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Spiritual Passion

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev was a great Chassidic leader of 18th century Europe. It is well-documented that his love of God was so great that he lived in constant state of ecstasy. At his Shabbos table, as he recited prayers to God, no one ever knew what would happen. He might throw his Kiddush cup up in the air, start dancing on top of the table, or break into an hour-long bevy of song.

The story goes that Rabbi Levi Yitzhak longed to share a Shabbat meal with Reb Baruch of Medzhibozh, another Chassidic master. There was, however, one difficulty: At Reb Baruch's table, everything was done in a dignified, royal manner - and any wildness on the part of the Rabbi Levi Yitzhak would not be welcome.

A deal was struck between the two. Rabbi Levi

Yitzhak felt he could control himself if he would but remain silent and not say anything more than "amen" during the meal.

When the appointed time arrived, much to everyone's surprise, everything went smoothly. That is, until Reb Baruch's servant asked Rabbi Levi Yitzhak whether he preferred his fish sweet or sour. "Fish?! Do I like fish?! I love God!!" he shouted and, overcome with ecstasy, he tossed the fish plate high into the air. To everyone's horror, the plate landed squarely on Reb Baruch's Tallis, staining it all over. Tension filled the air, as everyone awaited Reb Baruch's response.

Reb Baruch calmly announced: "These stains are holy - they were caused by a Jew who really loves God." Afterwards, Reb Baruch refused to have the stains washed out -because of the great enthusiasm they represented. And that treasured, stained Tallis was passed down through the generations!

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak's behavior, as exceptional as it appears to be, actually has a deep source in Jewish tradition. Throughout Jewish literature, the Sages emphasize the need to lead one's life - especially one's spiritual life - with passion. In Rabbi Kalman Shapira's powerful spiritual guidebook, *"To Heal the Soul,"* he declares that every human being is filled with passion; the only question is in which direction we focus those passions.

A tremendous lesson is found in this week's Torah portion, Ki Tavo. A lengthy passage stretching over 53 verses describes all the horrific things that may befall the Jewish People if they act improperly. Such punishments as confusion, anxiety, depression, ignorance, starvation - and worse - may befall them.

Remarkably though, the Torah emphasizes that this would come about only because *"You did not serve the Lord your God with joy and goodness of heart"* (Deut. 28:47).

Proper service of God does not simply consist of observing the mitzvot. It involves doing them with joy! The Sfas Emes (quoting the Arizal) provides us with a guideline for what constitutes sufficient joy in serving the Almighty. He states that one's joy for spiritual matters should be equal (if not greater) than one's joy in partaking of the physical and material realm. The way you run for pizza or a candy bar, is the same way you should run to the synagogue or to Torah study. Ultimately, it is the direction toward which we focus our passions that tells us who we really are.



The Farmer and Telling the Story of the Jewish People

Storytelling is what makes us human. Interpreting events and constructing narratives about what happens to us in our lives is something we all do. Things happen to us - the basic, factual elements of a story - but as humans, we have unique perspectives that shape how a story is relayed, that give shape and meaning to the experiences we go through.

And this, perhaps, is why our sages refer to the

human being as the *medaber*, "the speaker". Animals also communicate with one another through sounds and gestures, but it is human beings alone who construct narratives and interpret events.

We see a stark illustration of how central constructing narratives is to Jewish identity in this week's Torah portion. Ki Tavo opens with the requirement of a farmer to bring his first fruits to the Temple and make a declaration, in the presence of the Kohanim, dedicating the first fruits of his field to God. The wording of that declaration is precisely spelled out by the Torah and includes a significant word: *higaditi* - translated as "And I have told..." The farmer is telling a story.

What story is this farmer telling? There are the objective facts, the physical events, which led him to this point in time. He ploughed and planted and irrigated and harvested, and reaped produce from his land. But, there is also a narrative running parallel to these events. There is metaphysical shape and meaning to be found nestled in these physical details. Because bringing the first fruits to the Temple and dedicating them to God is a gesture of gratitude to the Creator. In acknowledging God's blessings - God's crucial role in bringing all of those processes quite literally to fruition - the farmer is situating his agricultural endeavours within the context of a much grander narrative, a narrative that frames his entire farming experience in the context of spiritual meaning, connection to God, and deep appreciation.

