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Keeping an Eye on the Goal

Ideally, we should be able to maintain a focus of the “big picture,” that is, to tie every decision we make each day back to some goal, which in turn fits within a larger goal, so that every act is meaningful in terms of one’s life “Mission Statement.” In that way, every act has meaning. In the previous section, we discussed that “following halachah” does not completely describe our life’s work, whether we think of that work as being like the furniture the carpenter is supposed to be making, or as the right path that takes us from who we are to who we were made to be. This is the most important question we must answer for ourselves, as the answer or answers we discover will set the course for our entire lives.

This need to have a *derech* clearly in mind also underlies Rav Shimon’s worldview, and is why his introduction to a work about subtle halachic details opens with a description of life’s big picture.

The numerous streams within the Jewish tradition describe the goal of life in various ways. These descriptions may theoretically be of the same ideal, but they will end up emphasizing different aspects of it and therefore suggest different routes to reach it. The primary fork in the road in Eastern European Jewish thought in Rav Shimon Shkop’s day was set in the debates at the start of Chassidus, and this split had earlier precedents. Therefore, to really understand Rav Shimon Shkop’s path, we should look at the context in which he was writing.

Let me explain the two sides of this “fork” with a metaphor.

If one puts a cup in the sink, and the cup doesn’t fill as it should, it could be because of at least one of two basic reasons: The first is that the

cup's mouth isn't properly positioned under the stream of water coming out of the tap; this is the assumption that the utensil is fine, but not properly connected to the Source. Taking this approach to the human condition is suggested by the notion of *Derashos HaRan*,⁸ and Rav Yosef Albo⁹ (who, as a *talmid* of the *Ran's talmid* Rav Chasdai Crescas, was a product of the *Ran's* school), who understand that the effects of sin are that it dirties the soul, and that the sin itself is a barrier blocking the soul's association with Hashem. The implication is that the sinful soul itself is fine, but it made for itself a layer blocking its access to Divine Good. In contemporary terminology, we would call this a *deveikus* (\קב"ק = attach) approach.

The other likely kind of explanation for why the cup does not become full is that the cup itself is flawed. Perhaps its mouth is not as wide as it needs to be, preventing water from entering it. Or perhaps there is a hole in the cup through which the water immediately leaves the cup. Or some such reason. In this opinion, the purpose of life is to give us opportunities to perfect the self. Apparently, this is the position of Rabbeinu Yonah,¹⁰ who compares the soul of a sinner to someone who is sick. Sickness is a different metaphor than dirt; dirt is on the outside, sickness is a statement about the state of the soul itself. Just as a sick person suffers from his disease, so does a sinner feel the effects his deeds had internally on his soul. *Teshuvah* is a repairing or healing process. This leads to an approach to mitzvos, equally well-represented¹¹ as the previous, the idea of man's quest as *temimus*, or "*sheleimus ha'adam*—human wholeness." Man's goal in life is to strive for self-perfection.

Note that despite the subtle difference between whether the effects of sin are on the soul's relationship to Hashem or within the soul itself, all of the Rishonim cited—the *Ran*, Rav Yosef Albo, and Rabbeinu Yonah—define punishment as a consequence of the sin. Less "Thou shalt not charge interest," and more "If you charge interest, not only will the borrower

8 *Derashos HaRan* §10.

9 *Sefer Halkarim* 4:13.

10 *Shaarei Teshuvah* 4:1.

11 By Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi, in the beginning of *Kuzari*, as just one example.

suffer, you will be causing harm to yourself.” Not “Obey or I will punish you,” but “Avoid these things because they’ll hurt.” These approaches liken the commandments more to manufacturer’s instructions or doctor’s orders than to a general’s orders. Mitzvos enable our souls to be filled with Divine Good, and this is why Hashem tells us to perform them.

We say in the *Amidah* for Shabbos and Yom Tov, “*Vetaheir libeinu le’avdecha be’emes*—purify our souls to serve You in truth.” One can see this in two ways: We request from Hashem that He purify us, so that we may reach that *deveikus* to serve Him truthfully and reliably. We do not want “dirt” on our souls blocking the good. Alternatively, we could be requesting *temimus*, that purity of soul that we are describing as being healthy enough to be capable of serving Him.

