

Parashat Beshalach 5772, 2012:

Changing and Perfecting the World

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Frieda

The *Shirah* (Song) of praise and exaltation sung by the Jewish people after having crossed unscathed through the Sea of Reeds (“Red Sea”) is one of the most often recited passages in the entire Torah. After all, we say it every day as part of the introductory section of our daily prayers (*Pesukei d’Zimrah*). Yet, due to its poetic language and metaphoric images, its meaning remains elusive and difficult to comprehend.

One example of a well known, yet difficult to understand phrase in the *Shirah* is that of “*zeh kali v’anvahu.*” (*Sefer Shemot* 15:2) One would think that such an expression would have a clear and unambiguous translation that would reflect unanimity of opinion as to its meaning. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Judaica Press translation, following the Aramaic translation of Onkelos (first century CE), interprets our phrase as “this is my G-d, and I will make Him a habitation.” Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*, takes a somewhat similar approach and translates our phrase as “this is my G-d, I will enshrine Him.” In stark contrast, Rashi (1040-1105) and his grandson, the Rashbam (1080-1158), following *Talmud Bavli*, *Shabbat* 133b, translate this as “this is my G-d, and I will glorify Him.” Thus, there is no definitive interpretation of our phrase.

The above-referenced Talmudic passage is based upon a comment of the *Mechilta* on our *pasuk* (verse):

R. Yishmael says: And is it possible for a man of flesh and blood to add glory to his Creator? It simply means: I shall be beautiful before Him in observing the commandments. I shall prepare before Him a beautiful Lulav, a beautiful Sukkah, beautiful Tzitzit and beautiful Tefilin. Abba Shaul says: O be like Him! Just as He is gracious and merciful, so should you be gracious and merciful. (Translation, Jacob Z. Lauterbach with my emendations)

Abba Shaul's explanation of "*zeh kali v'anvahu*," i.e. *imitatio dei*, is discussed at length in a famous passage in *Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a*:

Just as Hashem clothed the naked [in the case of Adam and Chava]... so, too, should you clothe the naked. Just as Hashem visited the sick [in the case of Avraham after his *brit milah*]...so, too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He comforted the mourners [in the case of Yitzhak after Avraham's passing]...so, too, should you comfort the mourners. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He buried the dead [in the case of Moshe *Rabbeinu*]...so, too, should you bury the dead. (Translation, my own)

This passage represents a profound and practical formula for fulfilling the mitzvah of "*v'halachta b'drachov*" ("and you shall walk in His ways," *Sefer Devarim 28:9*).

The 13th century anonymous Sephardic work, known as the "*Sefer HaChinuch*," introduces this mitzvah (number 611) in the following fashion:

We were commanded to perform all our actions in a way of honesty and goodness with all our power, and to channel all our matters that are between us and others in a way of kindness and compassion – as we know from our Torah that this is the way of the Eternal L-rd, and this is His desire from His human beings, in order that they should merit to attain His good reward, *because He delights in loving-kindness (Sefer Michah 7:18)*. About this it is stated, *and you shall walk in His ways (Deuteronomy 28:9)*. (Translation by Charles Wengrov)

Given the above, *v'halachta b'drachov* emerges as the fundamental basis of the entire ethical structure of Judaism (Rabbi Soloveitchik *zatzal*, 1903-1993). Unlike the society around us, where kindness and compassion are more often than not unanticipated events, the Jewish people have a clear and unambiguous mandate "to channel all our matters that

are between us and others in a way of kindness and compassion.” (Ibid.) In doing so, we emulate the actions of our Creator and, thereby, ultimately create significant changes in ourselves. Moreover, it is in this sense that we can truly be “partners with Hashem in creating the world” (*shutfim im Hashem b’ma’aseh Bereishit*). Indeed, Rashi hints at this concept in his comment on *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 133b, when he explains “v’anvahu,” in our *pasuk*, as a contraction of “Ani” (I) and “Hu” (Him = G-d). In other words, when we “walk in His ways,” He becomes our *Yedid nefesh* (“Beloved of the soul”), and we become His partners in creating the world anew.

May we find the spiritual energy and strength of conviction within ourselves to join *Av Harachamim* (our Compassionate Father) in creating the world anew, helping to make it a better and nobler place. In this way, may we fulfill the phrase said three times each day in the *Aleinu*: “*L’takane olam b’malchut Shakai*” (“to perfect the world through the Almighty’s sovereignty”). *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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