



Honorable Mentchen: Refining Character #1

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Hanoach Teller

The Midrash Tanchuma in Vaykhel says that a person is given three names, one by his parents, one by his peers, and one that he acquires. The latter is the most important. Rabbi Telushkin brings the example of Oscar Schindler whose checkered past was all but forgotten. When he put himself in peril to save 1,100 Jews he earned himself an eternal reputation as a paragon of human kindness. Picture yourself at your own funeral. Will people say you were a kind and giving person or egocentric and self-centered? This should give one pause and motivate one to improve.

There is a phenomenon in criminology called the Broken Window theory. If you see a building with a broken window and many days lapse without it being repaired, there will be another broken window very soon. It will deteriorate until people up to no good start

making it their base. Neglecting to rectify what needs fixing creates an environment that is conducive to decay. This theory was put in practice in the 1980's on the New York city subway system. The city hired a tough employee to crack down on lawbreakers and shape things up. The first thing he set out to eliminate was the graffiti, with the message, "We will not tolerate any infraction on the subway." Then he decided to bear down on fare evaders. People soon learned very quickly to respect the system and New York became a safer cities.

Similarly, with character improvement we have to start small. If we go after minor wrongs and add more and more things to rectify, we'll soon eliminate that inner environment that's conducive to a faulty character. Rabbi Telushkin suggests that when you are

confronted with a situation and you're not sure what to do you have to ask yourself, "What is motivating me? Is it my *yetzer tov* or *yetzer hara*. Am I doing this to satisfy my pleasures or is my intent to do good?" The Chofetz Chaim once advised the Ponovozher Rav, do whatever will bring more *kavod shamayim* (honor to Hashem). For the rest of his life the Rav never had a dilemma. He always plugged in that formula.

The Torah commands us to follow in the ways of Hashem by leading a life that sanctifies His name. This is encapsulated in two *mitzvot*, "*Kedoshim tiheyu*," (Be holy.) and "*V'asita hayashar v'hatov*." (Do what is good and right in the eyes of Hashem.) We can elevate ourselves by going above and beyond our duty to be honest, correct, and noble in all our deeds.

The Power of The Soul: Sefirat Haomer Part III

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Eliezer Miller

The beginning of Parshat Bechukotai tells us that Hashem will give the Jewish people rain in its time and other material rewards as a result of their keeping the *mitzvot*. However, the Gemara says that a *mitzvah* is something spiritual and cannot be compensated in this world. How can we understand these assurances?

Additionally, the Mishna in Avot says that a person should serve Hashem for the sake of heaven and not to receive reward. The Sefat Emet explains that the reward itself is a *mitzvah*. Enabling a situation where we can receive recompense is fulfilling Hashem's will, because He desires to give us good. The Mishna says, "*Sechar mitzvah mitzvah*." Hashem gives us reward for a *mitzvah* by giving us an opportunity to do another one. Similarly, the punishment Hashem administers in response to sin is also a sin because it moves Hashem to go against His nature of kindness. In Shir Hashirim, Hashem is compared to a mother, "*Achat hi l'ima*," A mother's deepest desire is to give. When we turn to Hashem with our requests we create

nachat ruach for Him by giving Him the opportunity to answer our prayers and to do kindness with us.

If we would receive Hashem's *chesed* without doing *Torah* and *mitzvot* it would be like *nahama d'chisufa*, free bread which we hadn't worked for. Instead, Hashem gave us the gift of *Torah* through which we can give Him pleasure and feel that we had earned our reward. The verse says, "*Lecha Hashem hachessed ki ata tishalem l'ish k'maaseihu*. You Hashem are kind because You give a person reward according to his deeds." The Chofetz Chaim asks, what is the kindness here? If a person performs a good deed he should be rewarded. He explains that it's really Hashem's *chesed* that enables a person to do the *mitzvot*. He does this to give us the feeling that we have earned our keep, but Hashem is still the force behind it all.

The Nefesh Hachaim explains that the Creator fashioned man in His likeness, *dmus*. *Dmus* comes from the root word *dimyon*, comparison. We are compared to Hashem, who is all

powerful. Hashem gave mankind the power to rule over this world through his thought, speech, and action. A Jew has the power to draw down holiness and light through his good deeds. Conversely, he can destroy and darken the world through sin. The Zohar says our physical body is like a shoe. Our outer garment is here but our soul is rooted high above, near the throne of glory.

