

“MEMAAYAN HACHAIM”

Mussar talks from the Magiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit"א

The Deep Hidden Spiritual Necessity of Guarding One's Natural Human Feelings

“Yaakov became very frightened, and it distressed him. So he divided the people with him, and the flocks, cattle, and camels, into two camps.” (Breishis 32:8)

One could ask a profound question on our Parasha: why would the Torah relate that “Yaakov became very frightened, and it distressed him”? What should have frightened him? Wasn't Yaakov promised by the Almighty, Blessed be He, that He would protect him from any and all difficulties and harm which might befall him? If so, didn't Yaakov have nothing to worry about; why should the Torah state that he “became very frightened”? Even more so, was Yaakov any less spiritually proficient than King David, about whom is written: (Psalms 23:4) “Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me”! If King David was not worried, why would our Father, Yaakov, the progenitor of the Jewish people, worry?

From here, we can establish a significant principle: the Torah teaches us a foundation of our Divine service in this world—“One should never deny his nature, his innate human feelings, to act in a “holy” way **if this is in contradiction to his natural sensitivity**. Rather, on the contrary, one should respect his deep-seated feelings and live “naturally”. That is the way to serve Hashem and fulfill the Torah.”

The will of Hashem and the purpose for which man was placed in this world is nothing other than to elevate, to ennoble his own unique personality, **even with his inborn weaknesses**. It is for precisely this reason that the Torah does not hide, but even stresses the fact that “Yaakov became very frightened and it distressed him”—Yaakov our Father was indeed frightened by Eisav, his brother. Fear is a natural

human response. Therefore, while Yaakov accepted the promise from Hashem that He would protect him from any and all harm, nonetheless, when faced with the normal human response to danger—fear—Yaakov did not deny it, he did not fight it. Just the opposite: Yaakov's entire conduct was not to go “against” his nature, but to work through that nature according to the precepts of Torah. This is a vital lesson for us concerning the correct approach for our Divine service-- not to reject our natural human response, but to elevate and sanctify ourselves specifically through that nature.

With this insight we can offer a deeper understanding of a passage in the Gemora in Taanis (11a): “One should always relate to oneself as if he has sanctity within his insides.” According to the principle we articulated above, an explanation of this saying is that the manner in which holiness manifests itself in our lives is specifically “within our insides”. In other words, even while one eats and lives a natural life on the outside, within one's physical nature the soul's spiritual force of holiness should become apparent. This is also the meaning of the line in the well-known poem, “Bilvovi”: “In my heart I will build a sanctuary for Hashem”—specifically within one's heart, i.e. within one's deepest nature which envelopes all of a person's deepest physical presence, just there do I yearn to create a dwelling place for G-d's Shechina, His presence. In turn, that Divine revelation will direct with holiness all of a person's human aspects, not just his spiritual soul. Indeed, this is the meaning of the phrase from Parashas Terumah—(Shemos 25:8) “I will dwell within them”, that is, the Almighty, Blessed be He wishes that we take His sanctity, His loftiness, and use it within our nature by allowing holiness to

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influence all of our body. (See R' Chaim Volozhin's Nefesh HaChaim where he explains at length how the various utensils of the Temple correspond to the inner limbs of a person, as the purpose of holiness in this world is to sanctify all of the natural physical universe in general and all of man in particular.

These ideas were expressed most pithily by the Kotzker Rebbe, zt"l. in his explanation of the verse (Shemos 22:30) "You shall be to Me a people of holiness", 'What is the meaning of "a people of holiness" (Heb. anshei kodesh)? Menschliche heilig—human, but suffused with sanctity.' That is to say, you should be human—people—while you are yet holy. This clearly reflects our explanation above, that The Holy One Blessed be He already has myriad angels in heaven. He created man as "man", with his own weaknesses and nature so that holiness can devolve upon him and upon his world, and in so doing, elevate himself to the level of "a people of holiness".

We see in Parashas Shemos when the Almighty taught Moshe Rabbeinu the signs to show to Pharaoh, He commanded him to take his staff and throw it to the ground where it became a snake. The Torah makes a point of relating to us: "And he (Moshe Rabbeinu) fled from before it (the snake, in fear--Transl.) It would seem appropriate to ask the question we asked above concerning Yaakov, also here regarding Moshe Rabbeinu's action—how could it be possible to state that a person of Moshe Rabbeinu's stature would flee in terror from a snake?! And again, specifically, how could he run away from a snake which he was just commanded by the Almighty in a Divine revelation to create! Why would the Torah stress this behavior? What could be the intent of the Torah to teach us?

