

Parashat Bo, 5779, 2019:

Closeness to Hashem

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

“On that day, you must tell your child, ‘It is because of this that G-d acted for me when I left Egypt.’” (*Sefer Shemot* 13:8, translation, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*) This is one of the best known *pasukim* of both our *parasha* and the Passover Haggadah, and is used by *Talmud Bavli, Pesachim* 116b as the source text for the well-known concept: “In each and every generation an individual is obligated to view himself as if he went out of Egypt.” This interpretation underscores the concept that *yitziat Mitzraim* (the Exodus from Egypt) is not some long ago historical event; rather, it is a constitutive element of our people’s identity that we are obligated to re-experience during the Passover Seder each and every year.

So much emphasis has been placed upon our verse’s interpretation in the Talmud that its direct meaning has been nearly lost. Yet, we must ever remember Chazal’s (our Sages of blessed memory) statement: *Ain hamikra yotzai m’yidei peshuto* – the simple and direct understanding of the Torah text must never be ignored. This mode of analysis was championed by the Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, 1080-1158), who analyzes our *pasuk* in the following manner:

“...it is because of this” Hashem performed miracles **for me** in Egypt. Therefore, I am performing this sacrificial service. So, too, do we find in the case of the verse: “This is the day that Hashem created **for me** for **I was** on the highest of heights, let us rejoice and let us celebrate.” (The latter quote is based upon *Sefer Tehillim* 118:24, with the Rashbam’s interpolations in bold, translation my own).

The Rashbam strongly emphasizes the terms “for me” and “I,” and urges us to focus upon the personal salvation experienced during *yitziat Mitzraim*, that helped forge a powerful relationship between the Almighty and every member of the Jewish people. As the celebrated verse in the *Shirah* (Song upon Crossing the Sea of Reeds) proclaims, “...this is my G-d and I will extol Him, the G-d of my fathers and I will raise Him up.” (*Sefer Shemot* 15:2, translation my own)

The closeness of our relationship with the Master of the Universe is underscored by *Dovid HaMelech* (King David) in *Sefer Tehillim*. These verses reflect his passionate belief in Hashem’s nearness to us:

You are near, O L-rd, and all Your commandments are true. (119:151)

The L-rd is near to the broken-hearted, and He saves those of crushed spirit. (34:19)

Truly, His salvation is near those who fear Him, so that His glory dwells in our land. (85:10)

The L-rd is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him with sincerity. (145:18)
(Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

A careful reading of these *pasukim* reveals a fascinating pattern. 119:151 teaches us about G-d’s status; He is, by definition, “near.” This is somewhat parallel to 34:19 wherein, simply because a Jew is broken-hearted, Hashem is close to him or her. This, too, is a matter of status. In contrast, 85:10 and 145:18 clearly indicate that Hashem’s nearness is partially contingent upon our behaviors toward Him. This raises a simple and direct question: “If it is Hashem’s nature, so to speak, to be close to mankind, why are our actions of any import whatsoever in this regard?”

My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, poses a similar type of question in his analysis of Friday night *Kiddush*. He asks: “If Shabbat is sanctified since the very moment of Creation, why is it necessary for us to say the words of the *Kiddush*? What can we possibly add to that which G-d has already sanctified?”

The Rav explains that although the essential *kedushah* (holiness) of Shabbat is a constant and endures eternally, when we recite *Kiddush*, we bear testimony to Hashem as the Creator of the Universe, and thereby join Him as partners in the act of Creation – *shutfim b'ma'aseh Bereishit*. As such, our words spoken during *Kiddush* add to the holiness of Shabbat, and raise it to an entirely new level of *kedushah*.

I believe that the reasoning inherent in Rav Soloveitchik's analysis of *Kiddush* provides us with an answer to our earlier question, "If it is Hashem's nature to be close to mankind, why are our actions of any import whatsoever in this regard?" It is true that, by definition, Hashem is close to us. Yet, when we call upon Him in heartfelt sincerity, we reinforce our relationship with Him, just as *Ya'akov Avinu* (our Father, Jacob) did when he declared, "*Mah nora hamakom hazeh*" ("How awe-inspiring is this place," *Sefer Bereishit* 28:17). Moreover, when we recognize Hashem's awesome nature, our personal relationship with Him achieves new and more profound levels of meaning.

With Hashem's help, may we ever strive to call upon Him in sincerity and awe. Then may we be *zocheh* (merit) to grow in our closeness to Him, so that we may each proclaim, "...this is my G-d and I will extol Him, the G-d of my fathers and I will raise Him up." (*Sefer Shemot* 15:2, translation my own) *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.