

Beshalach, 5781  
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Despite having hundreds of eligible Mitzvot to choose from, our Sages go to great lengths in extolling the immense rewards associated with eating three meals on Shabbat, a Mitzvah that is exegetically derived by the Talmud from Parashat Beshalach (16:25). Among the multiple assurances, the Talmud states (Shabbat 118a) that one who is careful regarding the three weekly meals will be spared from the travails preceding the arrival of the Mashiach and from the pre-Messianic war of Gog U'Magog. While every Mitzvah carries inestimable value and reward, one cannot help but wonder what makes this specific Mitzvah so uniquely valued.

From the very beginning of life, each of us experiences a perpetual internal struggle between two aspects of ourselves, what Judaism refers to as the יצר הטוב -- the higher self, associated with the Divine soul, and the יצר הרע -- the lower self or ego, associated with the mortal body. These two forces are diametrically opposed, and utterly despise each other: while the יצר הטוב seeks self-negation in fulfillment of one's innate Divine will, the יצר הרע seeks self-indulgence, creating the illusion of an independent will distinct from that of G-d. While the יצר הטוב derives joy from transcendence and spirituality, the יצר הרע opts for gratification from ephemeral physical pleasures. While the יצר הטוב attempts to elevate a person to the pristine level of an angel, the יצר הרע tries to pull a person down to the sordid level of an animal.

It is critical that a person remain acutely aware of this struggle within him or herself. Indeed, this inner war represents the central interest of the entire Torah (see Shabbat 89a), and it is not coincidental that the very first episode in the Torah symbolically addresses this conflict, through the interactions of Adam, Eve, and the serpent. When a person lives life oblivious to this inner fight, he or she may readily experience a life characterized by tension, confusion, and regret. Such a person is frequently left wondering cluelessly how he or she could be so fickle, desiring such blatantly oppositional things at different moments. Just a moment ago, a certain decision made so much sense, and now, the opposite seems to be so patently obvious, to the point that one somehow feels as if it was not truly he or she who made that initial decision. Bewildered and perplexed, the hackneyed apology "I don't know what got into me" becomes all that can be offered. While mere awareness of this inner conflict obviously

does not ensure success, it is the first step towards enabling one's יצר הטוב to consistently triumph, which is the truest source of greatness a person can achieve in this world.

And so, throughout our entire lives, whenever it comes to fulfilling the Divine will, we endure some measure of a tug of war, being pulled in opposite directions: the יצר הטוב drives us to proceed, and the יצר הרע attempts to thwart, or at least diminish, the effort. But at the Shabbat meal, something most unusual occurs: a remarkable armistice is declared. The Halacha commands us to eat meals -- not just basic meals, but meals consisting of the most delicious foods and drinks. Moreover, we are instructed to minimize our eating on Friday and Shabbat afternoon, so we approach each of the three meals with a potent appetite. The meal is so appealing that all of a sudden, there is peace: The יצר הטוב and the יצר הרע *want the exact same thing*, to indulge in this holy meal. Gone is the tension. Gone is the tug of war. Gone is the fragmentation. For a few hours a week, we are granted reprieve from the weariness of the relentless battle, and all that remains is a wholehearted desire -- בלבב שלם -- to act in accordance with the will of the Almighty.

The mitzvah of “עונג שבת,” delighting in the Shabbat, is thus established so that our will becomes singular -- the יצר הרע's very attempt to indulge itself ironically results in the direct fulfillment of G-d's will. In this sense, the Shabbat meals enable the highest level of Divine service, which the Mishnah (Berachot 9) describes as serving the Almighty “בכל לבבך” -- בשני יצריך -- ביצר טוב וביצר רע. All of me, with complete and focused awareness, is delighting in this experience, savoring every bite of Challah and every sip of chicken soup that I take. With every item consumed, we experience the deep truth that *the more I enjoy, the more G-d enjoys*, which enables us to feel G-d's endless love for us, and can serve a paradigm for our relationships with our own loved ones, learning to derive joy from their own joy.

In light of this analysis, the common practice of reciting the song, שלום עליכם, takes on new meaning. This song, which greets the Shabbat angels, is based on a well-known Talmudic passage, which describes two angels who visit the home on Friday night. Many commentators explain that the so-called “Shabbat angels” being referenced are actually the יצר הטוב and the יצר הרע (see Prisha, O.C. 262:2). Immediately before we commence our first Shabbat meal, we welcome these two forces as “מלאכי השלום,” angels of peace, recognizing that tonight, we are about to experience the bliss that comes from their peaceful unity. Our greetings of “שבת שלום” and the special blessing of “הפורש סוכת” further underscore this theme as well.

Our Sages teach that the Messianic era will be characterized by the absence of a desire to do anything other than the will of G-d, which is actually identical with our own true will (Ramban, Devarim 30:6). At the Shabbat meals, we experience a taste of this reality, of the unbridled joy that comes from freedom from the perpetual inner conflict between the יצר הטוב and the יצר הרע. It is thus readily appropriate that a person who experiences the Shabbat meals carefully and consciously -- recognizing every sip and taste as a wholehearted fulfillment of the Divine will -- should be blessed to experience the Messianic era in its entirety. May we all merit to achieve this speedily in our days.