The answer is exactly as we explained above regarding Yaakov Avinu. The Torah wishes to stress that everyone, even the forefathers of our nation like Yaakov Avinu or someone as great as Moshe Rabbeinu, have human frailties and feelings, and the Torah does not hesitate to reveal the truth to us that they were normal, feeling human beings with fears like ourselves. Indeed, Moshe Rabbeinu fled from before the snake, just as Yaakov Avinu was frightened by the prospect of meeting Eisav face-to-face, even though they both were completely aware of the miraculous aspect of these events. Nonetheless, the normal

human reflex functioned in them as it does with us, teaching us that the greatest of our people were also normal humans subject to natural human reactions.

In his sefer Chiddushei Halev, the Gaon R' Alter Chanoch Henach Lebowitz zt"l., writes along the lines we have described. Here are his words, quoted at length: We have learned that Avraham Avinu loved Ur Kasdim and suffered at the thought of leaving his native land. It was his land, the city where had had been born, where his father lived. Isn't it wonderous, why would Avraham love Ur? There was no mitzva from Hashem to love the land of his birth! Just the opposite: logic would dictate that Avraham Avinu should not have had any emotional connection to Ur, for its inhabitants were wicked people, who it is mitzva to hate! But, we must prove from here that even without a specific command to love one's native land, Avraham experienced a natural bond of love for the land where he was born and grew up. Further, in his avodas Hashem, Avraham never tried to uproot from his heart this natural love, for he understood that so doing was not the Almighty's will. We see here a fundamental insight into the nature of a Tzadik. A Tzadik is not someone who has no natural feelings, who only feels that which he has a command from Hashem to feel, with no innate personal will or feelings. Rather, while even the Tzadik has private feelings, he knows how to overcome them and to act only in accordance with the Almighty's will and commands.

Rabbi Lebowitz continues, in his analysis of the words of the Mesilas Yesharim regarding the character trait of Piety, Chassidus: We find today, as well, many people who think, mistakenly, that Chassidus is reflected in an individual who conducts all of his behaviors like a "robot", uprooting all of his human feelings from his heart. However, from the words of our Sages, z"l., it is clear that this is not true Piety. Further, we have seen true Chassidim in the previous generations who did not behave thus.

Finally, he cites along these lines the insight of the Alter of Slabodka, on a passage from Yalkut Shimoni concerning the Akeidas Yitzchok (Vayeira Remez 101) (Breishis 22:9) "And Yaakov placed him (Yitzchok) on

the alter”: ‘Avraham Avinu’s eyes were focused upon Yitzchok’s eyes, and Yitzchok’s eyes looked off to the lofty heavens. Tears poured out of Avraham’s eyes to the point that his height was lessened. Even though it was Avraham Avinu’s intent to fulfill the mitzva of Akeidas Yitzchok with a complete heart and absolute joy, he nonetheless was overcome with sorrow. He shed tears over the fact that he was obligated to offer Yitzchok, his only son, on the alter. The Alter asks: why didn’t Avraham simply control his filial love and natural parental feelings in order to fulfill the Akeida without any tears, to accomplish the mitzva as was his original intent, with a complete heart and absolute joy? After all, this was Hashem’s commandment, to bind Yitzchok, his son, and wasn’t it incumbent upon Avraham to do it with joy? The Alter then explained: Avraham felt that on the contrary, he should not hold back his tears, for in so doing he suspected he would be uprooting from his heart some of the natural parental love he felt for his son, and he understood that one should never uproot his natural feelings and perform his avodas Hashem in a machine-like fashion, without the full spectrum of natural emotions. Avraham Avinu knew, the Alter explained, that such is not the Will of Hashem. Rather than controlling his emotions and tears, he channeled his mercy from his son to fulfill the command of his Creator.

Based on our insight, we can offer an explanation in Parashas Yisro. When Yisro arrived at the Jewish people’s encampment in the desert, Moshe Rabbeinu went out to greet him and the Torah relates, (Shemos 18:8-9) “Moshe told his father-in-law everything that Hashem had done to Pharaoh and Egypt for Israel’s sake—all the travail that had befallen them on the way—and that Hashem had rescued them. Yisro rejoiced over all the good that Hashem had done for Israel . . .” Rashi, on verse 9 comments on the use of the unusual word for ‘rejoiced’ (Heb. vayichad, which is based on a root which connotes ‘sharp points’): “(when Yisro heard about the destruction of Egypt) . . . his skin became full of goosebumps, showing how he was saddened over the destruction of Egypt.” The words of this statement of the Midrash, simply understood, mean that the Torah here uses the uncommon phrasing “vayichad” to criticize Yisro. Even though Yisro was Moshe Rabbeinu’s father-in-law who had converted to Judaism in order to come

close to the Jewish people, he still retained feelings of sorrow over the loss of Egyptian lives, people who had enslaved and even murdered millions of Jews.

