



Footsteps of our Fathers - Avos 1.3

WHERE HASHEM REALLY LIVES

Harav Y. Reuven Rubin Shlita

Ask a small child what he loves the most. Some will tell you ice cream; others will say sweets. There will be the more discerning types who will say Tatty or Bubby, but upon further investigation, one will find that the love of Tatty and Bubby is predicated on their ability to give ice cream and sweets.

It's a normal fact of life that little children see things in very limited terms. Their world is very small, and, generally speaking, it is a world that revolves around them. Everyone and everything is there to serve them and provide for their needs and whims. As we get older, we hopefully mature, realising that the sun doesn't rise and fall for us alone.

It's the same with our belief in Hashem. Ask a youngster where Hashem lives, and he'll tell you that Hashem "lives on the roof of my house." When he's a little older, the same child will explain that in fact Hashem lives in the sky. Then our prototypical youngster will be able to explain that Hashem abides in Heaven, and so on, until, as he gradually matures, he realises that Hashem is everywhere (not just in the song but in fact).

Antignos, leader of Socho, tells us in the third mishna of the first chapter of Avos, **"Be not like servants who serve the master for the sake of receiving reward. Rather, be like servants who serve the master not for the sake of receiving reward. And the fear of Heaven shall be upon you."**

The mishna tells us not to act as if we were servants who do things just for material recompense. Rather, we are children of Hashem, and as such we are meant to mature and become aware that doing Hashem's Will is in and of itself the greatest gift. As the Ruzhiner Rebbe, zy" a, was wont to say, "One should not boast about serving Hashem. Does the hand boast when it carries out the will of the heart?"

When we are immature, we need to feel that Hashem will reward our positive actions. But with time, we are meant to

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aspire to greater levels of understanding. Slowly we should become altruistic, realising that being able to do Hashem's Will is the true glory.

Let us try to understand this better. Ahava is the Hebrew word for "love". Its root is hav, give. Loving is giving, not waiting for rewards. Any other sort of relationship would be built on self-indulgence, a sense of "what's in it for me." Such a situation leads to cracks in the foundation of the relationship and can fall apart given life's stresses and strains.

Hashem gives to us totally – we can't even begin to fathom such totality. The mishna describes how our actions should be motivated – giving of our love without any aspect of selfish gain.

This ahavas Hashem is no easy level to obtain. It takes time to push away the many barriers our egos set up. Chassidim tell how the Baal Shem Tov was once collecting desperately needed funds for a Mikva. At one point, he promised a wealthy fellow his own share in the World to Come if he would only supply the needed money. The man acquiesced to the deal but insisted on a signed agreement before handing over the donation.

After the transaction was completed, the talmidim asked their Rebbe how he could forfeit his share in the World to Come after working so hard for it his whole lifetime. The Baal Shem Tov answered at several levels. Most importantly, he explained that he had never sought to fulfill mitzvos for the sake of a place in the World to Come. He had always striven to do mitzvos for the sake of the mitzvos themselves.

Having understood that our mishna speaks of following Hashem's Will out of love, it then takes what seems to be a strange turn: "And the fear of Heaven shall be upon you." Are we supposed to do mitzvos out of love or out of fear?

Some explain that this means that one who does everything for the sake of Hashem through love of Hashem carries with him a sense of awe, and that spiritual charisma inspires others. The Sfas Emes tells us that in fact this final sentence expands the levels in which one can serve Hashem altruistically. The mishna calls on us not only to love Hashem without expecting any material reward, but even fear of Hashem should be, not because one fears punishment, but because he is aware of the total awesomeness of Hashem's Presence.

There is another, very moving way of reading these last words. "And Heaven will be anxious [concerned] for you." A mother is concerned for her child, and Hashem is concerned for us. The love we give is strengthened with the knowledge of Heaven's love for us, concern and anxiousness for our well-being.

One of the greatest of the Kotzker chassidim, Reb Yechiel Gustinina, was once asked how he became a talmid of the Kotzker. He told the following story:

"Upon my marriage at a young age, my father-in-law presented me with two special gifts – a tallis and a pair of tefillin especially written for me. I was so moved by these gifts that I took it upon myself to watch over them with great care, never using them without great spiritual preparation.

"In those days, I would sit in the beis medrash most of the day. I would get up before daybreak, go to shul and learn until the early minyan. After davening, I would sit down and put in several more hours of learning. By two in the afternoon I had already studied for at least eight hours.

"One afternoon, a wild-looking Yid came rushing into the shul. I guessed he had some connection with Kotzk. The Yid walked straight over to me and said, 'Young man, loan me your tallis and tefillin. I haven't davened yet.'

"I thought to myself, Two in the afternoon and he hasn't davened yet. What kind of a chassid is this? I told him outright, 'I am a young fellow, yet I've davened and learned some eight hours already. What were you doing that you didn't manage to daven yet?'

“Yungerman,’ he answered, “I’m not asking for advice. Either you want to lend me your tallis or you don’t.’

“Of course I had no choice. If a Yid wants to borrow your tallis, what can you do? You lend it.

“With shaking hands and a beating heart, I handed the Yid my tallis – the one my shver had bought me. ‘My tallis is very precious to me. I try my best to treat it with great sanctity.’

“The fellow looked at me. ‘Nu, nu, I’ll find another one.’

“‘No, please take it.’

“Needless to say, I figured that at two o’clock in the afternoon the fellow would at least daven with some zeal. But he put on the tallis and tefillin and slowly walked over to the open window. He stood there idly watching the marketplace, not saying a word. The fellow stood there for at least an hour. I was bursting. My holy tallis was being desecrated by this lazy fellow.

“Suddenly he turned and ran up to the aron kodesh, throwing his face into the curtain. No more than four minutes had passed and the chassid was finished.

“I was steaming. The Yid spends one hour in my tallis staring out the window, and then he holds his head in the curtain for four minutes? This is davening?

“I went over and quickly grabbed my tallis. The tallis was wet. I felt the ark curtains, and they were wet as well – wet with what was apparently the man’s tears. I felt so ashamed.

“‘Please forgive me, I didn’t know you were praying this whole time. I thought you were just looking out the window.’

“‘Come,’ said the Yid, ‘let me show you something.’

“He took me to the window and pointed to the square outside. There were ten Cossacks doing their basic training, marching up and down. ‘Watch those Cossacks,’ the Yid told me. ‘As the officer commands them, “Left, right, left, right,” so they do. Yungerman, what is a Cossack? He is nothing more than a village drunkard. And his officer is nothing more than an even bigger drunkard. Yet if the officer tells the soldiers to go right, the soldier goes right, no matter what. And if the general – an even greater drunkard – tells him to go to battle, off he will go, no questions asked. And if the czar of Russia tells him to go right, he would gladly die rather than go left. Isn’t this so?’

“I nodded my head.

“‘So I thought to myself as I watched the Cossacks,’ he continued, “How is it that I stood at Har Sinai, and I heard Hashem telling me to go right, but I am still going left? With this in my heart, I prayed.’

“The chassid finished his explanation and noticed how I was clutching my wet tallis to my heart. ‘Don’t worry,’ he assured me. ‘Your tallis will dry by tomorrow morning.’

“At that moment, I could not take it anymore. I broke down and cried. ‘No, I don’t want my tallis to be dry ever again.’

“The Yid put his arms around me and said, ‘Ah! You really want to daven. Then pack up fast and come with me to Kotzk.’”

Those Yidden knew about love and awe. If only we could possess such talleisim and feel for a moment a velvet paroches that is wet with loving tears.