

concerned with hearing “no!” – we want to hear “yes!” – that is when we even bother asking.

Rav Preill quotes a fascinating *Chazal*, which he uses as a foundation for addressing the Jew in relationship with society, but very applicable (with a dose of this author’s license) to contemporary times. The *Talmud Berachos* 8A quotes Rabbi Yochanan (who himself was blessed with outstanding longevity) wondering how there could be old people in Bavel, Babylonia, considering that the blessing of longevity (according to our opening *pasuk*) is reserved for residents of *Eretz Yisrael*. The response was, “There are people who arise early to attend synagogue in the morning and stay late in the synagogue in the evening.” In other words, *shul* attendance (obviously followed by real *davening*) can make the difference in one’s lifespan.

The *bais haknesses* has always been the centerpiece of our *Yahadus*, Judaism. It has been our spiritual home: the place where we go to pray, to learn; the place for spiritual resuscitation and revival. It is there that we pour out our hearts in supplication to Hashem. The *shul* has been the font from which our souls imbibed their spiritual sustenance, thus allowing us to maintain the proper values and outlook. When the fortress of protection is breached from within -- or worse, when the people who require its stability and preservation do not remain inside, or they simply do not show up -- they lose the insurance that it provides.

There used to be a time when the *shul* was truly the centerpiece of Judaism in a community. (Please consider that Rav Preill wrote this in 1929, and America did not have much established to speak of at that time. Thus, he must have been referring to Europe, whose culture was dominantly Torah oriented.) Sadly, in the present (so he writes), the *shul* has been supplanted by the lodge, the country club, the board room. People no longer have the time or the inclination to spend their days, beginning with early morning and ending in the evening, in the *shul*. Understandably, one must leave to earn a living, but, as long as his primary focus is Torah and *tefillah*, he is safe.

The *shul* changed, as it became more and more the place where people gather to socialize, *shmuess*, do business, decide the future of the world – everything but *daven* and learn. The older generation became extinct, and the young and more powerful-- with their material successes to bolster their strength -- took over, making decisions based upon a new set of values. This, explains Rav Preill, does not lend itself to *arichas yamim*, spiritual and physical longevity.

Now, let us fast forward ninety years and consider the state of our *shuls* today. We are leagues ahead of the past in our Torah knowledge, but is *davening* with a *minyan*, on time, remaining in the sanctuary for the duration of the service, a priority? Do we make a point to come to *shul* a few minutes early to recite *Tehillim* or to learn as our fathers did, or do we come on time for *Borchu*, put on *Tallis* and *Tefillin*, and leave prior to the last *Kaddish*? *Davening* used to be a daily staple, our singular opportunity to speak with Hashem.

Although we certainly *daven*, it does not have the same critical importance. Do the *shul* and *tefillah b'tzibur* play a vital role in our lives, or do we attend only when we have time, settling instead to *daven* wherever and whenever? The sanctity of the synagogue is contingent upon the sanctity of our prayers. They go hand in hand. If our *tefillas* take a distant second place to everything else, what can we say for the edifice that is supposedly dedicated to prayer?

Va'ani Tefillah

Refaei nu Hashem/nei raf ei Heal us Hashem and we will be healed

The *Sefarim HaKedoshim* (Kabbalistic writings) teach that all of the prayers which we recite anywhere throughout the world must make their way to *Eretz Yisrael* – then to Yerushalayim; to the *Bais Hamikdash* (the place where it was situated); to the *Kodesh HaKedoshim*, Holy of Holies, where the Angels dispatch the prayers to Heaven. The entire “journey”, from prayer recital until it reaches the Heavenly Throne, is fraught with challenge, as there are a number of spiritual obstacles along the way that can impede the prayer’s “arrival” in Heaven. All of this changes with regard to prayer on behalf of a *choleh*, sick person. We are taught that the *Shechinah*, Divine Presence, rests above the head of a sick person. Thus, the prayer need not take a circuitous route to reach Hashem. He is right there! We say Heal us, Hashem, *v'nerafei*, and we will be healed, immediately, since there is nothing in the way to impede the prayer from reaching its goal. We must, however, make sure to offer a sincere prayer, with meaning and devotion.