The spread of Chassidus gave the common Jew a means to relate to mitzvos and the purpose of his life by defining them in terms of an experiential closeness to Hashem—along the lines of the *Ran* and Rav Yosef Albo, a pursuit of *deveikus*.

In contrast, the Vilna Gaon’s students titled the first chapter of *Even Sheleimah*, a collection of his thoughts, “In Which Is Explained All the Ways of Breaking the Evil Middos [proportions of character traits] in General—Which Is the Root of All Service of Hashem.” Being whole, *sheleimus*, with the whole person operating harmoniously, *temimus*.

The mitzvah of *bris milah* is introduced with the words, “וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי אֲנִי קֵל שְׂכֵי הַתְּהַלֵּךְ לְפָנַי וְהִיָּה תָמִים—*I am Kel Shakai, walk yourself before Me, and be whole.*”¹² How are we supposed to read the quote? Is it the **walking** before Hashem that is primary, and being whole a side effect—*deveikus*? Or is Avraham being asked to “walk **yourself** before Hashem,” as the means toward *temimus*? To put it another way, when we speak of the “*Derech Hashem*—Path of G-d,” in what way are we calling it His? Are we referring to walking a path to Hashem, or walking the same path Hashem does, emulating Him?

A person lives in tension between his spiritual and physical sides—*neshamah* versus *guf*. To achieve *sheleimus* and *temimus*, he

12 *Bereishis* 17:1.

would necessarily be serving his spiritual goal and walking in Hashem's path. In reverse, if one strives for *deveikus* (attachment) to the Singular G-d ("*Hashem Echad*"), how could he be a chaotic battleground of warring urges? Cleaving to Hashem forces His Priorities to be yours, leaving *temimus*. So we could see these two positions as being different perceptions of the same thing. But they reflect differing priorities, and therefore actual differences in practice.

For example, in the ideal, the Chassidic position is that one must invest time to prepare for *davening*, even if this is at the expense of timeliness. (We are not discussing blanket permission to ignore the clock and the laws of the times for prayer.) Chassidus is a *deveikus*-based worldview. Therefore, when weighing the relative merits, it is more important to be able to invest time to prepare one's mind and heart for the act of *tefillah*, for relating to Hashem, than when the *tefillah* actually begins.

To someone with a *temimus* orientation, however, *zehirus*, meticulousness, care in how each facet of the mitzvah is done, is the more important consideration. *Zerizus*, the passion and diligence to do what's right, is also an important *middah*, as in *seder*, order, and conforming to the day's structure. All of the *middos* come into play when considering the timeliness of *tefillah*.

Both *mussar* and Chassidus saw a predecessor in the *Ramchal* (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato). I think this is possible because the *Ramchal* appears to echo the Torah's dialectic. For example, they have two contrasting ways of understanding the beginning of the first chapter of *Mesilas Yesharim*:

יסוד החסידות ושרש העבודה התמימה הוא שיתברר ויתאמת
אצל האדם מה חובתו בעולמו, ולמה צריך שישים מבטו ומגמתו
בכל אשר הוא עמל כל ימי חייו. והנה, מה שהורונו חכמינו זכרונם
לברכה הוא, שהאדם לא נברא אלא להתענג על ה' ולהנות מזיו
שכינתו, שזהו התענוג האמיתי והעידון הגדול מכל העידונים שיכולים
להמצא. ומקום העידון הזה באמת הוא העולם הבא, כי הוא הנברא
בהכנה המצטרפת לדבר הזה. אך הדרך כדי להגיע אל מחוז הפצנו
זה, הוא זה העולם. והוא מה שאמרו זכרונם לברכה (אבות ד):
העולם הזה דומה לפרוודור בפני העולם הבא.

The foundation of saintliness and the root of perfect service [of Hashem] is in a person obtaining clarity and realizing the truth of what is his duty in the world, and to what he has to set his sights and aspirations in all of his activities all the days of his life. This is what Chazal taught us, that a person was created for nothing but finding pleasure in Hashem and enjoying the splendor of His Presence; for that is the true pleasure and greatest joy of all forms of enjoyment that can be found. The true place where this pleasure may be derived is the World to Come, which was expressly created to provide for it, but the path to the object of our desires is this world, as our Sages of blessed memory have said (Avos 4:21), “This world is like a corridor to the World to Come.”

