

Fascinating INSIGHTS

ה' אלול תשפ"א
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Gravestones

There is a concept of a הולך and an עומד. A הולך is one who has the power to grow spiritually—like us in this world. The opposite of this is an עומד, which is stationary. For this reason a מלאך is called an עומד,¹ since he can't grow spiritually.

After one dies, he no longer has the ability to be a הולך. In fact, Chazal expound on הפשי that the dead are free from Torah and Mitzvos.² Indeed, the term נפטר is rooted in פטור as a dead person is exempt from the Mitzvos. This is in contrast to one who is living as חי is sourced in חיוב, as he has an obligation to fulfill the Torah's precepts.

In the year 1797, when the Vilna Gaon was crying on his deathbed, he was asked why he was crying. The Vilna Gaon lifted his Tzitzis and said that in this world one can purchase Tzitzis for a few kopecks (currency) and every moment he wears them, he gets a mitzvah. However, in heaven a mitzvah cannot be bought with any amount of money!

In this light we can grasp the words ודרש אל המתים:³ We should learn from the dead. That is to say, to get the right perspective on life and make the most of it. There is a saying, "Only when you think about the fact that you will die, will you truly start living."

R' Moshe Feinstein tells us that the word מצבה, gravestone,⁴ is sourced in the word נצב, standing. This is because when a person dies, he becomes stationary (in a spiritual sense). One who sees a מצבה should then fulfill the living should take it to heart.⁵ He should be galvanized and realize that he has the ability to ascend levels spiritually.

Uniquely Unified

Elul is a time that we need to improve and excel in our Bein Adam L'chavero. This is alluded to in איש לרעהו,⁶ as its initials spell אלול. We must show care about each other as is hinted to in לרעהו לשלום, and וישאלו איש לרעהו, each inquired about the other's well-being,⁷ where the first letters spell אלול.

When we act this way, we can then arrive at Rosh Hashana in unity, the way that it is intended. Indeed, Rosh Hashana is called יום תרועה,⁸ a day of רעות, love and friendship.⁹ This idea is also hinted to in בחדש אחד (in the seventh month on the first day of the month, which refers to Rosh Hashana): we must arrive at Rosh Hashana באחד, as one, in unity.

² Tehillim 88:6, Shabbos 30a.

³ Devarim 18:11. The simple meaning is that there should not be found among you one who consults the dead. It is jokingly said that when a Rav gives a shiur where the students fall asleep, that is דרש אל המתים, as he is lecturing to those that are sleeping, which is an aspect of death (Brachos 57b).

⁴ The sefer Shemot (section of letters, letter 34, in the letter of R' Shabsi Sheftil Weiss) cites that on the day a מצבה is erected, the נפטר, one who passed away, enters Gan Eden and his relatives there say to him, "Mazel Tov..." In Poland they would make a proper seuda on this day for having the מצבה erected (אוצר פלאות התורה, Bamidbar, p. 312).

⁵ Koheles 7:2.

⁶ Esther 9:22.

⁷ Shemos 18:7.

⁸ Bamidbar 29:1. The simple meaning of this is "a day of shofar-sounding."

⁹ See Bamidbar 23:21, Rashi.

¹⁰ Bamidbar 29:1.

¹ Zecharya 3:7.

Soul Purpose

A new homeowner complained to the seller of the home that he never told him of the rat problem in the apartment. The seller said the entire city is swarming with rats. Didn't you have this problem in your previous apartment? No, was the answer. After realizing that his previous apartment was on the 10th floor, he got his answer. Living so high up, rats were unable to get there. Now that he lived in an apartment on the first floor, the rats were in reach. This is comparable to one studies Torah since he becomes elevated as it says זאת תורת העולה.¹¹ He is no longer on the ground level of this lowly world. This exalted level saves him from the Yetzer Hara. This is what the Mishna¹² tells us מעלה...מתעלה. One who engages in the study of Torah becomes elevated.

Man is compared to a tree—¹³כי האדם עץ השדה. How does a tree grow? Through water. Likewise, we grow through Torah which is compared to water.¹⁴

In 2015 in Israel, during a gathering to discuss the question of how to best rehabilitate prisoners, a professor arose and addressed the question to R' Grossman. "Kevod Harav, the prison system spends millions of shekels annually trying to rehabilitate the prisoners in prison. Many of the brightest people have worked long and hard trying to figure out a way that works, but have been forced to concede defeat each time, when prisoners who were released returned to prison. How is it that you send young Talmud students into the prisons—people without a degree in criminology or psychology or the like—to learn Gemara with a prisoner and within a short while, the prisoner changes completely? R' Grossman answered that in order to understand it, you need to come learn Torah for a year. Torah learning is a spiritual matter and a matter of providing the Jewish soul with the proper nourishment that it needs to feel happy and satisfied. Without that learning, the Jewish soul will always feel empty.

