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The Beinoni in a Nutshell

There are no holidays in the month of Elul, but the entire month is preparation for the holidays coming in the month of Tishrei. In order to best prepare, it is a good idea to connect to a spiritual guide and take a guidance manual along with you. Now, in the middle of Elul, we can stop, take a deep breath, and be inspired by two exemplary figures: Rabbi Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov and Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi – the first Lubavitcher Rebbe and author of the *Tanya*. Both of them were born on the 18th of Elul (47 years apart) and they illuminate our lives to this very day.

Everybody is looking for shortcuts, just like the non-Jew who came to Rabbi Hillel the Elder and requested that he teach him the entire Torah while he stands on one leg. He received a definitive answer from Rabbi Hillel the Elder, who taught him to walk the trail blazed by Aaron the High Priest, “Love God’s creations and bring them close to the Torah.” If he received such a good answer for the entire Torah, we are certainly justified in looking for a standing-on-one-leg review of the *Tanya*.

In-Between

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi originally named his book, “The Book of Intermediaries.” Later it became known as the *Tanya*, after its first word. It is a book of spiritual guidance for intermediary people (*beinonim*). That is the entire story in a nutshell!

Are we supposed to be intermediary people? Yes. But what is an intermediary person?

We may consider an intermediary person to be someone who does both good deeds and bad deeds. But, that is not what the *Tanya* means by a *Beinoni*. Of course, we all do things that we later regret. But we aspire not to sin. *Mitzvot* are in. Sins are out.

We might think that a *Beinoni* is a type of aspiration-less soul, just drifting along without thinking too much. But that is not what the *Tanya* means by a *Beinoni* and we certainly do not aspire to just meander through life.

The description of the *Beinoni* in the *Tanya* paints a deep philosophy on the nature of the soul and it is appropriate for everyone. It means that we are always in the middle, between our good inclination and our evil inclination; between our Divine soul and our lowly, animal soul; between our illuminated side and our dark side.

What do we do in the middle of the road? We always can—and must—overcome our attraction to the negative. If we truly desire to do so, God will help us to fortify our good inclination and triumph. The *Beinoni* is in complete control. His intellect controls his heart. His intellect controls his physical desires and his wild imagination and he acts in a strictly positive manner.

How can it be that this person who does only good deeds and fulfills God's commandments is called an "intermediary" person and not a *tzaddik*, a righteous person? Because his evil inclination is still alive and well, a lurking monster waiting for the right moment to pounce. The *Beinoni* should never live in an illusion or delude himself into thinking that he has completely overcome his evil inclination.

For example, there are laws to ensure that a man and woman who are not married should not be alone so that they will not transgress. A *Beinoni* needs to adhere to those laws and should never assume that his evil inclination is in a coma and that therefore, these laws do not apply to him. He may be surprised at the miraculous recovery his animal soul can make at a moment's notice. In addition, he should never assume that it is fine for him to view immodest images on his device or elsewhere because his evil inclination is tame. It is not. Even if he is a great rabbi with a long beard, he is not immune to his evil inclination. He is in a war and he must never let his evil inclination get the upper hand.

Present Tense

In language, we use past, present and future tense. Traditionally, the Hebrew word used to describe the present tense was *zman beinoni* or "intermediate time." The present is called *beinoni* because it is in the middle, between the past and the future. We can grasp the past; we can measure and describe it. We can also imagine and estimate what will be in the future. But the present is impossible to grasp. In the blink of an eye, it transforms from being the future into the past.

There is a connection between the present tense and the persona of the *Beinoni*. In Hebrew, a criminal is called an *avaryan*, which literally means "a person living in the past." The evil person is stuck in the past, constantly repeating his mistakes as if there is no such thing as free choice. By contrast, the righteous *tzaddik* is already living the good future. But the *Beinoni*—all of us, when we are able to apply these teachings properly—is always in the middle, in the present, in the tiniest yet most important juncture. He tells himself, "Don't look back to the past. Whatever has happened, has happened. From this moment on, anything and everything is possible and I have free choice to do good. Do not ignore the present moment while dreaming about the future or fretting over the past. My job is to be present and do good in the here and now.

That is the *Beinoni* in a nutshell. May this continue to be a successful Elul and the precursor to a good and sweet new year!