The question becomes: What is the nature of this “corridor”? The *Ramchal* reminds us that we cannot get the full pleasure of Hashem’s Presence in this world. Do we try our best to achieve *deveikus*, connection to Him, in this world despite knowing our short-term success is limited, because that is how we earn full success in the World to Come? Or is the purpose of this life to refine oneself to be capable of as much connection—and therefore as much enjoyment—in the next world, and that refinement is significantly different than connecting itself?

I would suggest that Chassidus sees itself in *Mesilas Yesharim* because they take the former stance, whereas *mussar* sees itself through the latter interpretation. This ambiguity is possible also because the *middos* listed in the *baraisa* of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, which the *Ramchal* uses as his list of topics for the rest of the text, is on the one hand an exercise in self-refinement, but on the other hand framed as a ladder up to holiness, Divine Inspiration (*Ruach haKodesh*) and the revival of the dead (*Techiyas haMeisim*).

As the *Ramchal* writes later in the chapter:

ואמנם ראוי לו שתהיה כל פנייתו רק לבורא יתברך, ושלא יהיה לו שום תכלית אחר בכל מעשה שיעשה אם קטן ואם גדול אלא להתקרב אליו יתברך ולשבור כל המחיצות המפסיקות בינו לבין

קונו, הן הנה כל עניני החומריות והתלוי בהם, עד שימשך אחריו יתברך ממש כברזל אחר אבן השואבת. וכל מה שיוכל לחשוב שהוא אמצעי לקורבה הזאת, ירדוף אחריו ויאחז בו ולא ירפהו. וכל מה שיוכל לחשוב שהוא מניעה לזה, יברח ממנו כבורח מן האש.

It is indeed fitting that his every inclination be toward the Creator, may His Name be blessed, and that his every action, great or small, be motivated by no purpose other than that of drawing near to the Blessed One and breaking all the barriers (all the earthy elements and their concomitants) that stand between him and his Possessor, until he is pulled toward the Blessed One just as iron to a magnet. Anything that might possibly be a means to acquiring this closeness, he should pursue and clutch, and not let go of; and anything which might be considered a deterrent to it, he should flee as from a fire.

Deciding what is of value in this world in terms of what brings us closer to or further from Hashem became the centerpiece of Chassidic thought. Whereas the Mussarist would see the central theme of the chapter a couple of sentences later:

...כיון שביאתו לעולם אינה אלא לתכלית הזוה, דהיינו, להשיג את הקירבה הזאת במלטו נפשו מכל מונעיה ומפסידיה.

...Since our coming to [this] world is for nothing but this goal, which is to obtain this closeness by rescuing his soul from all the deterrents to and detractors from it.

And so they can conclude that no, the *Ramchal* is talking about dealing with those issues now, in the corridor, to enable true cleaving to Hashem in the World to Come.

Perhaps this plurality is the whole point of the Torah's doubled phraseology—(1) “walk yourself before Me,” (2) “and be whole.” Because there are two groups of approaches to the same ends, we don't want to eliminate one in favor of the other. This is why Chazal

speak of “*shiv'im panim laTorah*—the seventy facets of the Torah.”¹³ Shlomo HaMelech advises us in *Mishlei*: “חֲנֹדֶךָ לִנְעַר עַל פִּי דְרָכָיו גַּם כִּי יִזְקִינְךָ—לא יסור מִמְּנֶה—Educate the child according to His way, [so that] even when he grows old he will not veer from it.”¹⁴ Each person must find his own facet, his own path, but only as long as we look for a path that leads to the proper goal. Without this first step, all of our Torah could be as dangerous as poison and as constructive as watering a plot of untamed weeds.

Rav Shimon Shkop's answers to these questions describe a *derech* founded on ideas that we, as products of today's culture, can very well relate to. Not only does this introduction provide us a trail up the mountain, but one that begins at the place where most of us today are already standing.

13 *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:15–16.

14 *Mishlei* 22:6.



Widen your Tent

Thoughts on Life,
Integrity & Joy

RABBI MICHA BERGER

BASED ON RAV SHIMON SHKOP'S INTRODUCTION TO SHAAREI YOSHER

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