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The Power of Small Actions

The Value of One Small Mitzvah

The *Sfas Emes* (Chanukah 5637) explains a lesson of Chanukah that is meant to change our perspective for the entire year.

The light of Chanukah is so great that it illuminates even below ten *tefachim*. (Chazal said that the *Shechinah* never descends below ten *tefachim*.)

When they found the small flask of oil that would only suffice for one night, we would naturally expect them to downplay the value of the mitzvah they were about to perform. They knew they'd only be able to light for one night and no more. Nevertheless, they didn't minimize the value of the mitzvah. They lit the *neiros* with great joy, declaring, "Today we can do the mitzvah completely. Why worry about tomorrow? Isn't every single mitzvah precious to Hakadosh Baruch Hu?"

Because they fulfilled the mitzvah without *cheshbonos*, because they recognized the value of a single mitzvah, **they illuminated even our smallest and lowest actions with a great light.**

The Midrash says that from the beginning of Creation, Hakadosh Baruch Hu wished to have a dwelling place in the lower worlds, as He does in the higher worlds; this is why He commanded us to build the *Mishkan*. Tzaddikim explained that this was not limited to the *Mishkan*. Hakadosh Baruch Hu constantly yearns for His light to be extended further and further down, to the lowest of places.

Dwelling in the Place of Pain

Rav Chaim Vital writes (*Eitz Hadaas Tov, Vayeira*) that Hakadosh Baruch Hu's *Shechinah* is especially near at a *bris milah*.

Do not be surprised at this. You should know that all of Hashem's desire and goal is to look for places where His *Shechinah* can dwell. At a *bris milah*, He sees the baby suffering pain in order to fulfill this *mitzvah*, and He chooses to rest His *Shechinah* there. All the people of the town should attend the *bris milah*, for Hakadosh Baruch Hu's presence is there.

From Rav Chaim Vital we learn that Hashem chooses places where people keep mitzvos notwithstanding the pain involved. If the pain of an eight-day-old child, who did not choose to undergo *bris milah*, brings the presence of the *Shechinah* – how much greater must be the achievement of a Yid who consciously chooses to do a *mitzvah* when it's painful.

In *Pirkei Avos* (5:23) we learn, לפום צערא אגרא – *The reward increases according to the pain*. We also learn (*Avos* 4:2), שכר מצוה מצוה – *The reward for a mitzvah is another mitzvah*. Clearly the Mishnah is referring to spiritual reward, because no material reward could ever equal the reward of a mitzvah.

In light of what we learned from Rav Chaim Vital, we can understand the progression. לפום צערא אגרא – **the more pain involved in fulfilling a mitzvah, the more the *Shechinah* will be present in the person's life**. The greater the presence of the *Shechinah*, the more a person's heart opens to complete more and more of Hashem's mitzvos, leading him to great reward in *Olam Haba*.

Hashra'as haShechinah doesn't depend on the performance of an especially great mitzvah, or a great number of mitzvos. Rather, it depends on our recognizing the importance of even the smallest mitzvah, and completing it with *mesirus nefesh* even if it's painful.

Why Are Wealthy People Stingy?

Rav Moshe Yehudah Gintzler was a *talmid* of the Yismach Moshe. He used to travel from town to town collecting funds to support widows and orphans. Once, he entered the home of a wealthy man and tried to ask him for a donation, but his pleas fell

on deaf ears. Not only did the man give him nothing, but he embarrassed Rav Moshe Yehudah by throwing him out of his house.

Rav Moshe Yehudah went to his Rebbe, the Yismach Moshe, and told the Rebbe how much this hurt him.

The Yismach Moshe looked at Rav Moshe Yehudah with compassion and said, "I'm surprised to hear that this rich man has the *middah* of stinginess (*kamtzanus*).

"When Chazal said (*Menachos* 86a) 'The rich are stingy,' they were describing a kindness that Hashem does for the wealthy. Because of their stinginess, they feel pain each time they give *tzedakah*, and their mitzvah therefore becomes very precious. If they weren't misers, they would pour out money for *tzedakah* without even thinking about it, and it wouldn't mean much.

"However, the rich man you encountered doesn't give *tzedakah* anyway, so why does he need the *middah* of *kamtzanus*?"

A Young Man's Painful Shabbos

A close friend described an experience that he had a few weeks ago. There's a teenager he knows who had many difficulties and challenges growing up. He never fully learned how to read and write. Gradually, his mitzvah observance became a thing of the past, and he lost touch with the *kehillah*. My friend said,

On Shabbos evening a few weeks ago, I walked into the *beis midrash* to join my friends in singing *zemiros*, in what *chassidim* call a *sheves achim*. I was surprised to find this troubled teenager standing before me. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

He answered, "A few weeks ago, I realized I want to return to keeping Shabbos. I made a commitment to keep Shabbos according to *halachah* no matter what.

“Thursday night, I was out drinking with my friends until late, and afterwards I fell into bed drunk and exhausted. I slept all Friday, and woke up just a half hour before Shabbos.

“I immediately got ready for Shabbos, and when the time came, I put away my phone and stopped doing *melachah*.

