

Daily Teaching
16 Kislev, 5768
Monday, November 26, 2007

Vayeishev #2

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

Yesterday, we saw that Rebbe Hillel of Paritch explains that Jacob, having inter-included love and fear of God, was able to dwell, i.e., sustain the state of fearing God and not flee from it to a state of complete and absolute nullification of self. Yet, we still have to understand, what makes Jacob’s ability notable? Is it not better when experiencing awe of God to simply flee upwards, amid laughter like his father Isaac, to the bosom of his Father in heaven?

To understand this we have to pay careful attention to the two verses that Rebbe Hillel brought in support of the definition of “dwelling” as a fear of God, and see them in context. The first was:

All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the horn and the mountain smoking; when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance.

Then they said to Moshe: “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.”

Moshe said to the people: “Do not be afraid, for God has come in order to test you, and in order that His fear may remain on your faces, so that you do not sin.”¹

And the second was:

Men will enter cavernous cliffs and earthy tunnels from fear of God, and from the splendor of His majesty, as He rises to make the earth tremble.

On that day men will cast away to the moles and the bats, their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship.

To enter clefts in the cliffs and caverns in the rocks from fear of God and the splendor of His majesty, when He rises to make the earth tremble.²

The first verse, as mentioned, describes the effect of the initial revelation of God at Mt. Sinai, as He came to give the Torah. When the people saw the sounds (sound waves were picked up by the eyes), they received an experience of higher fear³—the fear of shame. Moshe Rabbeinu tried to persuade them to move closer, explaining that the reason that God revealed Himself in such a fearsome manner (that it caused them to pull back) was in order “that His fear will be on your face, so that you do not sin.”

But, where the first verse brought by Rebbe Hillel describes the experience of only the Jewish people at the Mt. Sinai, the second verse is spoken by the prophet Isaiah about all the peoples of the earth. Isaiah tells us that in the future, “When man casts



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away his silver (money) and gold (riches) idols,"⁴ all of humanity will experience this state of awe of God and thus ascend to a state of nullification of being, as did the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai.

How are fear of God and embarrassment related? The sages explain that the experience of the fear of God at Mt. Sinai indeed left a lasting impression of embarrassment on the face of every Jew. The simple explanation is that the embarrassment is both before God and before other people and is caused by one's self-consciousness of one's own sins. However, Rebbe Hillel states that this embarrassment causes absolute and total nullification of self. This suggests that the embarrassment is considerably deeper and more existential than embarrassment from past sins. Instead, in Chassidut it is explained that the full revelation of God causes a person to be embarrassed that his very being contradicts the omnipresence of the Almighty. The fear that arises in the heart is how is it possible that God is indeed everything and He alone is, and yet, that I perceive myself to have being of my own; how is it that I continue to experience myself as separate and distinct?! It is true that the embarrassment is most strongly experienced when one sins, because at that time not only does my experience of self contradict God's omnipresence, but, to quote the Tanya's very graphic image, when a person sins "it is like taking the head of the king and pushing it into a latrine full of excrement." Nonetheless, when God's singular totality is understood, even without sins, it leads to a need to be sucked into the body of the King; to be completely and absolutely nullified.

But, we still have to ask: where in the two verses selected by Rebbe Hillel is there a description of complete and absolute nullification? Physical embarrassment and fear is evident: the Jewish people stood far away, embarrassed to come any closer and all people will ultimately flee from the presence of God into metaphoric caves, to hide from fear. The answer is that every person comprises a body and a soul. These verses describe the reaction of the body to the experience of higher fear. But, the soul reacts differently. While the body runs away from God (down), the soul runs towards God (up)!