לז"נ נתן אריה בן זאב

יום היא"צ י"ח אב – ת.נ.צ.ב.ה

לז"נ יקותיאל בן יחיאל זיידל ז"ל

יום היא"צ כ' אב – ת.נ.צ.ב.ה

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Parashas Eikev

תשע"ז

פרשת עקב

ואתפלל אל ד'

I prayed to Hashem. (9:26)

The effect of prayer can never be overstated. We have no idea of its power: to alter a decree; to incur favor; to demonstrate our love for the Almighty in recognizing that it is all in His hands and that, without His constant will, we are nothing. We think of prayer as requesting something positive. After all, why would anyone ask for something bad to occur? The following story is a wake-up call, but it is the punch line that really delivers an inspirational message.

A distinguished *rav*/motivational speaker was dispatched to speak to a group of irreligious Jews in a settlement in southern *Eretz Yisrael*. Following his speech, an elderly couple approached him with a strange request: “Rabbi, could you please pray for us – that we die?” they asked. We can only imagine how the rabbi must have felt to hear such a request. “I have never been asked to do something so unusual. You must have a good reason for such a request,” he responded.

“Let us tell you our story. We grew up in Communist Russia. Finally, we were able to immigrate to the Holy Land. Life was difficult; acclimating was hard; financially we were challenged every step of the way. Nonetheless, we had one blessing, one comfort, a double gift from G-d: our two daughters, both of whom were a great source of pleasure and satisfaction. One daughter is a graduate student at the Technion in Haifa; the other one lives in Los Angeles. Both are successful and are on the road to even greater achievement.

We recently saved up some money and purchased tickets to visit our daughter in Los Angeles. We spent a month visiting, touring, spending time with our daughter. It was absolutely wonderful. On the last day of the trip, our daughter accompanied us to the airport, where she broke to us her tragic news: *‘Ima, Abba*, I have a request of you. Please erase my number from your phone book. I have decided that I want to move on with my life, acculturate myself, and sever my relationship with the past. As long as I am connected with you, I am still in the old country. I want to live!

“Understandably, our twelve-hour return trip was filled with grief, and we wept the entire way home. We comforted ourselves, however, that we still had one other daughter. We traveled to Haifa to share our unfortunate news with our other daughter – who shocked us with a similar request. She felt that we are backwards and, if she were to remain connected with us, she could never become a part of the ‘now’ scene. Rabbi, it is now one full year that

we have had nothing to do with either of our daughters. Our lives are worthless. This is why we want to die.”

If there has ever been a sad story – this is it. The *rav* listened, looked at them with caring eyes and asked, “Rather than have me pray that you die, why do you not pray to G-d that He open your daughters’ hearts? Why do you not pray for them?” he asked.

“Rabbi, we are over seventy years old, and never once have we prayed to G-d. We have no clue how to pray to Him,” the parents replied.

“My friends,” the *rav* began, “can you imagine the feelings of a Father Who has waited over seventy years for His children to speak to Him? You have been sitting by the phone for a year – everyday – waiting, hoping that perhaps your daughters might call. Your Heavenly Father has been waiting for you for over seventy years! Call Him, talk to Him, cry to Him! Use any language that is comfortable – but call!”

מה ד' אלקיך שואל בעמך

What does Hashem, your G-d, ask of you? (10:12)

Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl, views *ahavas Hashem*, love for Hashem, as the *yesod*, foundation, of the entire Torah. To love Hashem is not a *mitzvas asei*, positive commandment; rather, it is the principle upon which hinges all of the *mitzvos* of the Torah. Every *mitzvah* is just another aspect of our love for Hashem; *mitzvos* are our expression of love. When we carry out a *mitzvah*, we are demonstrating our unabiding love for the Almighty. This love is reciprocal, because we understand and acknowledge Hashem’s love for us. A Jew’s commitment to Judaism -- the very same commitment that impelled him to declare, “*O Yehudai O tzlav*”; “Either I am a Jew or I am prepared to die” -- is derived from his total connection, his overriding *dveikus*, clinging to Hashem, all of which is founded in love.

