

Shabbos Behar Bechukosai 5780 - Pirkei Avos Chapter Five

It has been quite a while since we have stepped foot into our beloved Shul. We miss it dearly.

What is it precisely that we miss? The camaraderie? The convenience and comfort of a place to pray in? An escape from our homes?

As we are poised to hopefully re-enter our Sanctuary in the coming weeks, G-d willing, it would be wise to understand what a Shul is supposed to represent to us.

We long, but what are we truly longing for?

In this essay I quote a poignant expression from the seminal Jewish rabbinic figure, Rav Samson Rafael Hirsch, that should give us pause in contemplating how much we identify with his powerful sentiment.

If the opportunity to avail ourselves of the privilege to daven in a Shul was taken from us, perhaps it is G-d's intention to prod us to consider a more meaningful appreciation of this precious gift.

Read, consider, and absorb the message. Maybe in the merit of our elevating our consciousness of its treasured value, we will return there more quickly.

*B'Ahava,
Rabbi Zvi Teichman*

Connecting

(במדבר כד ה) מה טבו אהליך יעקב משכנתיך ישראל (במדבר כד ה) How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Yisrael.

The Talmud explains these tents and dwelling places to be referring to the בתי כנסיות ובתי מדרשות, the 'Houses of Gathering' for prayer and the 'Houses of Study' of Torah.

This verse that we recite daily, was uttered by the wicked Bilaam. His quest to curse the Jews was foiled when G-d directed him to bless them instead.

The Talmud points out that from the ultimate blessings he was compelled by G-d to bestow upon them we can learn what his initial cursed intentions were.

Bilaam knew that the thriving of these entities is critical to the survival of the Jewish people, if he could only succeed in shooting them down, we are doomed. We have a guarantee though, that although because of our sins many of Bilaam's forced blessings turned back into his original intent of curses, this blessing we are assured will never cease, and they will endure for eternity. (סנהדרין קה: מהרש"א ושפתי כהן עה"ת.)

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Is it in the small amount of time relative to our other daily duties that we spend in Shul or the Beis Medrash, devoting ourselves to the spiritual obligations to pray and study Torah, that assures our future?

ארבע מדות בהולכי בית המדרש: הולך ואינו עושה, שכר הליכה בידו; עושה ואינו הולך, שכר מעשה בידו; הולך ועושה, חסיד; לא הולך ולא עושה, רשע. *There are four types among those who go to the House of Study:*

One who goes but does not do, has the reward for going;

one who does but does not go, has the reward for doing;

one who goes and does, is pious;

one who neither goes nor does, is wicked. (אבות ה יד)

The Mishna in Avos starts out by referring to four types of people who 'go' to the study hall, yet then goes on to describe only two who do actually go, while of the other two, one doesn't go but does and the last one who does neither. So, who then are the 'four' people who **go**?

Rav Hirsch in his commentary on Tehillim describes so touchingly the secret to Jewish survival during our long years in exile.

ד' אלקי ישועתי יום צעקתי בלילה נגדך (תהלים פח ב),

G-d my Lord of my salvation, by day I cried out by night I was before you.

When I cried out at day, as I struggled to deal with the all afflictions and challenges of my stance among the nations to endure, I found solace at night standing before You, the Lord of my very existence. True, during the day a Jew is forced to fight; for his bread to provide for his wife and children; against the enemies who deny him life; opposite the derision and shame; versus the numerous difficulties that are scattered before each man on the path filled with the fate of thorns and thistles. But when the sun sets, he goes to his close friends; to his brothers; to his books; to the Shul and the Study Hall; to the intimate conversation between him and his Creator; to his kin in spirit and perspective. Engaging with them he absorbs the mighty and radiant spirit of our nation's glorious past, from whose holy books we draw wisdom and inspiration, comfort and strength, fervor and invigoration that fuels our journey on the path uniquely selected for us by His hand. With a common mission we join in doing good deeds, for the sake of our beloved brethren; for the sake of upholding values of decency and justice in creating a healthy community founded on principles of honesty and righteousness. Indeed there were times when they destroyed our homes, our shuls, our study halls, our community centers, but as long as they pitied our property the Jewish spirit would continue to flourish freely with all its blessings, especially at night as we would gather in the beis midrash camping under the blessed shade of nightfall. In the course of hundreds of years our holy libraries became a national treasure of the people, it helped stifle the plague of ignorance. The Talmud poetically describes how "a man would return in the evening from the field entering the shul; if he was up to reading from the Torah he would, if he was more capable he would study mishna, recite the Shma and then pray Maariv".

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'By day I cried out, by night I was before you', this short sentiment expresses the sum total of our experience in the course of our lengthy exile.

Inevitably each one of us in the journey of life, find ourselves entering these hallowed 'halls'.

The pointed question though is, what do we draw from that experience?

Some enter, become inspired, they **'go'**, but do not necessarily translate their 'going' into action, they do not **'do'**. But at least they remained inspired, rewarded for the 'going' that one day will spark them into action.

There are others who remain uninspired, not really **'going'** with any enthusiasm, but nevertheless join in the communal efforts at least earning reward for their action – **'doing'**.

