

Parashat B'huko'tai

Devekut & Yirat Shamayim, The Solution to the Problem

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Rather than address any one pasuk (verse) in this parasha (Torah Portion), I felt drawn to address the entire issue of blessing and curse. It is no secret that the curses listed in this week's parasha have all come true upon the Jewish people, often many times over. Whether Jews have been religious or irreligious, pogroms and holocausts have followed us throughout the centuries. There is obviously something very wrong here. HaShem does not send punishments upon us simply because He wants to. No, we are punished because we are not receiving the Divine message. And what message is that? Read on.



One of the concepts that I find hard for people today to understand is that HaShem is the Living G-d of Israel and that we must each cultivate a personal experiential relationship with our Creator. Even within the religious community where Torah study and the observance of mitzvot are paramount, many still have a hard time accepting the idea that they can and that they must talk directly with HaShem and be aware of His Presence and Will constantly.

Barukh HaShem that today we have so many yeshivot. More people than ever are studying Torah, more people are becoming Ba'alei Teshuva (returning to religion). Indeed, today we find that there are more properly prepared people who are studying kosher Sitrei Torah (the secrets of Torah). Yet, with all this expansiveness of learning, there still seems to be one mitzvah that we severely lack. This is the mitzvah of bonding with HaShem.

What I am referring to might be understood today in light of the Torah of the Ba'al Shem Tov, yet he had no monopoly on this type of spiritual awareness. Throughout the TaNaKh (Bible), we find our fathers and teachers each having a very personal relationship with HaShem, talking to Him on a daily basis, interacting with Him as the major component and reality in their lives. Today, except for the small few, this type of bond with HaShem is all but forgotten, even amongst many of the religious.

The type of relationship with HaShem to which I refer is discussed in the writings of Rabbi Haim Vital, most notably his Sha'arei Kedusha. In the writings of the Ba'al Shem Tov this type of bonding with HaShem is properly called Devekut. Indeed, Devekut is considered by most Sages to be one of the 613 mitzvot of the Torah.

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In Sefer Peleh Yo'etz, (Dalet), the great Sephardi Sage Rabbi Eliezer Papo writes regarding Devekut:

"Devekut (bonding) with HaShem is one of the 613 commandments. One is obligated, in accordance to ones ability; to make all efforts to properly observe this mitzvah, at all times.

One must be bonded with HaShem continually, with great yearning, and with sparks of burning love.

There is no greater attribute than this, for all things are included in it.

The difficulty in achieving it (devekut) is in direct proportion to its level of importance.

The one who sanctifies himself below, is sanctified by above (by HaShem), until such a time when that one receives a spirit from above which purifies, and sanctifies him."

This lack of Devekut within the religious community is not my personal revelation. I have heard many Rabbanim, in Aretz, New York and elsewhere bewail this sorry state of affairs. I endeavor to follow in the footsteps of our holy Sages and try to address this most important issue. Indeed, although the learning of Torah has increased, the awareness of the need to bond with G-d has decreased in direct ratio. No one can deny that this is the work of the Yetzer HaRa (evil within us) and the Satan (evil outside us).

Barukh HaShem (thank G-d), commitment to Torah and mitzvot is growing. Barukh HaShem, Torah scholarship is booming, even Kabbalah study (by kosher people in kosher yeshivot) has experienced a renaissance. Yet, one thing is missing from almost all of it - where is HaShem? While everyone is well bonded to Torah and one's Rav, not too many people think about HaShem or endeavor to establish a one-on-one relationship with our Father and King.

I see so many people in the religious communities who appear only to be interested the external observance of mitzvot. Shabat, Kashrut, Tefilah, Talmud Torah, even Tzniyut (modesty) are all widely practiced. Yet, when it comes to the internal mitzvot of bonding with HaShem, rectifying our personality midot (attributes) and showing true Ahavat Yisrael towards one's fellow Jew, the number of people observing these becomes very small. I have long wondered if we have the proper definition for defining who is truly religious. Many we should only call one religious when one lives a life fulfilling ALL the mitzvot, the inner ones and the outer ones. If this were the case, indeed, the religious would be a very small minority in any Jewish community worldwide. Alas, and we wonder why would HaShem ever be angry with us.

I believe the key to understanding Parashat B'huko'tai is to be found within the mitzvah of Devekut. In other words, the secret of blessing or curse revolves around how we each individually stand before our G-d. Let us always keep in mind HaShem's majesty. Not one of us, not even the Tzadik of the generation can stand before HaShem as anything other than a servant entreating his Master for His mercies. Not one of us can stand before HaShem, no matter how religious we are and say, "I deserve a Berakha (blessing)."

Jewish history has long proven HaShem's Words to be true. All the curses in this parasha have at one time or another come true. While we all endeavor to do teshuva, the essential teshuva that we need do is not a mere return to religion but rather a return to righteousness. All too often religious individuals behave without any sign of Yirat Shamayim. This too has been bewailed by many Rabbis of our generation. Let me give an example.