In fact, this narrative of the farmer extends further - connecting his own individual experience to a national narrative, situating his own farming efforts within the context of the

Jewish people and land of Israel as a whole. As part of his declaration, the farmer tells the story of how God gave the Jewish people the land of Israel, but also how Jewish history is intertwined with our relationship with God, and how he brought us into being as a nation through redeeming us from the slavery of Egypt. The farmer's declaration traces the story of how the Jewish people landed up in Egypt, how we were afflicted by the Egyptians, how we called out to God, and how He answered our cries and redeemed us with signs and wonders. And so from this mitzvah, we learn how to narrate the story of Jewish identity - a story rooted in the historical facts of the Egyptian slavery, our redemption from that slavery, the Divine mission we were given, and the gift of the land of Israel.

Narratives are important because they frame the context and the meaning of our lives. This particular narrative - the story of the foundational episode of Jewish history - is important because it frames context and meaning of Jewish history. And, of course, it's a narrative we tell over during the Pesach Seder. It's instructive that the name given to the book we read from on Pesach night is the Haggadah, which itself means the "the telling of the story". Again, there are the historical facts of our slavery in Egypt and our redemption, and all that follows - but the night of the Seder gives us an opportunity to frame those events with a particular understanding and interpretation that helps us discover our very essence as Jews.

And that's why the centerpiece of the Seder is the interaction between parents and children, because it is the platform to hand over the meaning of Jewish identity and Jewish history and Jewish mission to the next generation, by

telling the story of who we are and where we come from and why we are here. In relating the facts and telling the narrative of how, through God's miracles, we came into existence as a nation, and that He gave us His Torah at Mount Sinai, and that He brought us into the land of Israel and that He gave us a Divine mission to live in accordance with His will, and to spread His light in the world, we transmit the essence of the Jewish story from one generation to the next. It's a narrative that defines us both as individuals and as the Jewish people.

The Torah itself is a framework for understanding the mission and meaning of our lives. Why is the mitzvah of learning Torah so important? Why is it referred to by our sages as the gateway to all of the other mitzvot? Why is it that our sages declare that the merit of learning Torah is equal to the merit of all the mitzvot combined? It could be because, through the mitzvah of learning Torah, we understand the story of our lives and the context and the meaning of all of the mitzvot. Through Torah learning, we discover the framework to understand the purpose and meaning of our lives. It also gives us the insight to understand the mitzvot we do. The mitzvot are not simply actions that we have to perform. With every mitzvah, there is an accompanying narrative. Only through learning Torah can we understand, for example, that Shabbos is not only about what we can or can't do on a particular day of the week, but it's about a day that reminds us of the fact that God created the world and He took us out of Egypt and we owe our allegiance to Him.

When we give our money to charity, it's with an understanding of the narrative that all blessings and material prosperity come from God and that

He gives us this prosperity in order to be able to give to others and to share it with the world, and that when we are giving away money, it is not our own money that we are giving away, we are merely allocating it in accordance with the wishes of the One who gave it to us originally, God Himself. When we learn Torah, we understand that every person is created in God's image and that requires of us to treat everyone with sensitivity, with kindness, with compassion, with dignity and with respect. So many of the mitzvot relate to how we treat one another and the ethics of these interpersonal relationships. These are not just actions. There is a narrative that surrounds it, a narrative of understanding and meaning of what it means to be a human being.

Through the halacha, we are constantly framing our reality, and so, for example, when we say a blessing on a fruit, we are framing the reality that God created it and that when we enjoy it, we do so as a gift from Him. When we wake up in the morning and say thank you God for having returned our souls, we are acknowledging the gift of life, and the very fact that we are alive and can breathe and function is a gift from God, which we can appreciate and rejoice in.

This idea of constructing narratives also touches on the essence of leadership. One of the words for a leader in the Torah is *nagid* (Samuel 2:5:2). The Radak says *nagid* comes from the Hebrew word *neged*, which means "facing" - the idea is that people face the leader, looking towards them for guidance, support and direction. But, perhaps there's another meaning of *nagid*, based on the word *higaditi* from our *parsha*, "to tell the story". One of the responsibilities of leadership is to provide the

narrative and tell the overarching story of our lives; to frame the times we live in and place them within a wider, meaningful context.

Each of us can be a *nagid*. Each of us is called on to play leadership roles in one way or another. Some people have official positions within society, but everyone is involved in influencing and leading the people around them in some way. We play leadership roles in our families, among our friends, in our communities, in our business or other kinds of organisations, and in society in general. Parents, especially, are leaders, who frame the meaning and values of their children's lives. Providing the narrative for life is one of the most sacred dimensions of parenting. Whether it's among our children, our peers, our communities, our places of work, each of us has the opportunity to create the narrative, to frame experiences, to provide shape, meaning and context to our own lives and the lives of those around us - to lead by example and inspire virtue in others. The story is ours to tell.