The Maharshah says that the form of Yaakov is engraved in the throne of glory on which hangs a peg, which is the *Torah*. If we keep the *Torah* and *mitzvot*, the world is held together more firmly. If we sin, it begins to shake. We were created in Hashem's likeness, with the weighty responsibility of holding up creation with our *Torah*. The same is true on the micro level. The Arizal says every person is a small world. The soul hovers over the body and gives it life. The *Torah* a person learned and the *mitzvot* a person performed in his lifetime are what energizes his soul. The Gra writes that what the *Torah* does for men, *tzniut* (modesty) does for women.

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Sometimes we see great Torah scholars who are poor. This may be because Hashem sees that too much physicality will pull them away from Torah. It could also be that they willingly relinquish their reward to merit their genera-

chesed.

Each year on Shavuot, each person gets his or her unique portion in *Torah*, which he is meant to actualize during the coming year. May we

merit to appreciate this great gift and power and utilize its potential to the fullest.

Netivot Olam II: Inclusion Within Boundaries

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller

Discord develops when people look in the wrong places for more vitality and a sense of being alive. Instead of getting that feeling by pursuing peace they get it by fomenting dissension. *Shalom* is a name of Hashem while *emet* (truth) is His signet. People and the world are creations of God and obviously not God. They are something other than Hashem and in that sense they are like a stamp. *Shalom* isn't just the picture of wholeness, but the source of it and thus it is Hashem's name. The world is full of opposites, hot and cold, male and female, light and dark. The common denominator in everything is Hashem's vitality and force that joins it together like a giant puzzle to give us a picture of who He is.

Shalom means respecting the boundaries of every creation, yet still recognizing each one as part of a greater whole. If you lose the box with the picture of the puzzle on it, it's hard to put the puzzle together again. The Jewish people who live Torah are meant to be a living version of Hashem's will and wisdom. Discord usually results by not valuing the worth of all the puzzle pieces. The picture can only be complete when every piece of the puzzle is in order. Hashem binds and unifies everything, so that the relative place and beauty of all things comes through the way Hashem's *ratzon* is manifest through each object. This, in essence, is peace.

Picture a teacher with a class full of kids.

There's the child who can barely sit still and needs a lot of structure and activity. There's another child who has a hard time understanding and needs to be told a few times what to do. The class genius wants to go on after the first time and the regular kids who need the lesson explained twice. So who do you talk to? You have to find the part of you that's like Hashem and talk to everyone. You can't exclude anyone.

To develop *shalom* people need to use the trait of *anavah* (humility) while respecting boundaries and believing in inclusion. Saying, "It's my way or the high way," leaves no room for peace. This is because we don't recognize the other person's individuality. Moreover, we don't perceive that we are a part of a greater picture. Only Hashem is above it all. Rav Shimon bar Chalafta said, "Peace is great because it is a vessel that receives everything else." *Birkat kohanim* ends with the word *shalom* to teach us that all the blessings of the *kohanim* have no value unless we have peace.

The basic concept of order, which is an important part of *shalom*, applies even in war. There are *halachot* under what circumstances one can declare battle, who should go fight, what should happen to a captive woman taken in battle, and to a fruit tree in an enemy city. Even death needs *shalom*. Mourners must take care of the needs of the dead while

contending with their own. In secular society it's considered courageous to return to work the day after a close relative's funeral. While it shows that they know their place, it also shows disrespect for the loss. One part of the puzzle overtakes the other part and takes away its proper space. Conversely, even today, young widows in India are burnt alive on their husband's funeral pyre. Neither side is acknowledged independently as having intrinsic purposefulness and divinity.

Not only do *tzadikim* get their reward in *Olam Habah*, but they also get acknowledgment for how they brought peace into the world. The wicked never have peace because there's no room for anyone in their world but themselves. Their evilness was powered by their lack of peace. In contrast, the tie that held a *tzaddik's* righteousness together was his love of peace and respect of boundaries and inclusion. *Shalom* comes as a consequence of learning Torah. Torah gives everything its boundaries. Torah teaches that this is yours, this is mine, this is permitted, this is not, this is pure and this is impure. These six categories, which parallel the six sides of a cube, represent the boundaries of physical reality. *Halacha* is about knowing limitations and seeing the connecting force. True peace means making room for others and for oneself. It's having a sense of inclusion and humility and letting that carry us through.