As a result of this connection founded in love for Hashem, we understand the idea behind the *pasuk* (*Yehoshua* 1:8), *V’heegeesa bo yomam valaylah*; “Rather, you should contemplate it day and night.” If one takes a “break” from learning, he severs the connection. Rav Yeruchem explains that one’s connection with Torah should be like a magnet that does not break its pull on the metal. One who learns Torah on an “on and off...whenever” basis is not learning Torah. Those individuals to whom Torah-study is total immersion, feel nothing, sense nothing, are aware of nothing outside of the Torah which they learn. The reason for this, explains the *Mashgiach*, is because we do not learn Torah for the purpose of knowing Torah. Veritably, *yedias haTorah*, knowing Torah, is important, but that is not why

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we learn. We study Torah out of love! It is our expression of love for Hashem. When we study Hashem's Torah, He speaks to us. When we *daven*, we speak to Him.

The love is reciprocal. We know that Hashem chose us from all of the nations, as a result of His love for us. When one knows that he is loved, he returns the love. One who does not express his love for Hashem does not really perceive the love Hashem has for him. Otherwise, his own love for the Almighty would be more forthcoming.

Hashem has granted us certain *mitzvos* to (sort of) wrap ourselves in them as a sign of His love. They include the *mitzvos* of *Tzitzis*, *Tallis*, *Krias Shema*, *Succah*, *Mezuzah*, *Tefillin* and *Tefillah*. We wrap ourselves in the *Tallis*; the *Tefillin* are on our body. The *Mezuzah* protects our home, and the *Succah* surrounds us, protecting us from the elements. We speak to Hashem in prayer and accept upon ourselves the Heavenly yoke of observance when we recite *Krias Shema*. Indeed, the underlying motif of the *mitzvos* that were given to us at *Har Sinai* is to maintain our relationship with Hashem, that no instance goes by during which we do not maintain our connection with Hashem. From the moment we arise, when we recite *Modeh Ani* in gratitude to Hashem, until the moment that we retire and recite *Krias Shema* – our day is all filled with expressions of love to Hashem via the *mitzvos* which He gave us out of love. When we become *mitzvah*-selective, picking and choosing which *mitzvos* are more convenient and which are too costly, we demonstrate that we are not acting out of love, but out of compulsion and constraint. We may not always immediately see the reward for our love, but it is there - guaranteed.

The following story is one of many which underscore the meaning of the love we must manifest for Hashem. It was winter 2015, and the northeast was blanketed with snow. Roads were impassable, the city streets snow-covered, the weather outside with the added wind-chill was below zero. Many people called in sick to work, since it was physically impossible to negotiate the walk from their homes to the subway. Much of life in the big city was at a standstill. Chaim Goldman (fictitious name) had left his *Tallis* and *Tefillin* in *shul* the night before (as usual). He was now confronted with the stark reality that he lived a mile from *shul*, and it was impossible to get there – either by car or by foot. What would he do? Did he have to do anything?

As all *frum* Jews should, he contacted his *rav* and asked him flat out if he had to make an attempt to retrieve his *Tefillin* from *shul*. The *Rav* suggested calling the city to inquire if a snow plow could get him through to the *shul*. He called and spoke to the harried foreman in charge of snow removal. Yes, they could provide a snow plow for an emergency. The price tag: \$10,000 for approximately three hours of work. (The truck would have to be brought over and returned, plus overtime; and, after all, it was a large metropolitan city in the east coast.)

Chaim was floored by the price. He attempted to negotiate, but it was useless. Apparently, he was not the only one who claimed that he had an emergency. This was the going price. Chaim called his *rav* and asked him what he should do. The *rav* asked him if he had the money. Chaim replied in the affirmative. "If this is the case," the *rav* replied, "you should do what you think is right."

Chaim began to mull over the question seriously.

The Torah exhorts us to love Hashem with all our heart, all our soul, and all our material possessions. Here was a simple case of demonstrating his love for Hashem to the tune of \$10,000. If he really loved Hashem, the money should not be a factor. How could a day pass during which he did not put on *Tefillin*? He called the city, paid the fee and went to *shul*. That was his most meaningful *davening*, because he knew that he had acted out of love for Hashem.