Increasing Good is the Antidote to Evil

Parashat Ki Tavo begins by listing the steps we should take upon entering our homeland. We must acknowledge the good, give first fruits and tithes, provide for the leaders and teachers and

care for the less fortunate. After giving the tithes we are commanded to make a speech, saying, ‘I have given to the Levite, proselyte, orphan and widow...I have not transgressed Your commandments and I have not forgotten [*lo shachachti*]' (Deut. 26:13). This is a strange command. When else are we ever commanded to give a speech like this following the performance of a *mitzva*, stating that we have performed it and that we haven't forgotten to perform it? Surely, if we are announcing that we have successfully performed a *mitzva* then it is obvious that we didn't forget it?

Rashi explains that the phrase ‘I have not forgotten’ is actually referring to the requirement to make a blessing upon the separation of tithes. However, the question remains as the blessing or lack thereof does not actually change the essence or efficacy of the performance of the *mitzva*.

A possible answer is hinted to through the parallel with the final words of the previous *parasha*, ‘erase the memory of Amalek from beneath the heavens – do not forget [*lo tishkach*]' (Deut. 25:19). Amalek represents absolute evil. It is a nation that preys upon the innocent and weak, and as such is the antithesis of the Jewish vision of helping the needy and the vulnerable.

The Torah juxtaposes the story of Amalek with the commandment of the tithes, in order to show us that the only way to wipe out the abuse of the less fortunate is for the more fortunate to seek them out and act kindly. The society of Amalek worships power. The Torah, in contrast, constructs a society that cares for the powerless, the ‘Levite, proselyte, orphan and widow’.

Rav Kook states:

The purely righteous: Don't complain about wickedness, they increase righteousness;
don't complain about heresy, they increase faith;
don't complain about ignorance, they increase wisdom.

When we encounter challenging situations in our lives, often our first reaction is to complain and to focus on the negative. This approach, however, can lead us to sink deeper into the problem itself. We become consumed by the issue, and this blurs our ability to deal with it objectively. With a negative perspective, it is extremely difficult to create a positive outcome. Our complaining leads us to become part of the problem rather than a part of its solution.

With all the problems facing our world today, we must realise that the remedy for the world's ills lies in transcending the bad by overcompensating with good, combatting radical hatred with radical love. Darkness does not become diminished as a result of complaining about it or trying to cover it up, but rather through creating an abundance of light. And this message, as stated by the Torah, is so crucial, that we should all be able to proudly declare: ‘I have not forgotten!’



World Without Consequences

Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist, labels the God of the Old Testament, "the most unpleasant character in all of fiction," a "capriciously malevolent bully." This week's Torah portion is great fodder for him, because God discusses in graphic terms what will befall the Jewish people if they do not listen to his commands. Disease, war, exile and famine - to the point where a parent will eat the flesh of his own child's body and be unwilling to share it with the rest of his family! (Deut. 28:53-55)

It's really nasty stuff, and the sad thing is that everything written in this week's portion has occurred multiple times in Jewish history.

So what's God up to? Why so much pain? Why so much brutality?

Obviously I'm not going to give a full answer, but I'd like to at least answer this question with a question (as every good rabbi should do.)

Why do we complain about consequences, when a life without consequences would be our worst nightmare?

Let's imagine, for a moment, a world without consequences. I can get up as late as I like and not get fired from my job. In fact, I don't even need to show up at all and my big fat salary will still be automatically deposited every month in my bank account. I can spend what and when I

like, without ever running out of money. I can have relationships outside of my marriage, but it won't affect how I feel about my spouse or vice versa. I can cross the street without looking, drive 1,000 miles an hour, drive when I've drunk a keg of beer - and nothing bad will happen to me or anyone else for that matter.

Would we really crave such an existence? An existence in which our decisions make no difference to how our lives turn out? No. Without consequences, life would be empty and utterly meaningless. Quite simply, consequences make life worth living.

Consequences for not keeping the Torah also help to make it meaningful. If I have spent my whole life striving to be a good person, and God sat me next to Adolf Hitler in Heaven, it would make a mockery of my achievements. Equally, if I'd wasted my life and God put me with Moses, I would feel like a fraud.

We want consequences. We embrace consequences. Far from God's response to our disinterest in Him being that of a "capriciously malevolent bully," it is the response of One Who wishes to help us live meaningful lives.

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