Once I was standing on a very packed bus in Yerushalayim. In the front row seat sat two young yeshiva students about the age of 18. An old woman came on the bus carrying some very heavy sacks of vegetables just purchased in Mahane Yehuda. She asked the yeshiva students, "please get up and give your seat to me, I am old and weak and my bundles are heavy." Instead of helping the woman, one young man, in long coat and peyot responded and said, "I am tired too, move to the back of the bus." Needless to say, his remarks were heard by all around. A young immodestly dressed secular woman stood and gave her seat to the old woman. Now ask yourself, which person acted as a Yirat Shamayim (G-d fearing) Jew that day - the immodestly clad young woman, or the yeshiva student with his long coat and peyot? It is stories like this that cause the secular public to view the religious as a bunch of hypocrites. Unfortunately, I know that each one of you can tell your own similar story.

My friends, this must end! Although the yeshivot are full of students and mussar (moral teachings) is being studied every day, the lessons learned from these sacred teachings are not being applied. Mere talking about this sorry state of affairs is not enough. Might I remind you that the mourning period during the first 33 days of Omer is to commemorate the loss of 24,000 yeshiva students, who HaShem allowed to die simply because of this one sin - they showed disrespect towards one another.

We the Jewish people have suffered century after century. I do not believe that this is because HaShem wants it so. I rather believe that HaShem wants us to learn the lessons of His Torah so that he doesn't have to bring upon us these punishments!

Before one becomes a good Jew, one must first be a good human being. Rabbi Haim Vital writes in his Sha'arei Kedusha the following advise:

"Beware of all unworthy personality traits for they contaminate the foundation of the soul, specifically any and all types of pride, one should be as a doormat that everyone can step on. Seal humility within your heart completely until you don't feel the joy from one honoring you, or the shame from one abusing you, they shall both be equal in your eyes. Don't anger, even if one is to strike you in the face, for nothing hinders (receiving) the holy spirit more than anger. Don't at all, ever be impatient even with members of ones own family, don't ever be depressed, for prophecy shall not come, even to him that is worthy if that one is depressed. Be rejoiceful in your portion (in life) even when hard times come as it says "love HaShem your G-d with all your heart" (Deut.6:4)."

Everyone reading these words acknowledges their importance and truth. Yet, when we hold ourselves up to the criteria of examination as to how we fare in fulfilling these words, we claim that "they are almost impossible and that we need a lifetime of trying. Besides there are "more important" mitzvot to observe right here and right now such as Shabat and Kashrut." This answer was actually given to me once by a Rabbi in Brooklyn. I guess that he just didn't "get it."

Maybe you are reading these words and nodding your head yes, saying what is written here is important, very important. OK, now I have to get back to work! It seems that you too have missed the point.

The curses that HaShem has sent upon us in the past can very easily revisit us. With the continuing destabilization in Israel and growing anti-Semitism around the world, this is not the time that I would choose to ignore an essential way to neutralize G-d's curse of punishment.

What more can I say. I feel like I have run out of words. To describe the most sacred matter of bonding with HaShem relates to the heart, not to the head. Words speak to the head. Actions speak to the heart.

May HaShem open our eyes to return to Him, Him personally, and not just to study without observance, or mitzvot without midot. This is not the Torah way. One who calls him/herself religious and does not act righteously and not merely religiously, is not even religious. Let us turn our HEARTS back to HaShem so that He may turn His heart back to us. I pray that the following words may serve as inspiration.

"You who are bonded (devekim) to HaShem your G-d are alive every one of you this day." (Dev. 4:4)

"Respect HaShem your G-d, Him shall you serve, to Him shall you bond (tid'bak), and His Name shall you praise." (Dev. 10:20)

"You shall walk after HaShem your G-d, Him shall you respect, His mitzvot shall you observe, to His Voice shall you listen, Him shall you serve, and to Him shall you bond (tid'bakun)." (Dev. 13:5)

"Any man who offers his heart to rectify his personality, and to correct his path and actions, to pursue humility in all its aspects, to be the insulted and not the insulter, who hears others disgrace him, but answers not; immediately shall the Shekhina rest upon him, no longer will that one need to learn from men, for the spirit of G-d shall teach him." Sha'arei Kedusha

"When a father wishes to teach his toddler son to walk, what does the father do? He stands his son up and places him before him. He stretches out his arms to the sides so the child does not fall. Thus, the child will walk between the two supporting arms of his father. When the child reaches the father, the father then moves back a little bit so that the child will again move forward and come close to the father, each time the child does more. In this way, the child learns to walk correctly. For if the father would not back up, the child would have no place to move forward . . . This then is the way of the Holy One, blessed be He with His creation. When a person strongly desires to bond with HaShem, HaShem removes Himself a bit. If not for this, a person would never develop strength and continuity in their bonding. However now, as HaShem backs up, the individual needs to strengthen himself in meditation more and more. Thus one grows in strength (and seals the bond)." Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov, Noah 7

"One should always view oneself as being poor. One should always speak soft words, and supplications like a poor person. Continually meditate upon binding your mind to the Shekhina. Continually, think only of your love of Her, that the two of you are bonded. Continually ask yourself in your mind, when will I merit having the light of the Shekhina come dwell with me. If desires of this physical world come upon you, cast them from your mind, and despise those desires, until they are as hated and disgusting things before you. Strengthen your Yetzer HaTov (good inclination) over your Yetzer HaRa (evil inclination) and its desires. For by doing thus shall you nullify them. Do not feel the least bit of distress when you do not have of the desires of this world. On the contrary, be very happy with what you have merited, in that you are able to nullify your will for the honor of our blessed Creator." Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov, Ekeb 32