

BAAL SHEM TOV INSIGHTS

Issue 30: Vayigash

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POWER OF PRAISE How to Find G-d in Our Suffering

SUMMARY

What do you do when faced with a difficult predicament? Many people may just give up, surrender or retreat. Others may try fighting. And yet others would go into denial.

In this week's Baal Shem Tov insight, the Baal Shem Tov, interpreting the opening verse of this week's Torah portion, reveals for us a new and surprising approach that can help us get through any challenge, even the most formidable.

Two Talmudic opinions differ on the order of prayer: Do we first praise G-d and then pray for our needs, or do we first pray and then say our praise? The Baal Shem Tov explains that both opinions are valid - they just reflect two different approaches to facing life's difficulties.

Facing Adversity

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Judah and Joseph

At the opening of this week's Torah portion, Vayigash, we read:

Judah drew near to him [his brother Joseph] and said, "Please, my L-rd, let now your servant speak into my L-rd's ears" (Vayigash 44:18).

After Joseph had imprisoned Benjamin, Judah was faced with a serious predicament. After much resistance, Judah had finally convinced Jacob to allow

Benjamin to travel back with them to Egypt, as Joseph had demanded. Jacob was terrified that something would happen to his only remaining son from Rachel. The only way Jacob would allow Benjamin to go was when Judah personally guaranteed Benjamin's wellbeing.

So now, Judah rose to the occasion. He approached Joseph to prevail over him to release Benjamin.

Many interpretations have been offered explaining this dramatic episode. Here is a novel elucidation presented by the Baal Shem Tov, which also provides us, in the Baal Shem Tov's inimitable style, with an extraordinary lesson in life, how to deal with challenges that come our way.

A Talmudic Debate: Which Comes First - Praise or Prayer?

The Talmud says, "A person should always praise G-d first, and then pray" for his own needs.¹ Yet, in another place, the Talmud states the opposite view: Rabbi Eliezer said, a person should first ask for his needs, and then pray.² Each opinion is correct, and they are not arguing.

The Ramban writes that the essence of a craftsman can be found in the craft that he creates. [Likewise], the Creation is compared to a snail, whose garment is part of itself.³ In all suffering, there

exists a spark of holiness from G-d, although it is hidden within many garments... When a person realizes that G-d is with him even there (in the suffering), the garments become transparent and disappear, and the suffering is abated.

This is what it means to offer praise first. G-d's praise is that His Glory fills the entire universe. "In all their afflictions, He is afflicted,"⁴ - then, there is no affliction⁵ - and one can pray. When one knows how to praise G-d in this way, the suffering will disappear by itself.

The other opinion says to pray first [for your needs, before praising G-d]. In this case, a person's has faith that G-d is also there [in the affliction], [but he is not in a state in which he feels G-d's presence in his suffering, he only believes it with faith; but this faith then leads him] so that he can offer his praise [afterward].

In other words, even though a person does not perceive the spark of holiness in the suffering, if he believes that G-d is with him even there, he will eventually come to this realization.

With this, we can understand the verse: "Judah drew near to him."⁶ He praised the Holy One.⁷ First, he said, "Please my L-rd" - because all affliction derives from this Name.⁸ Then when he drew near to Him and praised and exalted Him, the

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affliction was annulled: Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, and they then realized that the very source of the their misery - the evil Viceroy of Egypt - turned out to be their beloved brother, whose intentions were only for their good. Joseph saves them and their families from the great famine.

An Astonishing Lesson on How to Deal with Difficulties

The Baal Shem Tov offers us here an astonishing lesson on how to deal with even the harshest challenges life presents us.

G-d is everywhere. And in every thing. The essence of the Cosmic Craftsman is imbued in the craft that He created.

Everything - every single life experience - contains Divine holy sparks. In pain and suffering these sparks are deeply concealed and hidden, but they are still there, whether we feel it or not - "In all their afflictions, He is afflicted."

But knowing that is not enough. We actually have the power to reveal the inner good, and eliminate the affliction. How? By praising G-d, by transcending the momentary and obvious pain and remaining positive - praising G-d Who is with us all the time, even in our afflictions. This very praise - when one knows how to praise G-d in this way - this causes the suffering to disappear by itself.

