

Good Shabbos, everyone.

I want to thank today's drasha sponsors:

- Howard and Shirley Blumenfeld, in memory of Shirley's mother, Jean Schreiber, Henya bas Mordechai, on her first yahrtzeit.
- Adam and Dena Lerner, in memory of Adam's father, Moshe Eliezer ben Yechiel (Mel Lerner), whose yahrtzeit is this Shabbos, 12 Tammuz.

May their neshamos have an aliya.

After more than three months apart, it has been energizing and heart warming, exciting and meaningful to be back together—in shul—for some tefillos, although sadly not yet with everyone.

It says in **Tehillim 133**: הנה מה טוב ומה נעים שבת אחים גם יחד:
How good and how pleasant it is when brothers sit together.

The **Radak** writes that David Hamelech is speaking about the Jewish people, who are called “brothers.”

As the **Baal HaTanya** says, in *Likutei Amarim*, Perek 32
שכולן מתאימות ואב א' לכולנה ולכן נקראו כל ישראל אחים ממש מצד שורש נפשם בה' אחד רק שהגופים מחולקי'.
“Coming from one source/father, Klal Yisrael are truly brothers, connected by their souls, separated by their physical bodies.”

Sometimes, when things are going well, when we sit together, day after day, we forget that we are connected. We focus on our differences. We take each other for granted. We don't respect each other as we should. We don't cherish our relationships as we should. We don't appreciate how “tov” and “na'im”--how good and pleasant--it is to be together.

Simply put, it is possible to physically sit together and not feel connected. David Hamelech is reminding us that we must appreciate that it is a special experience to sit with people who care about you.

For the past three months, although we have been apart physically, we have maintained our connection, a real connection that reminds us that we are truly אחים. Absence makes us appreciate what we have--a community, a family in our beloved Shomrei Emunah. May we use our newfound appreciation to show each other more respect and love, more tolerance and kindness...and merit soon to all sit together again in shul!

One of the final pesukim in the Torah extols Moshe's powers of prophecy
דברים פרק לד פסוק י: וְלֹא־קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדְעוּ ה' פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים:
“Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moshe – whom Hashem singled out, face to face.”

Chazal, in the medrash *Yalkut Shimoni*, learn from this pasuk that, while there never arose another person in Israel with Moshe's prophetic powers, a man from another nation did indeed possess identical powers. The medrash identifies this person as Bilaam, who was hired by Balak, the King of Moav, to curse the Jewish people.

ילקוט שמעוני פרשת וזאת הברכה רמז תתקס"ו "בישראל לא קם אבל באומות העולם קם ואיזה זה בלעם בן בעור"

Rashi poses a question originally asked in the *Medrash Tanchuma*:

רש"י במדבר פרשת בלק כב פסוק ה: ואם תאמר מפני מה השרה הקדוש ברוך הוא שכינתו על גוי רשע, מ כדי שלא יהא פתחון פה לאומות לומר אלו היו לנו נביאים חזרנו למוטב,

Why would Hashem give such great power to a person who would use that very power to destroy the Jewish people? The medrash answers that Hashem wanted to level the playing field: The Jewish people were given a prophet and so the “nations” were also given a prophet. But whereas the Jewish prophet raised his nation skyward, the “nations” prophet brought his nation down.

Many commentators find this answer inadequate. The “nations” can still argue that they were discriminated against. They can complain that, while Hashem did indeed give them a prophet, He gave them a particularly evil one. Had Hashem given them a righteous prophet like Moshe, perhaps they would have responded in a better way.

Rav Baruch Sorotzkin, who was Rosh Yeshiva of the Telz Yeshiva in Cleveland in the middle of the last century, suggests that the “complaint” of the “nations” is the result of a misunderstanding of cause and effect in spirituality.

והנ"ל בישוב זה, דהנה הקב"ה השרה שכינתו בעם ישראל וממילא נמצאים בני ישראל במדרגה רוחנית גבוהה, ובאים הגוים וטוענים שלו השרה הקב"ה שכינתו ביניהם גם הם היו נמצאים במדרגה כזאת, אבל הם אינם יודעים שהסדר הוא להיפך - שבאדם נמצא בעצמו במדרגה נכונה מאמין בה' ושומר מצוותיו אז זוכה להשראת השכינה ובזה עולה עוד יותר, אבל א"א להפך הסדר ולהתחיל מהשראת השכינה, כי באם אין נמצאים במדרגה נכונה אז לא תועיל השראת השכינה כלום, ולא עוד אלא כוחות הרע שבאדם ינצלו גם את השראת השכינה לרעה ולטובתם הפרטית.

The “nation’s” argument went like this: “If You (Hashem) give us a righteous prophet *then* we will become righteous ourselves”. Rabbi Sorotzkin asserts that this if-then statement is erroneous. The correct statement is: “If you (the “nations”) become righteous and worthy, *then* Hashem will give you a righteous prophet who can make you even more righteous.”

Powers of prophecy are acquired by years of hard work spent refining one’s self. It is not possible to give prophecy in a productive way, as an unearned gift to those who are unprepared. It actually can be counterproductive and be “hijacked” for evil purposes.

The **Rambam** codifies the need for preparation, and perfection of character, to achieve prophecy in Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah (6:1-2)

רמב"ם הלכות יסודי התורה פרק ז הלכה א

ואין הנבואה חלה אלא על חכם גדול בחכמה גבור במדותיו ולא יהא יצרו מתגבר עליו בדבר בעולם אלא הוא מתגבר בדעתו על יצרו תמיד והוא בעל דעה רחבה נכונה עד מאד,

“Prophecy is bestowed only upon a very wise sage of strong character, who is never overcome by his natural inclinations in any regard. Instead, with his mind, he overcomes his natural inclinations at all times. He must [also] possess a broad and correct perspective.”