Now we are closer to understanding the importance of Jacob's ability. A regular person, when experiencing fear of God, experiences a rift between body and soul. The soul runs, as it were upwards, towards its source in God, while the body flees as it were downwards, to hide in embarrassment and fear. This is the deep meaning of the verse: "Who knows, the spirit of men, does it rise; the spirit of the brute, does it descend to the earth?"⁵ But Jacob, who is likened to the crossbeam that connects the upper and lower extremes of the middle axis, both at the same time, does not move at all. He is like the axis around which everything revolves, or in the language of philosophy, the unmoved mover! Jacob is able to sustain both extremes, running up and fleeing down as a single experience, freeing him from the experience of the shattering of the body-soul bond. Jacob, as the archetypal soul of beauty, corresponds to the torso (the main part of the body's physique) and to the Torah. Thus, it follows that the unity of experience is

dependent on one's complete observance of the Torah's body, the 613 *mitzvot*. Indeed, the *gematria* of "one beam" קרש אחד is 613!⁶ The beam is able to sustain Jacob's unified experience when a person is wholly committed to the observance of all the commandments.⁷

Submission, separation, sweetening

Now, let us return to the second verse that Rebbe Hillel brings. The first thing we would like to note is that it almost repeats word for word 2 verses later, with a verse in the middle describing when all human beings will experience the higher fear of God. We now have three verses that describe the fear of God:

- 1) All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the horn and the mountain smoking; when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance.
- 2) Men will enter cavernous cliffs and earthy tunnels from fear of God, and from the splendor of His majesty, as He rises to make the earth tremble.
- 3) To enter clefts in the cliffs and caverns in the rocks from fear of God and the splendor of His majesty, when He rises to make the earth tremble.

These three verses lend themselves to analysis using the Ba'al Shem Tov's three stage model called *chash-mal-mal*, or submission-separation-sweetening.⁸ The two examples that the Ba'al Shem Tov gave for understanding this model were circumcision and speech.⁹

Circumcision is required in order to sanctify the procreative organ so that a man's sexual energy is not wasted. But circumcision is a three stage process. First the foreskin is cut away. Then a thin transparent membrane is removed. Only then is the crown of the organ completely formed. Circumcision cuts away the foreskin in order to reveal the aspect of holiness in procreation.¹⁰

The same is true for rectified speech. For our speech to be sweet, i.e., an instrument of holiness, we must go through two earlier stages of submission and separation. The "foreskin" of the mouth is cut away by refraining from speaking ill of another person or improperly. The "thin membrane" of the mouth is cut away by annulling any feeling of self that accompanies our words. Only when these two have been removed can the spoken words come from the heart and have the proper effect on the listener.

Thus, we have the following correspondence:

Ba'al Shem Tov's terminology	in circumcision	in speech	Verse
submission	removal of foreskin	refrain from forbidden speech	All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the horn and the mountain smoking; when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance.
separation	removal of membrane	removal of feelings of self	Men will enter cavernous cliffs and earthy tunnels from fear of God, and from the splendor of His majesty, as He rises to make the earth tremble.
sweetening	revelation of the crown	revelation of rectified speech	To enter clefts in the cliffs and caverns in the rocks from fear of God and the splendor of His majesty, when He rises to make the earth tremble.

In the first verse, the fear of God caused the people to be embarrassed to enter into a conversation with God. Instead they appointed Moshe to speak with Him and they themselves remained silent, viewing things from afar. Thus, their fear of God brought them to a state of submission. In Chassidut, this is likened to the state of the bride under the wedding canopy. Because of her natural modesty, the bride is embarrassed to speak out loud and submits to letting the groom speak the words of sanctification to her without verbally expressing her consent.¹¹