But according to the ideas we’ve expressed, we can learn from here that not only is Rashi not citing the words of the Midrash as a criticism of Yisro, but on the contrary, they reflect a lofty praise. We can understand in a deeper way that while Yisro was, indeed, Moshe Rabbeinu’s father-in-law, a ger tzedek with all the spiritual accomplishments this entails, nonetheless “his skin became full of goosebumps”—the midrash shows us that Yisro did not deny his natural human feelings, his traditional long-established emotions of warmth and concern for the Egyptian people. He did feel sad when told by Moshe Rabbeinu about their destruction, since, in truth, they were a part of his cultural inheritance, his upbringing. Thus, even after his conversion, the Torah does not insist he turn a blind-eye to his past history, experiences and feelings. Rather, just the opposite, it requires him to raise these feelings aloft, showing in this way that even in a natural sense Yisro has felt those feelings and still come close to G-d and His people. Just as Avraham Avinu felt normal, natural emotions of attachment to the land of his birth and still raised himself above them to follow the command of Hashem—“Lech lecha! Go out from your land, from your place of birth . . .”, in spite of all the normal human feelings of connection to one’s birthplace, one’s homeland which create a profound difficulty in abandoning that home, the Torah testifies by its use of the unique word “vayichad” to teach us that so too, Yisro experienced these natural challenges and overcame them. This shows his spiritual accomplishment.

In the chapter describing the building of the Mishkan, the Sanctuary in the desert, Hashem commands Moshe Rabbeinu (Shemos 26:15) “You shall make the planks of the Tabernacle of acacia wood, standing erect”. The Gemora in Tractate Yoma (72a) wonders why the Torah had to say that the acacia wood beams should be “standing erect”?! One of the explanations offered by the Sages is: “Standing erect—that is, their position in the Mishkan should be the same way they grew. (i.e. the builders should not place the acacia wood beams upside down—Trans.) In other words,

the Torah stresses with the phrase “standing erect” the legal requirement that the beams of the Mishkan must be built the same manner in which they stood in the forest, as they grew. However, in addition to this halachic requirement, we can also find a profound educational thought along the lines we’ve described above.

The Mishkan symbolically represents the structure of the human being. When the Torah insists upon a requirement in the building of the Tabernacle, it is teaching us a requirement in the building of the character of a person. Pointing to the requirement for the acacia wood beams to be erected “as they grew” (Heb. *derech gedilusan*), the Torah teaches that every person, too, must build his spiritual life “as he grew” i.e. forge his growth in consonance with his natural foundations, faithful to his own personal strengths and abilities, emotions and deficiencies with which he grew up, in his natural environment. A person must always be grounded in his nature and never overturn the truths which formed the basis of his existence. Even more, one must feel secure in the knowledge that his family, his homeland, his childhood environment were exactly the ones necessary for his personal development. Only when a person builds his life “as he grew” can he continue to grow in an authentic way, true to his roots, and then, like the Mishkan, receive the spiritual influence of the Divine Presence, the Shechina. Just as the Mishkan had to have the acacia wood beams “as they grew” to be the natural foundation upon which the holiness of the Mikdash could devolve, and in this way complete its establishment, so it is with the building of a complete spiritual human being, so he can be totally in harmony, not only with his past, but with his purpose in this world.

Another sharp insight to the requirement to build oneself “as he grew”: we find that this halachic requirement is manifest in the mitzva of the Four Species we are commanded to bring on the holiday of Sukkos. We see there that the citron, the esrog is not

simply invalid to fulfill the mitzva when it is held with the other species (i.e. palm branch, myrtles, and willows—Trans.) upside down (a lack in the “*ma’aseh hamitzva*”). Rather, an upside down esrog is not even the species the Torah requires! An upside down esrog is not halachically an esrog. So, too, in character building-- one who denies his nature, the “way he grew”, cannot even be classified by the Torah as a human. Denial of one’s roots creates a loss of one’s essential humanity.

We’ve been discussing a profound requirement for a person’s Divine service in this world: one must maintain his behavior in consonance with his nature, the “way he grew”, to be solidly rooted in his innate feelings and emotions. G-d forbid should one deny those natural human feelings! The Holy One, Blessed Be He, has thousands upon thousands of Angels in Heaven, yet He created man on Earth with all of his frailties and natural quirks so that just upon this nature can he cause His Presence, His Shechina to rest in holiness. In the exact same way the Holy Tabernacle had to have its boards standing “as they grew” for the Divine sanctity to rest on them. Man’s spiritual work is to elevate his decidedly human nature, to experience and articulate his deeply-rooted feelings and emotions, to be authentic and true to his nature, and in so doing, go beyond them if necessary to fulfill the commands of his Creator, as we have seen in the lives of the founders and leaders of our people. They maintained their essential humanity and allowed their natural feelings be alive within their hearts, and still fulfilled Hashem’s will. May we follow their lead, and merit to attain the level of “. . . Be for me a holy people”.



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understanding of writers]

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