

Parashat Terumah 5772, 2012:

Our Task: To Enable Hashem to Dwell Among Us

Rabbi David Etengoff

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 Friedel.

Our *parasha* contains the source text for the *mitzvah* of building the *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple). The Rambam (1135-1204) states in the first *halacha* (law) of *Hilchot Beit Habechira* (Laws of the Chosen Place): “There is a positive commandment to make a House for Hashem, that is established for the purpose of offering sacrifices, and rejoicing therein three times a year. As the Torah states: ‘And you will make a *Mikdash* (a Holy Place) for Me...[*Sefer Shemot* 25:8]”

The conclusion of the above-quoted *pasuk* (verse) is: *”v’schachanti b’tochom”* (“and I will dwell among you [the Jewish people]”). As amazing as it seems, the Torah teaches us that G-d, the Infinite, seeks to be among us, the finite. He wants to shine His Divine countenance upon us and enable us to receive His mercy and kindness. What do we need to do to be worthy of our Creator’s blessings, to become proper vessels to accept His *chane v’chesed, v’rachamin* (His favor, kindness, and mercy)? The answer is clear: We need to be *m’takane nafsheinu*, to perfect our spiritual being, to the best of our abilities. How can this noble and essential goal be achieved? How can we become better than who we are today?

Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 13b, helps provide an answer to our questions:

Our Rabbis taught: For two and a half years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel argued. One side said: “It would have been better if man had not been created rather than his having

been created.” The other side claimed: “It is better that man was created rather than his having not been created.” They reached the following conclusion: “It is better that man should not have been created rather than his having been created. Now, however, that he was created, he should examine his actions.” An alternate text reads: “He should scrutinize his actions.”

In my opinion, this dispute appears, at least in part, to be based upon two contrasting passages that are found in *Sefer Bereishit*. The first section refers to the creation of man, the second to mankind’s perversity. In the first, many *midrashim* teach that man appears as the crown of Hashem’s creation, the greatest of all His handiworks:

G-d said, “Let us make man with our image and likeness. Let him dominate the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock animals, and all the earth - and every land animal that walks the earth.” G-d [thus] created man with His image. in the image of G-d, He created him, male and female He created them. G-d blessed them. G-d said to them, “Be fertile and become many. Fill the land and conquer it. Dominate the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every beast that walks the land...” G-d saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good. It was evening and it was morning, the sixth day.

Unfortunately, a mere five chapters later, following the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the first murder in history, man’s potential for depravity and evil reaches crescendo-like proportions. Humanity corrupts the entire world to the point where Hashem decides to destroy it:

G-d saw that man's wickedness on earth was increasing. Every impulse of his innermost thought was only for evil, all day long. G-d regretted that He had made man on earth, and He was pained to His very core. G-d said, ‘I will obliterate humanity that I have created from the face of the earth - man, livestock, land animals, and birds of the sky. I regret that I created them.’ (Translation, Rav Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah*)

Clearly, man’s beginning, as depicted in these two passages, contains the elements of his nearly unlimited potential for good as well as for evil. Man, it seems, is a study in polar opposite potentialities. He is a conflicted being who is constantly presented with the choice of performing actions that are either good or evil. Hence, the two and a half year dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, two of the greatest yeshivot in Jewish history.

I believe that the key to man's potential spiritual growth and improvement is contained in the concluding statement in the above-cited Talmudic passage: "Now, however, that he [man] was created, he should examine his actions. An alternate text reads: 'He should scrutinize his actions.'" The original Hebrew terms are "*y'phashpfash b'maasuv*" ("examine his actions") and "*y'mashmash b'maasuv*" ("scrutinize his actions"). Each of these terms is explained in different ways by our classic commentators.

The *Aruch* (Rabbi Yechiel ben Natan, 1035-1110) explains "*y'phashpfash b'maasuv*" as referring to careful inspection of one's actions after having committed a sin. In contrast, "*y'mashmash b'maasuv*," refers to the scrutiny of one's potential actions to ascertain whether or not they fit the criteria of meritorious behavior. These approaches, therefore, should prevent a person from committing a *chate* (sin) or, at the very least, from repeating it. Rashi (1040-1105), the Prince of Commentators, follows the *Aruch's* approach in reference to "*y'phashpfash b'maasuv*," while significantly expanding upon the analysis of "*y'mashmash b'maasuv*." In doing so, he comes close to paraphrasing the *mishnah* in *Pirkei Avot* 2:1, wherein Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi said: "Be as careful with a minor *mitzvah* as with a major one, for you do not know the rewards of the *mitzvot*. Consider the cost of a *mitzvah* against its rewards, and the rewards of a transgression against its cost." Thus, in his commentary on our Talmudic passage, Rashi states the following:

y'mashmash b'maasuv – for example, if one has an opportunity to perform a *mitzvah*, he should consider the loss that will obtain due to its non-performance in light of the reward that would accrue as a result of its performance. He should, therefore, not put off its performance because of the [momentary] monetary expenditure since, its reward will surely come in the future. [Moreover,] if the possibility of performing a sin presents

itself, he should carefully consider the “reward” that will accrue immediately over and against the future loss for which he will have to make restitution.

In my opinion, however, the most trenchant analysis of “*y’phashpfash b’maasuv*” and “*y’mashmash b’maasuv*” is found in the classic gem of the Mussar Movement entitled, “*Mesilat Yesharim*,” authored by the great Italian kabbalist and ethicist, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto *zatzal* (1770-1746). Rav Luzzatto defines “*pishpush*” (the nounal form of “*y’phashpfash*”) as:

...to examine all of our actions, in general, and to carefully think about them. [To ascertain] if they contain therein actions that we ought not to do that do not follow the ways of the commandments and statutes of Hashem. Any actions that fit [this negative criterion] should be destroyed from the world.

In contrast, he defines “*mishmush*” (the nounal form of “*y’mashmash*”) as:

...the careful and exact analysis of even good actions, to determine and see if they contain any aspect, whatsoever, that is not good or any bad feature that must be removed and destroyed...one must scrutinize his actions [in this fashion] to examine their innermost content, the purpose of this examination to [yield] actions that are pure and perfect.

According to Rav Luzzatto, then, the ultimate purpose of “*pishpush*” and “*mishmush*” is “for man to scrutinize all of his actions and to be aware of all of his approaches [to the world], in order that he will not have any bad habitual behaviors or negative moral qualities – and all the more so that he will not perform any manner or variety of sins.”

(Translation and emphasis my own)

Rav Luzzatto has provided us with a blueprint for true spiritual growth and development that will allow the Almighty to dwell among us; namely, to examine all of our actions, those that we know need improvement, and even those that we currently believe to be above reproach. With Hashem’s help and guidance, we will thereby merit the fulfillment

of the *pasuk*: “And you will make a *Mikdash* (“a Holy Place”) for Me and I will dwell among you.” May this time come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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