In the two verses from Isaiah, the word that we have translated as “cliffs,” צרים, arouses a strong association with circumcision, as it also denotes a very sharp flint rock which throughout the Bible is the instrument of choice for performing the circumcision. But, in the first verse from Isaiah, צרים appears in reference to “caverns,” מערות, while in the second verse it appears in reference to “cleft,” נקרות. In Hebrew, “caverns,” מערות, is related to the word “immodest” (in the sexual sense), ערוה, thus the first verse from Isaiah is clearly related to the removal of the transparent membrane from the male procreative organ. The word “clefts,” נקרות, is found in relation to Moshe Rabbeinu when God reveals Himself to him in “the cleft of the rock,” נקרת הצור. It was at that moment that Moshe experienced the greatest revelation of the Almighty (he saw God as much as a human being can) and heard the Thirteen Principles of God’s Mercy recited. The revelation to Moshe in the cleft of the rock was the high-point of the entire revelation at Mt. Sinai, and arguably would have been experienced by every Jew had they been able to enter into a dialogue with God after shrinking back in fear. What this means is that the entire Jewish people did not complete the three stages of submission-separation-sweetening at Mt. Sinai—only Moshe did. The highest state of union with God was attained only by Moshe, 120 days after the giving of the Ten Commandments.

¹. Exodus 20:15-17

². Isaiah 2:19.

³. Lower or minor fear of God is fear of God’s kingship, His power to reward and punish.

⁴. Isaiah 2:20.

⁵. Ecclesiastes 3:21.

⁶. We may say that an electrical wire is the best metaphor for understanding how something can connect two things at a distance, transfer messages between them, and yet never move itself. Electrical wiring, which runs within the walls of a building is also a splendid physical metaphor for the actual, original middle crossbeam (בריה התיכון, see Exodus 26:28) that ran within the walls of the Tabernacle. Although electrical wiring is the medium for electricity, we might think that as it connects two extremes, it itself (or at least, its inner composition) must be moving. But, in reality, neither the wire itself, nor anything that it is made up, actually moves when electricity is transferred.

This is one of the applications of the relationship called enclothement (התלשבות), which we have talked about in length in the past. Indeed, the Hebrew for “live electrical current” זרם חשמלי is 653, the same value as that of the phrase from the Shabbat morning prayers “[...]all innermost parts of the body (alluding to Jacob, the archetypal soul of beauty)] shall sing to Your Name...” יומרו לשמך (note that the word for “current” is a permutation of the word for “sing”), quoted by Rebbe Hillel above, indicating that turning the body on in this way also translates into the ability to praise God with one’s body.

⁷. This is hinted to in Jacob’s own words: “With Laban I dwelt” (Genesis 32:5). The word “dwelt” here is written גרתי and its numerical value is 613. The sages say that literally this implies that even though he dwelt with Laban he did not fall from his spiritual level, but allegorically, following Rebbe Hillel this means that after having experienced the fear of God of his father Isaac, his performance of all 613 commandments allowed him to balance the experience with his corporeality.

⁸. See *Keter Shem Tov*, 28.

⁹. “Circumcision” in Hebrew is מילה, which has the same numerical value as “mouth,” פה. The analogy between the two is found originally in *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:3. See more in *Body, Mind, and Soul*, pp. 41ff.

¹⁰. In Chassidut, the power of procreation is considered the infinite power, the exemplar of the similarity (image and likeness) of man to God, who is infinite in all His powers. In the Talmud, procreation is called the great *mitzvah*, where the word for great is רבה whose *gematria* is the same as that of “light” אור. The circumcision itself is called an אות, which means “sign” or “letter.” Thus, just as the letters of the Torah are like lenses focusing the infinite light of God to form words that have physical holiness, so the circumcision focuses the infinite power of procreation in man to form the body of a child that will have physical holiness (the body of a Jew is considered holy, a quality that will be fully revealed to all people in the future).

With the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s encouragement, it has become a common practice for parents to purchase a letter in merit of their newborn child in a special Torah scroll written in honor of Jewish children around the world. How appropriate it is that when the newborn infant is a boy, the letter be inscribed in the Torah scroll on the same day that the circumcision is inscribed in the flesh.

¹¹. In the future, both the sound of the groom’s voice and the bride’s voice will be heard; see Jeremiah 33:11.