Judging Yourself

The Gemara¹⁵ says that Moshiach will come in a generation that is entirely virtuous (דור שכולו זכאי) or entirely guilty (דור שכולו חייב). We can comprehend Moshiach coming to a דור שכולו חייב as we see how low we are but how are we to grasp that he can come to a generation that is כולו זכאי?

The Baal Shem Tov¹⁶ tells us we are never judged unless we were put into that situation previously and gave our own judgment. To illustrate: you are shopping in a store and you see someone shoplifting. When you judge him—whether innocent or guilty—it is yourself who you are judging since in the past you shoplifted. If you never shoplifted before, that may only be what you remember. However, it could be you did in a former גלגול (reincarnation).

We can understand this a bit more with the following. We may look out of a window but actually, it may be a mirror since the window has a reflection. The same is true here—when we judge others, it is analogous to that of a mirror in that we are in fact viewing ourselves.

In this way, we can explain אל תדין את חברך עד שתגיע we won't judge our friend until we ourselves were once in that situation.¹⁷ An example of this is shown to us in the episode of Nosson Hanavi and Dovid Hamelech.¹⁸ After Dovid had Uriah killed,¹⁹ Nosson related a parable to Dovid in which Dovid gave his opinion—...כי בן מות האיש העשה זאת, any man who does this deserves to die and he must pay fourfold.²¹ The person in the parable Nosson was referring to was Dovid²² himself—אתה האיש, you are that man.²³

We can now comprehend how it is possible for Moshiach to come in a דור שכולו זכאי. If we judge others innocently,²⁴ then we are judged likewise.

It comes as no surprise that פרשת שופטים heralds in the month of Elul, the month we prepare for our judgment, as שופטים means judges. In fact, the word אלול means to spy out as the Targum Onkolos on ויתרו²⁵ ויאלול. This is expressing to us to look deeper and see how we can view our fellow Jew innocently.²⁶

Rabbi Alt merited to learn under the tutelage of R' Mordechai Friedlander ztz"l for close to five years. He received semicha from R' Zalman Nechemia Goldberg ztz"l. Rabbi Alt has written on numerous topics for various websites and publications and is the author of the books, Fascinating Insights and Incredible Insights in addition to being the host of The Fascinating Insights Podcast. His writings, some of which have been translated into Hebrew, German and French, inspire people across the spectrum of Jewish observance to live with the vibrancy and beauty of Torah. He lives with his wife and family in Kiryat Yearim (where the Aron was for 20 years [Shmuel 1, 7:1,2]) where he studies, writes and teaches. The author is passionate about teaching Jews of all levels of observance.

¹⁷ Avos 2:5. Baal Shem Tov, Kedoshim 5. The simple meaning is don't judge your friend until you have reached his place.

¹⁸ This is also another meaning in נפרעין מן האדם מדעתו ושלא מדעתו (Pirkei Avos 3:20), as one gives his opinion yet it is still שלא מדעתו because he doesn't realize that the judgment is on him (Baal Shem Tov, Kedoshim 2, footnote 3).

¹⁹ Shmuel 2, chapter 12. When Yosef said אני יוסף העוד אבי חי, I am Yosef, is my father still alive (Breishis 45:3), it refuted Yehuda's claim which was not to cause their father pain (regarding Binyomin), as they caused their father pain with the selling of Yosef. So, אני יוסף העוד אבי חי—I am Yosef that you sold. Is my father still alive—the one whom you caused so much pain? This is why the brothers couldn't answer him as the Pasuk continues there. This also applies to us, as Hashem will answer each person according to their claim. For example, if one says he can't give Tzedaka because of a lack of money he may be refuted with how he had enough money for some other desire (See Beis Halevi, Vayigash).

²⁰ Shmuel 2, 11:15-17.

²¹ Shmuel 2, 12:5,6. In this light we can explain why it says וחסבון first because justification and reckoning, as it should really say חשבון first because initially there is an accounting and then a judgment (Avos 3:1). This is because first one gives judgment (דין) to others and then חשבון—they make an accounting on that person in heaven.

²² In this manner, we can explain דן ידין (Breishis 49:16): in the story of דן, we see this idea that where one judges another (דן), he is judging himself (ידין).

²³ 12:7. We also see this in the story of Yehuda and Tamar when Yehuda said she should be taken out to be burned because of harlotry (Breishis 38:24).

²⁴ This is referred to as לימוד זכות (See Avos 1:6, Avos Drebi Nosson 8:7,8, Vayikra 19:15 Rashi. Also Shabbos 127.). Taking these words literally we see advice hinted for this. Be a למדן and think of ways to view another person as innocent. How many times have we done something similar and exonerated ourselves? Do the same to him.

²⁵ Bamidbar 13:2.

²⁶ If one doesn't do this then Elul ח"ו can be באי גנפשי.

¹¹ Vayikra 6:2.

¹² Avos 6:2.

¹³ Devarim 20:19.

¹⁴ Taanis 7a.

¹⁵ Sanhedrin 98a.

¹⁶ Kedoshim, 2.