When Judah was faced with the grim situation of Benjamin being lost to his father, he chose this method to address the dilemma: Judah - who knew the secret of praise (as embodied in his name) - praised Joseph, and G-d, and this caused the affliction to be annulled, and the entire experience was transformed from a terrible calamity to a great salvation and blessing.

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Two Ways to Deal with a Dilemma

Not all of us may always be on this level to ignore our needs and predicament and offer praise. Not all of us can perceive the Divine presence in suffering. Therefore, we have - and this is

the second Talmudic opinion - another method: To first pray to G-d and ask for our needs. Beseeching G-d for your needs is a sign of faith that G-d is with you in the affliction (even if you don't perceive or feel it). And this faith will eventually bring you to this full realization, and ultimately annul the affliction.

The Relevant Lesson to Us

In practical psychological terms this Baal Shem Tov insight teaches us the power of positive thinking. However, this is not just the conventional positive thinking we are accustomed to hearing about. This positive thinking is based on

the reality that G-d and G-d's goodness - and G-d's bigger plan - is present within every life experience, even affliction. "In all their afflictions, He is afflicted."

The only question - and this is indeed a very big question, perhaps the biggest of them all - is: How do we reveal and release the Divine presence in affliction hidden and concealed under layers of garments?

Answers the Baal Shem Tov: We reveal the hidden goodness by "praise" - by recognizing and realizing the Divine presence in everything.

Instead of succumbing to the demoralizing effects of pain and suffering, we dig deeper and access the goodness in ourselves and in others, and the goodness in G-d, even when it may be concealed. And we do that by offering praise.

So what does one do when faced with a formidable dilemma? Prayer, of course, is the first thing that comes to mind. But prayer itself - says the Talmud as explained by the Baal Shem Tov - can be done in two ways: Praise and then pray, pray and then praise.

There are two ways to release the Divine good spark within a painful experience: Praise and reveal the Divine first, and

then your needs will follow. Or pray for your needs and nurture your faith and that will lead you to praise G-d, realize and reveal the Divine within.

Praise

Two paths indeed: Praise and then pray, or pray and then praise.

Praise to G-d. Praise to others. Praise even to someone who may be afflicting you - as Judah praised Joseph!

So next time you feel hurt by someone, do the unexpected: compliment the person and you may discover that your pain will go away.

Praise G-d, and recognize that He is with you in your affliction, and you may see your affliction melt away...

Sources: Toldos Yaakov Yosef Parshas Vayechi. Keser Shem Tov sec. 98.

FOOTNOTES

¹Berachos 32a.

²Avoda Zara 7b.

³Bereishis Rabba 21:5. Just as the garments of a snail are part of itself, so the creation is not something separate from or outside of the Divine. It is part of Him, and His Presence is continually present within it.

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⁴Isaiah 63:9.

⁵The Hebrew word lo (b'chol tzorosom lo tzar) in this verse is written different than it is read. It is written lamed vav, which mean "him," in this case, G-d. However, tradition tells us to read the word lo as though it were written lamed aleph, which means "no," in this case, "there is not." The Baal Shem Tov combines both readings. When a person realizes that G-d is present in all of his afflictions, then the afflictions themselves cease to exist.

⁶The Baal Shem Tov reads Judah's words as not being addressed to Joseph, but to G-d himself. See Pri Tzaddik, Vayigash 1, by Rabbi Tzaddok HaKohen of Lublin, who explains that tzaddikim often address their words to the Divine Presence, even when they are speaking to other human beings.

⁷The name Judah - Yehuda - is from the Hebrew word "hodu" - to praise. As Leah said, when he was born: "Now I will praise G-d; therefore, she called his name Judah" (Vayeitzei 29:35). And Jacob said: "Judah, your brothers will praise you." (Vayechi 49:8).

⁸"Bi Adoni." The Baal Shem Tov sees this as alluding to G-d's name Ado-nai, which represents the forces of concealment and strict judgment.