

The CHASSIDUS PERSPECTIVE with Reb Yoel Kahn



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THE ULTIMATE COMFORT

As is well known, the *parshiyos* of the Torah are related to the time of year when they are read. The same is true with Parshas Matos. Parshas Matos is always read either during the month of Menachem Av or on Shabbos Mevarchim Chodesh Menachem Av. It follows that there must be a connection between Parshas Matos and this month.

TO VOW AND TO REVOKE

Parshas Matos begins with the mitzvah of *nedarim*, vows. A person who articulates a vow must heed his word, unless he visits a *chacham* who revokes the vow (or, in the case of a daughter or wife, if the father or husband annuls it).

In the practical sense, the one making the vow and the one annulling it are two separate individuals. However, in the spiritual sense, the concepts of making a vow and of annulling one can both exist by a single person.

What is the spiritual meaning of these two concepts?

The Mishnah tells us in Pirkei Avos that *nedarim seyag laprishus*, vows are a barrier that lead a person to abstinence. By making a vow to abstain from something permissible, a barrier is created that will prevent one from transgressing an *issur*. Furthermore, even if that would be of no concern, the mere indulgence in permissible pleasures is also improper, and *nedarim* are there to help a person abstain from them.

From this angle, the concept of annulling a vow represents a higher level, where the vow is unnecessary. Instead of withholding oneself from physicality, the person finds holiness within it. (An example would be the mitzvah of deriving pleasure on Shabbos, where the enjoyment itself is a mitzvah.)

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

We find a similar theme with the month of Av.

Although the name of this month is Av, it is customary to call it

Menachem Av. (In fact, if the word Menachem alone was used when writing the date in a document, the document is still valid.)

At first glance, the word Av—the month's original name—is associated with the negative aspects that occurred during this month, while Menachem reflects a positive idea—comforting and relieving the pain associated with Av.

However, the Midrash tells us that Av, too, represents something positive. The Midrash states as follows:

"A father offers compassion, as the *possuk* states, 'As a father is compassionate to his children.' A mother offers comfort, as the *possuk* states, 'Like a person whose mother comforts him.' Hashem says: 'I will act like a father and a mother,' " hence the name Menachem Av.

It follows that there are three aspects to this month. There is the lower level of Av, where pain and sorrow still exists; there is the level of Menachem, comfort; and finally, there is the higher level of Av, compassion.

COMFORT AND COMPASSION

What is the difference between comfort and compassion?

When comforting another, one does not replenish the loss the other is suffering. Although it is impossible to replace what is lacking, he endeavors to mitigate the pain somewhat, by offering words of consolation and placing the situation in a new light. Compassion, on the other hand, spurs one to actually provide the other with what he needs, so that there will be no more loss.

These two ideas reflect the spiritual counterparts of a father and mother, namely, *chochmah* and *binah*, the "parents" of emotions.

Emotions are passionate and fiery, and, if let loose, can bring about negative results. They can be tamed and guided through the intellect of *binah*, which channels the *midos* in the proper direction. However, although *binah* is higher than and can control

midos, the negativity associated with *midos* still exists (similar to comfort, which does not replenish the loss). *Chochmah*, on the other hand, is completely beyond *midos*, and from its point of view, there is no negativity to begin with (similar to compassion, which replenishes what is lacking).

TWO ATTITUDES TOWARD SUFFERING

This is the meaning of the Midrash cited above. First, Hashem acts like a mother (*binah*), comforting us for the terrible calamities that befell us during this month. However, we still remain in *golus*, and the pain and suffering is still felt.

Next, Hashem acts like a father (*chochmah*), offering compassion and removing the pain. This will be accomplished in the times of Moshiach, when the troubles of *golus* will no longer exist.

Furthermore, the level of *chochmah* can be attained even today: when a person reaches a level of great *bitul* to Hashem, the world and the pain of *golus* are of no significance to him.

These two ideas reflect the two concepts described above relating to vows. From the perspective of *binah*, since the world possesses some sort of value, one must abstain from physicality so it will not lower him even more. From the perspective of *chochmah*, however, such abstinence is unnecessary, and to the contrary, he can find holiness within physicality.

The attitude of *chochmah* can be illustrated with the following story:

The Maggid of Mezeritch once sent a student to Reb Zushe of Anipoli to learn from him how to accept suffering with joy. When he approached Reb Zushe and told him the reason for his visit, Reb Zushe was surprised. "If you want to learn how to accept suffering with joy," he said, "you must visit someone who is experiencing pain. I have no suffering to begin with!"

Now, Reb Zushe was an utter pauper who was beset with numerous difficulties, *rachamana litzlan*. Yet, from his point of view, he was not experiencing any pain at all! Reb Zushe was permeated with the mindset of *ein od milvado*, and how nothing negative descends from Above. He had attained the level of *chochmah*, where it's not that the suffering exists but is accepted with joy (as is the case with *binah*), rather there is no suffering at all.

CONTINUOUS COMFORT

At first glance, once the level of *chochmah* is achieved, there is no need for *binah*. Once all suffering has been obliterated, there is no need for comfort, where pain is still felt. Yet, the Midrash says that Hashem will act "like a father and a mother." Even after He shows us compassion, He continues to provide us with comfort. Why?

How does one achieve the level of *ein od milvado*? One aspect is to develop a mindset where the world possesses no significance whatsoever; nothing exists other than Hashem. However, the ultimate goal of *dirah betachtonim* entails making the world itself, according to its definition and perspective, into a dwelling place for Hashem. The goal is that the feeling of *ein od milvado* should permeate the world's existence even on its level.

Both *chochmah* and *binah* have a disadvantage. With *binah*, the world is still viewed as an existence, while with *chochmah*, the truth of Hashem's existence has not permeated the world itself. Hashem will therefore provide us with both compassion and comfort, so that the world's own perspective will also agree to the truth of *ein od milvado*.

For further study see לקוטי שיחות ח"ד פ' מטות

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