Of course, the height of piety is the one who aspires – **'goes'** and grows – **'does'**.

But unfortunately, there is the type that simply pays his dues, mechanically attending, emotionally **'not going'**, and leaving uninspired and rarely participating – **'not doing'**.

The Maharal asserts that the only place where we find a specific reward 'for every step one takes' in pursuit of a spiritual goal is when walking towards a House of Prayer or House of Study. He explains that this is due to the fact that in these places the *Shechinah*, the Divine presence resides, therefore one who is naturally drawn and physically moves in order to minimize the distance between himself and the Divine is expressing *dveikus*, cleaving, for the very nature of these pursuits, to pray and study His Torah, is to achieve 'closeness to the Almighty'. It is thus one in the same and rewarded alike. (נתיבות עולם, נתיב עבודה פרק ה.)

The very first directive to Avraham Avinu was that of לך לך... אל הארץ אשר אראך (בראשית יב א), *Go for yourself... to the land that I will show you*. The Midrash here points out that G-d did not reveal the destination so that Avraham would be rewarded for each step he took. Perhaps the deeper understanding of this is precisely the idea of the Maharal. Avraham's entire life was one continual pursuit of discovering G-d's presence in the world and to cleave to Him. G-d intention in not having described the exact location was to emphasize that when one pursues closeness to G-d each step in that journey is already an expression of deep attachment.

The Holy Izhbitzer interprets this verse's open-ended conclusion, אל הארץ אשר אראך, *to the land that I will show you*, as a constant never-ending goal, G-d will constantly be revealing deeper and more profound aspects of His connection to us. Even when we reach the destination, the Land of Israel, אשר אראך, 'I will show you' principle will prod us towards endless closeness to His Presence.

The secret to our nation's survival is the instinctive drive each one of us possess to seek Him out. We are all among those that are affected by the landmarks of the proverbial

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houses of prayer and study we frequent along the trek of life. It is up to us to be susceptible to its influence in prodding that natural drive within us to get closer to Him.

This is what Bilaam desperately sought to quash and curse.

The great disciple of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, Reb Nosson, records the following interpretation in the name of his Rebbe.

הן עם לבדד ישכון, *who is like this nation that is capable of isolating themselves in meditative and focused closeness*, ובגוים לא יתחשב, *not allowing the influences of the outside world to distract them from that consciousness of His presence in maintaining their pining for Him.*

מי מנה עפר יעקב (שם בג ט) *who can count and assess the profound holiness in each imprint they make upon the very earth they tread upon in that inspired journey to constantly minimize the distance between us and G-d.* (ליקוטי הלכות או"ח ברכות השחר ה)

Upon the conclusion of the *Amidah*, we take three steps back as we walk back respectfully from our intimate encounter with G-d. The Bais Yosef explains that these three steps counter the three steps Nevuchadnezar took, when he was merely a scribe, to summon back a messenger who was about to deliver a letter to King Chizkiyahu so that he may rewrite the message in a way that would demonstrate the proper reverence for the G-d of Israel. It was because of this honor for G-d that he would later become king and destroy the Temple. We therefore show reverence as well in stepping back three steps and recite the *Yehi Ratzon* prayer where we ask 'May it be your will... that the Holy Temple be rebuilt...' to bring back that which the evil Nevuchadnezar destroyed.

It is precisely when we walk away from G-d that we remain ever conscious of the need to continue to implant our imprint upon the dust of the earth that we forever pine and remain cognizant of that connection, seeking constantly an ever deeper connection.

In the Mussaf service of the three festivals we pray: ...ונשתחוה לפניך... והשב כהנים לעבודתם... *Restore the Kohanim to their service... and prostrate ourselves before You... during our three pilgrimage seasons.*

It is recorded in the name of the Sefer *Ben Emunim* a clever interpretation of this request.

What we are asserting here is our fervent hope that G-d will bring us all back to the Temple in the merit of the שלש פעמי רגלינו, literally, the **three steps** we take back with our **feet** at the conclusion of *Shemonah Esrei*, that will negate the destructive steps of Nevuchadnezar.

The greatest merit indeed we have is to embed lasting imprints of holiness in every step we take on our journey back to Yerushalayim in always being on the lookout for the constant opportunities of 'G-d revealing Himself' amidst the clouds of exile and its challenges.

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The Shul is the focal point in our relationship with G-d.

Sometimes even when we are restricted from entering, we are capable even more so to sense our desire for closeness.

I know an individual who senses G-d's presence in every step he takes. The Shul though is where he speaks one on one with G-d, in His intimate home. He is wont when in time of need to enter the Shul late at night, all alone, open the Aron Kodesh and unabashedly pour his heart out directly to G-d.

He shared with me that although entry is now forbidden, he situates himself at the outer wall of the Shul opposite where the Aron is situated and davens there, similar to our standing at the Kosel HaMaaravi, outside of the wall that divides us from the area of the Holy of Holies.

It is not where one davens that is important as much as it is to Whom one connects to.

It is that longing that bonds us.

May we commit to a deeper appreciation of what a Shul is supposed to be.

May we be numbered among those whose every step brings holiness to the very earth, bringing us ever closer to Him.

May we enter His sanctuary very soon.