A person must earn the right to prophecy through years of unrelenting effort and toil. If a person is granted prophecy without being spiritually prepared, the results can be disastrous. The “nations” were unwilling to expend the energy necessary to earn the right to prophecy and they got what they deserved: the wicked Bilaam.

After discussing prophecy, Rabbi Sorotzkin mentions something quite alarming;

וכעין בתורה שלמימינים בה היא סמא דחיא ולמשמאילים בה סמא דמותא, כי הכחות הגדולים שבתורה מנוצלים לרעה, וכמו כן כחות השראת השכינה מנוצלים לרעה

“this principle applies with Torah as well....”

He references the Gemara in **Maseches Shabbos [88b]** that teaches “To those who are right-handed in their approach to Torah [and engage in its study with strength, good will, and sanctity], Torah is a prescription of life, and to those who are left-handed in their approach to Torah, it is a prescription of death.” Rashi explains the term “right-handed in their approach” as people who use all of their intellectual might in an effort to understand the Torah.

Rabbi Sorotzkin’s logic is clear: The study of Torah, the Word of Hashem, is as close as one can get today to prophecy. We must be spiritually prepared when we engage with the Torah, or else its study will not sanctify or purify us; it could even have a disastrous effect.

In this regard, I have been asked: If Torah is so inspiring and life changing, then why are there many Jews who are observant but seem otherwise immoral and unethical?

Based on Rav Sorotzkin’s analysis, we can suggest that the quality of our efforts determines their ultimate effect. Those who expend the time and effort required to internalize the Word of God may be elevated to incomparable heights. But, sadly, those who do not prepare properly, who are unwilling to approach the Torah with hard work and commitment, are not transformed by their observance and Torah learning.

And it is true not only with Torah. Any major challenge can be a life altering experience for good, but only if we are both prepared and willing to put in hard work to change ourselves.

And to the extent that we prepare ourselves—and work hard—we will be able to make something of our challenging experiences in life. To the extent that we have perfected our character, we can grow from any difficult experience. And the converse is also true. To the extent that we are unprepared, the difficult experience can be neutral or even lead to negative outcomes.

The coronavirus pandemic, which continues to wreak havoc, is a major wake up call. We are certainly being “spoken to”—even if the exact message is difficult to comprehend. This challenge forces us to consider whether this message will positively affect us.

Are we prepared and ready to positively grow from this experience?

It will depend on our attitude.

After weeks of not being able to enter a shul for minyanim, do we now daven with awe and trepidation, and proper kavod hatefilla and kavod beis haknesses? Do we appreciate that davening in a shul is a privilege?

After weeks of watching swings in the stock market, and seeing so many struggle with parnasa, do we now internalize that our sustenance is granted by G-d? Do we appreciate that we owe Him thanks and should be proud to give charity and support those in need?

After experiencing fear, anxiety, and loneliness, do we understand better what it means to be lonely and alone, and will we make time to reach out to the lonely and have more empathy and compassion?

After depending on others—family and friends, and community—for comfort and camaraderie, will we be better friends, more respectful of others?

The question that we must ask ourselves after all of this—will we be different, for the better?
We have experienced a life-altering situation. But how will it affect us?

Each of us will determine that for ourselves.

Rav Moshe Shternbach, in his sefer *Taam V'Daas* points out that the chok of the para aduma, the fact that one thing can purify some, and make other impure, is called Chukas haTorah, instead of chukas hapara. He suggests that this distinction teaches us a very important lesson about life and especially about spirituality—that context and choices determine the meaning of everything.

טעם ודעת: עוד יש לבאר הלשון חקת התורה...ויש בזה למוד גדול לדרכי העבודה בקיום התורה, שהרי נבדלו בני האדם איש מרעהו באפיים ובתכונות נפשם, ...עד כי דרך אחת מדרכי העבודה שהיא רצויה ביותר עבור אדם אחד, לא תועיל היא עצמה אצל רעהו, לפי מצבו ומדרכגתו, וע"כ כל אחד ואחד לבדוק עצמו ולהכיר היטב את תכונותיו ומעלותיו, ועל ידי זה יוכל הוא להתבונן מה חבותו בעולמו...ודבר זה נרמז בפרה שאף שאת הטמא היא מטהרת, בכל זאת הטהור לפי מדריבלו מטמא על ידה...

What can help inspire one person can damage another.

We are the ones who will determine how things affect us. No one else can make that choice for us.

The **Rambam** in Hilchos Teshuva criticizes in very harsh tones anyone who believes that our lives are predetermined, anyone who sees life as just going through motions that have already been decided and programmed for us with no potential for change or improvement.

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ה הלכה ב
אל יעבור במחשבתך דבר זה שאומרים טפשי אומה"ע ורוב גולמי בני ישראל שהקב"ה גוזר על האדם מתחלת ברייתו להיות צדיק או רשע, אין הדבר כן אלא כל אדם ראוי לו להיות צדיק כמשה רבינו

The Rambam's prime example of bechira chofshis, free will, is not Avraham Avinu, but Moshe Rabbeinu. Why does he choose Moshe Rabbeinu to teach us this?

When we contrast Moshe to Bilaam, it becomes clear. Both of them were given the highest level of prophecy, but Moshe made the choices that allowed for his prophecy to make him a godly, spiritual, and humble person. That contrast highlights the power of choices.

It is up to us to decide whether we will turn our opportunities into growth experiences, and come out like Moshe, or waste the opportunities and turn out like Bilaam.

The choice is ours.

May we be zoche to make wonderful choices in life, and merit soon to see the day when clarity will replace confusion, when Hashem will restore His Holy presence to Yerushalayim, with a rebuilt Beis Hamikdash...bimhera viyamenu...amen.