“I often have a hard time falling asleep at night, with all the thoughts that race through my mind. I usually watch things on my phone until my eyes finally close. Tonight, I was afraid that I might not be able to resist using my phone to help me fall asleep, especially since I slept all day so I’d probably have insomnia.

“I decided to go out and wander the streets for hours, and only return home when I feel exhausted enough to sleep. I’ve been walking and walking. When I found myself outside the *beis midrash*, I decided to stop in.”

My friend continued talking with him for a long while, until he finally said,

“I’m starting to feel really tired... I think it’s safe for me to go home now.”

We have no concept of how painful it was for this young man to commit himself to keeping Shabbos. When Rav Chaim Vital spoke hundreds of years ago about the *Shechinah* yearning to dwell where someone is *moser nefesh* to keep a mitzvah even when it’s painful, who was he speaking about if not this teenager?

It’s clear to me that if only our eyes were open, we would be able to see the *Shechinah* in all its glory accompanying this boy who sat up in a *beis midrash* in order to ensure that he wouldn’t transgress the *halachos* of Shabbos.

The Arizal’s Magnifying Glass

Rav Chaim Vital writes that his Rebbe, the Arizal, told him that in his generation, even the smallest thing that a Jew does for the sake of

heaven is more important to Hakadosh Baruch Hu than the deeds of *gedolim* in earlier generations.

Rav Chaim Vital asked the Arizal:

The Mishnah (*Shabbos* 5:4) says that the cow of R. Elazar ben Azarya would go out on Shabbos with a ribbon between its horns, against the will of the *Chachamim*. The Gemara quotes a Braisa that explains: It was not the cow of R. Elazar, but of a woman who was his neighbor. Because he didn't protest her behavior, it was attributed to him.

The Talmud Yerushalmi relates that R. Elazar's teeth turned black as a result of the fasting he took upon himself in order to atone for this sin.

Rav Chaim Vital asked, "If that is the extent of *teshuvah* necessary to atone for one small *aveirah*, how can we ever repair the damage cause by our many *aveiros*?"

The Arizal answered, "**One deep sigh of a Jew in our time is more precious and beloved in Hashem's eyes** than the fasting and self-affliction of the earlier times, because we live in a time great *hester panim*."

What Can We Say?

The Yismach Yisrael of Alexander added, "This was what the Arizal said in his time. What can we say in our time, when we are so much more distant than in his time."

Similarly, we can say: If that is what the Yismach Yisrael said in his generation, what can we say, in a generation that has descended even further and experiences even more *hester panim*? There is no doubt that every small good deed done in our generation illuminates all the *olamos* and bestows a great light on the world.

אגרא לצערא אגרא – *the reward is commensurate to the pain*, and Rav Chaim Vital explained that the nature of the reward is *hashra'as haShechinah*.

If that is true for every *frum* Jew, how much more so does it apply to a Jew whose connection to Torah has weakened, with each day becoming more difficult than yesterday. It should be obvious that **absolutely any small action** that he performs *l'shem Shamayim* is a mighty force that brings the *Shechinah* into the world in a tremendously powerful way.

Rav Shalom Ber of Lubavitch discussed the *pasuk* that describes Moshe Rabbeinu's humility, וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עֲנִיּוֹ מְאֹד מְכַל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה.

What brought him to such humility was seeing the generation of *Ikvesa d'Meshicha*, who will have no connection to understanding, and will live in a time of *hester*, a time of such heavy darkness, but **nonetheless will keep mitzvos with mesirus nefesh**. This inspired Moshe Rabbeinu's humility.

To Remember in the Moment

Any Jew, great or small, may find himself in a situation of *tzaar* or *nisayon*. He wants to follow Hashem's *ratzon*, but it seems to him that even if he succeeds today, he will fail tomorrow, and these fears can lead him to despair.

This is the moment to remember that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is waiting to see if His *Shechinah* can dwell in this Jew's place **at this moment**. If you fulfill the mitzvah despite the *tzaar*, the *Shechinah* will rest on you and you will be blessed with endless *brachos*.

Why Pain?

In his *sefer Zera Kodesh*, the Ropshitzer brings us another lesson from the laws of Chanukah that we need to remember throughout the year. The halachah is that ideally, *ner Chanukah* should be lit less than ten *tefachim* from the ground. This halachah (the Ropshitzer says) teaches us never to undervalue anything a person does in honor of his Creator. There is no limit to the *nachas* Hashem has when a Jew learns what Hashem wants from him and fulfills that desire to the best of his ability.

A simple Jew may be very aware that he doesn't have the intellect and wisdom needed to fulfill the mitzvah in all its depth. Nevertheless, he should do what he must, and have *bitachon* that Hashem will imbue his *nefesh* with *chochmah* and *daas*.

This approach was evident in the *mesirus nefesh* of the Chashmonaim. The Yevanim had decreed that Jews were forbidden to actively do mitzvos. Had the Chashmonaim so desired, they could have fulfilled the aspects of the mitzvah that apply to the mind and heart, and exempt themselves from the actual action-mitzvos because of *oness*, circumstances beyond their control.