Far be it for me to wonder how many of us would lay out \$10,000 to put on *Tefillin*. Truthfully, I am almost afraid to wonder. Having said that, we may wonder why, although putting on *Tefillin* daily and attending *Shacharis* cost nothing but our time, many people still cannot find the time to carry out this *mitzvah*. Perhaps we might ask ourselves: If Hashem responded to our petition in the same manner and attitude that we attend *shul* – would we be pleased? Perhaps it might be proper to consider that what goes around comes around

את ד' אלקיך תירא

Hashem, your G-d, shall you fear. (10:20)

Fear is a powerful word which connotes various emotions, from respect to anxiety, love to awe. Since Hashem is beyond anything we can imagine, the definition of fear with regard to the Almighty must also be unique. The notion of comparing the fear one should have for a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, to that which one should have for Hashem begs elucidation. The *Midrash Tanchuma (Beha'alo'secha)* teaches us that the *es*, conjunctive word, which precedes (*es*) *Hashem Elokecha (tira)* instructs us to fear one who has mastered the Torah. (Clearly, such mastery involves much more than erudition. It applies to one who embodies the Torah, eruditely, spiritually and ethically – in mind and action.) What aspect of fear of Hashem includes the *talmid chacham*? It certainly does not mean fear of retribution. Scholars do not go around excoriating and issuing maledictions against people. For the most part, they are in their own world of devotion to Hashem. We may disturb that world by gently "knocking" and ask to be allowed in to obtain counsel and inspiration, blessing and encouragement. Fear? What is there to fear? The Torah scholar is a unique individual whose entire persona is honed by the Torah that he has learned and the relationship he has established with Hashem. Where does fear enter the equation?

In his work, "A Vort From Rav Pam," Rabbi Sholom Smith quotes Rav Pam as suggesting that the fear the Torah expects that we manifest towards our Torah sages is much like that mentioned concerning Avraham *Avinu* following the *Akeidas Yitzchak*, Binding of Yitzchak. After waiting for a century to finally beget a son the caliber of Yitzchak, a son who was worthy and would carry on his life's work, Avraham was instructed by Hashem to slaughter his son, sacrifice his hope, his future, his legacy. Just as he was about to execute Hashem's command, he was stopped, by an angel representing Hashem. The angel said: "Now I know that you are a *yirei Elokim*, G-d-fearing man, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from Me (*Bereishis* 22:12).

Without a doubt, Avraham had reached an unprecedented pinnacle of service and devotion to Hashem. Yet, following such outstanding achievement, he is merely described as having just proven he is a *yarei Hashem*. Is that all? We really do not understand the depth of meaning

concerning fear of Hashem. *Rav Pam* cites the *Zechusa D'Avraham* who explains (based on *Kabbalistic* sources) that there are two levels of *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven: *yiraah tataah*, lower fear; and *yiraah ilaah*, higher fear. The lower fear is an apt description of the primary source of fear to which most of us can relate: a fear of getting into trouble; of being on the receiving end of anger catalyzed by our misdoings; a fear of punishment. This fear motivates him to refrain from sin, because once one understands the consequences, he would have to be slightly "off" to continue with his errant behavior.

We identify a higher level of *yiraah*, one that is even more sublime than *ahavah*, love (of Hashem). This fear is one that is inspired solely by his feelings of *afsius*, nothingness, of *bitul lifnei romemuso u'kedushaso Yisborach Shemo*, total obedience and subservience before the sublime, lofty greatness and holiness of his (Creator). Such fear transcends not only punishment, but even love.

The Torah wants us to have a similarly profound fear of the *talmid chacham*, because the scholar is someone who has devoted every aspect of his being to serve Hashem. He has spent his life immersed in the sea of Torah, plumbing its depths and delving into its profound wisdom. In addition to his uncanny erudition, he has refined himself spiritually by struggling to elevate his *neshamah*, soul, overcoming his *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, under the most challenging circumstances. He has perfected his *middos*, character traits, thus developing an intimate relationship with Hashem through his constant prayer. In other words, the scholar embodies the Torah at its apex. He is the perfect specimen, a consummate *nachas*, source of satisfaction and pleasure to Hashem. When we come across such a holy Jew, it is incumbent for us to treat this individual with the respect and reverence that he deserves. This is the meaning of fear of a *talmid chacham*.

