding efforts and achievements on the part of the Avos in recognizing Hashem and implementing Godly

3 7:29.

4 Nedarim 9:4.

5 Vayikra 19:18.

6 Bereishis 5:1.

living led Him to choose their descendants for a higher level of Divine knowledge and attainment. If people in general have the innate capacity to recognize Hashem as Creator and the value of moral living – the basis of the seven Noachide laws, the Jewish People were further endowed with the capacity to love Hashem and recognize His involvement in the course of world events – the basis of the Torah’s mitzvos:

- ▶ Mitzvos such as tzitzis, tefillin and mezuzah reflect love for Hashem by placing a reminder of Him on the person, his clothing and his dwelling. Similarly, the various korbanos reflect a desire to attain a greater closeness to Him.
- ▶ Mitzvos such as reciting the Shema, learning Torah, remembering the Exodus and keeping Shabbos and Yom Tov, reflect the desire to spread Hashem’s word and celebrate His guidance of world events.

However, in the same way that humankind in general can have its basic sense of moral living corrupted by selfish forces within them, so, too, the Jewish People can experience this corruption with regards to their natural affinity with them mitzvos of the Torah.

HEARING HASHEM’S VOICE

It turns out that the relationship between doing teshuvah and hearing Hashem’s voice is twofold:

- ▶ Firstly, doing teshuvah comprises a decision to hear Hashem’s voice in the sense of recommitting or strengthening one’s commitment to heed His commandments as set forth in the Torah.
- ▶ Additionally, doing teshuvah purifies the person’s heart and rids it of corrupting and distorting influences, to the degree that he is then capable of hearing Hashem’s voice emanate *from within his own heart*.

It is this second voice that is being referred to by R’ Yehoshua ben Levi’s statement in Pirkei Avos:⁷ “Every day a voice emanates from Chorev (Sinai) and says ‘Woe to the people over the disgrace of the Torah!’” this voice is the one that resonates and reverberates from within

With this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah explains the meaning of pasuk 10 which states:

כִּי תִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוּר מִצְוֹתָיו... כִּי תָשׁוּב אֵל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ

When you hear the voice of Hashem, your God, to keep His mitzvos... when you return to Hashem, your God, with all your heart and all your soul.

The ideas contained within this pasuk – doing teshuvah and heeding Hashem’s voice – have already been mentioned earlier on the perek,⁸ for they are the basis of teshuvah itself. What is being added by their repetition here at the end of the Torah’s discussion of teshuvah? Rather, in this later pasuk, the Torah is referring to hearing Hashem’s voice *from within*, something that is only possible once one has purified his heart through doing teshuvah “with all his heart and all his soul”.

7 6:2.

8 Pasuk 2.

If the heart of humankind generally is a book instructing the person to live in a moral and Godly way, the hearts of the Jewish people are a sefer Torah, exhorting the person to live on accordance with all the Torah's mitzvos. Teshuvah begins by heeding Hashem's call to return to the Torah and ends by hearing that call echo in one's own heart. It is this idea which the Torah proceeds to set forth in pesukim 11-14, where it says:

כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת... לֹא נִפְלְאָת הוּא מִמָּוֶד וְלֹא רְחֹקָה הוּא... כִּי קָרוֹב אֵלָיךְ הַדְבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ

For this mitzvah... is not inaccessible to you nor is it far away... for the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it.

כתיבה וחתימה טובה לכל בית ישראל!