Instead, they risked their lives to fulfill even the physical aspects of the mitzvos, **because they knew that Hashem wants to illuminate even the lowest parts of the physical world with His light.**

Their self-sacrifice succeeded, and is reflected in the halachah that *ner Chanukah* is lit under the height of ten *tefachim*. Chazal taught us that the *Shechinah* does not usually descend to that depth in our world. This unique aspect of Chanukah teaches us that anything we do, even our "lowest"-level accomplishment, affects the highest places in Creation.

The Ropshitzer adds that when a person does something while aware that he doesn't have the intellect and wisdom to do it properly, as long as he does it for the sake of heaven, it is as if he places a wick in a *ner*. Then Hashem will come and fill that cup with oil (oil represents *chochmah*), and the mitzvah will be fulfilled completely.

The Ropshitzer's teaching helps us understand why a mitzvah performed with *tzaar* creates a place worthy of Hashem's presence. **Someone who performs a mitzvah with *tzaar* probably isn't experiencing the *geshmak* of the mitzvah.** In fact, he probably knows that he will suffer insult and embarrassment as a result of the mitzvah. Nonetheless, he is *mevatel* himself to the *ratzon* of his Creator and does the mitzvah simply because Hashem commanded him to do so. That places the wick in the *ner*, and Hashem then fills the *ner* with the oil that, when ignited, will light up the world.

Lightning or Torches

I heard a beautiful *peirush* that relates to this idea. Before *Mattan Torah* it says (*Shemos* 19:17) וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְהֵיטָב הַבֶּקֶר וַיְהִי קוֹלַת וּבְרָקִים – *On the third day when morning came, there was thunder and lightning.* However, after *Mattan Torah* it says (*Shemos* 20:15) וְכָל הָעָם רָאוּ אֶת הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת הַלְפִידִם – *The entire nation saw the thunder and the flaming fires.*

Why did the Torah describe ברקים, lightning, before *Mattan Torah*, and לפידים, flames like torches, after *Mattan Torah*? The explanation is that before *Mattan Torah* the light that reached Am Yisrael was like lightning, which blazes for an instant but then disappears, having nothing to hold onto. However, after they received the Torah and began to fulfill mitzvos because that is Hashem's will, the light resembled the light of a torch. **When fire takes hold of a torch, it doesn't dissipate; it keeps burning and illuminating.**

This image of the torch expresses the understanding of the word *mitzvah*, which is based on the word צוּתָא, a union, a team that works together. A Yid who does his part is forming a partnership with Hashem, Who fills his *ner* with oil and enables him to shine with a light that keeps on growing brighter.

Linking the Spiritual to the Physical

This lesson of *Mattan Torah* is just as relevant today. Someone who doesn't approach Torah with *bittul* will experience the light of Torah as a flash of lightning that doesn't last. His *neshamah* may ignite while singing *zemiros Shabbos*, but as soon as the singing ends, he will find himself in the same place as before the *zemiros*. The fire can't take hold and become part of him; he is like a wick that was soaked in water.

We shouldn't be surprised when we see people experiencing something spiritual without it taking hold and becoming part of them. That is actually the default. Naturally, it shouldn't be possible for something spiritual to merge with the physical. The Rema states that this is the astounding wonder referred to in the *brachah* of *Asher Yatzar*,

when we say ומפליא לעשות - Hashem performs the wonder of connecting body and soul.

With the shift from לפרקים to ברקים, Hakadosh Baruch Hu revealed to Moshe Rabbeinu that the Jewish people, whose souls were all present at Har Sinai, are able to moisten their wicks with the oil of Torah and mitzvos. Then, when the light comes from above, they will ignite and become flaming torches.

“If all I can do is moisten my wick, how long will that fire last if there is barely any oil?” – Remember the explanation of the Ropshitzer. As soon as you moisten the wick with the little bit of oil that you have, Hakadosh Baruch Hu will refill your *ner* with oil, enabling you to continue burning and illuminating endlessly.

As we explained, when someone fulfills a *mitzvah* while in pain, **he becomes a better vessel for *hashra'as haShechinah*, because he is in a more complete state of *bittul* to Hashem.** This enables the light of *kedushah* to penetrate even more deeply into his soul, transforming him into a person who is drawn to *kedushah* rather than to other aspects of the world.

Torah as the Cure for the Yetzer Hara

Everything we learned above helps us understand why Torah learning when it comes easily lacks the power to truly defeat the *yetzer hara*. Only learning that comes with *tzaar* – as when a person is exhausted after learning for hours, and fights to keep his eyes open and learn a bit more – has the power to defeat the *yetzer hara*.

That precious learning, which he accomplished despite the pain, brings *hashra'as haShechinah*. A person in the presence of the *Shechinah* won't be drawn to the *sitra achra*.

The important thing is to appreciate the value of every positive act, no matter how small. Once we have internalized that understanding, we will perform even the smallest *mitzvah* with tremendous *simchah*, for we know that it will bring the *Shechinah* into our world.



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