Horav Rafael Boruch Toledano, zl, was such an individual. He possessed a vast knowledge of Torah – both the revealed and the hidden. His primary ambition in life was to study Torah and perform *mitzvos*. Nothing else mattered. He excelled in *mitzvos bein adam l'chaveiro*, between man and his fellowman. If there was a possibility somehow to alleviate the pains of one who was ill or poverty stricken, he was there. On the other hand, he refused to turn a blind eye to one who would desecrate the Torah. To him there was no compromising on the supremacy of the Torah. His prayers were a lesson in total self-abnegation and devotion to Hashem. When he *davened*, one could sense that he was speaking directly to the Almighty (which is something that we should all feel). His majesty and nobility, his modesty and humility, were products of his *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven. They all focused together in total harmony to create a *tzadik* whose feet walked the earth, but whose mind was in Heaven.

As *Rav* of Meknes, Morocco, *Rav Toledano* not only oversaw the Jewish spiritual concerns of his community, but he was also a Torah giant who was present for all Jews. His prime concern was always the children, and providing for their Jewish education. The distance from Meknes to Oujda in eastern Morocco is approximately 400 kilometers. When word reached him that the education of the Jewish children in Oujda was hanging in the balance, he immediately left to speak with the powers that be. We must keep this trip in perspective. It was during World War II, the roads were

dangerous, and love for Jews was at an all-time premium. It was not a time to take a trip in the best of health – a state which *Rav Toledano* never was in. He was a sickly person who was physically weak his entire life.

The *Rav* arrived in Oujda and immediately convened a meeting of the heads of the community. He explained to them the significance of a Jewish school. True, it was World War II, and people were short on funds. Nonetheless, Torah study must prevail. It must take center stage in the life of a Jew. He begged them to support the local Torah institutions. They listened, smiled, and said that they were not interested. It was not uppermost on their list of priorities. When he heard their response, the *Rav* began to weep. At first, it was a few tears; then it became full-blown crying. The men attempted to assuage his feelings, to get him to stop crying. They understood his concerns, but Torah study was not prioritized on their "to do" list.

"Do you think I am crying about you? No! I am crying for myself! Our sages teach that anyone who has fear of Heaven, his words (requests) will be heard (listened to). I spoke with you; I pleaded with you, but you ignored my requests. This is a sign from Hashem that I lack sufficient fear of Heaven. Thus, the onus of guilt is upon me."

When they heard these pure, heartfelt words, they realized that they were standing in the presence of greatness. Their hard-heartedness suddenly softened, as they opened up their hearts and their wallets in support of the children of Oujda.

למען ירבו ימיכם וימי בניכם על האדמה אשר נשבע ד' לאבותיכם

In order to prolong your days and the days of your children upon the land that Hashem has sworn to your forefathers. (11:21)

I just came across a homily published in 1929 by *Horav Elazar Meir Preill, zl*, *Rav* of Elizabeth, New Jersey, in which he decries the lack of respect for the "older" generation. There used to be a time (he writes) when the older generation were the pillars of the Jewish community, their advice sought, appreciated and accepted. "Here" (in America at that time), the younger generation has taken charge – relegating their forebears to a place of honor in a nursing home or to a corner of their homes. Not only is their opinion not sought, it is not accepted. They are "has beens" who have little to no value with regard to the furtherance of their respective communities. This was ninety years ago. The reason for the change of communal leadership between Europe and America, explains *Rav Preill*, is that the values had changed. What was important and valued in Europe no longer carries weight in America. Here an alternative set of values reigns.

In a society in which people prioritize spiritual values in their life and *weltenshaung*-- as was the case concerning the members of the previous generation who had "been there and done that," who had life experience and were closely connected to the spiritual leadership of the past -- the people turn to their elders for advice and counsel. When life, however, is all about material advancement, fulfilling our physical passions and living up to the standards of a hedonistic, narcissistic society whose barometer of culture is the ancient Greeks – well, obviously we are not interested in a course of history and ethics. We are not